Une discographie de

Robert Wyatt



ARCHIVE 6
au 1er juin 2026

Interviews & articles - vol.1 (en anglais)

Interviews & articles

ABÉCÉDAIRE



- In English
- En français
- In Italiano
- Auf deutsch
- Norsk
- Cesky
- Po polsku
- In het Nederlands
- En español
- 日本語
- Em Português
- στα Ελληνικά
- Türkçe

My Wantlist

***

IN ENGLISH

On visiting a friend - thebluemoment.com - July 1, 2024

Robert Wyatt's son shares health update: 'He's being well looked after' - NME.com - 7th February 2024

An Austr-Alien In Paris - Shindig ! - May 2022

Robert Wyatt - interview with a reclusive legend - Witchdoctor - March 8, 2021

In Conversation : Robert Wyatt - Clash - October 14, 2020

Team Spirit - Mojo - September 2020

Deeply personal - Internationaltimes.it - September 19, 2020

'I'm so somewhere else now...' - Uncut - March 2020

'Always finding nice things in a tragic situation' - Robert Wyatt at 75 - Morning Star - January 28, 2020

Robert Wyatt and Alfie Benge - Luncheon - Autumn-Winter 2019-20



"He has a real life" - Mojo The collector's Series Paul Weller Modern Classics 1991-2019 - 2019

Robert Wyatt : The Matching Mole interview - Popgruppen - January 28, 2019

Soft Machine - Prog Rock Uncut The Archive Collection - 2019

"I'm not concerned with whining" - The best of NME 1970-1974 - August 2018

"It's a magical thing" - The best of NME 1970-1974 - August 2018

The World Spins - Shindig! - January 2018

All His Thoughts In Focus - Shindig! - December 2017

Shaping the '70s: Simon Draper and the Story of Virgin Records - Red Bull Music Academy - October 12, 2017

'Robert Wyatt and Nick Mason on 'I'm A Believer': "We made our own rules and did what we liked" - Uncut - 27th January 2017

A conversation with Robert Wyatt - Swench.net - August 07, 2016

Robert Wyatt Interview - Hi Fi + - March 31, 2016

The Wilde Flowers + Robert Wyatt on how The Wilde Flowers blossomed - Uncut - March 2016

Robert Wyatt - Record Collector - January 2016

"He wanted Things Done Right" - Uncut - September 2015

Ornette Coleman 1930–2015 by Robert Wyatt - Wire - June 2015 in Abécédaire

Dear Daevid - Prog - April 2015

The Sound Of The Underground Scene - Prog - April 2015

A Life Less Ordinary - Prog - April 2015

Robert Wyatt - Q - February 2015

Robert Wyatt: 'Everybody's got an equally good voice. It's just a matter of using it' - The Guardian - January 28, 2015

Robert Wyatt interviewed: "I'm not a born rebel…" - Uncut - January 28, 2015

Robert Wyatt at 70: happy birthday, Old Rottenhat! - The Guardian - January 27, 2015

Soft Touch - Q - December 2014

End of an Ear - Uncut - December 2014



Different Every Time: The Authorised Biography Of Robert Wyatt - Wire - November 2014 in Abécédaire

I'm a Believer - Jazzwise - November 2014

Robert Wyatt interviews - Pitchfork - November, 14 2014

My hero: Robert Wyatt by Jonathan Coe - The Guardian - October, 31 2014

Soundtrack of my life: Robert Wyatt - The Guardian - October, 26 2014

Playlist : Robert Wyatt - M PRS for music - September, 19 2014

Robert Wyatt : Taking a rare peek in the rear-view - Modern Drummer - June 2014

Robert Wyatt Reflects on the Making of '68 - Downbeat.com - March, 26 2014

The making-of ... I'm A Believer - Uncut - February 2014

The 67-year-old art-rock godhead on the music and stories of his life - Pitchfork - March, 26 2012

Robert Wyatt - Bomb - Spring 2011

Robert Wyatt - Artforum - February 2011

This is what happens - Shindig! - January-February 2011

The Ghosts Within Uncut 4 Stars - Uncut - November 2010

Robert Wyatt Interview - Uncut - November, 14 2010

Robert Wyatt - Spectral Voices - Jazzwise - November 2010

Haunted by ghosts - Haaretz - October, 15 2010

Robert Wyatt and "The Merry Dance of Shared Creativity" - A Necessary Angel - July 14, 2010

Captain Bob - The Word - September 2009

An Audience with Robert Wyatt - Uncut - March 2009

Robert Wyatt - Revelatory Revolutionary - Artrocker - January 2009

Robert Wyatt Interviewed: The Quietus Salutes An English Treasure - Thequietus.com - December 19th, 2008

Robert Wyatt - Art-Rock's Grumpy Comedian - Mojo - December 2008

The Inner Sleeve - Artwork selected this month by Robert Wyatt - Wire - November 2008



- Robert Wyatt - Clash Q&A - 28.11.2008
- Songs of experience - Plan B - November 2008
- 'Staying Open to Possibilities': An Interview with Hugh Hopper - Eartrip Magazine - September 2008
- Canterbury Scene Pioneers 1 : The Soft Machine - Audion - August 2008

"I'm a big fan of the Style Council" by Robert Wyatt - Mojo - June 2008

- Wyatt cities blues - Record Collector- January 2008
- Max Remembered by Robert Wyatt - Modern Drummer - December 2007
- The Rhythm interview Robert Wyatt - Rhythm - December 2007
- Robert Wyatt : Web Exclusive Interview - Modern Drummer Magazine - November, 1 2007
- Trebles all round - Mojo - November 2007
- Kevin Ayers and Robert Wyatt - The Guardian - October 24th, 2007
- Human nature - Jazzwise - October 2007
- Lost and found - Plan B - October 2007
- Saturday night and Sunday morning - Wire - October 2007
- 'Other' Music - Robert Wyatt gets subversive and operatic - The Village Voice - October 23, 2007

'I was trapped into being alive' - The Guardian - October 18, 2007

Robert Wyatt: Child-like charm of a pop survivor - The Telegraph - October 18, 2007

Where are the heirs to 'awkward buggers' like Robert Wyatt? - The Guardian - October 14, 2007

- The freewheelin' Robert Wyatt - Uncut - October 2007
- 'Sing Like You Speak' - The Word - September 2007

A Conversation With Robert Wyatt - Dave DiMartino's Blog - January 17, 2007

- Q&A: Robert Wyatt - Stop Smiling - July 12, 2006
- Wyatting (vb): when Jukeboxes go mad - The Guardian - July 10, 2006
- Robert Wyatt - Beard - Winter 2005
- Q & A : Robert Wyatt - Record Collector - Christmas 2005



Robert Wyatt : The Mojo interview - Mojo - November 2005

Repeat cycles - Wire - September 2005

Robert Wyatt presented by David Gilmour - Mojo - August 2005

Robert Wyatt & Alfreda Benge - Dream Magazine - Spring 2005

Do the Wyatt thing - Time Out Magazine - September 2004

Robert Wyatt talks to Spencer Leigh - BBC Radio Merseyside's On The Beat - November 22, 2003

Cloud Cuckooland - Straight No Chaser - Winter 2003

At last I'm old - The Village Voice - November 17, 2003

Special Brew - Mojo - October 2003

Triumph Of A Late Bloomer: Robert Wyatt - Daily Telegraph - 2 October 2003

Robert Wyatt: Cuckoo In The Nest - Independent - 12 September 2003

Robert Wyatt learns the value of cheap music from a Ray Charles ballad - Wire - September 2003

I've no idea what's next - Guardian Unlimited - September 22, 2003

Robert Wyatt: Cuckoo In The Nest - The Independant - 12 September 2003

The primer : Soft Machine - The Wire - June 2003

Rock Bottom by Robert Wyatt - Uncut - February 2003

Home entertainment - Robert Wyatt - The Guardian friday review - 17th January 2003

Robert Wyatt in his own words - Get Rhythm - August 2001

A-Shleep at the Wheel: Robert Wyatt - Ways of Hearing - 2001

The jazz singer - Mojo collections - 2001

The great Wyatt hope - The Observer - May 27, 2001

Epiphanies - Wire - April 2001

New Model Army - Soft Machine - Mojo - March 2001

Robert Wyatt and Annie Whitehead: Songs In The Key Of Louth - The Independent - 25 October 2000

Christmas *(Lindsay Cooper on Robert Wyatt)* - Tone Clusters - Mar/Apr 2000



Twist a St Tropez - Crohinga Well - 1999

The Mike Ratledge Interviews - Facelift - September 1999

My Favourite Ethnic Recording by Robert Wyatt - Resonance - 1999

The Artist Shop IRC Chat with Robert Wyatt on Sunday, March 21, 1999

8 out of 10 cats prefer Whiskers - Mojo - March 1999

Not just different dialects - Popwatch - Winter/Spring 1999

Going Back a Bit - An alternative History of Robert Wyatt - Discoveries - December 1998

An interview with the late Hugh Hopper - Panmodern.com - September 6, 1998

Robert Wyatt: Acting on Impulse - Modern Drummer - July 1998

Singer/instrumentalist (& ex-Soft Machine drummer) Robert Wyatt reveals the secret world of dreams with Shleep - U.S. Rocker Magazine - June'98

Who is Robert and Wyatt matters - Pulse ! - May 1998

Robert Wyatt & Soft Machine - Weird and Wonderful Stuff - Goldmine - April 10, 1998

Robert Wyatt Shleep - Facelift - March 1998

Red beard - New Times Los Angeles Online - January 22, 1998

Deep Shleep: Robert Wyatt Gets Personal - Boston Phoenix - 20 January 1998

Robert Wyatt - Uncut - December 1997

Robert Wyatt Inner Visions - Straight No Chaser - Winter 1997

Counting shleep - Jazzwise - October 1997

The Impressionist - Mojo - October 1997

Or do you wanna get serious? - The Guardian - October 10, 1997

The only way is up when you've hit rock bottom - Independent - September 30, 1997 **NEW**

If I were Blackpool rock, I'd have Marxist-Leninist right through the middle." - New Statesman - September 26, 1997

The Minimal Robert Wyatt : A Group by Himself - International Herald Tribune - September 11, 1997

Robert Wyatt - Local hero - The Wire - September 1997



Robert Wyatt Singer Drummer Paraplegic - Paralinks - 1997

- Soft Machine - Mojo - June 1997
- Mole on Hold, an interview with Bill MacCormick - Facelift - January 1997
- A space for - Facelift - January 1997
- Interview by Richie Unterberger on November 18, 1996

Very nearly heaven - The Observer - July 28, 1996

- Invisible jukebox - The Wire - December 1995
- An interview with Mike Ratledge - Facelift - June 1995
- The Wilde Flowers - Record Collector - February 1995
- Memories From the Purple Jumper - Why Are We Sleeping ? - February 1995
- *Old Rottenhat's Journal - Autumn 1994 in Abécédaire*
- Robert Wyatt speaks - Canterbury Nachrichten - August 1994
- Wrong Movements - A Robert Wyatt history - Facelift - August 1994
- "Hear this man do it, and take courage" (Bob Dylan album review by Robert Wyatt) - Mojo - December 1993
- Who, Wyatt, Where - The Amazing Pudding - June 1993

The Richard Sinclair Story 1965-1993 - Facelift - April 1993

- Old Rottenhat's Journal - Spring 1993
- Jimi & Soft Machine - Univibes - December 1992
- Tough Guys Don't Dance - Bill Nelson meets Robert Wyatt - originally appeared in the August, 1992 edition of Musician magazine (US)
- Robert Wyatt - Record Collector - June 1992
- Communist celluloïd - New Musical Express - January 18, 1992
- Robert Wyatt - Ptolemaic Terrascope - January 1992
- Hugh Hopper interview - Canterbury Nachrichten - Winter 1991
- Comrade softy - Q - October 1991
- The born-again politico - The Guardian - September 26, 1991
- Wheelie saying something - New Musical Express - September 21, 1991



- There's a Wyatt going on - The Wire - September 1991

Songs remain the same - The Independant - August 15, 1991

- Nothing can stop him - Option - July-August 1991

Robert Wyatt's Peel sessions - Facelift - June 1989

- Dedicated To You But You Weren't Listening, The Concise Soft Machine Handbook - Strange Things - June 1989

- Things you should know about Robert Wyatt - Creem - January 1987

Nothing can stop Robert - Rockbill - November 1986

- Robert Wyatt - Record Collector - April 1986

From hippy underground to the Communist Party - Morning Star - January 13, 1986

Robert Wyatt - Downbeat - April, 1986

- English as a foreign language - New Musical Express - December 14, 1985

- Wyatt & Dammers - Sounds - November 2, 1985

- Chewing on Chomsky - City Limits - November 1-7, 1985

- Rocking the Botha - New Musical Express - October 26, 1985

Sun City - Melody Maker - September 28, 1985

- Robert Wyatt: Mongrel Musics - New Musical Express - September 8, 1984

- Life's A Wyatt! - Sounds - September 8, 1984

To the Fidel few - Melody Maker - August 11, 1984

- Robert Wyatt - OP Independant Music Magazine - May-June 1984

- Nothing to kill or die for - New Musical Express - March 10, 1984

- The Wyatt life - The Face - July 1983

- Diving for pearls - Melody Maker - June 4, 1983

- When the boat comes in - New Musical Express - 4th June, 1983

- His Master's Voice - Strange Fruit - Freedom - 13th November 1982

- Portrait of the artist as a consumer - New Musical Express - June 12, 1982

- Robert Wyatt : Whistling in the Dark - New Sounds New Styles - June 1982

- East West - Collision - Feb./April 1982



Strange Fruit Stallin' - New Musical Express - March 20th, 1982

A Wyatt of his own - Hot Press - April 17th-May 1st 1981

Robert Wyatt looks Back - Comstock Lode - Winter 1981

Shape Some Action! - New Musical Express - 22nd August, 1981

Wyatt stories on the air - Melody Maker - April 4, 1981

Of dogs and underdogs - Melody Maker - January 24, 1981

Quiet Wyatt breaks his silence - New Musical Express - August 16, 1980

Up from rock bottom - Melody Maker - March 15, 1980

The wild spume of his hair broke over my bowsprit - New Musical Express - June 26, 1976

The Flowers That Grow On The Compost Heap: a cock-eyed optimist's diary - Liquorice - 1976

Mantler paints it black + Gorey stories - Melody Maker - April 17, 1976

The real Back to Africa movement starts here - Street Life - April 2, 1976

The Evolving Hymn: Illustrated by Her, Words by Robert Wyatt - Paintings by Alfreda Benge - Street Life - January 10-23, 1976

The Roman spring of Mr. Wyatt - New Musical Express - July 19, 1975

Robert Wyatt Devious tactics - Melody Maker - July 12, 1975

When in Rome... - Sounds - July 12, 1975

Robert Wyatt, Henry Cow - New Musical Express - July 7, 1975

Ruth, Richard And Robert - Melody Maker - June 14, 1975

The essence of team spirit - New Musical Express - June 7, 1975

Wyatt singles are out - Sounds - May 31, 1975

Mantler paints it black - Melody Maker - April 17, 1975

Lookin' Back - The Soft Machine Part 2 - New Musical Express - February 1, 1975

Lookin' Back - The Soft Machine Part 1 - New Musical Express - January 25, 1975

Soft Machine Man : Up from Rock Bottom - Rolling Stone - January 16, 1975

My Top Ten by Robert Wyatt - Let it rock - January 1975

I played Robert Wyatt at 78rpm and saw God - New Musical Express - October 26, 1974



- He ain't heavy... he just wants to be loved - Record & Popswop Mirror - October 19, 1974
- Wyatt: up from the Rock Bottom - Melody Maker - October 12, 1974
- The bizarre beatitudes of the B side, singles reviewed this week by Robert Wyatt - New Musical Express - October 5, 1974

British rock: are we facing disaster? - Melody Maker - September 21, 1974

- Oldfield joins Wyatt return - New Musical Express - August 24, 1974
- Join the professionals, form a rock band... - New Musical Express - July 27, 1974

Wyatt makes solo debut - Melody Maker - July 27, 1974

- Wyatt: back on top - Melody Maker - March 30, 1974
- Expressions of Robert - Sounds - March 23, 1974

Canterbury Tales - Melody Maker - December 8, 1973

- Wyatt fights back - Melody Maker - November 10, 1973
- Pink Floyd-Soft Machine: Rainbow Theatre, London - Melody Maker - November 10, 1973
- Wyatt, the innocent abroad - Sounds - November 10, 1973
- Floyd, Softs benefit gigs - Melody Maker - November 3, 1973
- Pink Floyd in Wyatt Charity at Rainbow - Record & Radio Mirror - November 3, 1973

Under the influence. This week : Robert Wyatt - New Musical Express - March 3, 1973

Matching Mole Cosmic music and a weird Fripp trip... - New Musical Express - September 30, 1972

- The mole in his hole - Cream - June 1972
- 'Matching Mole : the beginning of an other ear' - Time Out - June 16, 1972
- Mole: a spirit of togetherness - Sounds - April 29, 1972
- Mole in a hole - Melody Maker - April 29, 1972

Reluctant Robert - Sounds - December 11, 1971

Machine changes gear - Melody Maker - September 11, 1971

- Wyatt quits Softs - Melody Maker - September 4, 1971
- American experience - Melody Maker - August 14, 1971
- Dialogue on festivals (with Robert Wyatt and others) - Melody Maker



- July 3, 1971

- Player Of The Month - Beat Instrumental - May 1971

- The Sounds talk-in: Robert Wyatt - Sounds - April 17, 1971

- Soft Machine - Jazz & Pop - April 1971

Robert Wyatt-an out of work singer currently on drums with Soft Machine - New Musical Express - January 16, 1971

- A freaky spear carrier - Sounds - January 16, 1971

Wyatt-drums across the barriers - Record Mirror - January 16, 1971

- Inside the mind of a Machine - Melody Maker - January 2, 1971

- A fantasy come true, by Robert Wyatt - Sounds - November 28, 1970

- The Soft Machine blow it hot and cold in Holland - Melody Maker - October 31, 1970

- Soft Machine at The Proms - Jazz Journal - October 1970

- Why Sir Henry Moore turned in his grave... - Disc & Music Echo - September 5, 1970

- The Softs, the Proms and drummer Wyatt - Melody Maker - September 5, 1970

- Soft Machine man's switch - Melody Maker - July 18, 1970

- Soft Machine - Time Out - July 11th, 1970

- Two pound notes must copulate - Bath Festival of Blues and Progressive Music '70 Program

- The Soft Machine : contemporary classical musicians - Friends - July 10th, 1970

- Where pop and classics meet... - Melody Maker - June 27, 1970

- Our week at Ronnie's made us improvise - Soft Machine's Mike Ratledge talks to Richard Williams - Melody Maker - June 6, 1970

- Soft Machine album an MM preview - Melody Maker - May 30, 1970

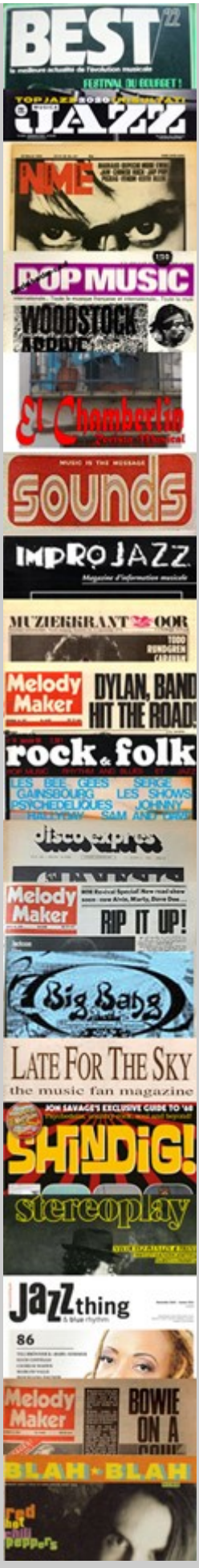
- A child of the pop scene - Melody Maker - February 14, 1970

- 'Dobson's voice' - Melody Maker - January 31, 1970

- Soft Machine - Beat Instrumental - December 1969

- When the Soft Machine broke down and cried - Disc and Music Echo - November 29, 1969

How to get that special sound - Melody Maker - November 15, 1969



- Unclassifiable Soft Machine - Melody Maker - November 8, 1969
- Soft Machine... looking for more complicated musical ideas... - Record Mirror - October 25, 1969
- Soft Machine's no ordinary trio - Melody Maker - July 5, 1969
- Soft Machine - Beat Instrumental - April 1969
- The Soft Machine - Mike Ratledge interview - Oz - February 1969
- Soft Machine - International Times - 29 November 1968
- New stars on the horizon - Hit Parader - November 1968
- The Soft Machine - Downbeat - July 11, 1968
- Soft Talk - International Times - June 14, 1968
- A Different Drummer - Downbeat - October 5, 1967

'Technicolour Dream stirs Underground' - Melody Maker - May 6, 1967

- 2500 Ball at IT-Launch - The International Times - October 31 - November 13, 1966

Music or Noise ? - Kent Observer and Canterbury Times - February 1, 1966

'Norman and Robert - know-how and blues beat' - Kentish Observer - October 26, 1965

Meet The Wilde Flowers - Kentish Observer - June 8, 1965

On visiting a friend - thebluemoment.com - July 1, 2024

thebluemoment.com

A blog about music by Richard Williams



> Zoom

On visiting a friend

The front of the home of Robert Wyatt and Alfie Benge, a pretty Georgian house on a quiet street close to the centre of the Lincolnshire market town of Louth, was bathed in sunshine as I pressed the bell one day last week. The door was opened by Dee, Robert's daughter in law, who took me inside to see him.

I've known Robert since the end of the '60s, when he was still with the Soft Machine. He and Alfie tell the story of how I officiated at their marriage one night at Ronnie Scott's in the early '70s, before his accident, using a twisted-up piece of silver paper from a cigarette packet as an improvised wedding ring. A couple of years later they were formally married at Sheen register office on the day of the release of the extraordinary *Rock Bottom*, his great 1974 album of songs expressing fathomless emotions.

Alfie was in London for attention to her eyes on the day I visited, to see Robert for the first time since before the pandemic. She'd warned me that, following his recovery from a near-fatal encounter with something nasty called Lewy Body Dementia, his memory was impaired, although "he's far less away with the fairies than he was." And his sight had improved after long-awaited double cataract surgery.

His eyes were bright as we started to talk, his conversation just about as animated and every bit as surreally funny as I remembered. A mention of that first informal wedding ceremony prompted him to talk about how he had been 10 years old when he first met Ronnie Scott, when they were both guests at Robert Graves's famous house in Mallorca (Robert's mother, Honor Wyatt, was a friend of the poet, and may have named her son after him). He loved Ronnie and his co-director Pete King — whose name provoked a chuckling mention of "The great smell of Brut!" — and the whole vibe of the club, where Alfie had worked behind the bar. He remembered young Henry, who looked after the cloakroom and saw the ageing Ben Webster safely home every night during the great and hard-drinking tenorist's residencies.

We talked about a little about how Robert had enjoyed contributing vocals to three tracks on *Artlessly Falling*, Mary Halvorson's second Code Girl album in 2020, about Duke Ellington, and about Gil Evans, another venerated figure whose "Las Vegas Tango" Robert turned into a mesmerisingly wayward two-part invention on his first solo album, *End of an Ear*, in 1970. And about the 1971 Berlin jazz festival, where Robert — having just left the Softs — was selected by the festival director, Jo Berendt, for the rhythm section accompanying a Violin Summit starring Don "Sugarcane" Harris, Jean-Luc Ponty, Michal Urbaniak and Nipso Brantner ("I don't think they liked my playing — I was either too rock or too jazz"). When I remarked that a mutual acquaintance perhaps "fell in love too easily", he picked up the cue, hummed the opening of "I Fall in Love Too Easily" and talked about how much he still enjoyed listening to Chet Baker singing such songs.

I stayed an hour and a half, longer than expected. On the long drive home I listened to *Comicopera* and *…for the ghosts within*, two late masterpieces. All in all it had been a joy to find that Robert is still entirely himself, one of the most original and loved figures of his generation, still living his "improvised life", not making music any more but continuing to incarnate his socialist principles and thereby justifying his friend Brian Eno's description of him (in Marcus O'Dair's excellent authorised biography) as living without "any glaring inconsistencies between what he claims to believe in and what he does as a person and as an artist."

Alfie wanted to leave me a copy of *Side by Side*, the book of poems, lyrics and drawings that she and Robert published in 2020. "It came out during the lockdown," she said, "so it didn't get much notice." I told her I'd already bought one. If it escaped your attention, this might be the time to rectify that omission — maybe as a way of celebrating their the fiftieth anniversary of their wedding (the official one), which falls on July 26**: a milestone in a remarkable, wonderfully creative and happily enduring partnership.

* Side by Side *by Robert Wyatt and Alfie Benge is published by Faber & Faber. Marcus O'Dair's* Different Every Time: The Authorised Biography of Robert Wyatt *was published by Serpent's Tail in 2014. The photograph of Robert and me was taken by his son, Sam Ellidge.*

*** Correction: the piece originally said that the anniversary is on July 24. It's the 26th. Alfie also points out that that they originally chose the date to coincide with the first day of Fidel Castro's first attempt to start the Cuban Revolution: the attack on the Moncada garrison in 1953.*

Read the post on thebluemoment.com

Ten years ago, Richard wrote this post on the same blog after reading that Robert Wyatt had decided to retire from music.

Pieces of Robert Wyatt - thebluemoment.com - October 30, 2014

Pieces of Robert Wyatt

When I read, in the new issue of *Uncut* magazine, that Robert Wyatt has decided to stop making music, I felt an immediate pang of dismay. So I rang him up to see if he really meant it. His reply was to tell me a little story about the novelist Jean Rhys, who, after a long period of inactivity, responded to her publisher's gentle suggestion that she might like to write another book by asking him if he'd enjoyed her last one. "Yes, of course," he answered. "Well, read it again," Rhys said.

We could all do a lot worse than work our way through Robert's albums, starting with 1970's *End of an Ear*, which includes his fabulous deconstruction of Gil Evans's "Las Vegas Tango", and concluding with 2010's magnificent *'…for the ghosts within'*, on which he shares the credit with the saxophonist Gilad Atzmon and the violinist/arranger Ros Stephen. And we could cherish memories of live performances stretching, in my case, from the Soft Machine at Croydon's Fairfield Halls in 1970 to Robert's guest appearance — singing and whistling on "Rado de Nube" and playing cornet on "Song for Che" — with Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra as part of Ornette Coleman's Meltdown season at the Festival Hall in 2009.

We can also read Marcus O'Dair's *Different Every Time*, an "authorised biography" of Robert, published today. Diligently researched and sympathetically told, it gives us the best all-round view we're likely to get of the man who came to attention baring his torso behind a drum kit with Soft Machine everywhere from UFO to the Proms before the accident in 1973, at the age of 28, that cost him the use of his legs and propelled him into a different sort of existence, the one that produced *Rock Bottom*, "I'm a Believer", *Ruth is Stranger than Richard*, "Shipbuilding", "At Last I Am Free", *Old Rottenhat*, *Dondestan*, *Shleep* and *Comicopera*, as well as collaborations with the likes of Carla Bley, Brian Eno, the Raincoats, Scritti Politti, Hot Chip and many others, most of them listed in O'Dair's discography.



> Zoom

I say "most of them" because I've noticed an omission: a 1970 session with the Amazing Band, featuring the great cartoonist/illustrator Mal Dean on trumpet, Rab Spall on violin and accordion, Maia Spall on voice, Mick Brennan and Chris Francis on alto saxophones, Jim Mullen on bass and harmonica and Wyatt on drums and voice. Soon after they recorded it, Robert gave me an acetate of the proposed album, with a sleeve he'd made up himself, featuring the collage you see above. It wasn't until 1997 that the music — just under 40 minutes of free improvisation — finally saw the light of day, released under the title *Roar* on the FMR label.

I listened to the acetate again last night and it remains a lovely example of the kind of open-minded, non-idiomatic, anti-materialistic music that was in the air back then. And still is, if you look hard enough. I'm sorry, of course, that seemingly there won't be any more of it from Robert himself. But what he's given us is quite enough to be going on with.

* Different Every Time *is published by Serpent's Tail (£20). Robert Wyatt will be talking to Marcus O'Dair at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on November 23, as part of the EFG London Jazz Festival*.

Read the post on thebluemoment.com

Robert Wyatt's son shares health update: 'He's being well looked after' - NME.com - 7th February 2024



Robert Wyatt, 2004. CREDIT: Yui Mok/PA Images/Getty

NME

Robert Wyatt's son shares health update: "He's being well looked after"

The musician retired 10 years ago

By Tom Skinner

Robert Wyatt's son has shared an update regarding his father's health, saying he is "being well looked after".

The musician and composer, 78, was a founding member of Soft Machine and Matching Mole, serving as a drummer and vocalist in both bands. He later embarked on a 40-year solo career after becoming paraplegic following an accidental fall from a window in 1973.

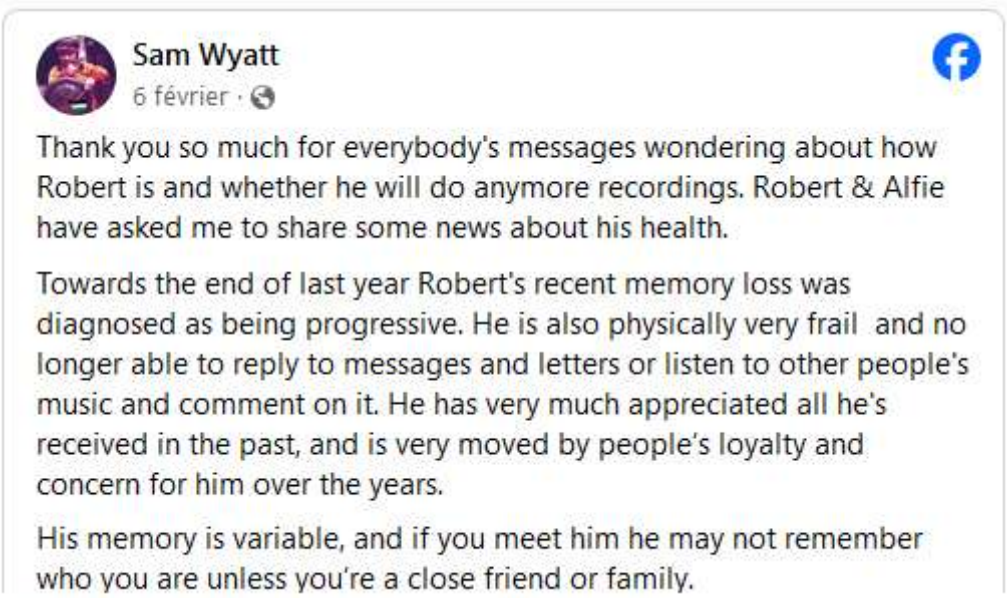
Wyatt branched out to other instruments and became an important name during the formative years of British jazz fusion, psychedelia and progressive rock. His final studio album, 2007's 'Comicopera', features contributions from Brian Eno, Paul Weller and more.

He retired from music in 2014, telling Uncut: "I would say I've stopped, it's a better word

than retired. Fifty years in the saddle, it's not nothing. It's completely unplanned, my life, and it's just reached this particular point.

"Other things have happened – I'm more taken up by politics, to be honest, than music at the moment. Music tags along behind it. There is a pride in [stopping], I don't want it to go off."

Posting on Facebook yesterday (February 6), Wyatt's son Sam thanked his followers for their recent "messages wondering about how Robert is and whether he will do any more recordings".



He went on to say that Robert and his wife Alfreda Benge had asked him "to share some news about his health", writing: "Towards the end of last year Robert's recent memory loss was diagnosed as being progressive.

"He is also physically very frail and no longer able to reply to messages and letters or listen to other people's music and comment on it. He has very much appreciated all he's received in the past, and is very moved by people's loyalty and concern for him over the years."

Sam explained that Robert's memory is currently "variable, and if you meet him he may not remember who you are unless you're a close friend or family".

"Thankfully, he's coping well, as he always has with physical adversity, and he's being well looked after," the message concluded. You can see the post above.

According to Setlist.FM, Robert Wyatt's final live performance took place as part of the 2014 EFG London Jazz Festival.

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

An Austr-Alien in Paris - Shindig! - Issue 127 - May 2022

AN AUSTR-ALIEN IN PARIS



DAEVID ALLEN's journey from guitarist in Soft Machine to big cheese in **GONG** took in art happenings, deportation, gynaecological instruments, teddy bears and a haunted castle along the way. This culminated in the Australian's triumphant return to the UK, leading his French band onstage at the second Glastonbury Festival.

IAN THOMPSON speaks to many of the cast of thousands involved in this leg of Allen's long, strange trip





Allen with Daniel Laloux
on hunting horn, early '70

Soft Machine arrived in France at the beginning of July 1967 with a booking to play all summer long at a "psychedelic discotheque" near St Tropez. When "all summer long" became "for three nights only", the band found themselves stranded in paradise with a truck full of gear and no money. However, a chance beach-side encounter with a Parisian antique dealer would quickly turn things around. Bob Benamou, who would soon become Gong's manager, tells *Shindig!* "They were playing on the beach at a beer festival; it was a horrible place and nobody was there. I said, 'You can't stay here,' so I installed the whole group in a villa in St Tropez. We became very close. Daevid Allen was so creative, so poetic, and so surrealistic: an amazing person."

Benamou was organising a series of happenings with underground artist Jean- Jacques Lebel. Lebel offered Soft Machine the opportunity to perform during a staging of Picasso's play *Desire Caught By The Tail*. The band leapt at the chance, immersing themselves in the Dadaist production for three weeks. Lebel told writer Aymeric Leroy, "Daevid said to me several times afterwards, and Kevin [Ayers] too, that this experience had really allowed them to 'bloom' as artists, to differentiate themselves from what was around them."

Soft Machine also scored an invitation to play at a party organised by the owner of Barclay Records, where they impressed a large crowd of movers-and-shakers with a 40-minute rendition of 'We Did It Again'. These performances created a buzz among the Parisian artistic elite who'd flocked to the Côte d'Azur that summer, which gave the band a real foothold in France. They would consolidate this position by returning to the country every month for the remainder of 1967.



Soft Machine in London just prior to Allen's enforced Paris sojourn.
L-R: Allen, Robert Wyatt, Mike Ratledge, Kevin Ayer

However, Soft Machine would make these trips as a three-piece. An expired visa saw Allen turned back at Dover, and even worse, banned from entering the UK for three years. Not wanting to return to Australia, he had little choice but to install himself in Paris. His time in Soft Machine was brutally cut short.

Once in Paris, Allen leapt into action, quickly gathering a collective of improvising musicians around himself. These included his long-term collaborator and partner Gilli Smyth, vocalist Ziska Baum and flautist Loren Standlee. For their first show they took the name Gong Full Moon Fantastickal, and soon landed a 10-week residency at underground hotspot La Vieille Grille. Their sets of freely improvised music caused a sensation in Paris's nascent underground

scene. A long segment filmed for French TV in early ’68 (available on YouTube) is revelatory, showing the genesis of the idiosyncratic styles that Allen and Smyth would later perfect in Gong.

Allen has always given Syd Barrett credit for inspiring his “glissando” guitar technique. In *Gong Dreaming 1* he writes: “I saw Syd playing a curious sort of slide guitar with the Floyd at Ally Pally in ’67 and he looked rather embarrassed by it. But out front it sounded spectacularly Wagnerian! I was impressed.” Armed with a box of antique gynaecological instruments and a delay unit, Allen learned to coax a galaxy of sound from his Telecaster guitar. While Allen was able to explain the origin of his style, he was at a loss when it came to describing Smyth’s “space whisper” vocals. “It didn’t come from any outside influence that I know of. She just immediately began to sing like that... Ziska Baum and Gilli were magical together. The two of them just created that style together out of thin air.”

Allen made many contacts at the Vieille Grille, the most important being with the young filmmaker Jérôme Laperrousaz. His support would prove incredibly important to Allen over the next few years. When Allen told him he was looking to put together a new group to play more traditionally structured songs, the filmmaker put him in touch with Marc Blanc and Patrick Fontaine. They were the rhythm section of a band whose guitarist had just been called up for national service, and as fate would have it were already ardent fans of Soft Machine.

The trio clicked immediately, playing their first gig together in January ’68. Blanc told Shindig!, “We had just enough time to rehearse two tracks [‘Why Are We Sleeping’ and ‘We Did It Again’]. We played three sets that were basically freakouts. The audience was stunned, enjoying it without realising it was Soft Machine’s guitarist playing.” Allen christened the new band Bananamoon. While it would only play a score of gigs and record a handful of demos that were unreleased until decades later, its impact on French music would be enormous. It spawned the bands Gong and Ame Son, and in bringing the first flush of real psychedelia to France, helped shape the country’s emerging musical underground.

Laperrousaz worked on the TV programme *Bouton Rouge*, and used his influence to organise a spot for Bananamoon. Arrangements were made to meet in the Latin Quarter to shoot a clip for their version of ‘Why Are We Sleeping?’. The chosen day turned out to be during the worst street fighting of the May ’68 protests. The band arrived in what looked like a war zone: hastily erected barricades, burned-out vehicles, and uprooted trees everywhere, and the air electric with tension. Bravely or foolishly, Laperrousaz leapt at the chance to use this as his backdrop. “We were filmed climbing the barricades with our instruments, against a background of total chaos”, recalls Fontaine. Filming continued for the entire day, with Laperrousaz truly pushing his luck at times. Allen relates in *Gong Dreaming 1* that with cameras in tow, “I wandered down a block to find a menacing black battle-truck full of super tough paracommandos. From somewhere Jérôme miraculously conjured up a large paper bag full of toy teddy bears. So I danced up to the wagon, and bowed to the stonefaced paratroopers... ‘Les compliments de Winnie le Pooh...’ I cried solemnly and handed each of them a wee teddy bear. Stern jawlines cracked open with amazement and then delight. They’d all abruptly turned into little boys. I left behind a truckload of human laughter...”

The paras may have been left laughing, but once news of this filmed escapade reached the authorities, they were not amused. Laperrousaz was dismissed from his job, but worse potentially lay in store for Allen. Informed that he was on an arrest list of undesirable aliens, he and Smyth fled France. They headed for Deya on the island of Mallorca, with Blanc and Fontaine following soon after. Fontaine remembers these months spent together on their island refuge as an extraordinary time. Living in community, they grew closer both personally and musically.

In their absence Laperrousaz worked to gain the interest of several record labels, and in December ’68 Bananamoon clandestinely returned to Paris to record demo tapes, which ultimately failed to secure a signing. To evade the attention of the Paris police, the band relocated to a property owned by Bob Benamou in the tiny town of Montaulieu, near Avignon – a place that would also be significant in Gong’s story. There Allen began writing the songs that would form the core of his *Magick Brother* album.

Unfortunately, Marc Blanc was finding less inspiration in Allen’s new music. When Blanc’s former guitarist returned from the army in April ’69, it didn’t take long for him to float the idea of starting a new band. Two months later Blanc and Fontaine split amicably with Allen to form Ame Son.

From this point things moved very quickly. Within months both Ame Son and Daevid Allen had signed to BYG Records, recorded their debut albums, and shared the stage at the legendary Amougies Festival. Well before Bananamoon split, Allen had nurtured the vision of

a different kind of band. Central to his plan was a flute and sax player he had encountered in Paris, and then, in a bizarre twist of fate, met again in Deya just weeks later. Didier Malherbe told *Shindig!*, "I went to spend the summer in Deya and Daevid was there! Summer of '68 was pretty amazing, one of the best times I've had in my life. We were seeing a lot of each other and playing music, and eventually we kind of decided to set up Gong… not immediately, it came little by little."



> Zoom

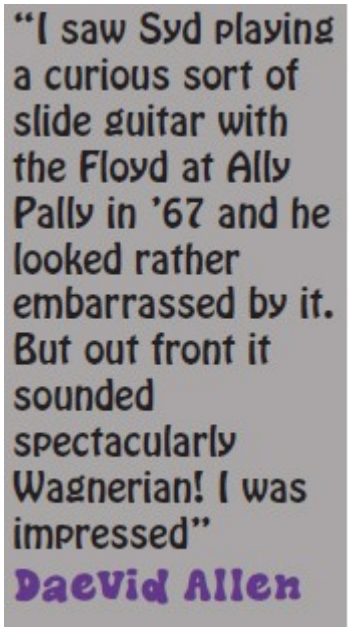
Bananamoon, Balearic Islands, 1968. L-R: Patrick Fontaine, Daevid Allen, Gilli Smyth, Marc Blanc.

With an album to record for BYG, Allen called on Malherbe, who would be the one constant musician at his side for the next five years. According to Bob Benamou, "After Daevid, Didier Malherbe was the most important person in Gong: a great, great musician." Malherbe makes the point that *Magick Brother*, recorded in September '69, isn't a Gong record, but a Daevid Allen solo album with guest musicians: himself, Gilli Smyth, and drummer Rachid Houari – who would all become members of Gong – along with a number of American jazzmen. The LP is a fine set of psychedelic pop songs leavened with flourishes of free-jazz. Most significant in foreshadowing the sound of Gong-tocome are the bookending tracks. 'Mystic Sister' points towards the glissando guitar/space whisper vocal passages of classic Gong, while 'Cos You Got Green Hair' is a more earthy taster of the floating stoned-ambient interludes of the Radio Gnome Invisible trilogy.

Immediately after completing the recording, the group was augmented with bassist Christian Tritsch, violinists Gerry Field and Dieter Gewissler, and the wildcard figure of Daniel Laloux on vocals, hunting horn, and marching drum. This was the line-up that played at The Amougies Festival in October '69.

Because of Allen's relationship with BYG, the band had a feature slot at the festival, headlining the Sunday night lineup of French bands. However, a series of delays and over-runs pushed their appearance into the wee hours of Monday morning. Gerry Field, who left the band immediately after the festival, informs *Shindig!* they were billed as The Daevid Allen Group, and he can't recall the name Gong being used during his tenure. Malherbe relates that it was 5am when they finally took the stage, and shock tactics were needed to energise the fading audience. "People were lying like corpses, half asleep. Daniel Laloux was playing a military drum from the Napoleonic period. So Daniel pounded on his drum, and recited a famous Victor Hugo poem about Napoleon and Waterloo,which was only a couple of kilometres from Amougies." The crowd responded enthusiastically. The remainder of the set featured songs from *Magick Brother* interspersed with a good deal of free improvisation. In

his review for *Rock & Folk* Paul Alessandrini called it an "indisputable success", impressed by the band's perfect balance of "musical delirium" and "devastating humour".



Jérôme Laperrousaz had filmed the festival, but the sound recording of Allen and co's performance proved unusable. To recreate their music for the film, he invited Gong (as they were now known) to move into his family's chateau in Normandy. The band would stay there for the next five months, rehearsing and recording. The tapes from the "haunted chateau" reveal Gong's progression from a psychedelic pop sound to a much harder psych-rock featuring long passages of free improvisation. By the time *Magick Brother* was released in March '70, Gong's music had progressed far beyond it. In fact, Allen is surprisingly dismissive of the album in an early interview. "It doesn't represent the current group. It was a kind of masturbation, or rather the result of massive constipation. In short I relieved myself."

Only a month later Gong's new sound was revealed on the single 'Garçon Ou Fille' which exhibited a new-found aggression: an almost punk energy courtesy of Allen's fuzzed-out guitar and violently delirious vocal. This was just one side of the coin, though. The more esoteric, improvisational aspect of the band can be heard in a performance of 'Dreaming It' filmed at about the same time (and available on YouTube) which brings Malherbe's and Gewissler's contributions to the fore.

Surveying the band's evolution for *Rock & Folk* in '71, Paul Alessandrini was clearly biased towards this era's divergent but oddly cohesive melange of music. He described it as "sonic madness, a kind of violence, with so many original components asserted to excess, without any search for formal perfection". Alessandrini singled out Daniel Laloux, praising his contribution to Gong's "comedic and derisive theatrical side". This first era would be closed when Laloux and Gewissler both departed in May '70. Bob Benamou also highlighted Laloux's early contribution. "He didn't stay long, less than a year, but he was great, completely surrealistic, a fantastic artist." Benamou had been installed as Gong's manager a few months earlier and offered his property in Montaulieu as the band's home base for the summer. Before heading there Gong spent two months in Paris, rehearsing in the cellar below Benamou's antique shop.



> Zoom

The catalyst needed to accelerate Gong's development was discovered just before they left Paris, in the person of Francis Linon, aka Venux De Luxe. Linon admits to *Shindig!* that he blagged his way into the band. "Daevid told me they were on their way to the south and that he needed people to help with the equipment. Without any knowledge at all on what was required, I said, 'I'm the man you're looking for!' and my whole life suddenly changed."

A few days later, he was in Montaulieu with the rest of the band. "It was a typical small village at the top of a hill, where the road ends. Bob owned practically all of it. Behind the village, on a plateau in the wilderness, there was an ancient sheepfold. The electricity had just been connected. This is where we moved in with the equipment. It took us more than a week just to clean up the goat droppings covering the floor. After putting rugs all over, we put the gear in the middle and around the walls some mattresses separated by stretched fabric for a little

privacy. A stove in a corner, the toilets outside, the bathroom in the river... The Gong community was born."

In the three months Gong spent there, Montaulieu became their spiritual home. It was there that communal living became an essential part of their lives, and it was there that Gong's music made a quantum leap; when Linon massaged their sound through his effects processors, a truly cosmic music emerged.

With winter approaching, life in the sheepfold was becoming harder and harder. After a year of nomadic wanderings, Gong needed a permanent base. They found it at Pavillon du Hay, an abandoned hunting lodge 120 km southeast of Paris and supposedly discovered by Gilli Smyth randomly placing her finger on a map. This would be their home until they quit France for the UK three years later.

The passage across '70 had been a formative year for Gong. They had honed their idiosyncratic music style and developed a strong community ethos. They entered '71 with only one seveninch to their name, but with the foundations laid for an incredible creative explosion. The first fruit was Daevid Allen's sophomore solo record. Keen to capitalise on Soft Machine's fame, BYG wanted Allen to record with some of his former bandmates. With the end of his three-year ban, Allen was finally free to travel to the UK and do just that. In February '71 he recorded the *Banana Moon* LP with Robert Wyatt guesting on vocals and drums. Other players on the session included violinist Gerry Field from the Amougies band and drummer Pip Pyle. During the sessions Allen met a young studio engineer who was experimenting with a new EMS synthesiser.



"I met Daevid at Marquee Studios," Tim Blake tells *Shindig!* "He was having trouble finishing *Banana Moon*, so I helped out with the mixing. Daevid invited me to go back with him to France the next day." Blake relocated to Pavillon du Hay, bringing his EMS synth with him. If all had gone according to plan, *Camembert Electrique* would have had a more electronic edge, but a change in drummers put a spanner in the works.

Rachid Houari's wife had never felt at ease in the Gong community, and he finally made the decision to leave the band in spring '71. Allen called in Pip Pyle from the *Banana Moon* sessions to take over. Unfortunately, he and Blake had history. "Pip and I knew each other, but I don't think we liked each other very much!" Pyle particularly hated Blake's synthesiser, claiming that it sounded "like a flock of deranged psychedelic chaffinches". He put his foot down, saying it was either him or Blake. Exit Tim Blake (at least for now).

Pyle's first few months in Gong were a baptism of fire. Continuing its creative streak, the band entered the Chateau d'Herouville studio – Elton John's "Honky Chateau" – in May '71 to record two albums in quick succession. First up was the soundtrack to Jerôme Laperrousaz's film *Continental Circus*. For Allen this was an important opportunity to pay Laperrousaz back for his immense support. In *Gong Dreaming 2* he writes, "We went into the studio clean and clear. With Pip on drums and no rehearsal whatsoever, we completed the soundtrack/album in a series of perfect first takes... recorded, overdubbed and mixed in two days. Jérôme was delighted."

It was Francis Linon's first experience in a recording studio. "Everything was done almost live, I was operating the echo chambers like in a concert. Everything went very quickly and everyone was pleased with the result. What happiness!"

Gong were back in Herouville almost immediately, backing poet Dashiel Hedayat on his album *Obsolete*. Allen was a fan of Hedayat's poetry and was very happy to provide the music for his songs and poems. The album was completed in another whirlwind two-day session and has gone on to be recognised as a classic of the French underground scene. While these albums are overshadowed by *Camembert Electrique*, they are both essential parts of Gong's discography. The longer tracks gave the band the chance to stretch out, showcasing the improvisational power they had developed – most notably on 'Cielo Drive/17' from *Obsolete* and 'Blues For Findlay (instrumental)' from *Continental Circus*.



With two albums under their belt, Gong entered Herouville studios yet again in June '71. This was the main event: a 10-day session to record their debut album. According to Linon, they entered the studio primed to bring the past 12 months to a culmination. "The recording of Camembert Electrique was the concretisation of everything that happened before, the perfect way of life at Montaulieu, and Pavillon du Hay." In Gong Dreaming 2 Allen writes, "The band was right on its own cutting edge so the results were satisfying. Within 10 days we had completed the backing tracks and most instrumental overdubs."

La Planète Gong débarque en France

At their very first encounter in June 1968, Didier Malherbe recalls Daevid Allen spinning tales of the Planet Gong. "We spent quite a few hours that night with Daevid playing his guitar and telling all his funny stories about Pot Head Pixies and The Octave Doctors. He already had all that in his head."

Francis Linon has a similar fond memory of his own first meeting with Allen. "At the end of the night Daevid told me I was from Venus, and he welcomed me to The Planet Gong. He had the revelation of my name 'Venux De Luxe'."

Gong's music may have come of age at Montaulieu, but it was at Pavillon du Hay that the band's mythology was elaborated. Over the long winter nights, the tales became more and more intricate. "It was Daevid's story," Linon told *Shindig!*, "evolving night after night with whoever was present around the table after dinner. At the end of a big delirium, Daevid went back to his room to put it together."

In *Gong Dreaming 2* Allen notes, "A great deal of discussion took place, and much outrageous story-telling. In this company wild flights of fancy were encouraged to the max... On one such night I spontaneously became Bert Camembert, Christian became The Submarine Captain and Gilli became The Good Witch Yoni. The precise design of Flying Teapots was discussed at length and in depth." Malherbe was happy to take part. "To be honest it was mainly Daevid's thing, but I played along with the game. Everyone had a nickname, so I chose my own: Bloomdido, from a tune by Charlie Parker. Then the Anglo-Saxon people translated Malherbe into Bad de Grasse, and Daevid added Count. So I became this character in the Gong mythology: Count Bloomdido Bad de Grasse."

The story of the Pot Head Pixies and The Planet Gong had only been briefly introduced on the *Magick Brother* and *Camembert Electrique* albums, most notably on the incredible graphical and lexical creations gracing their covers. The world would have to wait until Flying Teapot arrived in '73 to learn the whole tale.

There was a two-month gap before the mixing sessions took place in September '71. Allen recalled listening to the final playback. "I felt a deep sense of completion and I was very happy. For the moment, we had already won. I had the feeling that this album would be around for a long time." Between the two sessions Allen had led the band across the channel to play at the '71 Glastonbury Festival, and for him their first gig in England was also a homecoming. Francis Linon's account of the event is striking. "Glastonbury was like a vortex. No one could stop us doing it. We went through customs without any papers, just a smile on our faces and Gilli driving. We were real aliens, not speaking the same language, going home to this magic place." The band had just kicked off their afternoon set when disaster seemed to strike." As soon as we started, in a climax going up, the generator broke down." This setback actually ended up being a godsend.

Allen picks up the story in *Gong Dreaming 2*. "By the time we resumed it was that magic sunset time and we were now in the glow of stage lights. We had barely started when I looked up to see a pied piper line of a thousand or so dancing people snaking down the hill to gather at the front of the stage cavorting and rejoicing to the music of this odd French band called Gong... This was the kind of audience that Gong had been created for, and the gathering awareness of this was running both ways at once. This was our English spiritual family."

A certain Richard Branson was in the audience that day, and very soon he would be making overtures to the band. Gong would continue to live in France for some time, but their interplay with England would increase. The next album would be recorded at Virgin's Manor studio, and over time more English musicians would be added to the line-up. Gong would never lose its French influence, but after Glastonbury it would never be quite as strong. A new chapter had begun.

Ian would like to thank Bob Benamou, Marc Blanc, Patrick Fontaine, Didier Malherbe, Gerry Field, Francis Linon, Tim Blake, and Aymeric Leroy for their generous contributions.

Gong tour later this year and a box set is due soon.
For news visit planetgong.co.uk

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

Robert Wyatt - interview with a reclusive legend - Witchdoctor - March 8, 2021

witchdoctor
Shiny New Things

Robert Wyatt – interview with a reclusive legend

March 9, 2021 · Gary Steel · Albums·Interviews·Music·Recordings

Fresh from soaking up Robert Wyatt's newish book of lyrics and illustrations, GARY STEEL thought the time was right to disinter and publish - for the first time ever - his complete interview with the reclusive legend.



Note: This interview was conducted on August 23, 2007, around the then-

imminent release of his Comicopera album. I was nervous as anything because Robert Wyatt means a lot to me. His music has been a constant in my life, from the early psychedelic explorations of Soft Machine to his idiosyncratic early '70s group Matching Mole and on to an ever-evolving solo career that touches me so personally and so deeply that it's hard to critique or explain. Recently, Wyatt - now 76 - announced his retirement from recording projects.

Robert Wyatt – Hello.

Gary Steel – Hi, I'm Gary from New Zealand.

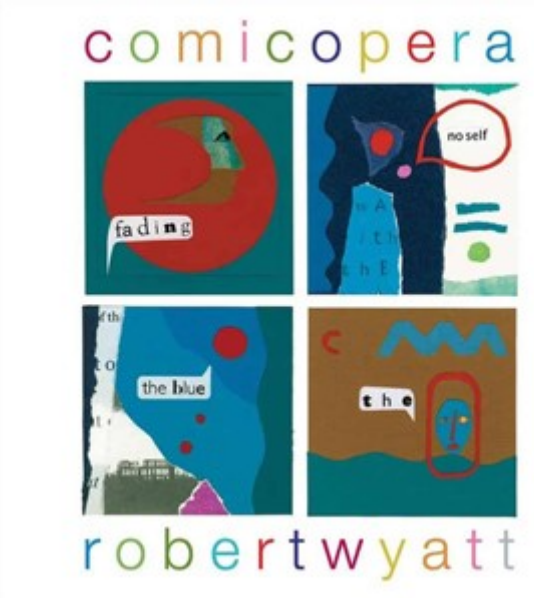
Robert – Yeah, I've been trying to work out… it must be very early morning there or something.

Gary – It's not too bad, it's 9am.

Robert – Okay, I'm relieved to hear that, I couldn't work it out, because I know Japan is about eight hours different, I thought it must be something about that, maybe more I suppose, I don't know.

Gary – We're normally about a full day… you'd be about 9 o'clock at night?

Robert – We're 10 o'clock in the evening.



Gary – We're about 12 hours ahead of you.

Robert – It's quite convenient in a way but it's just upside-down. How very Antipodean.

Gary – The complication is that we have daylight savings, and so it changes at certain times of the year.

Robert – Well we do that too. I thought Britain was the only place that did that. We change twice a year, we change the time as well.

Gary – Anyway I don't want to waste your time!

Robert – Yeah, it's just interesting.

Gary – The record company said they'd try to get me a copy of Comicopera to listen to, but it hasn't turned up, so you're going to have to help me a little bit.

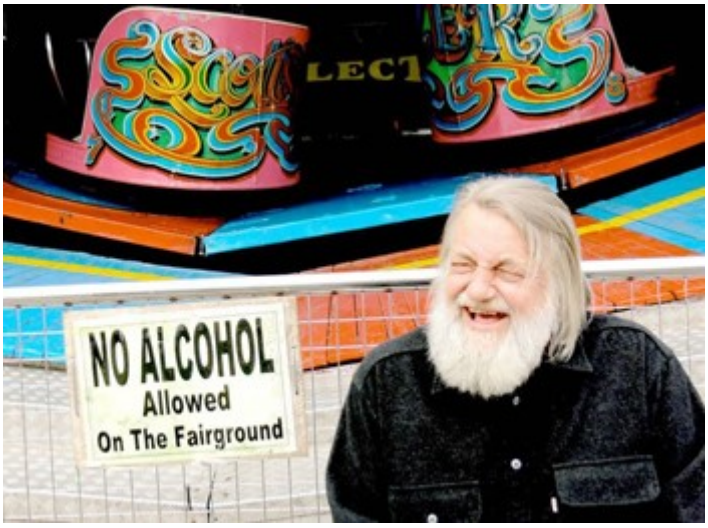
Robert – You're going to have to write from a different dimension.

Gary – It's not, I take it, an actual opera.

Robert – No, what can I say. I made a record a few years ago called Cuckooland, and this record has got much the same core of people on it. So it's me with three or four musicians that are sort of imitation family. I say "imitation", because we don't actually go on the road and live together in a van like a real band. But in fact, they're so desperate… if we were a proper band they wouldn't have me in it anyway.

But they're mostly jazz musicians, and just for a day or two in the studio, I've found the people who really help me do my songs right. A bloke called Yaron Stavi on double bass, and Gilad Atzmon on saxophone, reeds and clarinet, and a woman called Annie Whitehead who plays trombone, and that's the basic add-ons to me, and I do a bit of percussion, a bit of singing, obviously, and a bit of trumpet, and we've got a few guests. I got a couple of rock and roll guitarists in, but they don't really play rock and roll on my record. I just like what they do and they're friends.

Gary – Phil Manzanera and Paul Weller?



Robert – Phil did a wheel-on part on one track on this one, and he did one on the last, and Paul did two songs on this one and two songs on the last one, and two songs on the one before I think. He always comes up with something nice, and I love him. It's basically a bunch of jazzers not playing jazz is what it is. It's a bit more "bandy" than the last one. On the last record, I had my songs and I do this, I take stuff in as if I was going to make a solo LP with keyboards and beef it up with guests, but in this case, I actually planned it more with these elementary musicians in mind, so it's more upfront with the trombones and stuff like that playing a bit more "in there" like a band sort of thing. And that's about it really, it's not an opera, you're dead right there (laughs).



Paul Weller with Robert Wyatt

Gary – You described them as jazz musicians as though you're not. I would have called you a jazz musician in many ways.

Robert – Well, that's my music but… it's what I'm based in. There are such a lot of squabbles that go on in the jazz community about what is jazz and who is jazz and what it isn't. I'd rather keep out of it and use jazz musicians.

A lot of how I work and what inspired me to be a musician… when I was a schoolboy, was jazz. I mean I listened to lots of other stuff, my Dad had lots of 20th Century classical music and I had pop records and I liked all these things, but the thing that completely grabbed me and took my heart was jazz, and it still does really, and the same records too. Old Duke Ellington things and Charles Mingus and Coltrane and, the usual suspects.

Annie Whitehead, who is the perfect trombonist but like a lot of us struggles to write tunes, said 'where do you get 'em from'? She's very nice about my tunes and says she likes playing my tunes. I said I've got a really, really good record collection. I don't consciously nick stuff, it's just that I get so many ideas. Like in one Sonny Rollins solo, there's about 18 really good ideas for a tune, if you slow those little bebop lines down. If you hear what they're doing, on any chord sequence, even if it's just a well-known song or a blues, they're showing you how to get so many different notes out of any given situation,

and I'm just so grateful to them for that.



Robert Wyatt in the early '80s

So in that sense, jazz is my roots and my sustenance and everything like that. But on the other hand jazz musicians I know, they can all read music properly and have some kind of virtuosity on a musical instrument, and the only thing I ever really got to grips with was the drum kit, and of course, I stopped playing that 30 years ago.

Gary – There are many so-called jazz musicians out there who do interpretations of jazz standards and even their own tunes, but they sound just like carbon copies of what went before. In your case, every single record you do is just uniquely you to the naked ear. Do you feel that you're in your own way interpreting your influences? I guess what I'm trying to say is that when I listen to your records, they sound like a new vocabulary of music in a sense.

Robert – I'm glad you hear it like that. As far as I'm concerned, especially since I stopped drumming, I've had to invent a kind of music that I can do, that suits me, and has elements of other kinds. But I've had to invent a one-person genre in a way. It's not a deliberate attempt to be different, or anything like that, it's how I find I can work.

One of the things about being a singer is that any sort of American influence shows up very strongly in people's accents… (mimics 'I want to go' in both English and American accents). Everybody becomes a sort of ersatz American and I find that slightly embarrassing. English popular musicians were so drenched in black music that it's quite natural that singers all the way through rock and jazz history have sung in American accents. Joss Stone now is brilliant at it or English blues singers in the '60s or whatever. That was alright when I was doing other people's material, but when I write songs the words are so English really, and they just don't come out like that. The only thing that works for me is to sing more or less how I talk, it's nothing like anybody who invented jazz talks, really, it's not deliberate, I wasn't born in New Orleans.

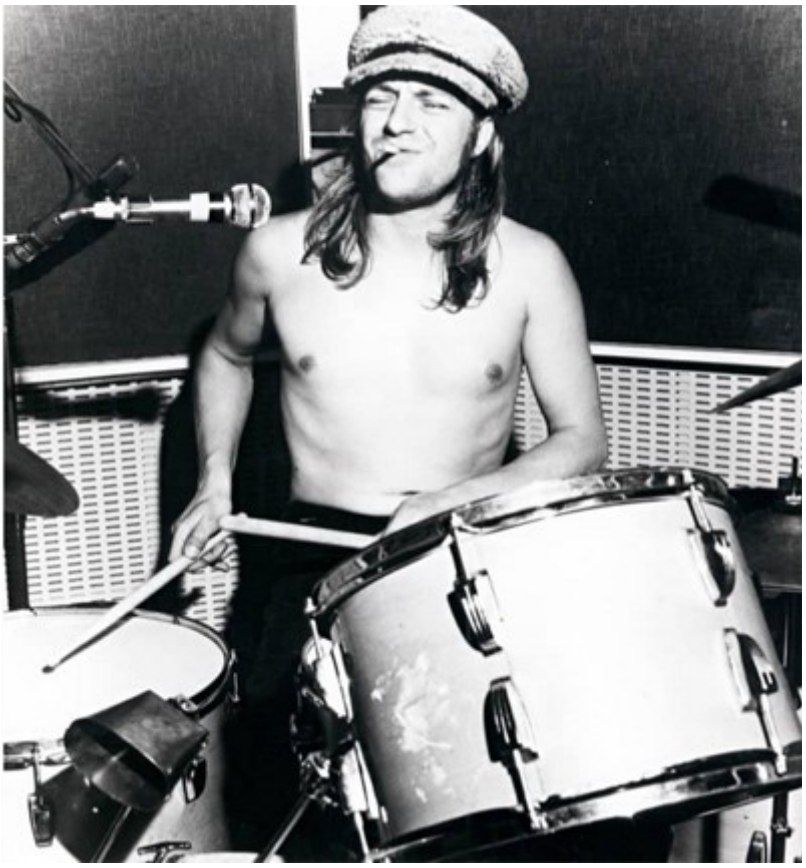
Gary – Was there any great flash of inspiration when you came up with your vocal style? Of course nobody sounds like you do, or can turn a tune on its head the way you do. Is that just the way it came out when you started singing, or was there some thought process going on?

Robert – Just an instinctive flinching when things went wrong, and trying not to do that again, whatever it was. There's a sort of… really I don't think particularly like a singer so I don't particularly sort of listen to other singers for guidelines. Not now, when I was younger I used to listen to… well because I had a high voice, I couldn't sing like any of the blokes, so I used to try and sing like Dionne Warwick or something. That was a good place to start, because she hits good notes and had some fantastic material to sing and that nailed it; how to do good songs with a true but soulful voice.

But I just found that… some French person once said to me it's so sad, the English, you haven't got any great operas, because nobody can sing in English, and I knew what she meant. Latin languages are much more conducive to singing, somehow, the way words flow. And English, being Germanic, is more guttural. We've got strange little grunty noises that don't turn easily into long notes. There are so many things I tried to do that just don't feel right coming out of my mouth, they sound like I'm a bad actor. And getting rid of all that stuff, I just use what I've got left really, and my influences how to phrase tunes come as much from listening to Coltrane doing a ballad, or something like that, as much as any singer.

The main thing I'm trying to do is hit the right note for about the right length of time, and have the vowels and consonants in the correct order, and the rest of it is just being really careful what material I choose to sing in the first place, so that it's got a good chance of coming out the way that it's meant to be. And the rest is just professional technique… I've learnt quite a lot about breathing and all that, common sense stuff like if you're going to

do a long note, take a deep breath first, get one in you know? [laughs]



Wyatt drumming for Soft Machine in the '60s

Gary – Have you ever thought of doing a whole album of covers? Like years ago you did 'At Last We Are Free' and of course, 'I'm A Believer'.

Robert – I guess you could put an album together of all my covers. I really like singing other people's songs because it makes you do things you might not think of yourself. All I'm really interested in in a record is making a kind of record that I would like to hear that doesn't already exist. Simple as that.

Preferably I'd probably always put on an old Charles Mingus record, but I'm not going to make one of those, I'm going to make a record that I want to listen to that ISN'T a Charles Mingus record. [laughs]. I sort of nailed that one.

I'm more interested in the whole record, the totality of the record. My singing, I take the responsibility for the voice and having to carry it, but I also like parcelling out the sound, because even a good singer can get monotonous.

So one of the things about the 'opera thing' was to split it up into three 20-minute chunks. It's over an hour long, and 20 minutes is a reasonable length of time to listen to a piece of music. The last one I split it up into two halves, and this one three thirds. And then I bunched the pieces together roughly in a sort of either atmosphere, or what the words might be about.

There's one song on it which is very difficult to sing because the words are written by my wife, a song called 'Out Of The Blue', just about what it might be like having your house bombed from an aeroplane. And you can't put after that a little comedy song about walking down the street… so you have to be careful where you put things. So the first third is more personal songs about love and lust and stuff, the second lot is walking around the streets seeing things that go on, and then it goes to this bombing thing, and then I go off into singing in foreign languages, speaking in tongues, and there's a bit more improvisation and kind of general alienation. The last third I get totally fed up with being English altogether actually, and pretend I'm not. You sing in a foreign language and it's a nice feeling, it's a bit like putting on ladies underwear or something… it doesn't make you foreign but it gives you that frisson of difference.

Gary – You've done a lot of collaborations over the years and going back to the

'70s you seem to have friends who were in bands like Gong and Henry Cow and Hatfield & The North, and you worked with Mike Mantler and so forth. Of course, on your latest output all those musicians are long gone from your musical world. Is that just a kind of natural attrition from your musical fraternities or is it more a friendship thing.
Members of Soft Machine with Wyatt in the middle

Robert – I've forgotten what attrition means. Well, some of the early collaborations, they split into two sorts. One is where they ask me and the other is where I ask them. And so some of them I didn't seek out but they just arrived. For example I would never have dreamt of saying to Mike Mantler or Carla Bley 'can I sing some of your music?' It wouldn't have occurred to me. So it was an amazing thing that just cropped up, and I've stayed friends with that little family; and I've been working with Mike and Carla's daughter, and she's on the last record and she's the same age as Carla when I first worked with Carla. A cycle of events really. However, Mike lives in Denmark and Karen lives in New York and her mother lives in upstate New York so there's not much. Karen is on the record I've just done, I used Karen's voice which I'd recorded last time she was in England, put it onto keyboard, sampled it and used it a bit. I like doing that.



But I always look for musicians who are a combination of really good friends, people I really like, and some ways unique, and have a voice that's really distinct. Again, that's something I learnt from jazz, like Duke Ellington, where everyone in the band had a character, so you'd have a trumpet section but Harold Baker didn't play many solos but had a very distinctive lead sound, they all had character, and I thought that's what distinguished Duke Ellington from bands where you just had a sax section or a trumpet section.

And I always wanted everyone on my records to be an identifiable human being and not just a clever noise. I wanted that, and I wanted to be friends with them because I'm fed up with playing with people that were clever but we didn't get on that well. I'm not doing that anymore. But also musicians that are really good but… don't patronise me but are comfortable working with me because I can't really read music, and I know they will understand the chords without me having to say what they are. A lovely bunch. And Annie Whitehead can read anything. But also modern jazz musicians now are more broad-minded, because everyone's used to playing with people from different parts of the world, and you get all these jazz experiments with Africans and Indians and people with completely different traditions, and it's taken on board now much more than the old days.

I don't really feel very associated with a lot of the musicians I did happen to work with in the '60s and '70s. I dunno, although what I do isn't pop music, it's not deliberately extra clever or anything like that. I don't know how to put it. I try to be pretty clear and emotionally direct in what I'm doing. I don't really like being deliberately obscure or taking pride in the fact that people can't understand what I'm doing. I get embarrassed by that. It's hard enough to get across to people anyway without putting obstacles… I found the musicians I work with now more comfortable. It's changed a lot since I was a drummer as well. And I just really like these people, and I really like working at Phil Manzanera's studio, and I like his engineer Jamie. And I've also got some guests on this one. I like getting a few, because I don't do live gigs or anything.



I don't live in London or near London anymore, I live in a small country town which is very nice, but I do miss cosmopolitan things, so on the first track I think it is, I've got a young woman of I think Chinese origin, who plays clarinet and sings like a theremin, and there's a Brazilian singer called Monica Vasconcelos, who sings on the second one, and a bloke called Orphy Robinson who plays vibes and steel pans on another… he's of Jamaican ancestry. It just keeps the pot boiling for me, you know? It shifts the colours around a bit, but it still ends up just another Robert Wyatt record really.
Robert Wyatt interview
Wyatt out and about

Gary – Well it's quite a good work rate, only three years since the last one.

Robert – Yeah, I think it's because everything about the setup of the last one seemed good, so I wanted to carry on really. I thought this is really great, with Annie and Yaron on bass. He's lovely, we get on really well, and Jamie the engineer is terrific, and we've watched him grow from novice adolescence to… in a few years he's become a married man and a dad. In fact, his father's a member of parliament, he's got much grander, and he's just engineered the Razorlight record, so I have to pay him more now. But he's not flash with it, he's really nice and funny.

Phil Manzanera's studio in Kilburn is really friendly. Phil's a great friend, and Brian Eno lives just a bicycle ride around the corner, and it's like 'I'm really enjoying this, I want to do it again'. In the past when I've tried to make records I've thought 'if I have an idea, how am I going to do it, who am I going to do it with'. This time I knew, so it encouraged the process of getting all my bits and pieces together. That, and finding myself in my sixties and thinking 'blimey, I'd better get some more stuff done before I'm completely ga-ga'.

Gary – Well you've outlasted Top Of The Pops.

Robert – I've outlived Top Of The Pops, you're right! Blimey, what do you know.

Gary – So what do you make of youngsters who would debate the merits of a Soft Machine live reissue?

Robert – Well, I'm very grateful. In fact, there's a French magazine called Improjazz which, as the title suggests, starts off with the Ornette Coleman area, and Sun Ra and stuff. But they also deal with a lot of the music I was involved in when I was a kit drummer, and they do indeed go through that stuff. I don't think about it much, but I have been shown a couple of videos people have dug up of when I was beardless and drumming. And it's so long ago it's like someone else, but I find it quite poignant really, and I'm grateful that people hold onto some of that. All the acrimony that went on in the band at the time, young men too much testosterone stuff, that's all just evaporated and I can appreciate what we were trying to do. Wincing at the mistakes, but realising it wasn't a complete waste of time.

I mean I'm still listening to Duke Ellington for god sake, you don't only have to listen to the stuff of your time. I find it difficult to listen to, but some of it is much better than I realised at the time, and does in fact involve a musician of New Zealand origin, which is Dave MacRae. He ended up with us in Matching Mole. There's a Matching Mole On The Radio put out by Hux records, and Dave's such a knockout on it on electric piano. He was married to a woman called Joy, a session singer, who's also a New Zealander. I think they

now both work in Australia, but I miss Dave, I'd certainly work with Dave if he were available. He was one of the first jazz musicians I knew who was a cracking technician, but so confident that he didn't mind at all playing with people like me. He actually did quite a bit of session work with people who knew less about music than I did. But he was always very nice and wasn't at all snobbish about his skill, he would just use it where it was appropriate.

People go away and move around. Some of the people I used to work with I have no idea where they are really.



Wyatt in the '70s

Gary – Are you familiar with this saying 'Wyatting'?

Robert – Yeah, it means clearing a room quickly by putting on an intolerable record, and I was chosen.

Gary – I don't know if it meant terrible, just weird I think.

Robert – I'm very sad and I feel very sorry for myself.

Gary – I thought you'd see it as a great honour.

Robert – I don't because I'm not like that. I would never put on a record if I thought somebody in the room didn't like it, and I never even send people my CDs and say 'this is my CD'… I'd be too embarrassed. I wouldn't impose what I do on anybody, because I know it's not everybody's taste, and so the idea that other people would impose my music on people who didn't like it I find a bit… I would never do 'Wyatting', put it that way.

Gary – I was thinking that the first time you hear something that's out of the envelope, your reaction tends to be in the negative. Anything that's good you tend to go 'I don't know if I like this', and then you play it again.

Robert – Yeah, well I've done that, that's true. When I first hear what used to be called modern jazz, bebop, in the '50s when I was still at school, they were playing so fast I just couldn't think why they were playing so fast, I couldn't tell the difference between one note and another, it just sounded like they were beating a bottle, I didn't see the point of what they were doing at all. It took me quite a lot of work to actually hear the underlying chord sequence that they were playing variations on, by listening out for what the piano and bass were doing, and I realised that it was in fact a chord sequence based on some popular song, and I'd sing along to it, and I'd realise the amazing skill and ingenuity of what they were doing. It baffled me at first, it was just like people shouting at you in a foreign language. But I stuck with it because it seemed to have such an authority to it. These people really know what they're doing, but I can't work out what it is. But I was just intrigued. My Dad had brought me up listening to Stravinsky and everybody, I don't need 'easy', but I just didn't know what they were doing. So I can see that maybe some of the stuff we've been involved in might have been a bit like that.

Gary – A lot of your older records seem to be out of print at the moment.

Robert – [I hope] Domino will take over the back catalogue and put them out, because there's a heap of a few thousand records there, and we certainly don't want them scrapped just because they haven't got the right record label now. So, they're a bit dubious about it, but we're hoping they will do that, but apart from that, they will be doing the back catalogue.

The Ryko thing… Ryko sort of got asset-stripped by some vast anonymous conglomerate and lost their bearings. They were surprised that we left and very pissed off, but my wife is my manager and she's very canny, and she had a clause in the contract that said we can't be used as collateral in takeover stuff in record companies. We want to choose the record company we're with and know who they are, and Domino turned up and they're great, I like them very much.



Gary – Yes well, it's interesting that in little old New Zealand Domino is being distributed by EMI, so you're back with the same company that distributes Virgin.

Robert – There's no escaping monopoly capitalist society as old lefties like me already knew. There you go. It still means I know who I'm talking to, and it's not some anonymous Texan who hasn't got a clue what I do. I'm too old for that crap.
Robert Wyatt

Gary – Robert, I could talk with you for hours but I should let you go.

Robert – I hope you think it's alright [the record]. It's not that surprising, it's what I usually do, my wife wrote half the words as usual, and then a few songs by other people… with an old Cuban folk song, and the rest is the usual stuff really with a bit more instruments in it. You don't have to hear it now, do you? [laughs].

Gary Steel

Selected Lyrics by Robert Wyatt & Alfie Benge – Side By Side is out now. Get it from Schrödinger's Books.

>> The interview on Witchdoctor

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

"I'm so somewhere else now..." - Uncut N° 274 - March 2020



"I'm so **somewhere else** now..."

Many happy returns, **ROBERT WYATT**! As he celebrates his 75th birthday, a national treasure invites *Uncut* round for a chat. Over carrot cake, Tom Pinnock hears tales of the Soft Machine, Pink Floyd and Wyatt's own wide ranging musical appetites. But will he ever make new music again? "Occasionally I hit the piano and go, 'Ah, that would be good, I must remember that!'..."

Photo by JEREMY GRAYSON

THE tea is made, the carrot cake is ready to be sliced and Robert Wyatt has just slid his electric wheelchair under the edge of the dining table when he realises he's forgotten the cake knife. *Uncut* offers to fetch it from the kitchen.

"No, it's all right," Wyatt says, reversing his chair. "I can get it without standing up, mate."

He returns with a huge knife - "It's a bit Agatha Christie" - and proceeds to slice the cake. "It's great, I can sit anywhere in town," he adds, detailing one of the advantages of being wheelchair-bound, "while everyone else has to sit on a bench. It's a bit toytown round here, like one of those imaginary places in train sets, but that's no bad thing."

The town in question is Louth in the Lincolnshire Wolds, where Wyatt and his wife Alfreda Benge have lived for over 30 years. Their house, situated right in the hilly centre, is deceptively large, its ground floor stretching back through room after room. The space facing the street is Wyatt's music room, complete with a baby grand piano and woven Tunisian wall hangings, while other areas are decorated with prints and paintings by the likes of Oblique Strategies co-creator Peter Schmidt. While Wyatt might have retired from making his own records after 2oo7's *Comicopera*, music still plays a huge part in his life and Benge's: indeed,

when *Uncut* arrives, *Who Is In Love?*, by Iranian singer Shahram Nazeri, is blasting through the large dining room stereo.

"A friend of mine just came back from the Iranian film festival," Wyatt explains, adjusting his yellow-and-pink glasses. "Apart from being irritated that she couldn't wear her designer clothes there, she brought back some records for me. What I really like is Iranian singing, it's just beautiful, so I've been playing this."

On January 28, Robert Wyatt turns 75. It's a milestone he didn't expect to reach. To discover how retirement is treating one of our musical national treasures, *Uncut* has travelled to Lincolnshire for an afternoon with the singer, songwriter and musician; during our time in Louth, Wyatt regales us with tales of Soft Machine and The Wilde Flowers, of Daevid Allen, Kevin Ayers, Nick Mason and Brian Eno, of hanging out with Robert Graves in Majorca, and of his own shape-shifting musical passions. He explains how he and his wife's health problems are inevitably changing their lives, but also why putting together a forthcoming book of their lyrics for Faber has revitalised them.

"It's a great thing that's happened in terms of tidying up who we are, me and Alfie. They gave us a couple of months to sort it out, with Alfie's stuff too - we're doing it together. Alfie keeps diaries which is lucky, but we had to remember the situations in which certain records were made, which was a good exercise for elderly, forgetful people. The timing was fantastic - just as we were finishing the book, Alfie started to get seriously ill to the point where we couldn't have carried on doing it. She's being taken care of, having operations and scans, and she will be for months. We'll see how that goes."

Wyatt's son Sam is sleeping upstairs. He's a nurse at a nearby hospital, and often stops in at their house to rest after night shifts. It's been more than helpful, considering their health issues, to have him there, and Wyatt seems to take huge pleasure in spending time with him.



"I was very lucky": At the piano soon after the release of *Rock Bottom*, september 1974

"By the time he was 19 and he'd delivered his first baby, I thought, 'He's already done something much more important than I will ever do in my life.' I wasn't there for him as a dad, but he doesn't seem to be resentful at all. It's great having him here because, well, he's a nurse, but he's also very kind and very clever. You can't look anywhere in the house without seeing something he fixed.

"One of the things that changes as you get older is the past," Wyatt adds, pondering life as he approaches his 75th birthday, free of alcohol or cigarettes but as lucid, frank, modest and wryly funny as ever. "It's like you're born in a village at the bottom of a valley and it's all you know. Then your life is spent climbing up this mountain and you're looking back down, and you see your village is just one of many villages. Then you see there's a whole landscape and you see the horizon - you can still see your little village, you know where it is, but you're

seeing it from this strange height. It just looks so different. That was one of the weirdest things about putting these lyrics together for the book. 'Did I really write that?'"

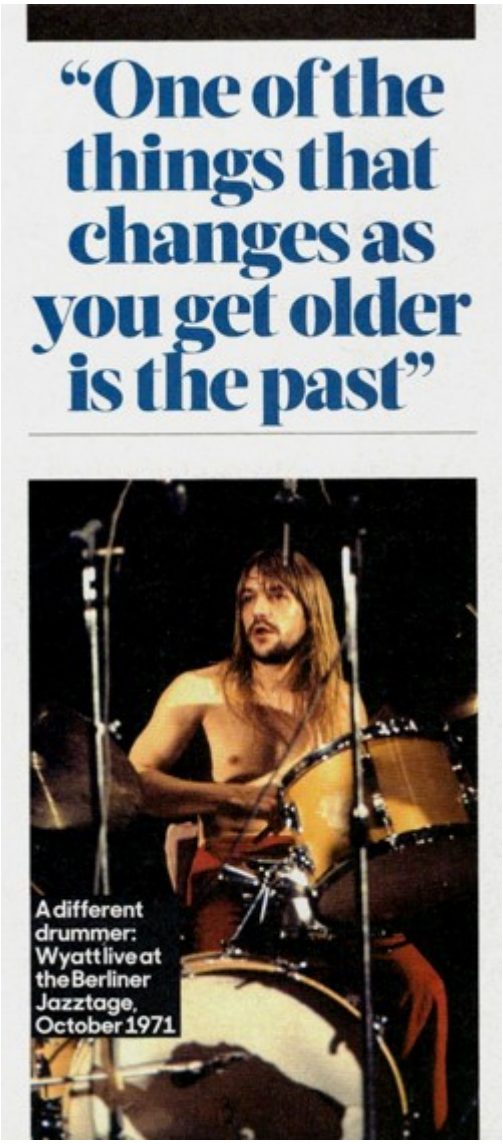
Cutting another slice of cake, Wyatt gestures to *Uncut*'s recording gear. "Are you sure you're getting this? John Walters came up and recorded me for the BBC once, and none of it came out. I don't mind, I can just do it again. But the alarming thing is I always seem to say something quite different to the previous time."

UNCUT: It sounds like you never imagined yourself getting to 75.

WYATT: Absolutely not, no. As far as I'm concerned, every surge of activity in my life was a sprint, which is a particular kind of energy. But then I'd get to the end of the sprint and fuck me, there's another one! If only I'd have known that, in retrospect, it was a fucking marathon! Nobody told me - if they had I'd have taken care of myself better and paced myself, instead of living in a panic all the time.

In 2014, you told *Uncut* that you'd retired from music. Your last few albums were so well received, I guess it was the perfect run to go out on?

One reason I stopped was that my dad had died long before my age, so I didn't know how to behave older than that. But I did find that [2007's] *Comicopera* was exactly how I wanted it to be, and it was partly thanks to this great engineer Jamie Johnson; I also got Alfie to do half the [*lyric*] writing. There were also the people I got to play in my imaginary band, like Annie Whitehead, Phil Manzanera, Paul Weller and Yaron Stavi. The trouble with proper groups is I can't follow and I can't lead, so I'm a bit stuck really.



Obviously, there's some great Soft Machine and Matching Mole stuff, but it does seem like you flourished, creatively, almost immediately after you had your accident and could no longer play drums in a group.

It's tough being in a band. All that diplomacy, and testosterone-fuelled young men. I actually really liked doing a few records entirely on my own, like [1991's] *Dondestan*. Somebody once said to me, "It's amazing you could do all that on your own." And I said, "You're amazed?! I'm fucking stunned! How the fuck did I do that?" I always just tried to make a good record, by any means I could; but I got to the point where I was trying to do something different, then I'd listen to it and think, 'Oh, it's another fuckin' Robert Wyatt record, isn't it? How can I break out of this cage?'

Many people would be quite happy to hear you in that particular cage.

Well, I just stopped in the end.

Do you miss it?

It's hard to say. I'm so somewhere else now, because me and the missus have our life now and it's just not built around making records any more. I'd rather sit around chatting with Alfie, really. If I'm thinking about happy memories, I wouldn't remember this gig or that gig - but what I do remember is getting into Alfie's little car, getting the wheelchair in the back, going off down the road and stopping at those little caravans where you can get a fried egg sandwich, and just sitting there for a bit in the layby. Alfie nips out and gets a sandwich and a cup of tea, we'll open the windows, have a fag. They're moments of

utter happiness that I remember, and I feel quite tearful about it now, because it will never happen again.

They're the most important things in life, tough, aren't they, love and companionship?

Getting older, the saddest thing I've had to give up is going down to London - I was invited to George Galloway's book launch, and I couldn't go. I think they thought it was because I didn't want to go, but I would absolutely have loved to. He's a brilliant man. Of course, not everybody thinks so - but I do. Then Nick Mason asked me if I could do an encore with *A Saucerful Of Secrets* singing "I'm A Believer", and I thought, 'That is a wonderful idea!" But I had to say no. I felt quite tearful about that too, because I would have loved to be with him again on a big occasion.



Wyatt in his music room in Louth, February 16, 2014

Couldn't they at least have sent a car up to take you London, though?

They offered all that, but I just can't. Being quite so disabled as I have become really does sometimes mean "disabled". It's nice that people don't think that, though, that I don't come across first and foremost as a cripple! *[laughs*] When we first met Ian Dury, his band were quite misshapen, the drummer was on a crutch, so Alfie jokingly said, "You could have Robert in your group." And Ian said, "Got enough fuckin' cripples in the band already!" He had a point. It would have been a fuckin' business carting us lot about. Alfie's imminently 80, and she needs physical comfort and peace - and I just don't do things without Alfie. You might think, 'What's the point of living older?' Well, one thing having lived this long is that we have this bunch of stuff we've done - if you look downwards from one end [*of my years*] to the other, it seems like a lot of stuff, more than I realised. So putting this book of lyrics together

has been a good feeling, and a good mental exercise. I'm glad we've lived long enough to do it, frankly.

How did you find the process of looking back over your work?

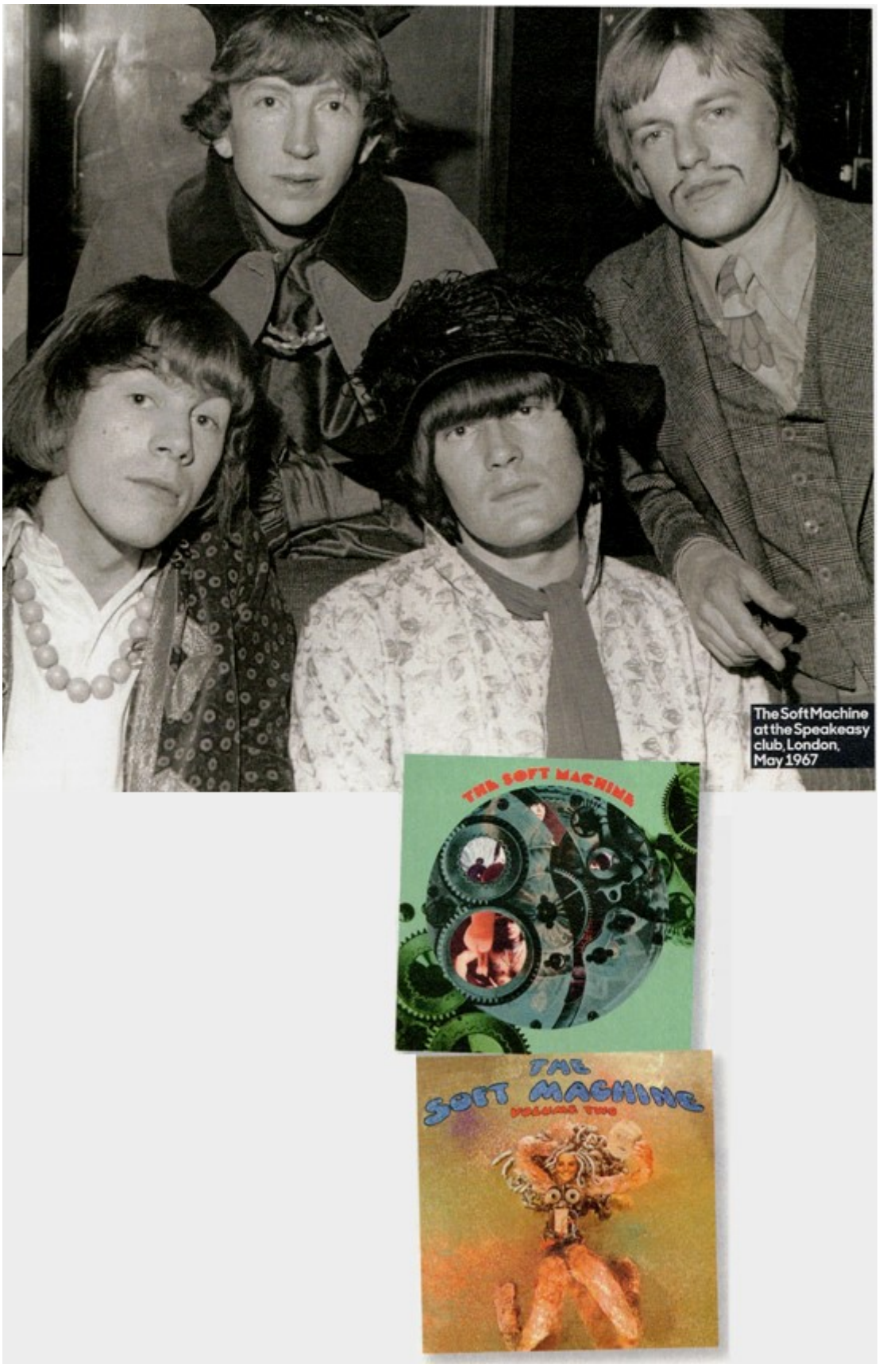
It caused quite a few sleepless nights. When I first tried to get some stuff together, I thought, 'I've only got enough for about 20 pages, this isn't gonna work.' I was thinking of Van Morrison - in his book he just put in 100 long things he'd done, and I was thinking, 'Bloody hell...' I do a lot of other people's tunes, and if you pick out the ones that I wrote without Alfie, it's not much.

You found enough for more than 20 pages, then?

Alfie and I are doing it together, and we also picked some funny little wordy things we'd done. There's a bit of annotation too. All my stuff was in these messy notebooks, but I think I got everything - oh, apart from one short lyric, a take on "Freight Train": "*Coltrane, Coltrane, going so fast/Wonder how your breath can last/I don't know what mode you're in/They all sound Greek to me.*" I forgot to put it in the book! So now you've got it [*laughs*]. When I made those records, everything went into each one, and that was the end of that journey. It wasn't played live.

That was quite a turnaround, considering the amount of gigging you did before your accident.

An amazing amount! That was a whole life there, even two. Before '68, we were this English grammar school band, a bit shaky, but we did our thing. That was a really friendly little band, with Daevid Allen and Kevin Ayers, just friends. We were also not like each other, which is why it couldn't have lasted. But to be young with, they were great. The early years playing in bands like The Wilde Flowers was the most fun - if I'd only ever done that, I'd be quite happy.



Once Soft Machine took off, though, you were playing all the time, from UFO and Middle Earth to touring America with Jimi Hendrix.

Playing the gigs required such concentration, listening to each other and keeping it all flowing, that I'd hardly register where we were, exactly. Talking of places like UFO, I remember that us and Pink Floyd and used to watch each other when we played the same venues, and there was just total mutual respect - you couldn't be rivals when you were trying to do completely

different things. I'm just grateful to the brilliant musicians I got to play for. Supporting Hendrix was very scary - if you're in an aircraft hangar with 5,000 Texans in it, you've gotta fuckin' get on with it and not stop until your half-hour is up. But it meant we came back to the UK really able to hit the ground running.

You'd lost Kevin Ayers somewhere along the way, though...

Yeah, without Kevin, of course. He'd had enough, and quite rightly he wanted to go and write his songs. I do get upset when he'd say later that he "wasn't technical enough" for the band - he was very good! I loved drumming with his bass playing, I loved his deep *sprechgesang* singing, a good contrast to mine, and I loved doing his songs.



When did everything start for you? I imagine it must have been a huge moment when Daevid Allen first turned up to lodge with your family in Lydden.

I'd already got into a lot of music through my brother Mark - he brought home the first Mingus and Ornette Coleman - but Daevid showed me how to live another way. Lydden was a little village then, there was just a post office, a few houses, a pub, and Daevid used to take his dog out for a walk, up and down... his dog being a tin on a long string. I was very impressed by that. When I first played music with Daevid, it was jazz and poetry. He would read out this poetry and Hugh Hopper and I would fiddle-fiddle, toodly-boodly behind him. I was at school and doing worse as the years went by, but one of the people who said "you don't have to approach life like that" was Daevid. He was the person who was doing what we assumed Dadaists did, which was inventing their own lives, writing their own scripts. That became a way out for me.

Did you already know Robert Graves, a similar free spirit, when you met Daevid?

Oh yeah, I think so. My parents had been in Majorca before the war, and I visited him there in the early '6os, and he was wonderful, a kind man, a patrician. He had a head you might see on a Roman coin, and his family were great to me. They still are. Robert had a little cottage on his plot halfway down the mountain, and he let me stay there. I was invited up to the house occasionally to hang around, but if you dined with Robert you had to do something, a turn or a poem or a joke or a song. Robert's son-in-law Ramon and I would sit opposite each other and imitate timbales for about five minutes! Simple things about living there were so exotic to me, like fig trees with great purple figs hanging there. But you didn't bite into them, because they'd probably got wasps inside! A perfect symbol of life itself. Kevin came with me once too, and I know that Kevin and Daevid went out there together too, and wrote some great songs there, which should have been the basis of the first Soft Machine LP, but it never got made. I think it would have been very good.

Were you aware of any of Graves' famous "muses" back then?

The muse thing was a bit over my head at the time. Most of that stuff is just retrospective understanding of who he was. It sounds a bit old-fashioned, doesn't it? Alfie doesn't like this muse thing - sometimes she gets called my muse: "I'm not your fuckin' muse. I'm Alfie, fuck off!"

That sounds a little like some of Alfie's lines on Rock Bottom - "*I'm not your larder/I'm Alife your guarder...*"

There was a feeling of relief about that record. It was the first time I hadn't had to be a drummer, so I could just take charge of the whole record. I was very lucky, because I had nearly a year to write it in my head and not have to do anything else. People don't think of it as a luxury, but if you're in hospital and someone is making your bed, turning you over, everything, then it is possible, with the scraps you had before, to conjure up 40 minutes of music and go over and over it in your head. I'd never had the opportunity to do that before. I still wasn't taking myself that seriously, though, I was still a bit "that'll do", which has always driven Alfie crazy. "Robert, that will not do. Do it again!" Another good thing was that there was no pressure, people didn't know if I was even going to live. I could have any combination of musicians on each track - like Fred Frith, Gary Windo, Mongezi Feza, Laurie Allan, Richard Sinclair. It was a wonderful feeling.



Man and knife: with Alfie, around the release of *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard*, 1975

One of your collaborations that's sometimes overlooked is your work on Brian Eno's Ambient 1: *Music For Airport*. How did that come about?

I was first introduced to him by [*Matching Mole bassist*] Bill MacCormick; he played on our song "Gloria Gloom" and then I did some stuff on a terrific record called *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)*. I love his singing, and his songs and his words. When some elephants get rejected from their herds, they sometimes get together in a rogue elephant herd - so I think in a sense me and Brian were kind of rogue elephants. We were free, because we weren't in groups. I didn't know about the "music as wallpaper" theory then - Brian just said, "Can you play some piano?" I played and played and then he took out a section that he thought could repeat ad infinitum, and then he did everything else you hear on it. Working with Brian is great, because we don't have the same music in our heads, but his sheer presence makes me do things differently in the studio, and it's just great talking about music, politics, everything.



You still seem so fired up by music, it's hard to imagine that you're not coming up with new ideas.

I sing to myself. Occasionally I hit the piano and go, "Ah, that would be good, I must remember that!" But it's quite a cumbersome business, recording and making records. Now I'm investigating other music, a lot of it made by people who are demonised, politically.

How do you mean, demonised?

Well, if I'm sad about anything now, being 75, it's that colonialism hasn't disappeared at all; how it's done has just got more subtle. This thing of fake benevolence, like, "Oh, we want to rescue you from your tyranny, and then you can just live in a happy land of McDonald's and Coca-Cola with us..."

It reminds me of the spread of Christianity: "Don't worship your false idols, they're terrible. Witch doctors? Dreadful people. You want our Jesus, here's the Bible - now get on with the work." Our economic systems are the new Bible, to which people are meant to aspire, and relinquish their old gods. It's the same old trick. On YouTube I now look out for ways to reverse the demonisation of people we're told to hate or feel sorry for.

What have you been into recently?

I've found some lovely clips of school choirs in Syria, it's a joy to watch them. There's a saxophonist called Sophia Tyurina - they like child prodigies in Russia, but this girl's really something. Traditional Moldovan dance music is my current favourite thing - it's a knockout!

You're exploring hidden corners of the world from Louth!

That is my sense of adventure now, these people are taking me somewhere else. It's so much more fun than making records now. I still feel like the same person, but I'm looking for

something else.

Robert Wyatt and Alfreda Benge's collected lyrics will be published by Faber this year

Ear defining

Robert Wyatt's finest work

SOFT MACHINE
THIRD CBS, 1970

A double album of just four side-long tracks, with the only non-instrumental being Wyatt's 19-minute "Moon In June". It's a lot less austere than the rest of *Third*, and in many ways opened the door to the rest of his work. **7/10**

MATCHING MOLE
MATCHING MOLE'S LITTLE RED RECORD
CBS, 1972

Produced by Robert Fripp, the second album by Wyatt's revolving group (try saying "Soft Machine" in French) contains its fair share of heavy jazz rock; there are fine songs here too, though, such as the baffled, angry "God Song" and the shifting "Gloria Gloom", named after a nickname for Benge and featuring Brian Eno on synth. **8/10**

ROBERT WYATT
ROCK BOTTOM
VIRGIN, 1974

Mostly conceived in Wyatt's head while he recovered from his life-changing accident, *Rock Bottom* still sounds like nothing else: a watery, melancholy mix of jazz, ambient, rock and the avant-garde, with star turns from Mike Oldfield and Ivor Cutler. **10/10**

ROBERT WYATT
RUTH IS STRANGER THAN RICHARD
VIRGIN, 1975

The mercurial follow-up, with the more playful *Ruth* side balanced by the darker churnings of *Richard*. With its versions of Charlie Haden and Mongezi Feza tunes, it introduced Wyatt's predilection for covers, but would turn out to be his last proper album for 10 years. **8/10**

ROBERT WYATT
NOTHING CAN STOP US
ROUGH TRADE, 1982

A compilation of singles that surpasses most standalone albums – highlights include versions of "Strange Fruit", "The Red Flag" and Chic's "At Last I'm Free", along with the sole original, "Born Again Cretin". **9/10**

ROBERT WYATT
SHLEEP
HANNIBAL, 1997

The beginning of Wyatt's masterful final trilogy, *Shleep* featured guests such as Paul Weller, Phil Manzanera, Brian Eno, Annie Whitehead and Evan Parker. As with 1991's *Dondestan*, the lyrics were all co-written with Benge. **9/10**

ROBERT WYATT
COMICOPERA
DOMINO, 2007

The final chapter in Wyatt's recording career, this three-act, hour-long opus starts off with icy jazz and slowly moves around the globe, eventually banishing the English language completely with the revolutionary "Hasta Siempre, Comandante". **9/10**



"His songs have a unique sound to them"

Jarvis Cocker explains why he loves the music of Robert Wyatt

I'VE been asked to write the introduction to the collected lyrics, and I was excited to be asked. I remember first seeing Robert on *Top Of The Pops* when he covered 'I'm A Believer' by The Monkees, and I always loved his version; then a few years back somebody heard 'Running The World' and gently accused me of ripping off his song 'The Age Of Self', so they played it to me and I thought it was brilliant. Absolutely there are some similarities in the lyrical content. Robert's very good at doing that, in covering dark subjects but doing it in a very direct way and accessible way. You could say we probably inhabit the same area of the political spectrum. Musically, his songs have a very unique sound to them, and you can recognise that it's a Robert Wyatt song immediately. Generally, I go more for a lower voice than a higher voice, but I make an exception in his case! His version of Chic's 'At Last I'm Free' is amazing. I was DJing in Cologne once and we'd been told we had to stop, so I put that track on, thinking, 'It's quite mellow, so that'll be the end of the party.' But it was a lovely moment – all these people in Germany at three o'clock in the morning singing a Robert Wyatt song at the top of their lungs."

> Zoom

Next article

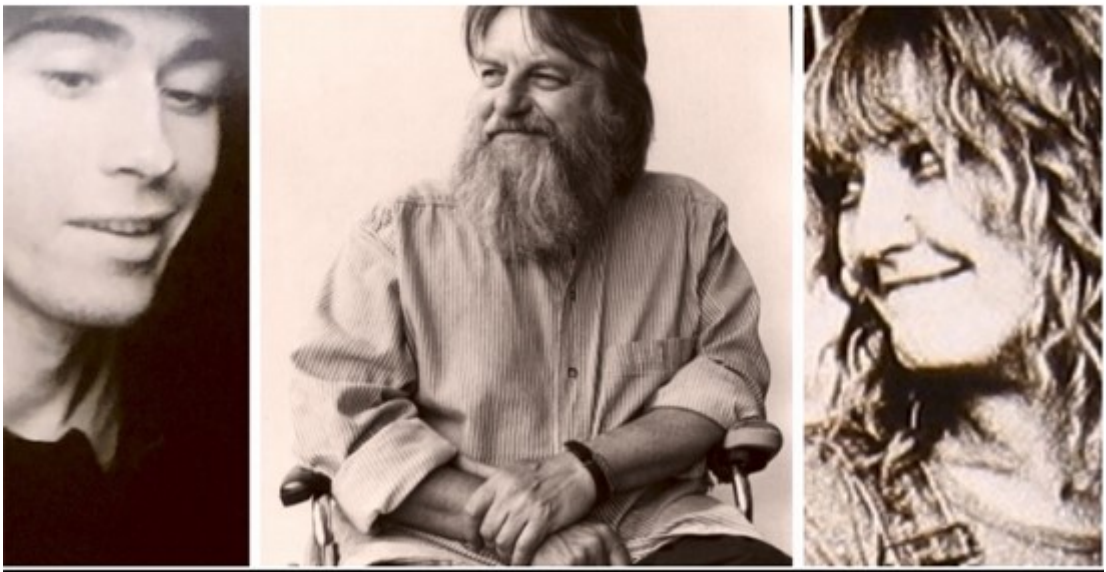
Back to the list

'Always finding nice things in a tragic situation' - Robert Wyatt at 75 - Morning Star - January 28, 2020

for Peace and Socialism
Morning Star

'Always finding nice things in a tragic situation' - Robert Wyatt at 75

MILES ELLINGHAM meets the unique left-wing singer with his partner and muse Alfreda Benge at their Lincolnshire redoubt



MS Robert Wyatt: 50 years of uncompromisingly political music that soundtracked apartheid, the miners' strike and the Palestinian struggle.

PULLING into the market town of Louth after a two-hour bus ride through the green speckled Lincolnshire countryside, you feel thrown back in time to an earlier England, one that feels very far from the "music industry."

It seems fitting that for the past two decades this has been the home of avant-garde cult musician Robert Wyatt and his partner Alfie Benge.

Today Wyatt will be 75 — which is something to celebrate, after a six-decade musical career that began as a teenager in the so-called "Canterbury scene."

The scene (posthumously titled or, as Wyatt would have it, invented) was formed around Wyatt's group, Soft Machine, who, with Pink Floyd, were the resident bands at London's legendary hippie club UFO and went on to tour the US with Hendrix.

Wyatt was the drummer (he learnt to play in Robert Graves's garden in Mallorca) and shared vocal duties with Kevin Ayers and, for a time, Daevid Allen.

But that is distant history. Wyatt has been a solo artist since a life-changing accident in 1973 that left him in a wheelchair and led to a shift in direction to vocalist-composer.

The following year saw his extraordinary, mesmeric record, Rock Bottom, which still makes any 100 best albums lists worth their salt.

And then came nearly 50 years of uncompromisingly political music that soundtracked international concerns from apartheid and the miners' strike to Palestinian rights, through reinterpretations of such songs as Strange Fruit and Chic's At Last I Am Free and, most famously, Shipbuilding (written for him by Elvis Costello), as well as seven further albums of his own compositions.

I can remember when I first heard Wyatt's music. It was always present in the house as I grew up, as, like some kindly ghost, Wyatt's lilting cadence would haunt my musical education, always stranger than the rest, always different.

Arriving in Louth, it was Wyatt who opened the door to me and took me through into his study, where we chatted over cups of tea and a big bowl of soup.

"I really identified with the painters of the early 20th century," begins Wyatt, leaning forward in his electric wheelchair, "and I grew to envy how they worked: just make something in the studio, put it up in the exhibition and bugger off. I felt I was trying to change the musical idiom and make it more like painting."

Wyatt's a wonderful interviewee and you get the feeling that he's always approaching an answer for the first time — he'll sit in silence with a pained look until he finds his words.

However, his meandering train of thought is more difficult to render in print, and, this being an interview at 75, I nudge him back in time, asking how he had experienced the 1960s, forming Soft Machine and touring the US with Hendrix.

"I look back very fondly on that time, you know. Kevin [Ayers] wrote these lovely songs and Daevid [Allen] was a beatnik, so he brought all the literary and philosophical influences.

"We were very interested in the work of Alfred Jarry and the self-aware humour of pataphysics. We became instrumentalists but we weren't comfortable with the hippy consensus, we preferred to use jazz musicians as a guide."

Why was that?

"Well, the hippies came from this folkloric tradition, and I always thought that they tended towards a dismissal of black culture at the time. I got the feeling they sneered at stuff like Gloria Gaynor or Motown.

"Not all of them, of course — and Dylan was great … but I just saw a load of people who were so stoned that they thought the Grateful Dead was a good band."

But what was it like living that way, among what we might call "rock stars?"

"Well it's funny you should say that, actually one of the papers came to interview Soft Machine just before the America tour and when they saw us, they said: 'Oh, you're just some little hobbits…'

"So, I'm not sure we were ever really accepted. We played for people who were much more into the goal of 'far-outness' than we were in our lifestyles. We — well I, at least — spent most of the '60s oddly domesticated, in my little Dulwich back-to-back."

Did you sense any rebellion in the 1960s counterculture overall?

"Not rebellion, really. More like what the French would call 'epater la bourgeoisie' — a shock to the system, yes, but no systemic change, not where it mattered."

Did you really punch [legendary US music promoter] Bill Graham in the face?

Wyatt laughs with a childlike sheepishness. "Well, I wasn't used to that kind of ballsy American 'get your ass over here' and 'You'll never play in this town again!' I don't think we had a fight but there was certainly a disagreement.

"I told him that I didn't give a shit about playing at his silly little club [San Francisco's Fillmore] and that made him upset."

I get the feeling Wyatt doesn't enjoy confrontation but is plagued with a sense of justice.

Alfreda Benge, known to all as Alfie, is more than just a partner to Wyatt.

She has been his collaborator for 50 years, designing every album cover of his solo career and often writing lyrics for his songs. While she taps away, talking politics on Twitter, at her laptop, I ask her if she remembers how they met.

"I liked musicians," she says, squinting. "They didn't have to get up in the mornings, you see. As to how I met Robert, I got to know a young drummer who ended up with Robert's wife.

"And I ended up seeing Robert play at [London's] Rainbow Theatre.

"We didn't really notice each other," she goes on, ignoring protestation from Wyatt, "and Robert was always with these tall, glamorous women, so I never really considered him — because I thought I wasn't, you know, one of them.

"Anyway, I ended up leaving him a note that said: 'Dear Robert, how about it?' and we went off to see The Kinks together. Things just went along from there, really."

Benge's arrival on the scene marked a change in Wyatt's career. Not only would she radically galvanise his politics but much of his post-accident album Rock Bottom was addressed to her: the otherworldly Sea Song, notably, and the paired songs Alife and Alifib (so-named, said Wyatt, because one was in E and the other was in B).

Wyatt's accident, he says, changed not just how he made music — he could no longer be a drummer with a band (leaving Soft Machine he had formed Matching Mole) — but resulted in a whole shift in consciousness.

This is readily apparent in the faraway dreamscape of Rock Bottom, which he'd started writing earlier in the year in Venice — accompanying Benge, who was working on Nicholas Roeg's classic film Don't Look Now — and subsequently finished in hospital.

"I was always finding nice things in what it meant to be in a tragic situation," says Wyatt. "I found that lying in bed in hospital with somebody else making the beds and bringing the breakfast was an ideal way to write without the pressures of daily life."

And no longer having to lead a band was liberating, too.

"Just getting people to come in and play — it isn't like getting married to them, but they can do nice things for you on the spot."

How did you find that "daydream" sound? It's quite an aesthetic departure from the earlier work.

"Well, I think I do live in a sort of daydream. When I was writing it, I kept picturing these early 20th-century paintings that I always loved, landscapes and things, then I found myself mapping the sonic equivalent to these paintings. Also, Alfie introduced me to Astral Weeks, by Van Morrison, which really influenced me."

And after that you went on to cover the Monkees' I'm a Believer. How did that happen?

"Again, I didn't like the class snobbery of how the rock world looked at pop music. I have a great admiration for pop music. I see it as industrial-era folk music really — despite the perniciousness of the industry. Though I should say Rough Trade was very good to me with

all those singles they wanted."

Wyatt produced an array of singles for Rough Trade throughout the 1980s and his recording of Shipbuilding, written for him by Elvis Costello and Clive Langer, is both timeless and redolent of its age: a profoundly political song about making battleships for the Falklands war.

Those years also saw him cover songs by Cuban and Latin American revolutionaries, singing in Spanish as naturally and idiosyncratically as in English, and another memorable partnership: with Jerry Dammers of The Specials, on The Wind of Change.

They were followed by his own hyperpoliticised album Old Rottenhat (1985), a reaction to hearing one of his songs on Radio Europe or Voice of America — what Wyatt calls "one of those propaganda channels" — and wanting to write songs that could not be misinterpreted.

It was this period in which Wyatt and Benge became active members of the Communist Party.

As Benge explains: "We were very pissed off with the Labour Party at the time. It was just before the Iranian revolution, when David Owen was still being nice about the Shah.

"My dad was a member of the Communist Party but I was always more of an anarchist — it was Robert who joined first."

Why did he join?

Wyatt, thinks for a second. "I think I saw it as a haven from any kind of racism. There was still a lot of racism among left-leaning middle-class dinner parties.

"It seemed to me that the Communist Party was ideologically anti-racist at its core. The Communist Party were also doing good work in South Africa."

You didn't consider joining the Socialist Workers Party, or something like that?

"No," says Benge, "I mean, we did know lots of Trots and got a lot of Trot newspapers. They would say they were internationalist but they weren't — because they think no-one has got it right, and end up hating all the same governments that Nato hates. That being said, during the miners' strike they did wonderful work."

So why did you leave the Communist Party?

"We left when we moved to Lincolnshire. It just wasn't feasible any more, we couldn't get to any of the meetings and I think we were two of the three communists in Lincolnshire. And we were disappointed with the Blair administration: how they'd pushed the left to the sidelines. All the New Labour stuff — about which there was nothing new."

When Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party, however, Benge and Wyatt became enthusiastic supporters. Wyatt even overcame his long history of stage fright to perform at a Momentum benefit, accompanied by Paul Weller, another serendipitous musical collaborator, at which he was introduced on stage by Corbyn.

We were talking only a week after Labour's disastrous election defeat and Benge and Wyatt were clearly feeling the pain. Nonetheless, Wyatt's take was, as usual, left-field. "We've witnessed a real phenomenon," he says. "I am not a current affairs chap — I get too hurt by it — but I'd like to stress that I didn't vote for Corbyn because I thought he could win, but because he was right.

"Honestly, he's one of the bravest Englishmen since Captain Oates. He reflected the urgent desire to take that humanitarian spirit to the top and he held fast in the face of a really pernicious smear campaign. I'll always be immensely proud that my last-ever gig was a fundraiser for his movement. It was a great honour to bow out that way."

So Robert, having retired, is there any new music that gives you hope for the future?

"There are some great young jazz groups that I listen to. There's this one group, Nerija, that I enjoy. And I've been finding Russian bands on YouTube — like Otava Yo, who make these wonderful music videos.

"But I think the idea of newness is jaded and, as an 'avant-garde singer' I often feel that the prefix is overrated. I'm more concerned with preventing things from vanishing, to be honest. Maybe It's just my age, my Time Team attitude."

Miles Ellinghame

>> L'interview sur le site du Morning Star

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt and Alfie Benge - Luncheon - N. 8 - Autumn - Winter 2019-20.

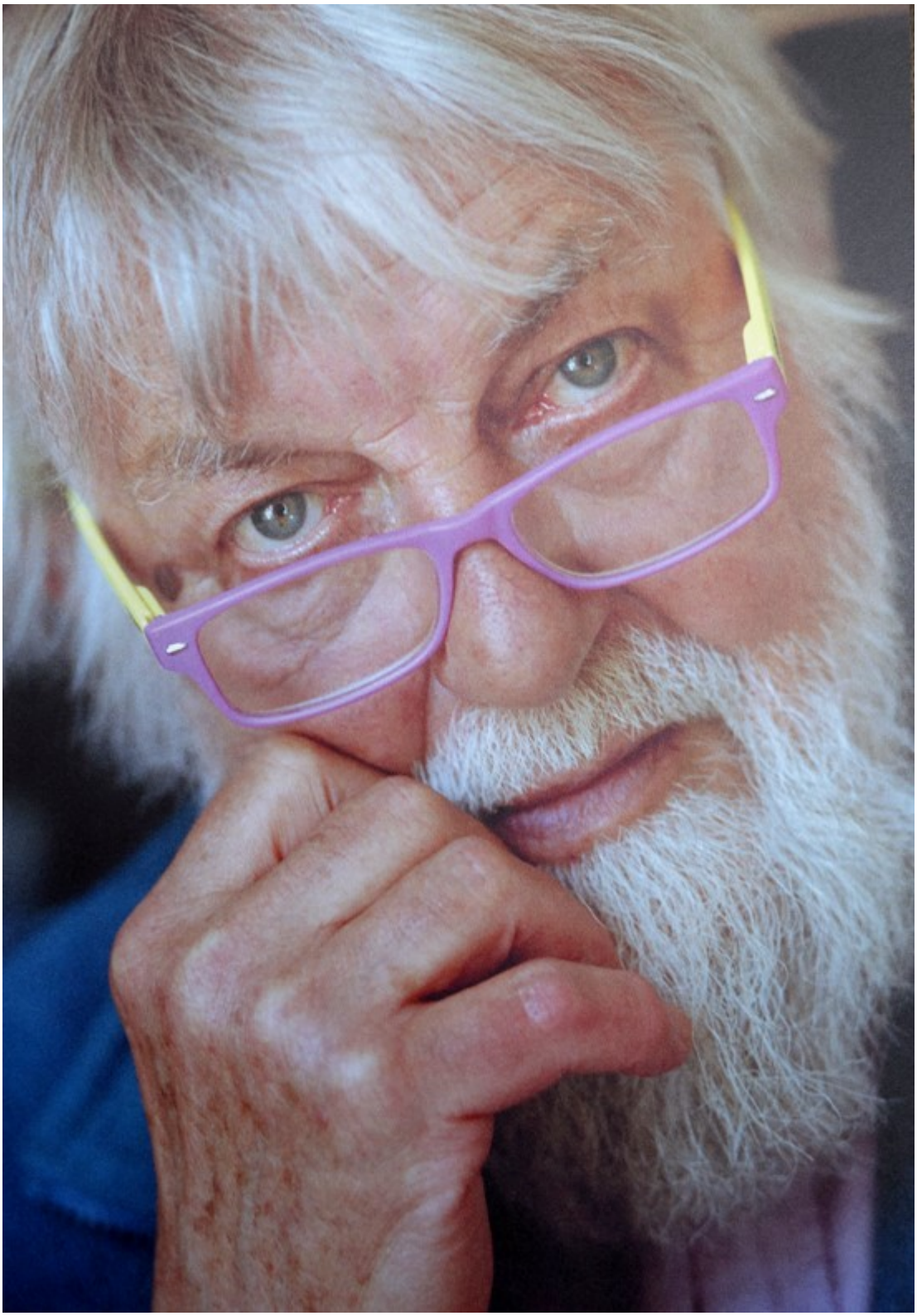


ROBERT WYATT AND ALFIE BENGE

***By* MARTIN CLARK**
Photographs by
KUBA RYNIEWICZ

Robert Wyatt is a musician and was a founding member of legendary British rock bands Soft Machine and Matching Mole. Since an accident in 1973 in which he was paralysed from the waist down, he has focused on his solo career, which has now spanned more than 40 years. He has collaborated with artists including Syd Barrett, Brian Eno, Bjork and Hot Chip and has released 13 studio albums and numerous EPs and singles. Martin Clark, Director of Camden Arts Centre, Luncheon's editor Frances von Hofmannsthal and photographer Kuba Ryniewicz took a train to Lincolnshire to have lunch in the home of Robert and his wife, Alfreda (Alfie) Benge, who has produced the artwork for all of his albums since 1974. Over a delicious fish pie cooked by Robert's friend and neighbour Jane Vincent, they discuss Robert's life, music and close working relationship with camera shy Alfie. Martin Clark is Director of Camden Arts Centre, London. Previously he was Director of Bergen Kunsthall, Norway; Artistic Director of Tate St Ives; and Curator of Exhibitions at Arnolfini, Bristol. He is an avid record collector and in a previous life worked in record shops, club promotion and as a DJ in Sheffield. He has been listening to Robert Wyatt for 25 years.





> Zoom

MARTIN CLARK: It's very nice to be here Robert, thank you for having us for lunch. I know Alfie is going to join us later, but I wanted to start by asking about your relationship with her, both personally and creatively. It's a partnership that has spanned more than 40 years now. How did you meet?

ROBERT WYATT: Well, actually, she knew some of my family before I knew her. I'd been married before and had a couple of kids, and she knew them. But when I first really took to her, we were in the Roundhouse, I think; I might have been playing, or in the audience. And I was wandering around in the back, and a lot of people were doing this kind of dance... I

can't do it now - a hippy, waving arms about thing. And there was this one girl - not dancing at, or to, anybody -just doing all this little footwork stuff, *tch, tch, tch*, and I was enchanted by this person. I thought, 'Blimey!' So, that's how we met. I think I said, 'Hello'.

MARTIN: What year was that?

ROBERT: It would have been late... oh, 1970?

MARTIN: Was she at art school then?

ROBERT: No. She was teaching film part-time, had made a film for the BBC about the Royal Academy and worked at IBM helping produce films. She'd also recently worked on dialogue for a Robert Altman film and was doing various freelance jobs too. She'd been to three art schools - painting at Camberwell, typography and graphics at the London College of Printing, and film at the Royal College of Art. Ten years altogether. She'd loved to have stayed on at art school forever.

She switched from painting because at Camberwell in the late 1950s, pure colour, which she always like using, tended to be looked down on. It tended to be browns and greys. She was doing these beautiful paintings and a teacher suggested, 'The colours would be okay if you were Eastern European.' She said, 'Well, I am', which shut him up. But she thought perhaps graphics would suit her better.

MARTIN: Did she know your music at that time? And how interested had she been in music over the years?

ROBERT: Alfie's actually contributed so much to my music since we've been together, I think of it as our music anyway... But even before our work together we were able to talk about everything for hours and hours. I could tell early on that this could be an endless conversation. I was interested in similar things to her - things she read and knew about -politics, music art ..

MARTIN: So you were interested in art as well?

ROBERT: Very. In fact, when I was a teenager I assumed I'd become a painter. That was my thing. We had art books at my home near Dover, in Kent. You know, modern art - all the usual suspects - and I just got lost in that, and I started trying to paint. I think my hero was Paul Klee, but I also liked a lot of the Futurists and De Chirico, that sort of thing. And another book we had, which I haven't seen since: a great, thick, fat book of Van Gogh drawings, just black-and-white things.

MARTIN: His drawings are amazing.

ROBERT: What I find interesting is that, at the time, people thought, 'These paintings are so modern - I can't stand it!' But now they just seem so sweet and old-fashioned, partly because of what they're of, the subject - never mind how it's done. It's very hard to think that those Impressionists were revolutionary at the time.

MARTIN: Its true. And it's become a cliché now of course, but there's a great quote from Wyndham Lewis that I always remember when I'm thinking about this. He said: 'The artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future, because he is the only person aware of the present.'

ROBERT: I've always been interested in the idea of the avant-garde, and there are various words related to that, some of which are pejorative, like 'trendy', 'ephemeral', but also 'cutting edge'. I'd take 'avant-garde' back to the original meaning of the word - it actually means the front end of an army. But the thing I don't like about the connotation, especially in terms of the music I was involved in, rock and roll, is that it fancies itself as rebellious or dangerous.



Record covers from left to right: Shleep 1997, Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard 1975, for Dennis and Ronnie. Courtesy of Domino Recording Co. Ltd.

I'm not at all hoping to be either of those things. What avant-garde means to me is seeing the beauty in things that people might not have noticed before. That's all. I'm not trying to get at anybody.

MARTIN: It happens with art as well. People think modern and contemporary art is all about trying to shock, trying to make something outrageous or provocative for the sake of it. But that's not what most artists are trying to do. They are simply trying to say something real and true, but in a way that is free of the received ideas or languages of the past, that somehow avoids disappearing into a kind of familiarity or bourgeois idea of good taste. So it may shock people because it's unfamiliar, but eventually it all gets assimilated - it usually takes a generation.

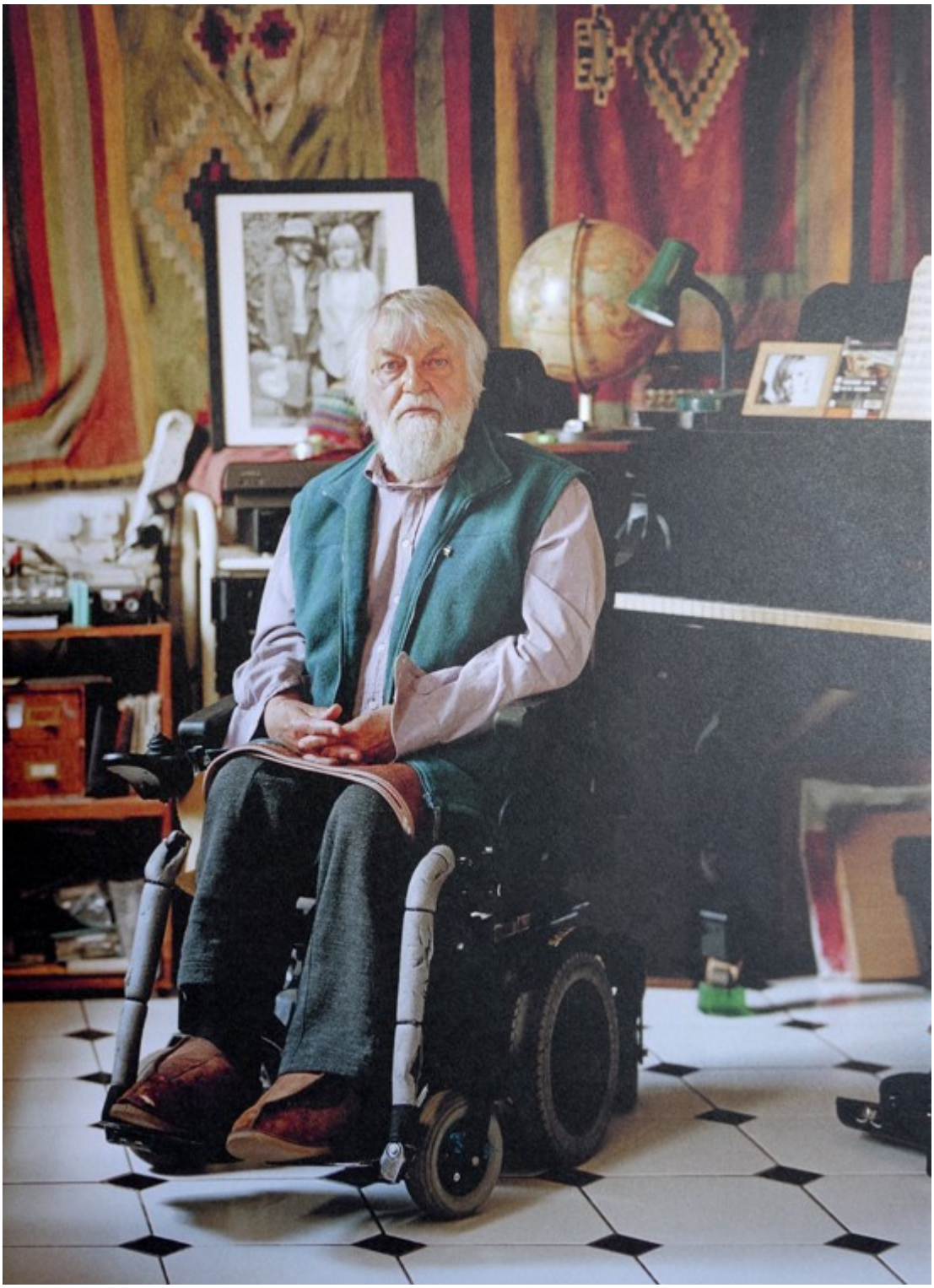
ROBERT.- I remember, Hendrix, when he did 'The Star-Spangled Banner' and was quizzed on television about it - 'Why did you make this ugly noise out of it?' - he said, 'I thought it was beautiful.'

MARTIN: Did you stop making paintings?

ROBERT: My parents let me draw and paint things on the wall and all that stuff- but I didn't paint on canvases. It was expensive, for a start. I painted on old doors and bits of hardboard, and I thought, 'Blimey. This is it.' But then, when I was 16 or so I went to art college and heard this tutor say to some gloomy students, 'I'm afraid you've got to learn to draw.' Oh fuck, I thought. But the great thing about that time was... I thought, Okay, where don't you have to be able to do anything? Beat music! If you're a drummer or a singer, you really don't have to learn anything. You just sit down and do it, or you open your mouth.

MARTIN: So, your route into music was through beat and rock and roll?

ROBERT: Playing it.



> Zoom

MARTIN: And what about jazz?

ROBERT: I would listen to loads of jazz, simultaneously with painting - but it seemed impossible to play. I just thought they were magicians. I couldn't see how it was possible to do what they were doing - especially between the late 1940s and the late '50s - they were dazzling. So, I traipsed around; saw Charles Mingus live, twice. It was a golden era. The best concert I ever saw in my life was Coltrane playing with Eric Dolphy. It makes me cry to think of it. It was so beautiful. I always liked playing drums, and I had a couple of drumming lessons. But they don't really apply - if its proper jazz technique no one will hear you in a rock and roll band. It's all crash, bang, wallop.

MARTIN: Did you see that amazing BBC documentary on Ginger Baker?

ROBERT: I did! He's a monster, but he's absolutely right. He's the proper drummer and the others don't really know what they're doing. I have to say that, and I didn't even like rock music. I saw him when he was playing with The Graham Bond Organisation at LSE - he was stonking.

MARTIN: He was playing in these massive rock bands with Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood and Jack Bruce, but all he really cared about was being taken seriously by the jazz drummers and African musicians like Fela Kuti...

ROBERT: That's right. Art Blakey ducted with him eventually. He may have been a frightening geezer, but he was a master, he had a feel.

MARTIN: Getting back to you and Alfie - she made the artwork for all of your solo albums, from *Rock Bottom* (1974) onwards. And those sleeves feel so intimately connected to my experience of your music over the years. I guess it's something we're losing now, with streaming and Spotify and whatnot, that thing of holding the sleeve in your hand while you listened to the record, almost living inside it for days and days. Were those paintings Alfie used for the artwork things she had made already, were they around the house or in the studio?

ROBERT: No.

MARTIN: So she made them specifically for the record sleeves?

ROBERT: She did. I wouldn't call them collaborations, but she knows the music backwards because she's had to hear it being done. She was with me all the time during recording, so she could pick up on images in the songs that someone at a record company, someone in the art department, might not have had the time to do.

MARTIN: Was she making her own work outside of that?



> Zoom

Herbert the Elephant and Herbert the Chicken, written by Ivor Cutler, illustrated by Alfreda Benge (both Walker Books, 1984)

ROBERT: She'd studied art, but when we met her trajectory was going to be in film. But she didn't like the way the film industry worked and she didn't like being censored. She was doing a thing for IBM about the Sixties and they took [the parts about] the Black Power movement out - not suitable for showing to IMB South Africa. And then, fortunately, I came along and broke my back, so she said, 'I'm not made for the real world, I'll retire and look after you instead.' Anyway, after that she thought she could use her skills in painting and

drawing - that this was something she could do here at home. She didn't really like the psychedelic record covers of the era. I know she thought she would deliberately do the opposite.

MARTIN: They have such a beautiful relationship to the music - a simplicity and depth and naivety and absurdity, and a sort of surreal, childlike charm - but there is an edge to them too. But for me your music has a very visual quality already. You can talk about a lot of music like that of course, but it's not just the images and characters that are conjured up through the lyrics or the song titles; there's also something about the way your songs are constructed. There's a sort of blocky quality to music - these drones in the background, like flat blocks of colour, and then these figures that are the melodies that sit on top of them, set against the ground. And I think Alfie's paintings work a bit like that as well.

ROBERT: I think in pictures. I listen in pictures. And so there does tend to be a landscape, which will be the chord sequence. There do tend to be things on it, which will be instrumentation; and there will be people in it, which is the voice. Composers like Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus are very pictorial, they take you places. I like that.

MARTIN: The other thing about them is the lyrics. Alfie writes as well, doesn't she?

ROBERT: The last half of everything I've done, and all of the things I've done here, she's written *at least* half my lyrics. Partly because I'm writing more music than I could think of words for.

MARTIN: So, for you it starts with the music?

ROBERT: Yeah, but even then - like, I had a little tune, *te de de de te de de duh* (sings), and I thought, I don't know what that is. And she said, it's a lullaby. And I said, 'Oh, right!' And she wrote a thing called 'Lullaby'. She was just able to do that. She'd listen to the tune until she heard the words. If the tune is organic, it's often very amenable to speech patterns. They can go together if you allow them to.

MARTIN: Were there any records that you made, perhaps with other collaborators, where you were looking at, or thinking about, other artists?

ROBERT: Visually, you mean?

MARTIN: Yeah.

ROBERT: No, except when I did 'Shipbuilding' [in 1982]. Alfie wasn't particularly connected to the making of that - it was written and produced by Clive Langer and Elvis Costello - but she had just seen Stanley Spencer's *Shipbuilding* paintings at an exhibition and thought they would be perfect. It turned out they were owned by the Imperial War Museum, who let us see the paintings for free. He was a war artist, and he painted a series in the 1940s called *Shipbuilding on the Clyde*, all these different panels showing riggers and riveters, all that stuff. So we used that on the single. The song was about the Falklands War.

MARTIN: I'd forgotten you'd used a Stanley Spencer on that sleeve. But it's interesting you mention him, because I was thinking about some of those other neo-Romantic artists in relation to your music, people like Paul Nash, Cecil Collins, John Craxton. I always think your songs have a kind of English pastoral quality. And the lazy interpretation of that is that it's a romantic, backward-looking, sentimental thing; but actually the neo-Romantics used the idea and the image of the English landscape to speak of a much more political, troubled, almost apocalyptic moment - coming out of the First World War with the threat of fascism, the atom bomb, and another war looming. They found a way to collapse the past, the present and the future into their pictures. I think your music is a bit like that - right from your early years with Soft Machine, and your association with the Canterbury Sound. And like their work it's also underpinned by a very radical, working-class socialism and critique.

ROBERT: Well, there are two separate things there: one is that things like Lewis Carroll and Hilaire Belloc and so on are very, very far out. They go a long way - particularly *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. They're pretty fierce looks at how things are run, the absurdity of bureaucrats and the madness of politicians - turning into a pack of cards and all that stuff. There's a lot going on there. But the other thing is about your earlier idea of being ahead or behind. I don't think, really, in chronological time. I think that when you discover a thing, that's when it's new to you. I think it's got something to do with the age you are. In your late teens and early twenties, things hit you; you're ready for them. And that stays with you. You can enjoy and appreciate things after that, but the things that really mean something to you, they hit you at that time - and it can be anything.

It can be old English churches, it can be Bach, it can be jazz. So, when I was a schoolboy, in the late 1950s, what I was looking at in those art books was early 2oth-century stuff, but it was revelatory, it was dazzlingly new to me, it was like the paint was still wet.

MARTIN: Your music is like that for me. It somehow speaks really immediately, in the absolute present, as well as drawing on something much more timeless. Some music sounds so much of its time - it can still sound great when we listen to it now, but it's very easy to place it or date it. But your songs aren't like that; they seem to exist in this other sort of time. Frances and I were talking on the train here this morning about just that kind of moment - and the first song of yours that each of us heard.

FRANCES VON HOFMANNSTHAL: The first song that I heard was'Pigs... (In There)'(1986).

ROBERT: (*Chuckling*) John Peel used to like that one.

FRANCES: I love that song so much! I think I've listened to is 945,000 times.

ROBERT: Funnily enough, it was more or less totally improvised. It just came out exactly as you might think it did -just thinking about it. What the fuck was that?

MARTIN: It's like a picture again, isn't it, or a movie. It's so visual. You can see the whole scene when you're listening to it, the landscape, the farm...

ROBERT: The music just came out, and then I found this drum machine device... it's no particular rhythm, it's actually random, but the beat stays the same. I thought, that'll do - you know, just three chords, add a bit of olive oil, a squeeze of lemon... (*Martin laughing*)

FRANCES: I thought you couldn't cook!

ROBERT: I cannot cook to save my life! That's why my friend Jane Vincent has made us this fish pie. I just had to do the salad! Alfie said, just chop up some tomatoes and onions and some of those green leafy things, put olive oil and lemon on it - so I did that. You don't have to eat it.

FRANCES: Where were the pigs?

ROBERT: A long, low, flat farm in Wiltshire. My older brother - my half-brother and his wife - lived there, and she used to take us about. You hardly notice it, the structure, because it's so low to the ground. And I thought, what on earth could you keep in there? It's not like you can store grain in it. So I just asked him what on earth it was for.

MARTIN: Pigs! In there?!

FRANCES: My children and I, we've listened to it so many times!

ROBERT: I'm very honoured. I'm very pleased.






FRANCES: And 'Soup Song' (1975). They've made a little stop-frame animation to that one, about all the ingredients! I'll have to send it to you.

ROBERT: I'd love that! I was a vegetarian as a child - but not by principle. It sounds posher than it is. It basically means bread and butter sandwiches with sugar poured on top - not healthy, nothing noble. Cornflakes and bananas and bread; Horlicks, boiled eggs, things like that. I always think eggs is the politest way to intervene in an animal's life cycle. (*Laughter*)

MARTIN: Did you record those songs here in this house?

ROBERT: No - I do work here, but I'm not technically proficient; I need a good engineer. I have recorded bits and pieces here, something that's got a feel, that I can take into the studio - but no, I go to a studio.

MARTIN: There is a kind of intimacy to your records; they feel very immediate, very close. Is that a deliberate thing, to take those - almost like sketches - into the studio, and then not overproduce them, not overdo them? To keep that immediacy, that simplicity.

ROBERT: I do overproduce them, but... Dolly Parton said, 'It takes an awful lot of money to look this cheap.' (*Laughter*) Well, it takes a lot of hard work to make it sound as straightforward. They are actually very, very worked. Somebody said to me once: 'What I like about 'Shipbuilding' is you just sang it from the heart and that was it - in one go.' But it wasn't like that. It was a lot of work.

I've thought a lot about the craft of singing. I listen to other singers and hear what they do. I wanted the songs to be [like] how I talk, because that's going to be the easiest to sing. I wanted it to sound like you almost couldn't tell which came first, the words or the tune. That was the thing I was aiming for. In fact, over the years, working with Alfie, that really became the thing. She started out listening to my tunes and coming up with words, and then eventually she'd come up with the words, and I would add the tunes.

MARTIN: I sometimes think of your songs as a kind of folk music. Not so much the sound but the directness and clarity, and the authenticity of your voice. And there's also the strong political and social aspect of the lyrics.

ROBERT: Well, a lot of folk people have done my songs - The Unthanks... a whole bunch of them. But it's also to do with acting. I really like Robert Mitchum - but he just says the lines; he just says the words. I find that so much acting is over the top; over-emoting, in one way or another - sadness, anger. That happens in songs too. I feel that, sometimes, people acting out songs are interfering in some way between you and the song. The thing is the song. So I thought, I don't want to sing like that. I never try and put anything across - it's got to be in the music.



> Zoom

The music has got to be solid enough. And then the words have got to be solid enough. If you get the music right, and the words right, it should just work. It's really a *non-thing* that I'm doing.

MARTIN: I talk to painters, and for them, often, the thing is knowing when to stop. How not to do too much. I did a show with a painter recently, and she was talking about the problem of pushing a painting too far, not being able to press a button and go back a couple of stages like you can in Photoshop. In the end, she said that the paintings were finished when the truck pulled up outside the studio to pick them up for a show.

ROBERT: Well, actually, I think I do know, in the end. What I'm looking for is something that, in a parallel universe, would be a living thing. I want a tune to be alive in some way - an organic thing. When I'm writing something, that's what I pursue. You can do a really nice chord pattern or a nice sequence of notes, or a nice rhythm, but on their own they're just ingredients - it's not yet anything, actually.

MARTIN: You've said very publicly that you're retired. And I know Alfie has a problem with her eyes, so she finds it difficult to work...

ROBERT: Yeah. [Hans] Arp said he never finished a painting, he just stopped. I thought, I'm having that! So yes, I've stopped. And Alfie, she's having a rest too, she's Tweeting now. *Alfie wasn't able to join us for lunch but we caught up with her later in the afternoon.*

MARTIN : I asked Robert about this earlier, but I want to ask you as well: what was your relationship to the music? Would you listen to those records and then think about the artwork, or was it more coming out of your interests and your own work?

ALFIE: I was present at every note of every recording. I mean, obviously, because I was Robert's carer - so, wherever he was, I was. And music was always there. Things would occur to me when it was being recorded; I'd just get an image, I'd do some scribbles. Some were more difficult than others. Some had subjects, like *Nothing Can Stop Us* (1982); *Rock Bottom*. But *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard* (1975) didn't have a subject - that was me in the studio, and I kept drawing a bird-man and a cow-woman. So they sort of emerged. *Old Rottenhat* (1985) was very political, it was hard to pick any image, so I just painted while listening to the music, and this abstract thing came out.

MARTIN: That's my favourite sleeve: *Old Rottenhat*. I think it's fantastic. And I can think of sleeves that I've seen since, and designers, who've clearly been influenced by it.

ALFIE: *Cuckooland* was also hard to choose an image for, there's so much variety in the subject matter and music. Robert has no normal musical notation. He does diagrams and notes for himself, which get added to during recording. I just watched what he was doing and based the cover on pages from his - ever-changing notebook and added a bit of colour here and there.





> Zoom

MARTIN: And what about *Shleep* (1997)?

ALFIE: He recorded that just as he came out of a really, really extreme depression and hadn't slept for months. He got over the hump - that bit where he's going to kill himself, into... when it's not plain-sailing, but he was suddenly able to sleep again. So, that's why we called it *Shleep*. A lot of the titles are mine as well.

MARTIN: He said you wrote a lot of the lyrics. I knew that you wrote lyrics, but I didn't know that you wrote so many of Robert's.

ALFIE: Since he started using them on *Dondestan* (1991), about half of the lyrics on each record are mine.

MARTIN: And when you were writing, was it because you thought they might end up as lyrics for Robert?

ALFIE: No, he had a thing about the music always coming first. The chords matter; the words don't. He was never going to write things to words - never. And so I wrote things. I wrote a diary, and out of the diary came little poemy things. We made a little book of them and just put them in a drawer - in 1983 or '84. Then, in 1990, he got them out because he couldn't think of any words. I think they really helped him to open up new musical possibilities.

MARTIN: He was able to hear the music in them?

ALFIE: Yes - so, things like 'Sight of the Wind' [from *Dondestan*]. I think it culminates in 'Cuckoo Madame', which, I think, is musically quite sophisticated. I think it comes from responding to the rhythm of the sentences, which is less predictable because they hadn't been written for music.

MARTIN: I asked him how you two met.

ALFIE: I was 32 or 32, and he'd left Soft Machine. I'd seen Soft Machine, but I didn't know

him then. I had a boyfriend. During the rip-roaring Sixties, I spent most of my time with drummers, as an official drummers' moll. One of the drummers was a pick-up in a speakeasy when I was about 27. It was very dark. Anyway, he came for the night and then wouldn't go away. It turned out he was only 17. It was a few months before I could get rid of him - but, in the meantime he'd made friends with a friend of mine, and he eventually hooked up with Robert's wife. So I got to know Robert's wife and his son through... (*Laughing*)

MARTIN: ...this 17-year-old drummer!

ALFIE: So, I knew them first. [Robert and I] didn't take much notice of each other at first. He had kind of glamorous women at the time. Purple hot-pants, I seem to remember! And usually a bit taller than him. I was still wearing high heels back then. When we met we were the same height; I stopped the high heels! But I didn't assume he was anything to do with me - I mean, my drummers were jazz drummers (apart from the speakeasy guy!), jazz drummers who knew what they were doing.

MARTIN: (*Laughing*) Proper drummers.

ALFIE: Serious people. Proper people. I'm joking. He was a very serious drummer! But I just kind of got to know him, and I thought, 'He's quite intelligent, I quite like that.' One day, he rang up. I think it was Pam, his wife, who encouraged him, because she thought I was probably a good idea. He wasn't having very much fun... I think his women were a bit glamorous, but a bit difficult. She thought I might be better for him. So he rang up, and that night I already had a ticket to go to the Rainbow [Theatre] to see The Kinks, so I said, 'Would you like to come along?' So we went to see The Kinks, and he stayed the night, and that was it, forever and ever. His excuse, at first, was that he had to go through my record collection.

MARTIN: (*Laughing*) That took some time!

ALFIE: I had a lot of records that girls didn't have at the time - sort of boys' records.

MARTIN: So that was immediately attractive!

ALFIE: Well, he just wanted to hear them. We had our ups and downs. We were together a year and a bit before the accident. After that it was, do I take this on? For me there was no question - and if so, it would probably be an idea to get married, so then we know where we are, and he knows where he is, and all of that. I've been really lucky.



MARTIN: And your studio is upstairs here in the house, above Robert's.

ALFIE: Yes, but I don't use it anymore. It's complete and utter ...it's like one of those films on the telly about hoarders. (*Laughter*) It's disgraceful, I'm so ashamed of it.

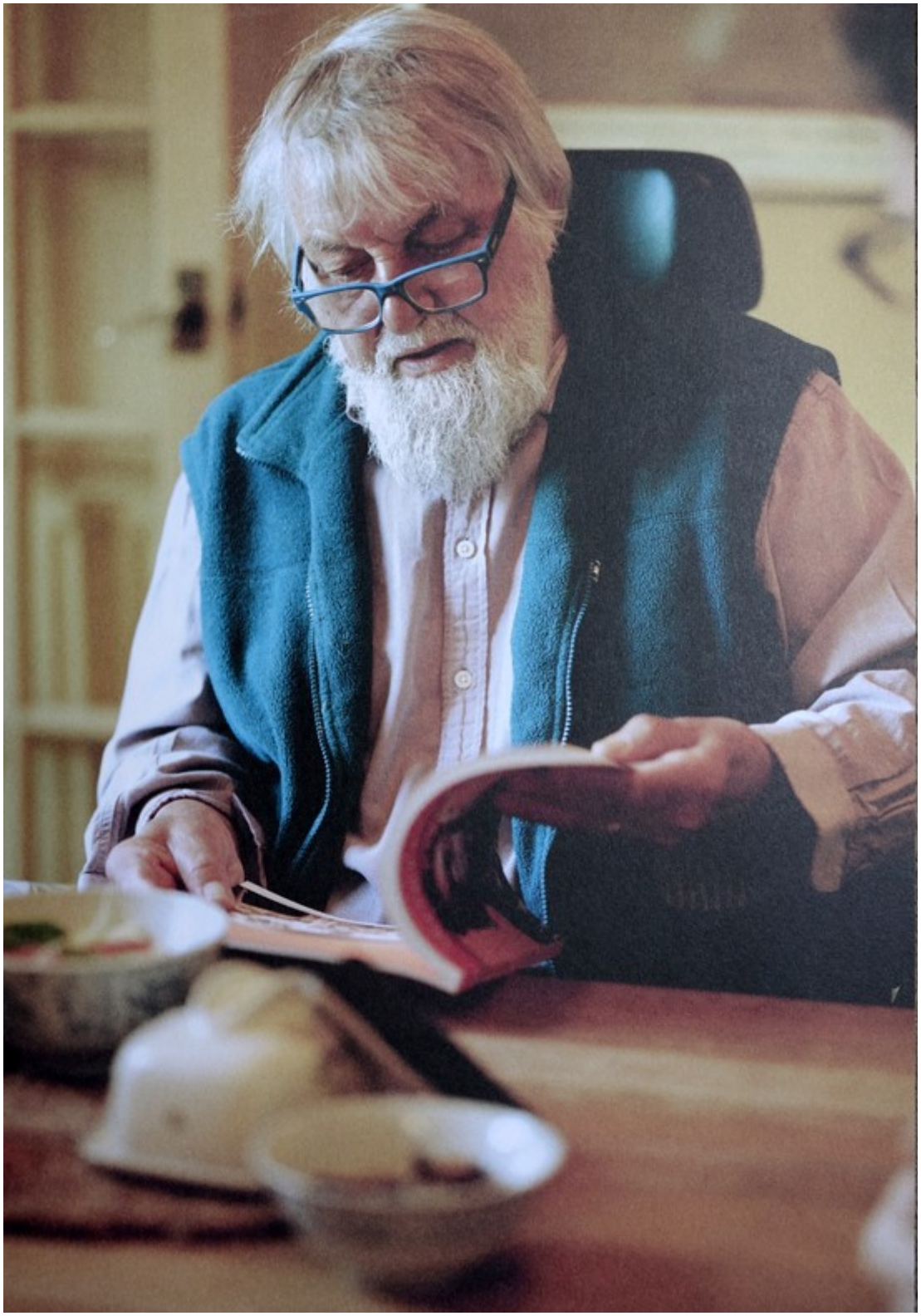
MARTIN: It's a studio! It's allowed to be. But tell me, what were the things that you were driven by when you were making your work?

ALFIE: The job in hand. Nothing else. The task. It's the same with everything. It's the same with making anything: What is it, this thing? With a cover you want to represent the person, you the subject. You try to make it a precious object. And you need a certain amount of information. I'm very hot on adding information. All the sleeve notes are by me. I think people want to learn a bit.

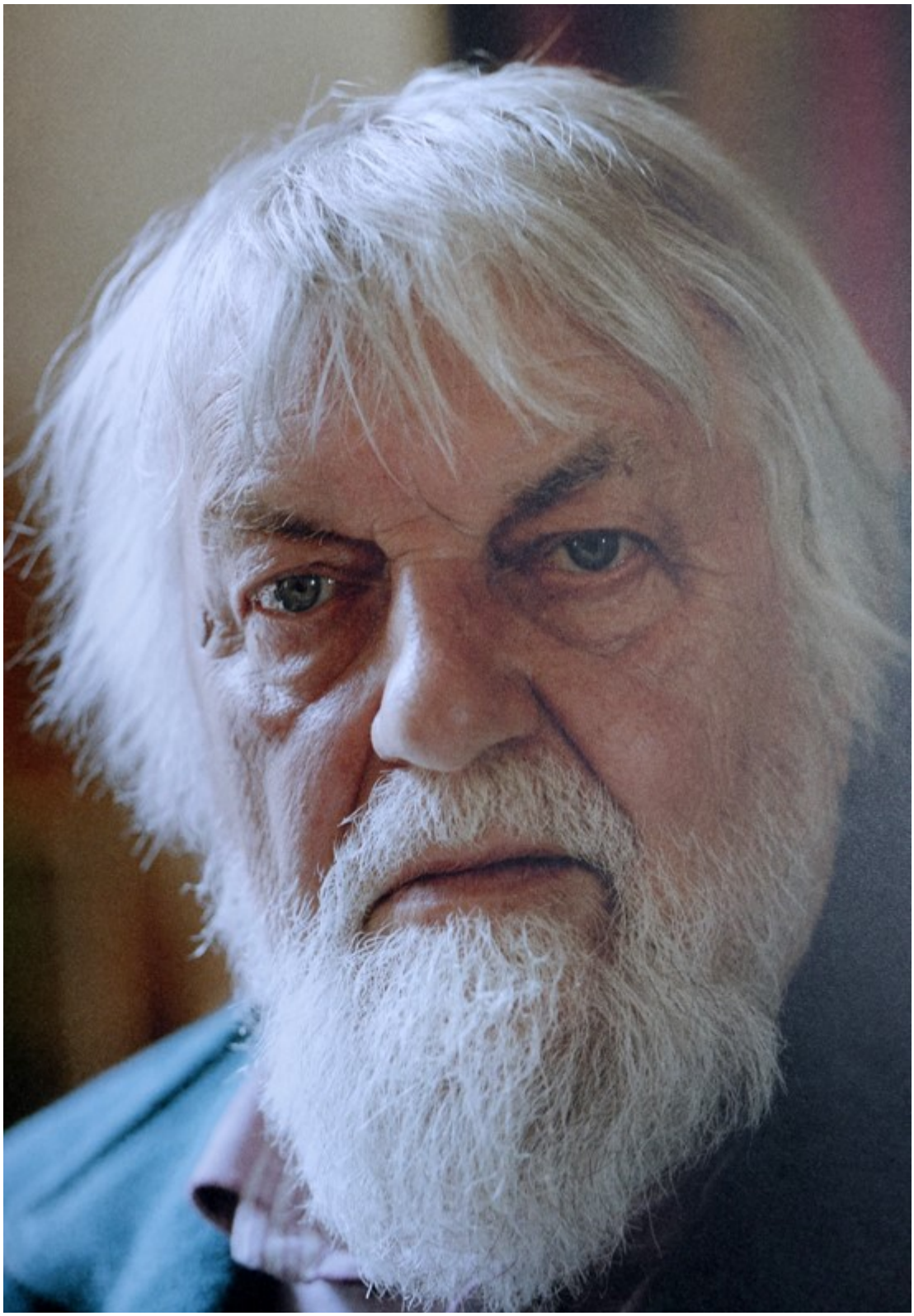
MARTIN: Were you asked by any other musicians to do sleeves and artwork?

ALFIE: I've done a couple for Fred Frith. And Annette Peacock; Gorky's Zygotic Mynci. Not a lot; I mean, you couldn't call us 'prolific'. We just about did the job. I find it hard to call

myself anything, really. I illustrated a couple of books for Ivor Cutler, like *Herbert the Chicken*. I think I've got a musical ear - so I loved lyric writing. I loved doing it to the music because of all the little nuances that you have to think about - like, does he want an 'oo' or an 'ee' here, in which case, do I have to change that word, because it really would sound nicer if it was 'oo'. I enjoyed that much more than painting when I started doing it. I've done some lyrics for Bertrand Burgalat as well, a French musician. But in the end, I think Robert and I go well together. His stuff is abstract, and mine generally always has pictures - so, without the pictures, this might be a bit... I mean he's very good; I really like his stuff- but I think both of us together, it works, just by accident.

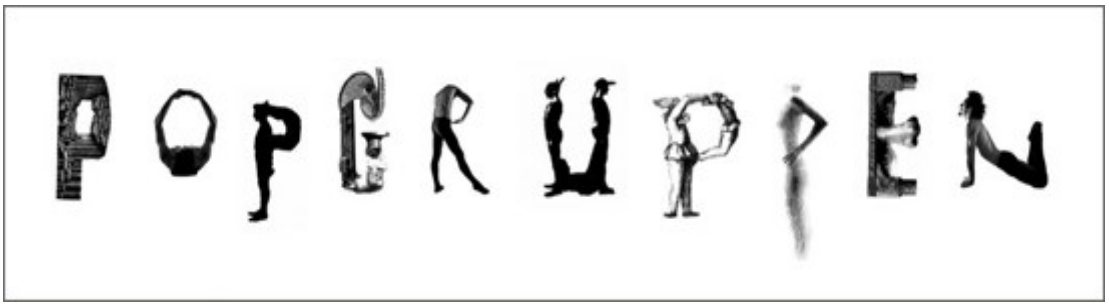


> Zoom



> Zoom

Robert Wyatt: the Matching Mole interview - Popgruppen - January 28, 2019



In celebration of Robert Wyatt's birthday, we here republish an interview with Robert focusing on Matching Mole. This is a pretty long piece, but rather interesting too, I would say!

The article was written by Michael Björn and originally published in Japanese music magazine **Strange Days #166, pages 14-25, September 2013***.

Copyright © Michael Björn 2013

* Please note that this is the original English article manuscript submitted for publication, and eventual differences to the Japanese translation made to make the article fit in the allotted space are not accounted for.



The first time I interviewed Robert Wyatt was in my late teens. I was invited to his London suburb home and was totally overwhelmed to meet this great rock star who had carefully prepared the visit with a selection of Swedish jazz records. For me – a teenage school kid. He has remained a great hero ever since, musically as well as on a human plane.

However, when I contact him about this article, I get

a categorical refusal and a ”No more to say.” Period.

Robert is very unhappy about how recent reissues have heaped bonus tracks on the originals. And just like he sings on ”Gloria Gloom”, he still has his ”doubts about how much to contribute to the already rich” – in this context represented by the record companies.

But during the course of some e-mails, Robert thaws and agrees to the interview. I get the feeling that his frustrations are overcome by a warm pride over the original albums, unique and masterly as they are. The last few e-mails are adorned with rhythmic references, a ding-ching here and an oobop sh’bam there. When we finally hook up, Robert is in a very good mood, full of friendly laughter. Again, I feel like that teenage school kid, totally charmed by his kind and thoughtful attitude.



My idea is that I would like to do an interview and send you the text before we publish.

Robert: You said that before. I don’t like the idea that I would have any kind of censorship role. I will tell you whatever I think and you write whatever you write.

OK, fair enough!

Robert: You should, however, be clear that it was your idea to talk about these things. There's a joke about a bishop who arrives in a city and a journalist asks him: "Are you going to visit the red light district in our city?" The bishop replies: "Is there a red light district in your city?" And the front page of the newspaper the next day is: "Bishop asks: Is there a red light district in your city?"

So, I would like to talk about Matching Mole and that is my idea then and not yours!

Robert: Yes, that's right, ha ha!

Matching Mole is a pun on the French translation of Soft machine, "machine molle".

Robert: Yes, that is what the French call Soft Machine. So I just thought I'd carry on with that. I didn't see why I should lose the name completely.

When you were in France with Soft Machine, they actually called the group "Machine Molle" then?

Robert: Yes, they did that anyway, so that is my little joke, that's all. Nobody owns the name, so in fact anybody can call themselves Soft Machine. I thought it would be quite funny to just call the Matching Mole records Soft Machine 5, Soft machine 6 et cetera and so on. But then I thought: "Oh, never mind, I won't do that." He he he!

How did the band come about, originally?

Robert: I can't remember… I can't remember how I knew Bill MacCormick. He knew me because he was a school friend of Phil Manzanera, and they used to come to Soft Machine concerts, apparently, when they were young. But apart from that, I don't really know. Dave Sinclair I knew from Caravan of course. And Dave MacRae, how on earth did I hear Dave MacRae? … I can't remember, that's ridiculous.

I started earning a living from music about 50 years ago. And for about ten years, I was working live, playing drums non-stop just every day. From 1973 until now obviously not on drums – but there's been so much stuff, it is hard to remember.

How did you approach making music with Matching Mole?

Robert: As a child, the music I listened to was my father's music, classical music basically. Then my big brother came home with his jazz records, and the LPs were pretty long too. I got used to that… in fact, to me, the innovative thing to do is to make short songs of three or four minutes, like pop records. I wasn't interested in if they were commercial, but just the idea of completing a piece of music in two or three minutes. It is the opposite way around, I think, from a lot of what people call progressive musicians do. They start out as rock musicians and then go on to do grand works afterwards, you know.

So the progression is in the other direction, from long to short.

Robert: It is in the other direction. It is interesting where we meet, but I wasn't going that way. And to me, the dramatic discovery in the 50s was pop music. I had never listened to it as a child. So I thought "Well, that is really interesting! You just do a song and stop after three minutes, wow!" Ha ha ha!

Ha ha!

Robert: My dad had things like Hindemith, Stravinsky stuff and Bartok. To me that was how long music was. And then my brother had stuff like Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus and Gil Evans, which were quite extended sort of things. So that was how I started thinking about music. It wasn't trying to be clever.

I didn't like the fact that people thought very carefully about the beginning to get people listening, but they would put the weakest track at the end. In fact, I think that the impact of a record ending is as strong as a record beginning. The last notes of a record – just like it did with a symphony – that's the thing that is hanging in the air when it stops.

About the first Matching Mole record

Even though you are going in the other direction, on the first record you don't end with the pop song 'O Caroline', you start with it.

Robert: No, I hadn't gotten around to that yet. But often I would play Dave Sinclair's advocate. When I was with people who looked down on pop music, I would be very defensive and say: "Well, you try and do that. It is not so easy." But when I am surrounded by people who think anything that isn't pop music is just pretentious and boring, that upsets me too. I don't see why there had to be battles. Instead one should enjoy the differences.

How did you go about putting the music together?

Robert: We lived in a place called 'All Saints Road' – a short attempt of having my own place, it was disastrous. But we had an upstairs and a downstairs – and downstairs, we had all the instruments. It was a very run down, poor area at that time. We could make a lot of noise and there weren't any neighbours who would make a fuss so that was OK. So there we were.

And really, it was about playing. Like jazz, it is about playing instruments as opposed to anything else. I wanted to reverse the process that happens in jazz, whereby you start with a plan but the improvisation is sort of the last thing.

On the first record we used themes, mostly by Phil Miller and myself: not songs or tunes really, just kind of patterns. But there can be endless variations on how to deal with these patterns. You keep the rhythmic pattern going or the harmonic pattern, and everything else changes. It was very influenced by free jazz, but I wanted to be based on a kind of rock sound. I wanted that kind of freedom in a rock context and I think that was what was unusual at that time.

The thing is then to turn it into something, and that is done in the editing of the recording. We would go through the routines for hours, but the process was to find the ones were it all kind of worked coherently, and to throw away all the bits that didn't work. That is what upset me with the CD reissue of this record. They put in all the stuff that didn't work with all the stuff that did work. And I feel… that it upsets me, frankly. Because although the original LP may sound random to a casual listener, it is not.

I really like things to sound as if people have just thought of it and it is totally easy and they don't have to think about it. What we call "artless". I like artless art. People think it's random; it is not random. There's a nice quote, I think it is Cezanne: "People think my paintings look as if they are done too quickly. That is because they are looking too quickly." Ha ha ha!

I suppose you want to put musicians in situations that they are not accustomed to, in order to make them grow?

Robert: It is more selfish. I want to hear music that I have not heard before!

I think Dave Sinclair really did feel that he was in a different context than he was used to.

Robert: He was uncomfortable; he wanted to do straightforward songs. He would be quite happy doing that and he does it beautifully. Personally, I found that he was a lovely improviser but it made him so anxious that I couldn't to it to him after a while. Nobody would let him down a groove; Bill didn't lay him down a groove, and I didn't lay down a groove. Phil chooses completely unlikely notes on guitar, there's absolutely no telling what notes Phil is going to play, or when and where – and Dave was completely unnerved by it, I think. Nevertheless, he did some terrific stuff on the album, and so I am very happy with that. We were very good friends, you know, he didn't have to do it. I don't think he regrets the experience, I hope he doesn't.

Dave Sinclair told me that you called him back from Portugal. You had really decided that you wanted to have him in the group?

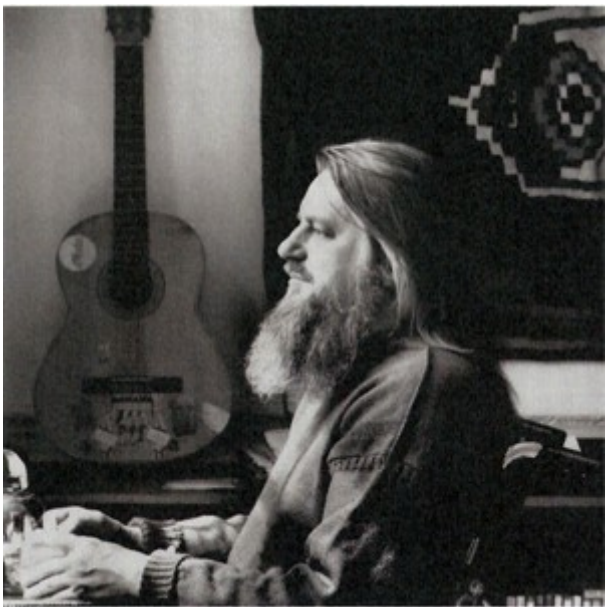
Robert: Absolutely, I knew some very good organists like Zoot Money and so on, but on the whole, the keyboard players I knew were either jazz players or jazzy blues players – which is a wonderful thing, but it is an idiom that exists already. Or, there were marvellous keyboard players who worked from a classical tradition who were interested in improvising. But I found that they had not a very strong concept of what I considered as swing or groove at all.

So there was difficulty finding musicians to play with. I didn't want people whom you can identify as belonging to any particular idiom.

I didn't get these certain ideas from music first; I got them from paintings. Bonnard is nothing like Degas and Degas is nothing like van Gogh and van Gogh is nothing like Kandinsky. They don't seem to be trying to fit into a… thing. They are developing their own… language. And I just wanted people who would do that and not just think: "Oh, this is a jazz thing" or something. I was really looking for something that hadn't been done before.

About 'Little Red Record'

On 'Little Red Record', the other musicians have a bigger role in the development of the music.



Robert: That's right. They were more familiar with each other, and they were more familiar working with me, so they knew what they were writing for.

This also means that 'Little Red Record' was more ramshackle because, although the playing on the first had been democratic, I had been totally autocratic on the editing. I felt that on the next record we made, I really must let everybody else do his thing. Whatever they want to do. So Dave MacRae does tunes, Bill MacCormick does tunes, Phil Miller does stuff and so on. By its very nature, it is less coherent in that way.

The title seems less ramshackle…?

Robert: It is not seriously political, although people think it was. I wasn't particularly interested in politics at that time, it was just my joke, you know. Everyone thinks we mean the little red book, but it could easily mean 'Little Red Engine' which is the name of a children's book in England, about a train.

There was some very simplistic socialist rhetoric on the record. I have no idea if I meant it; probably I had no idea what I was talking about. But the idea of the imitation Maoist cover was entirely the record company's, not mine. Nothing to do with us. And I would be embarrassed about that cover because poor Dave MacRae who's the gentlest man in the world has been given a frightening looking gun, which is very unfair on him because he wouldn't hurt a fly.

Some of the songs are nicknames.

Robert: Yes, if anybody is interested in those things 'Gloria Gloom' is my Alfie and 'Flora Fidgit' is Julie Christie, the actress.

And together with Dave Gale, they are Der Mutter Korus.

Robert: Absolutely. I only met Dave gale again recently, he made films and so on. In fact, it was he who was a friend of the Pink Floyd. When I broke my back, it was he who said: "Why don't you do a concert for Robert?" So I have lots to thank Dave for, he is a friend of Alfie's from, I think, art college.

Alfie and Julie are both talking on the record.

Robert: That is true. Then again Dave Gale is on there. He is making very funny little things, if you can hear them, about wanting to wear his woolly. He always likes to wear his woolly; it makes him feel more secure; some strange neurotic stuff. Julie for some reason decided to become a prostitute with a first-time customer. And Alfie wonders what on earth they are talking about. Anyway, we kept all of it on there. We really had good fun with that.

It seems that Julie's first-time customer is a woman?

Robert: Yeah, that's an implication there; Dave Gale certainly is not interested is he? He is too busy with his woolly. But really, I don't think it was thought through, I think they were improvising as much as musicians do. Then again: in a way that they would never normally do. It was very interesting and fun to try and work out how to keep instrumental coherence and allow some of the voices to come through, but not always.

Given that the record is a bit chaotic, Robert Fripp seems like an unlikely producer.

Robert: Yes, I know! I think he didn't quite know why I asked him. Funnily enough my son came over yesterday, he had found a photograph of Fripp and me, at some festival I think, talking to each other. It is a very merry little photograph and I don't remember it at all. I don't remember listening to his band or him listening to mine, or anything. When we were working in England in -67, there weren't really any other bands that I knew out there.

Phil Miller found it difficult to record in the studio, since he was in awe of Fripp.

Robert: Yeah, Bill MacCormick mentions that. Phil is in fact always like that. He is almost chronically shy and never seen in person. But if that was the case, I am ashamed to say I didn't really notice. I had been on the road with Hendrix, so it was very hard for me to imagine being awestruck by the presence of a terrific guitarist after a year of that.

Brian Eno is also on the album.

Robert: Yes, that was because Bill MacCormick knew him since he was a friend of Phil Manzanera's. Bill asked him for an introduction to 'Gloria Gloom', but he did it in his own studio and just brought it in and we worked it into the thing.

He did bring his synth into the studio, I think Dave MacRae is using it on the record as well.

Robert: Yeah, that is possibly quite right. I had completely forgotten that! Yeah, that's right. Eno contributes to the record in a way that is so discreet you often don't know he is doing it. Dave MacRae himself is very inventive on keyboards, using the fuzz box and pedals in a kind of crazy way anyway. But certainly, he would be very happy for Brian to be trying stuff.

There was a CD release of 'Little Red Record' on BGO in 1993 where the A-sides and B-sides where switched. I read that this is the way you originally wanted the album to be.

Robert: That is true. I wasn't sure about that. In the end I decided that it meant starting the album with Brian's introduction to 'Gloria Gloom' basically. And I thought it took too long to come in. And I thought: "Get some food on the table" you know.

Ha ha ha!

Robert: So I abandoned that after a while. I had exactly the same idea when I did 'Ruth is stranger than Richard', I swapped the sides around on different versions.

You were thinking loud about the track composition so to speak?

Robert: I was, yeah. I took responsibility for that because… somebody had to. I didn't really know anybody, not even Fripp, who was thinking like that; every track in terms of the complete piece of music, where it was in it and so on. Which is always a thing I like to think about.

Comparing 'Matching Mole' and 'Little Red Record'

The two Matching Mole records sound fundamentally unlike each other, how did that happen?

Robert: For the 'Little Red Record', I decided for some reason in my head at that time, that I would play without a snare on the snare drum all the way through. If you take the snare off, it doesn't just affect the snare drum, it affects the bass drum and it affects the rest of the band. It makes it more kind of translucent, if you like.

The moment you have the snare on, it affects the bass and you get those thumps without notes: boom-da, boom-da. The moment you take that off, a lightness comes through. Dave MacRae's playing is full of light, and I wanted that. It is not rock & roll, it is much more fluid. I wanted to play drums more fluidly to see if I could stick with Dave when he was playing.

The other thing is, I like to try and have sustained pieces so that one piece flows into another and it is some sort of journey going through. That is consistent on both albums, but the thing which is different is that Dave MacRae came with his tunes, like that lovely 'Smoke Signal' thing, and Bill came with his rather Soft Machine influenced stuff.

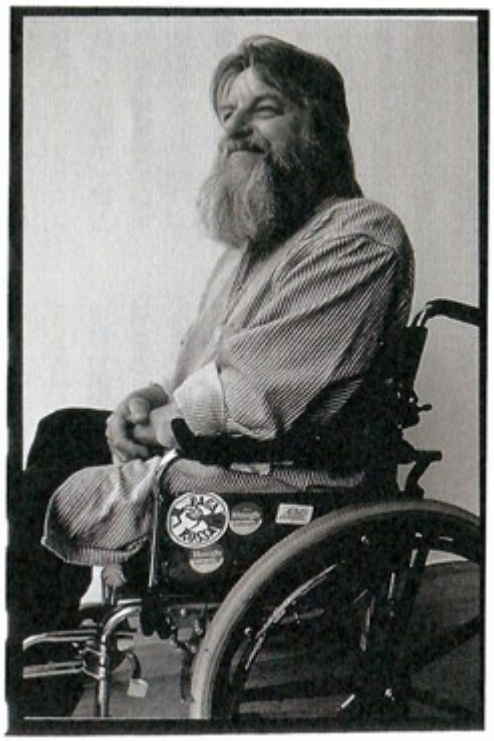
For the first record, CBS was closing their studio and you were the last band in there – and then on 'Little Red Record' you are actually more or less the first band in the new studio.

Robert: Yeah! You know, I had forgotten that, you are quite right! Poor Dave Sinclair in that cold studio, I had completely forgotten that. But you know, even so, it didn't influence us much. When you are young, you can sleep in fields you know. Ha ha ha!

With it being so cold in the studio, you had developed all the musical patterns before you came to the studio then, I suppose?

Robert: Not necessarily, because it is recorded and we didn't record at home. So I think it must have been quite a lot of it trying out stuff in the studio. We did rehearse it for ours to get everyone familiar enough with the patterns to not have to think about them.

I used to prefer the first Matching Mole record because it sounds more like other Canterbury records. But the more I listen, the more I like the 'Little Red Record' because it doesn't!



Robert: I have exactly the same reaction! I have been listening to them since you got in touch. The first one is totally coherent; I understand what we are trying to do and we did it. The second one is much more reckless, but because of that I find it very interesting. And I don't mind hearing the variations, the different takes, because they show different aspects.

In the case of the CDs, definitely it is the CD of the 'Little Red Record' that has more listening stuff on it. I am more comfortable with it now. I completely agree: I reversed on that. On the first one, I am very unhappy with the extra tracks and the repeats of the single and, I don't know, I just find it's a mess.

So yes, I agree. It is exactly what happened to me, listening to them.

About reissues

You are obviously not happy with the Matching Mole CD reissues.

Robert: I really like the idea of two sides, whether is on the original 78 rpm records or eventually on vinyl LPs. And I always find it very interesting that there are two sides on an LP of about 20 minutes each. This sounds very pretentious and I am very pretentious, mind you, but I find that a lot of life is about two unequal halves. Just the fact that so much is binary: eyes, arms, men and women, everything. If you watch a sprout growing, very often the first thing you see is leaves alternating one side and another, they are not quite the same.

I like the idea of one side of a record being about the same thing as the other side but quite different. There is no literary equivalent, I can't say this in words, I just have a feeling that the A-side and B-side meant something to me. Particularly on the first Matching Mole record but then again on the later ones, on 'Rock Bottom' and 'Ruth is Stranger than Richard'. Even when it became CDs, I tend to divide things in two parts at least. To have different parts, whatever kind of shape, parts that are about 20 minutes long, that seems

to be a good length for listening to a piece of music without having to go and have a piss or get another drink or something. So that was the idea here.

But there again, I am not happy with putting them all together in a big lump, because I want to make records that you can leave on until the end. If you make records where you have alternative takes, the same thing again and so on, it is OK for archives, for historical record, but it no longer serves the original function: A record you could put on and leave on until the end. So that was the idea of the original thing.

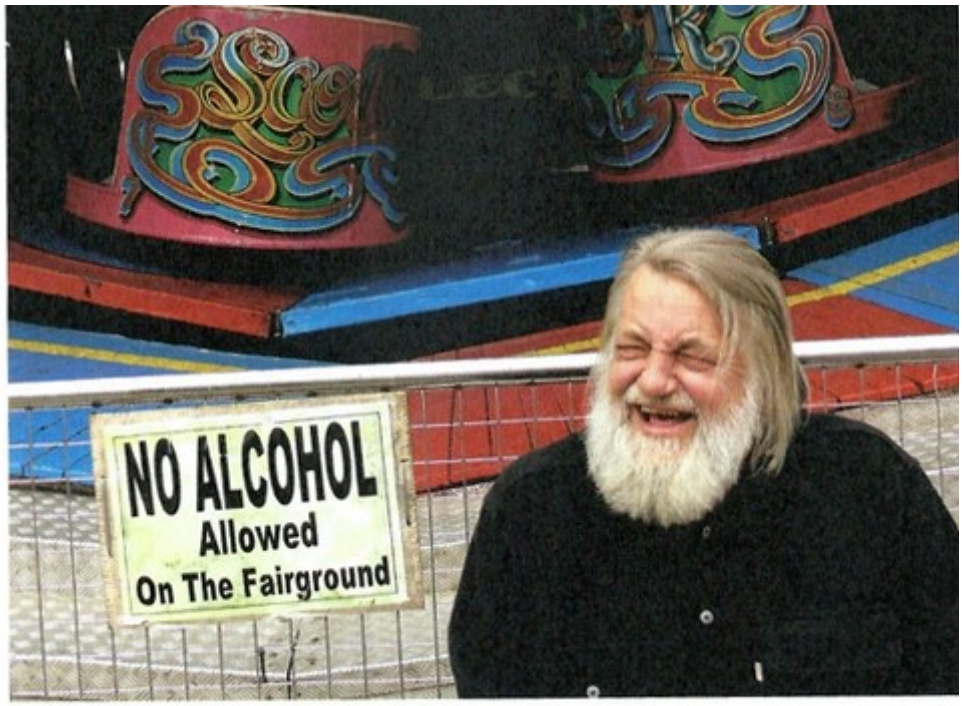
Live performances

You managed to play quite a lot of live shows during the short lifespan of the band.

Robert: We did, yeah! And they were very good fun to play. I used to like changing the themes, like… on the original 'Marchides', Dave wanted the improvisation completely out tempo, rubato or whatever the word would be, and I wasn't comfortable with that live. So I started to put some sort of a pulse underneath it. As much as I love free jazz, I am never really comfortable with too much out of tempo stuff. One of the things I really liked about jazz and rock music was that kind of physical movement. So, I tended to put that in, or change the time signatures slightly.

Did playing so much live influence the way the second album turned out?

Robert: Yes, I think that is possibly absolutely right.



Robert Wyatt ／写真提供：HosTess Entertainment

Splitting up

Do you have any memories from when you decided to split up the band?

Robert: I realised that in Soft Machine, I couldn't be a follower. And in Matching Mole, I

found out that also I couldn't be a leader. So I was left with these two things. And then it occurred to me! My inspirational light bulb moment was: "You don't have to be in a band, Robert! It is not a law."

For all that time, because rock groups started about the time conscription in the army ended, I always saw it as an extension of going into the army. In the early 60s all young men went into the army to occupy foreign countries for a few years and sit around drinking beer, and picking up local girls and so on. And when they stopped recruiting soldiers, the Beatles went to Germany and did exactly the same thing! Ha ha ha!

I always thought that you have to be in a sort of gang, but no you don't. You don't have to do it! I was liberated in the end by – people think I am being ironic – but, I was liberated by being in a wheelchair. A band was no longer a possibility. It is a paradox, but I am totally happy that it happened now.

But there was talk of a new incarnation of Matching Mole?

Robert: Dave MacRae wanted to form a jazz-rock trio. And I didn't really want to go that jazz-rock way. I don't really like what came to be known as jazz-rock. There are some very nice people playing it, but it seems a bit opportunistic. Jazz musicians who are jealous of rock musicians doing so well and thinking: "Well I can play instruments better than them. Let's grow our hair, give ourselves a mystical name, get rid of our horn player and get a guitar player and we can play rock better than them."

So, I didn't want to be in a jazz-rock band. I was trying to think about a keyboard player, really. And the one I came up with, who was lovely, was a man called Francis Monkman who played with Curved Air. He had no jazz in him, but I worked with him on a radio broadcast that was later put out on American label Cuneiform. He was brilliant, very imaginative also, from a classical background.

But I just didn't know what to do and I thought: "Well I want a jazz player, but someone like Gary Windo who just doesn't play like a session musician. And Bill again maybe." I was working on that, and I could imagine a few tunes with that, but I couldn't imagine spending a year just with that. So… I was sort of saved from all of it by just falling out of a window. Into another planet, ha ha! Into another world.

So as a solo artist, you have been a leader of yourself for the rest of your career.

Robert: Yeah, that's right. I boss myself around. There are no bad feelings that way.

The Italians of the East

I saw on Youtube that you did a kind of a workshop at pub last year, where there was some playback of your music and you were talking in-between.

Robert: Yeah, there have been a couple of those. One for Wire magazine, and then for Cafe Oto in London, they have a music venue over there, run by a Japanese person.

Would you be at all interested in doing something like that in Japan?

Robert: I would have been, but in fact I am not travelling anymore. I don't go on airplanes anymore. The thing is, my wife is older than me. She is in her 70s and she is not very well. She has been struggling with her health. Having been fairly selfish most of my life and just doing my thing, I am trying now to be more just kind of domestic.

I would love to go to Japan in the sense that they are wonderful. I get lovely letters from Japan, and beautiful gifts, lovely things. Somebody asked me to name their new

restaurant, and I did that, it is called ”Happy Mouth”. And I’ve got Japanese neighbours here. But I can’t travel anymore.

Certainly, musicians who play there love it, and I feel sad that I am missing that, but I can’t deal with it any more. I am not interested in talking about my disability, because as you gather, mostly it has been almost an advantage, making me concentrate and simplify my life. But that said, next year will be my 70th year, and I am getting health problems. I just can’t do things I used to be able to do.

I am so grateful to Japan, in some way they are kind of the Italians in the East. Because the two places I get the most alive and lively, understanding and friendly responses: in the West is Italy and in the East it is of course Japan. And those two areas of people listening have been my best encouragement over the years, absolutely no question.

Thank you for talking to me today!

Robert: I am sorry I gave you a bit of a hard time in the beginning… Temperamental musicians, what can you say!!

* * *

>> The interview on the Popgruppen website.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soft Machine - Uncut - The Archive Collection - 2019

SOFT MACHINE

Psychedelia, prog, rock and jazz fusion, all lightly brushed with absurdism – Wyatt's undulating crew proved an endlessly pliable sonic machine. *By John Lewis*

SOFT MACHINE have been several different groups over the course of their existence – a freakbeat combo who morphed into pioneers of psychedelic whimsy; an experimental prog band who eventually became a rigorous jazz rock act. The bulk of their output has been instrumental, but they still managed to spawn three distinctive vocalists – Robert Wyatt, Kevin Ayers and Daevid Allen – who questioned the fundamental nature of Anglo-American rock music.

Uniquely among prog-rock bands, Soft Machine tended not to use guitars, but they've still managed to feature several of Britain's top guitarists – Andy Summers from The Police, fusion guru Allan Holdsworth and jazz luminary John Etheridge. And the band has been the seedbed for dozens of other hugely successful musicians – film composer Karl Jenkins, big-name saxophonists Elton Dean, Ray Warleigh and Theo Travis, and drummers John Marshall and Gary Husband have all passed through the band's ranks over the past half century.

The band formed in 1966, from the ashes of the Daevid Allen Trio and the Wilde Flowers, featuring drummer Wyatt, bassist Ayers, Aussie guitarist Allen and organist Mike Ratledge. The only recording made by this quartet would be the February 1967single, "Love Makes Sweet Music" – a piece of charming freakbeat, not quite poppy enough for *Ready Steady Go!*, yet not quite freaky enough for the Summer of Love. Its flipside, "Feelin', Reelin', Squealin'", is closer to the hippie ideal, a piece of flute-drenched psychedelia featuring a growling baritone-voiced Kevin Ayers on the verses and a tenor-pitched



Dadaist chorus from Wyatt. It would also be the last recording that the band would release featuring a guitar for nearly a decade.

An early live engagement saw them on the French Riviera, playing in a production of Picasso's outrageous, erotic play *Desire Caught By The Tail* and already displaying a fondness for jazz-inspired improvisation. Allen left the band on the way home – denied re-entry to the UK for overstaying the terms of his initial visa from Australia, he stayed on the Continent to form the Anglo- French outfit Gong – but his surrealist vision lived on for the first two Soft Machine albums. In particular was Allen's interest in the teachings of the French "pataphysicist" Alfred Jarry, an eccentric, proto-Dadaist prankster who counted Picasso, Gauguin, Duchamp and Oscar Wilde as friends.

The three-piece band's debut album, 1968's *The Soft Machine*, is a wonderfully endearing collection of skewed pop songs. It was played with a certain rigour that owed much to the band's contemporaries the Jimi Hendrix Experience (whom the band would support on a mammoth US tour that year), but Wyatt, Ayers and Ratledge all wore their experimentalism lightly – like Alfred Jarry, this was a band who were very consciously not taking themselves too seriously. "Why Am I So Short?" is a hymnal piece of Wyatt whimsy, "So Boot If At All" has a certain heavy rock swagger, with organist Mike Ratledge playing like a metal guitarist; "Why Are We Sleeping" prefigures early Blur; while "We Did It Again" is a hypnotic one-chord groove that anticipates the motorik krautrock that Can would be making a few years later. The album's highlight might be "Lullaby Letter", an angular proto-punk miniature with unusual chord changes that sounds oddly reminiscent of Nirvana, with Ratledge again playing a heavy metal solo on his Lowrey organ.



After the US tour with Hendrix (when Andy Summers briefly joined the band), Ayers left, to be replaced by the band's roadie Hugh Hopper, and the band regrouped to create the 1969 LP *Soft Machine Volume Two*, which takes the Jarry-esque absurdism of the first album into an almost symphonic dimension. The influence of the band's friends Pink Floyd is strong (Wyatt, Ratledge and Hopper had backed Syd Barrett on his 1968 solo debut, *The Madcap Laughs*). But the band also take a conceptual direction that owes much to Frank Zappa (apparently, on Zappa's recommendation, they split the album's two dominating suites into a shorter series of segued tracks to maximise on publishing income).



















THE SOFT MACHINE
ABC PROBE/ BARCLAY, 1968
8/10

VOLUME TWO
PROBE, 1969
8/10

THIRD
CBS, 1970
9/10

FOURTH
CBS, 1971
6/10

FIFTH
CBS, 1972
7/10

SIX
CBS, 1973
7/10

SEVEN
CBS, 1973
6/10

BUNDLES
HARVEST, 1975
8/10

SOFTS
HARVEST, 1976
7/10



The first of these, "Rivmic Melodies", is a 17-minute suite filled with compelling shorter pieces. "*Good evening, we now have a choice selection of rhythmic melodies from the Official Orchestra of the College of Pataphysics*," announces Wyatt over a jazzy, loping groove, before launching into a *Sesame Street*-style recitation of the alphabet over a quirky melody (track four, "A Concise British Alphabet, Pt II", repeats the track with the alphabet recited in an entirely random order). Anchored by Ratledge playing suspended chords on the piano, often with him overdubbing buzzsaw organ riffs over the top, it's a thoroughly appealing album, and a fine vehicle for Wyatt's plaintive, mischievous choirboy tenor voice. "Dedicated To You But You Weren't Listening" is a lovely baroque ballad, while "Hibou Anemone And Bear" and "Orange Skin Food" both spin out into the kind of territory explored by Frank Zappa on *Hot Rats*, with Hugh's brother Brian Hopper playing harmonised solos on multiple reed instruments. Best of all might be "Hulloder", presumably written in the States, where Wyatt checks his privilege over the course of a lengthy, stream-of-consciousness ramble ("*If I was black and I lived here/I'd want to be a big man in the FBI… but as I'm not/And because I'm free, white and 21/I don't need more power than I've got/Except sometimes when I'm broke*").

The entire album is a cornucopia of ideas, any one of which could have seen them moving in a dozen different directions. The direction that they did end up taking, like many other jazz-loving rock musicians, was inspired by Miles Davis's album *Bitches Brew*. At the end of 1969, Wyatt visited a London jazz club where the pianist Keith Tippett was performing with his eight-piece, one that would later feature on his 1970 Polydor album *You Are Here... I Am There*. Wyatt was impressed by the horn frontline that lurched between tightly written harmonies and free improvisation. "We asked if we could borrow them to add spice to our distinctive but inflexible 'bees-in-abottle' sound and they generously agreed to help out," says Wyatt.

Elton Dean (alto saxophone), Marc Charig (cornet) and Nick Evans (trombone), along with Lyn Dobson (flute and alto) and Jimmy Hastings (flute and bass clarinet), were added to the Soft Machine lineup, forming a short-lived septet (Soft Machine weren't alone in their admiration of Tippett's band – King Crimson also hired Tippett, Charig and Evans around this time).

The resulting album, 1970's *Third*, turned out to be the way station between psychedelic prog and full-on jazz rock. Hugh Hopper's composition "Facelift" is a challenging and intriguing mix of ambient free improvisation and jazzy, high-pressure rock. It is a blend of two live performances recorded at Croydon's Fairfield Halls and then manipulated in the studio, Teo Macero-style, and subject to post-production tape loops. Ratledge's "Slightly All The Time" starts as a playful swing groove that moves into several stages and shifting time signatures; while the closing track, "Out-Bloody-Rageous", starts and ends with a nod to Terry Riley's *A Rainbow In Curved Air*, with overdubbed layers of organ creating a ghostly, hypnotic quality for the first and last five minutes of the track, sandwiching a jagged 7/4



groove that features one of Mike Ratledge's best fuzz-organ solos.

The album's penultimate track, Wyatt's "Moon In June", might be the band's masterpiece, but it was one that Ratledge and Hopper didn't particularly like. Wyatt sings a highly self-referential lyric that provides a running commentary of the recording process (the words would change when he performed the song live, at BBC Radio sessions, or at the Prom concert that Soft Machine headlined that summer). Wyatt plays drums, bass and keyboards for most of the track, his sparse approach reminiscent of his forthcoming solo albums like *Rock Bottom*. "Moon In June" could have augured a new era for the band as a Wyatt-esque conceptual pop group, but instead it became the band's last vocal track. 1971's *Fourth* sidelines Wyatt and it would be his last with the band. Hugh Hopper is the dominant songwriter, and many of the textures explored by the band start to become self-consciously jazzier. Roy Babbington joins the band on four tracks to play upright bass, complementing Hopper's bass guitar, while Ratledge puts his electric piano through a ring modulator – an FX unit popular with the likes of Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea. Elton Dean's first songwriting contribution, "Fletcher's Blemish", is a series of tightly written cued passages that are linked by free improvisation, consciously referencing *Bitches Brew*. Ratledge writes the bitty, fiddly "Teeth", while Hopper's "Virtually" is a four-part suite that moves between gentle harmonies and free-jazz freakouts. The waltzing "Kings And Queens" is a rare point of meditative peace on the album.

By the time of *Fifth* (1972), Soft Machine had fully morphed into a fusion outfit, broadly along the lines of Chick Corea's Return To Forever or John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra. Wyatt had been replaced by two jazz drummers – Phil Howard on side one, John Marshall on side two – both playing with a weird degree of restraint. Ratledge had ditched his Hohner pianet, the clunky-sounding electric piano he'd used on previous albums, and started using a Fender Rhodes, feeding it through numerous effects units and enjoying its glossy, ethereal qualities on tracks like "M C" and the aqueous ambient jazz of "Drop". "All White" is a rigorous modal groove in 7/4, "Pigling Bland" is an episodic funk ballad, while "As If" is a fidgety and idiosyncratic piece of collective improvisation written by Ratledge.



(Above) *Third*-era lineup – (l–r) Ratledge, Hugh Hopper, Robert Wyatt and Elton Dean – before their concert at the Albert Hall, August 13, 1970

What becomes apparent is that, for all the meretricious playing, there is no-one in the band capable of acting as a Chick Corea or a Herbie Hancock. Ratledge is great at texture and at "comping" (providing inventive backing for others), and he could get away with playing simple fuzz-rock riffs on his wheezy, buzzy Lowrey organ in earlier incarnations of the band. But, as a classically trained pianist dabbling in jazz, his limitations as an improviser become apparent. Even the band's strong instrumentalists, like Elton Dean, seemed reluctant to really take the lead.

Dean left after *Fifth* to be replaced by multireedist Karl Jenkins from Ian Carr's Nucleus, who started to dominate the band on 1973's *Six*, a double album that mixes live and studio recordings. A voyage through enjoyably disorientating time signatures, "37 ½" features some impressive drumming from John Marshall; "EPV" and "Lefty" are both interesting ambient explorations featuring an FX-laden Fender Rhodes; while the funky groove of Ratledge's "Gesolreut" recalls Eddie Harris's "Freedom Jazz Dance", the soul-jazz standard covered by Miles Davis. The most memorable track on the studio album is "Stanley Stamp's Gibbon Album" a propulsive groove set around Ratledge's fugal piano riff. But it's the angular "Stumble" that sets out Jenkins' stall as a songwriter, and sets the tone for how the band would continue on 1973's *Seven*.

By now Hopper had left, to be replaced by Roy Babbington, and the writing is dominated by Jenkins, who pens seven of the tracks, specialising in simple, static and rather repetitive grooves like " Nettle Bed". "Carol Ann" is a pretty, spartan ballad, "Day's Eye" is a rigorous workout in 9/8, while Ratledge introduces a synth to the band for the first time – a modular analogue EMS model called the AKS.

It's tempting to see subsequent albums as an afterthought, but *Bundles* (1975) is a fascinating change in direction. Ratledge is increasingly sidelined – Jenkins is even starting to overdub keyboards – but the real USP is that the band have introduced guitar for the first time since their debut single. Where the sonic space usually occupied by guitar was

filled by Ratledge's FX-laden keyboards, here Allan Holdsworth starts to dominate proceedings, playing with a John McLaughlin swagger on "Hazard Profile", showing an ECM delicacy on "Gone Sailing" and telling a compelling narrative tale on "Land Of The Bag Snake". Holdsworth would soon be lost to America (to join The Tony Williams Lifetime), to be replaced by the more introspective John Etheridge on the rather reflective and ambient 1976 album *Softs*.

Soft Machine have continued to exist, on and off, since then, as a legacy project – also known, variously, as Soft Ware, Soft Works and Soft Machine Legacy – drawing from an alumni of around 50 people and often featuring some very big names in British jazz (including John Taylor, Dick Morrissey and Theo Travis). But their repertoire concentrates almost exclusively on the mid 1970s incarnation of the band. There are dozens of fascinating iterations of Soft Machine that could provide fruitful territory for exploration.

(Below) *Bundles* lineup, 1975 – (c/wise from top left) Roy Babbington, Ratledge, John Marshall, Allan Holdsworth and Karl Jenkins



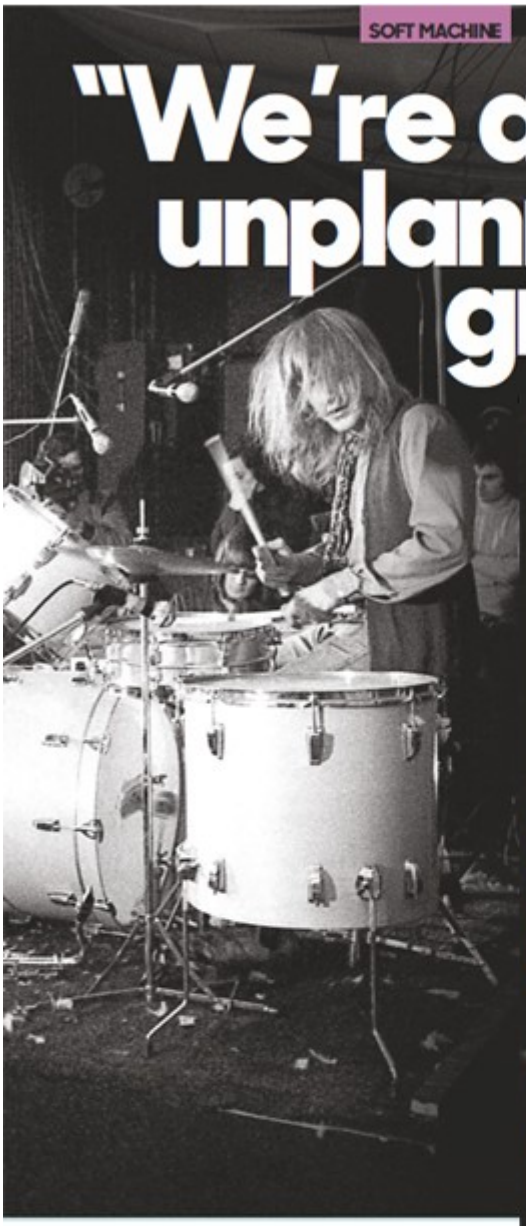
HULTON-DEUTSCH/HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES; TONY RUSSELL/REDFERNS



[Below : this interview is also published here]

SOFT MACHINE

"We're a very unplanned group"



MELODY MAKER JANUARY 2,1971


Melody Maker
RADIO 1 TO DIE?

1970 was a very good year for Robert Wyatt. It was the year in which he established himself as a major drummer in contemporary British music; the year in which he experimented outside the confines, unrestrictive though they are, of The Soft Machine, dallying briefly with Kevin Ayers, then concentrating more strongly on his role inside the Keith Tippett Centipede project, with whom he has played so impressively on their three initial outings.

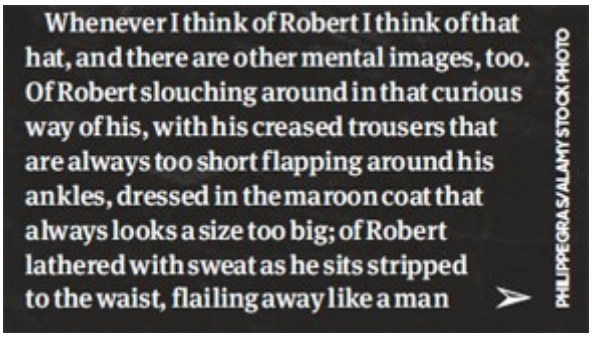
And then, as the year has drawn to an end, he has further established his own identity by becoming a prime mover in Symbiosis, that excitingly impromptu, free-blowing band, and finally topping off the proceedings by producing his own album – you believe he produced it, too?

He has called it *The End Of An Ear*, which is quite a funny pun, I suppose. But then, Robert it quite a funny person with his huge fur French hat crammed down over his untidy lank hair.

Whenever I think of Robert I think of that hat, and there are other mental images, too. Of Robert slouching around in that curious way of his, with his creased trousers that are always too short flapping around his ankles, dressed in the maroon coat that always looks a size too big; of Robert lathered with sweat as he sits stripped to the waist, flailing away like a man

PHILIPPE GRAS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

"I STILL FEEL LOST. SOMETIMES I'M BACK WHERE I STARTED SIX YEARS AGO"
ROBERT WYATT



possessed under the hot lights of the Albert Hall during the Softs' televised concert; and then there is Robert sitting with bitter tears in his eyes in a dressing room in Rotterdam because he hates the performance he has just given.

Because, you see, he's nothing if not an emotional person. He is also nothing if not a nice person, and niceness is not an excessively common quality among musicians and entertainers. Much of the secret of his success is that people respond so readily to his spontaneity and generosity of spirit. Everybody wants to work with him, and when they have made the gig they come back for more. There was nobody happier and more elated amongst those 50 people in Centipede than Wyatt, and no one more brought down when the band received reviews that were generally cautious and, in one instance, bitterly hostile.

"I'm upset, not for my own sake," he explained later, "but for Keith and Julie." And he meant it.

How do you feel about interviews, Robert? "

I regret most I've done when I see what's happened, but then I regret most performances on records, too. I think one of the big difficulties is that written words and spoken words aren't the same thing. You actually think different things in print – I do. Things I say, words I use in speech, if I was writing down the same thought, I actually wouldn't use the same word. There's nothing anybody can do about that, really. It's misleading. I find I say things just to pad some things out, or to be clever for a minute while I'm trying to think what I really think. I can see the value of them, but I still find it makes demands... It upsets me sometimes, put it like that. But that's true of anything."

But Hugh [*Hopper*] and Mike [*Ratledge*] don't like interviews, do they?

"Well, Hugh is pathologically shy. Very. The fact that he goes on stage is part of it. You don't get up on your own, you get up with equipment and amplifiers and volume. It's very private on stage; it's not an exhibitionistic thing to do at all.

"People are often surprised at musicians and performers being introverts but it doesn't surprise me. What surprises me is that people who are extroverts are musicians. What amazes me is when a brilliant musician is an extrovert, because if they're extrovert it probably means that they spent their time in their teens rushing round coffee bars meeting people, and I'm surprised that they had the time to learn to play anything at the same time.

"Whereas I find that introverts are less social people, are very often the ones who learn to play instruments properly. The one way you can hide is to be a performer, because it's really a false identity to be on stage. You can really feel untouchable and private.

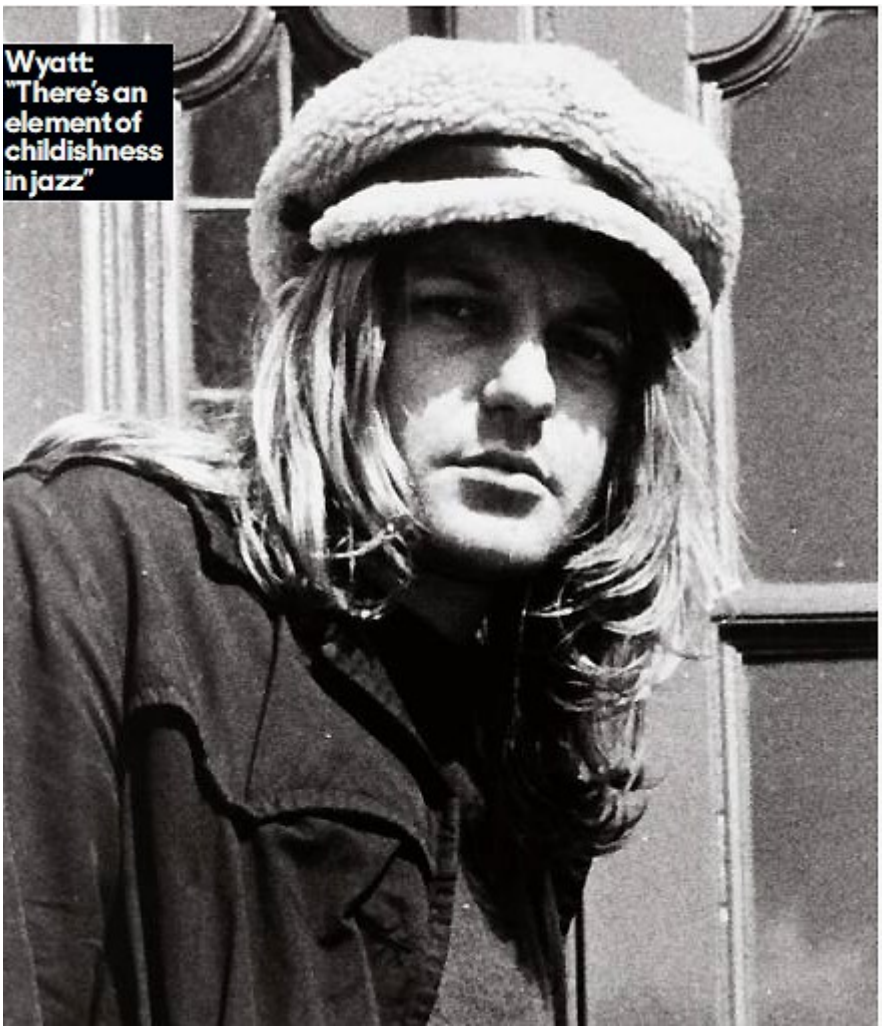
"The group has become primarily instrumental, for instance, because of our characters, in a way. We're a very unplanned group in our direction. We just sort of drift from whatever area seems to excite us at the moment to whatever other area seems to excite us. Even the simple things, like the gaps, the lack of gaps, is because we are embarrassed, I think, to have a silence on stage where the audience is expected to react back to us. I just find that totally embarrassing – ending a number, bang, then straight into the next one, all that business. I can't bear it."

You don't always appear happy with the group... What do you think it's doing wrong for you personally?

[Long pause] "All the things you can talk about in music we agree on. We all share similar

ideas on the possibilities of freedom and the different types of freedom, and structure, and discipline, and what use they are, and when they're useful and when they are not, and how to cooperate, and still express yourself. But music isn't, like, conscious ideas, concepts, if you had them; the real music is the way you play, the actual note that you put after the note before.

"And quite simply, sometimes we aren't playing the same piece of music – the drumming isn't the drumming for the bass line that Hugh's using, or there's another bass line that isn't being played, or the rhythm section thing that should be with Mike's organ solo isn't because Hugh and I are somewhere else. The idea, after all, is not to create four pieces of music but one piece of music, and I'm upset on nights when we create four pieces of music."



GEMS/GETTY IMAGES

So what have you gained musically from the Symbiosis?

"Since the summer, since I've started playing with Kevin, I've realised that in other contexts there are things in me which come out and never seem to come out when I play with Soft Machine. It's not a question of quality at all, it's just a question of different situations demand different skills, and I hadn't realised just how much you do adapt and just play what seems necessary. I would be very loath to put a word to it and think of a concept which fits what I mean.

"All I know is that when I get on a kit, and there's Roy Babbington on me left and whoever it might be, Neville Whitehead or someone, and Gary [*Windo*] and Nick [*Evans*], that a whole different thing happens. I just lift up me sticks and immediately something else happens and different situations arise that would never arise with Soft Machine. I just play completely different things.

"Symbiosis is different people. All music is a cooperative thing, you see. Beyond all people's

individual talent is a shared talent, which the music has. How to pin down the best relationship... European music sort of solidified in a way into an almost military hierarchy of composer, conductor and orchestra.

"What happens is, there's a kind of assumption that the type of person who conceives the music is a different kind of person from a performer – that's what European music assumes, although many great European composers have been virtuoso performers of their own work, and many great composers are great conductors. But generally speaking, this is a hierarchy that's accepted, and the fact is that in my opinion the most vital influence on music has been the black music of the past 50 years.

"The most interesting thing it seems to me, that has been suggested by black music, is that, as in, say, painting, the person who conceives of it and the person who plays it can be one and the same – combine both skills in one person. And this seems to me the most interesting, challenging thing that jazz music has come up with that European music doesn't really like to get to grips with. And what Symbiosis is, is a complete imbalance; in other words, we're all blowers without any of the composers, or when we do have composers – like Keith was with us the other night – he's not in a composing or controlling role at all.

"And so it's an incredible risk, Symbiosis every night, because we just turn up and play. The responsibility is enormous; you've got to be on form then and there because you're going to be doing all the composing and all the performing at the same time, and so is everybody else."

Would you agree that this seems to be a very interesting period for young jazz musicians and the thinking rock musicians? They really seem to be coming together.

"Well, Centipede is directly responsible for Symbiosis and so on. Yeah, I think so. For me, I find it staggering, and a bit scary, because it seems to me there's so much to do and so little to hide behind.

"There's a lot of knowledge and wisdom that's been spread around in the last four or five years. There's no excuse for certain types of musicians not knowing about other types. The standards are so high now! And the area of information you are expected to cope with! I think there's bound to be a lot of messy stuff of journalistic interest – interesting but disposable – but I think it's incredibly exciting. Short answer to your question – yes."

What do you think jazz people can learn from those musicians with rock references?

"That's interesting. Before I talk about it I think that if you think of it as a blanket thing you're in trouble; a band created out of generalised theories sounds like one to me, always. And a band made out of people who've met and work together well sounds like that as well. There can be as much difference in worlds between two so-called rock musicians working together, they can bring more completely different things to each other than a rock musician and a classical musician.

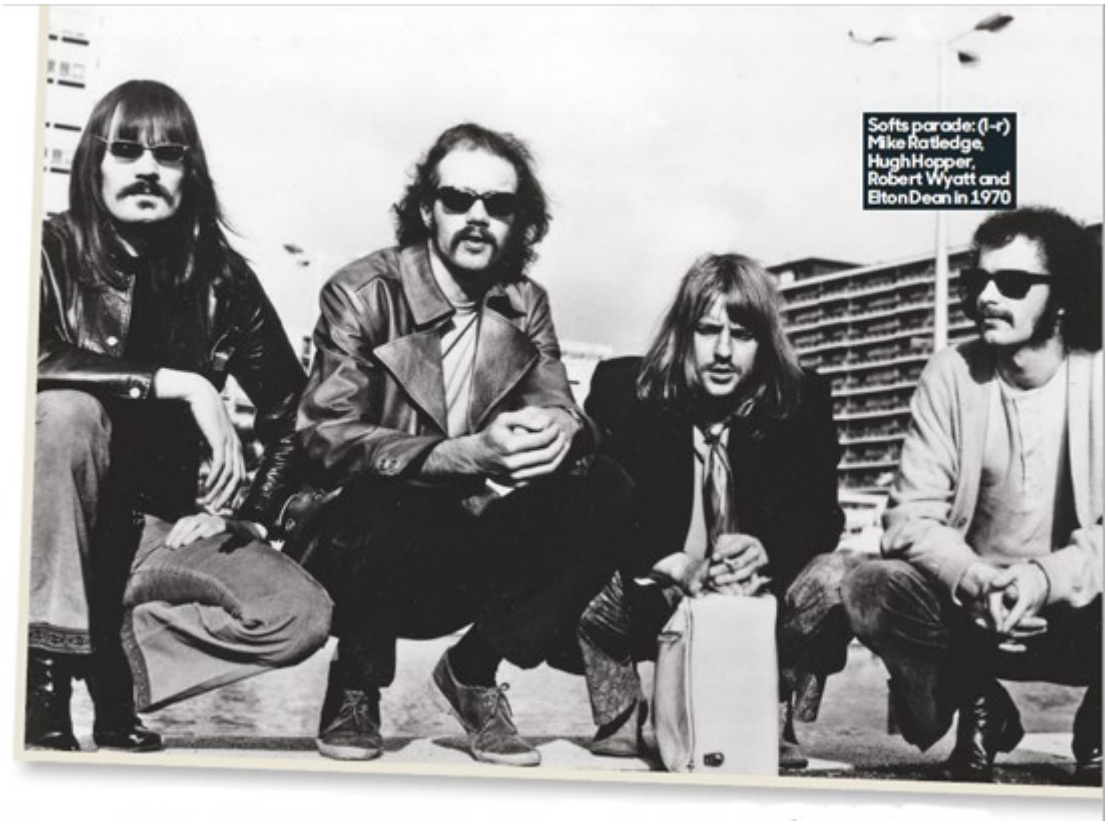
"If there are any general things, I think they're the obvious ones. Jazz musicians are now realising that there's nothing mature about consistently drowning out your bass player and pianist. There's nothing childish about getting your bass player and pianist heard, even if it means they have to play crude instruments such as bass guitar and electric piano. There's nothing essentially immoral or immature about it. The fact that rock musicians assume that you've got to hear the bass line – although very often they overdo it – seems to me an actual element of musical maturity in rock. There's an element of childishness in jazz. There's an assumption that jazz musicians can do all the teaching and rock musicians all the learning.

"If the soloist, for instance, is doing a development upon a harmonic sequence and you can't hear the harmonic sequence, so you don't know what the solo lines are referring to, then you lose the point of reference; you lose the lovely cosmic hum, if you'll pardon the expression; you lose the sense of well-being, you lose, actually, the music, and you just leave the ideas. It's an important thing in rock, the amplifiers and that, and instead of being rude about them, I think jazz musicians are realising more and more that they've got a very important function and that they're solving problems that can't be solved in any other way in the immediate future.

"And I think rock musicians can learn from jazz musicians. The most important thing they

learn is that you can get a lot more out of music and put a lot more into it if you learn to play properly. Quite simply, jazz musicians are showing rock musicians that there's an awful lot of things you can do on a guitar and drum kits that aren't unnecessary or just technical fiddle bits – they just expand your language.

"In practice, most jazz musicians tend to me to be very involved in what they play – actually, the relationship between them and their instrument; and they've developed that to a very high extent – a man and his bass, a man and his alto, a man and his piano. And what rock has spent a lot more time doing than most of jazz is studying the actual effect and balance of what all these instruments sound like from the outside on a stage."



PICTORIAL PRESS LTD / ALAMY

What do you think your strengths are as a drummer?

"Well, I suppose it's a bit late to say this, but I don't primarily think of myself as a drummer. I think of myself as a catalyst for the real musicians. How I see myself being most useful is getting people at it slightly more than if I wasn't there, or even getting them together and at it. If I was really into drums as an end I'd be sitting here practising. But I haven't got a practice pad! So long as I can play well enough to pin down what's going on and to emphasise the pace that's necessary.

"From the technical point of view I'm just nowhere, really. I've always felt a bit uncomfortable since we started. Basically, I came up to London to sing songs with Kevin [Ayers]. Five, six years ago. I'd done a lot of things before then that were instrumental, but by instrumental I don't mean jazz or rock. In fact, the funny way these discussions come to jazz and rock is that I don't see them as the two great sources from which musicians are drawing.

"A lot of my richest sources of inspiration come from not one musical idiom or the other but from paintings, and theatre and people's characteristics that you haven't seen come through in music."

But everybody is affected to a greater or lesser extent by every experience they encounter. Didn't you once tell me you'd learnt a lot by being told by Robert Graves, the poet, to leave home at 16 and make your own way in the world?

"Well, I lived with him in Majorca for a while, and he became my Mediterranean father in a way. He's happy to have me there, and I hadn't left school when I first went there, but he

didn't want me to loaf about in the sun and just have a nice time and groove, which is virtually the state he's got to now, because he has the traditional attitude that he's done his homework, built up something, and now he's out in the sun finishing it off, so to speak.

"I hadn't earned it yet, somehow, and though there was great love abounding it wasn't one which had to be constantly backed up by me being there all the time or him coming here, just that he felt I had to go out and do it, and then when I'd got something that I'd done, maybe go back and see him again. And I haven't been back yet because I don't feel I've done anything yet that would stand up to his kind of standards."

So how did the tie-up with Graves originate?

"There's a bunch of friends there in the early '30s who'd gone out there – poets and writers – and their children, their grandchildren, got invited out there by the people who stayed on there – you know, the children of the people who went back to England during the war. And I'm one of them. He's no relation, though my father's first wife was his secretary.

"There's a kind of family of thinkers that my parents belonged to, and to a certain extent Robert Graves could be called the head of that family. He's a kind of distant tribal chief, though it's several generations removed. He had various fights with me dad, who died some years ago. My father at that time, he was a sort of brilliant young Communist layabout, really [*laughs*].

"He'd done various things. He'd got a degree in law at Liverpool, and then he did modern languages at Oxford, and then he got on to do psychology at Cambridge. A very bright bloke.

"He lived just long enough to realise that I wasn't going into university, which really disappointed him. He died in a state of anger at me, I'm afraid. But he was also a pianist, and that's definitely where I got my ideas from. The house was full of music.

"And Graves, he's incredible. There's a colony, a set, around him there. Mind you, I'm talking about when I was there, which was before The Soft Machine. I've got lots of friends who have gone back there. Kevin spent some time there. He got into Majorca as a place to live much more than I did."

So when you came up to London you were going to sing with Kevin?

"Yes, I think that was the idea; I didn't really know. I'd been through a period in my head very much like the stuff I'm doing now, although not technically, probably. The music I was listening to – had been listening to – was Sunny Murray, Milford Graves and Cecil Taylor, essentially. And Eric Dolphy, and Elvin Jones, of course. And I arrived at the point where I decided the simplicity of Kevin's songs, and the rightness and charm of them, had a fantastic appeal to me after a couple of years of Sunny Murraying and freak-out. And I'm now, I think, at a similar stage. I'm likely now to get into the stage that Chris Spedding has been through on his album. I haven't heard it, but what he's said about it I recognise, and I think a lot of us do.

"In fact, it's becoming a long syndrome in music – people going from complexity to simplicity. But I still feel very lost, actually. Sometimes I'm back where I started six years ago. I've to go through the cycle all over again now."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

"I'm not concerned with whining" - The Best of NME 1970-1974 - August 2018



NME OCTOBER 26, 1974



Post accident, **ROBERT WYATT** unveils his album Rock Bottom, and a chart hit, "Daydream Believer". "The accident didn't in fact haunt me or in fact have half the effect on me that people might suppose." "You've got to think of something to sing..."



> Zoom

THERE'S something extra special about green suede boots. A certain devil-maycare attitude, a touch of fearless dandyism combined with a sense of the earthy and an instinct for style that just don't quit. Robert Wyatt weareth green boots. They go very nicely with the blue plastic stopwatch around his neck.



Nick Mason, Very Famous Drummer and Producer De Luxe, peers eloquently through the plate-glass barrier between the Shop Floor and Ground Control at CBS studios. On the other side, Gary Windo (fetchingly ceilinged by a little white cap) and Mongezi Feza are adding the horn lines to Mr. Wyatt's Next Teenage Smasheroonie.

"Great," opines Wyatt from his mobile command-post at the doorward end of the console.

"It does a bit, doesn't it?" replies Mason.

Wyatt groans elaborately. "You and your Pink Floyd in-jokes."

The song is another golden great from the sizzlin' Sixties, Chris Andrews' "Yesterday Man". Where Andrews' original was aggressively petulant, Wyatt's is wistfully surreal. He performs on assorted bits of percussion (including a bass-drum whomped by hand) and what sounds like a harmonium, but plays around the beat while the main rhythmic push comes from Windo and Feza. A modestly clad young man with an air of amiable vagueness that instantly pegs him as a member of Henry Cow wanders in, identifies himself by the highly improbable name of John Greaves, overdubs a positive humdinger of a bass line, inquires how long it takes to get from here to Liverpool Street, and wanders out again.

"Yeah, but could Pan's People dance to it?" inquires Windo.

It looks as if they may have to, because after a minor fracas with *Top Of The Pops'* resident plenipotentiary Robin Nash, Wyatt will probably not be gracing their studios for some little time to come.

It seems that Nash considered Wyatt's appearing in his wheelchair to be somewhat "distasteful", both to the audience and to the production team. Wyatt retorted, with ample justification, that if being in a wheelchair didn't hang him up, he saw no reason why it should offend anybody else. Exeunt fuming in opposite directions.

Meanwhile, there's a groovy little ditty entitled "Sonia" to go on the B-side, and for this one Wyatt whips it out on a specially prepared mellotron programmed with sound effects, tuned percussion, voices, xylophones and a whole circus of other foolishnesses. As he gets to work on the track (which already features him on piano and percussion) jaws sag and people run serious risks of falling off their chairs.

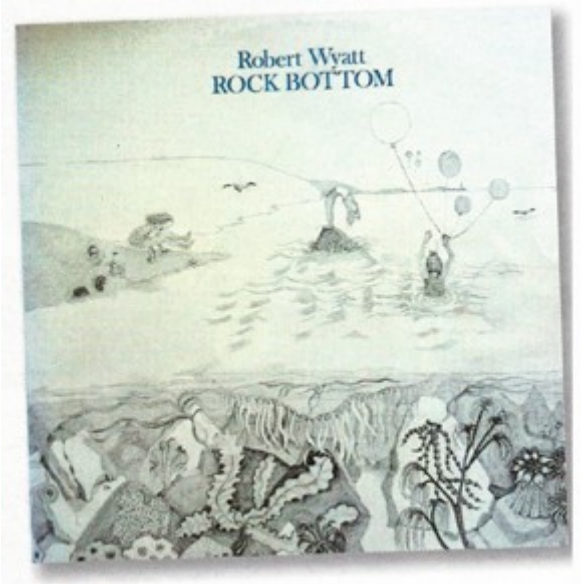
"He could do a show by himself with two or three of those," murmurs his wife Alfie.

"Can we hear the other one again?" asks Windo.

Mason spins around in his chair, face frozen in well-simulated disgust. "What do you think this is?" he asks icily. "A bleedin' discotheque or something?"

As the studio disintegrates once more into cackles of braindamaged hilarity, we fade out into a different time phase; : two weeks previously in Twickenham, playground of the Elder Deities. We'll give Wyatt one paragraph's start to make it back to his residence in time to admit the writer.

OK, Robert-go!



WHILE we're waiting, let's sling in a few thoughts on Mr Wyatt's album, *Rock Bottom*, which is being received in the nation's record stores with the proverbial storm of indifference. First of all, it's an easy album to listen to and a hard one to come to terms with. (Jeez, two clauses ending in prepositions. If my English teacher could see me now.)

As Ian MacDonald pointed out in his original review of the album, rock-star-as-paraplegic is a whole different ball game to the flood of spiritual hypochondriacs currently laying their bummers on paying customers, especially when Wyatt has triumphed over his particular slice of adversity, leaving others (like John Lennon, Lou Reed and pre-*Beach* Neil Young) staggering under comparatively featherweight burdens.

I don't want to pull any sanctimonious Oxfam there's-a-lesson-to-be-learned-by-all-of-us routines, but nevertheless, the point does have to be made. Not to dwell overlong, either, on the fact that the music and lyrics are a prime vindication of tile theory of lateral thinking as applied to rock music (ie, many of the conventional criteria of what constitutes a "good rock lyric" or a "good rock melody" are effortlessly short-circuited).

EYEWITNESS!



NICK MASON: "I first met Robert at UFO, then we probably did some gigs together – we certainly spent time together in New York when Soft Machine were touring with Hendrix. We were all holed up in the same hotel in New York in 1968. Then of course I produced Robert's *Rock Bottom*.

"Producing Robert didn't entail an enormous amount of hard work. He really just wanted a bit of assistance in the technical side. But I certainly didn't need to tell him anything about how the music went.

"Recording didn't take long, we probably did the backing tracks in an hour or so. We spent longer putting [*guitarist*] Fred Frith's stuff on than anything else, putting the violin part on and so on. That was all Fred's idea, we let him loose on it.

"It was probably faster than all the Pink Floyd tempos throughout history. We always kept to about 70bpm max. My doctor told me never to play faster than my pulse rate... But I was a lot younger and fitter, then, so it was fine.

"Pink Floyd had been on *Top Of The Pops* in '67. *Top Of The Pops* hardly changed at all from its first to last show as far as I remember. The same sort of slightly uncomfortable dancing and some DJ shouting. We appeared with Robert two weeks running, and the second week they didn't want us to show the wheelchair.

"Drury Lane was the only time the song was performed – unless you count by The Monkees. I remember it being fun.

There, now. I've gone on for five paragraphs when I only meant to write one, and poor old Robert's waiting for me two weeks ago in Twickenham - so into the conveniently located time/space reducer (cleverly disguised as an ordinary London taxi) and...

Lo and behold, here we are at the Wyatt residence, a large, airy house - reputedly donated by admirer Julie Christie - and here's Mr. Wyatt himself to open the door.

The living room window is adorned with a communist sticker (you just knew that he was a dirty Red, didn't you? Now he'll definitely never get back on *Top Of The Pops*). Beaming and kaftan-draped, he skids around the kitchen organising coffee ("We don't have any sugar, so is condensed milk all right? You don't look like a hippie, otherwise I'd offer you honey"), before transferring the discussion to the Principal Living Area, which, he claims, "has a totally spurious and extremely temporary air of tidiness."

He produces a reminder list for himself of things that he specifically wanted to talk about. A remark made by the author, to the effect that he never listens to the radio because he likes to programme his own listening, sparks Wyatt off on one of his ready-made topics.



"But the logical extension of that is why not get a piano so that then you can programme your own notes. It's like singing; everybody thinks that it's a case of some people have a voice and some people haven't. Everybody's got an equally good voice. Just like everybody's got two arms and two legs. It's just a matter of using it.

"People who get praised for doing it are the people who actually bother. It's incredible cheek, actually. There's nothing easier than putting on layer after layer of any instrument that you find lying around." Take that, Mike Oldfield. Still, that does presuppose that you can actually play the goddamn things in the first place.

"No, not assuming that you can play it. In fact, Dave MacRae had a much harder time putting down Mellotron than I did, because he knows much more about possibilities. I'm so delighted if I can get a note which sounds nice that I don't get too flash with it.

"Blokes don't like to admit that many of their heroes became heroes because a lot of girls fancied them"

Dave can do so much that it's almost a drawback. The people who make the best rock records are the people who can't really play that well at all."

"It must be very tantalising for someone like Keith Jarrett, because he can do so much. It's

like an athlete: there's such a real joy in doing it. His fingers are so fast that his brain can't keep up half the time.

"People with a fantastic amount of facility have a hard time controlling it for a specific musical event. In fact, amazing soloists tend to play different versions of Their Solo in everything they play. Jazz guitarists have a much harder time playing solos that are relevant to a particular tune than, say, George Harrison would, who can't move that fast. This is my theory, which is my theory and which belongs to me.

"Now what else is on my list... there's a few things that I'd kick myself for if I didn't mention. One of which is the growing antipathy among *NME* readers - and writers - towards boring old snobs left over from flower power, such as myself being given precedence over... no, not precedence, but... taking music away from the people or something... if I'm wrong I'll apologise... actually, I think I am wrong.

"Anyway, I'd just like to say that I heard Noddy Holder this morning, and I think he's one of the best singers I've ever heard. He's one of the only singers I've ever heard who's consistently done amazing vocals on everything since the first record his group did. I think he's an absolutely... fantastic singer.

"Now, what else do I think?"

What else does he think?

Heavens to albatross, gentle reader, the foregoing represents about four minutes of a four-hour conversation. The ideas-per-minute quotient of a Wyatt conversation rivals that of Groucho Marx in his prime. You'd need a "Wyatt Remembers"-type paperback to do justice to it all.

Anyway, let me just sling in a few random excerpts from our extravarapperama:

"Oh, another thing that I think is... see, Alfie liked the Sparks single straight off an' I didn't and she suggested that a lot of blokes miss the point that rock's based on. All us blokes claim Mick Jagger, or whoever it might be, as our sort of male hero, but in fact the basic reason that a lot of these geezers get famous is because they're sex symbols for girls.



Chairing proceedings: Wyatt in the studio, October 16, 1974

"The male rock fan takes over in terms of who's supposed to be good and who isn't - and I was wondering about this tendency towards sourness on the part of all blokes when they talk about rock'n'roll and the disillusion that they feel about rock'n'roll.

"It's because they don't like to admit that a large number of the heroes actually became heroes not as earthy rock-music-for-the-people people but simply because an incredible number of girls fancied them.

"I reckon you ought to have Elkie Brooks and Lyndsey De Paul and people doing singles reviews, because as far as I can remember it's been all blokes doing 'em. A lot of singles are to do with male sex objects, so it's very odd that it's largely men writing about it."

Two more minutes and counting...

ANOTHER bit, mainly about that Drury Lane gig of a month or so back. Gonna do anymore?

"No. I knew it was gonna be quite good, because Laurie Allan, Hugh Hopper and Dave Stewart are basically my dream rhythm section. I felt that no matter how bad it was, those people and Fred Frith and so on would be able to pull something out of the hat.

"There's some misleading things put out about me, actually, about my dislike of live performances. All I'm talking about is me and what suits me.

"I get things together in live performances that I wouldn't get together normally and there's certainly a certain magic to it if it's working right, but the sheer cost and the whole organisation of getting a live group working and the solid responsibilities of getting other people paid -there's just so many things that can go wrong that the percentages are all against you.

"But people like me aren't basically quick thinkers and we work best without people... staring at us.

"I've got a sort of composer mentality - not that I actually do much composing. If I wasn't watching telly I'd be composing most of the time, and this is how my brain operates.

"Performance is something else altogether. Performance is taking on people who've come out for a lift after their day, so that they feel good for a couple of hours, and there's therefore a temptation to get into the exciting bits. Whereas most of the music I like is... pretty boring, actually! Performing live gives you a cheap thrills consciousness."

On to the album, and its graphic depiction of Wyatt's life before, during and after the accident.

"The accident didn't in fact haunt me or in fact have half the effect on me that people might suppose. It was a useful bunch of symbols of what I think life's like anyway, but even then I'm not really concerned with whining.

"You've got to think of something to sing, and something that comes off the tongue quite easily, so obviously you draw on what's around you, just like a person who's going out to sketch. The sketch is just the sketch.

"What they are interested in is their control of their fingers. The subject that they use is really quite accidental. It's just one of the tools, part of the simulating stuff that sets things off. Nothing to do with the quality of what comes out. It doesn't matter if at the end you know nothing more about houses or trees. The words are just tools for me to make pleasant sounding songs out of."

Charles Shaar Murray



LIVE

"From the sublime to the ridiculous..."

Theatre Royal Drury Lane, September 8, 1974

NME SEPTEMBER 14, 1974



EVEN though the gig was due to start at 8.30, Drury Lane had started to clog up with earnest-looking hippies nearly two hours before the event. Mind you, it all adds to the sense of occasion, but the regrettably prosaic explanation was that someone had neglected to inscribe the precise time of showing on either the tickets or the ads.

So it goes.

Things kicked off with a brief monologue by the newlywed John Peel, clad in his most glam rock outfit. Undeterred by shouts of "Boring" from certain sections of the audience – all right then, from me – he intoned for a few moments and then vacated the stage to Ivor Cutler and Phyllis April King, who provided a highly amusing interlude of deadpan poesies and brief songs, which were received with great merriment by the assembled company.

So it goes.

After a discreet intermission, Peel cartwheeled dynamically back onto the stage. Through mobile, well-shaped lips he enunciated (rather devastatingly, it must be admitted) "For Robert Wyatt of Twickenham, opportunity knocks!"

Mr Wyatt perambulated rapidly to a strategic area between a small mixer ("These knobs don't actually do anything – they just give me the first trickles of the mighty wave of superstars that was soon to swamp the stage. (The preceding sentence comes to you courtesy of 36 back numbers of *Conan The Barbarian*).

Most of the material from Wyatt's *Rock Bottom* found its way into the front half of the set (and in case you need to be re-told, it's a wondrous LP indeed). Towards the end of "A Last Straw", a diffident young man with an unmistakable "I-am-a-junior-roadie" demeanour wandered on, played a bit of synthesiser and wandered off.

It wasn't until he reappeared half an hour later with a Gibson SG strapped around him, that the audience sussed that this dynamic figure was in fact none other than Mike Oldfield, the man with Britain's two best-selling albums to his name, one of which had been blasted through the PA during the intermissions. However, it was undoubtedly Wyatt's show, despite the superstars who wandered on and off – y'know, yer Nick Masons, Gary Windos, that bunch.

Swaying in his wheelchair playing ghost drums, fiddling with the dials of his mixer with one hand, clutching a mike with the other and his eyes squeezed tight shut, he was unquestionably the focal point of the proceedings, and folks, he's singin' better than ever.

Unfortunately Julie Tippett's contribution to the festivities rather derailed things. After joining Wyatt and co for one song, she was left alone tootling merrily on a recorder and humming into it occasionally.

This was followed by two songs at de piano, performed extremely nervously, and a number with Wyatt, Windo and trumpeter Mongezi Feza, which could well have been called "Dedicated To You But You Ran Out Of The Room Screaming for Aspirin". Ms Tippett's voice is still as compelling as ever, but her stiff, uncertain piano playing and the lugubriousness of her songs provided a rather dead area in the middle of the set, which

RSTOCK; JAK KILBY

something to do with my hands") and a keyboard set-up ("At rehearsals I couldn't find a position from where I could play these, so I probably won't play them. Still, they look good.").

He ran through a good-naturedly rickety version of Hugh Hopper's "Dedicated To You, But You Weren't Listening", backed up by Hopper himself on bass, Laurie Allan on drums, Fred Frith on violin and Dave Stewart on keyboards, eventually climaxed with a thoroughly berserk version of "I'm A Believer" with some singularly dirty rhythm guitar from Oldfield.

Generally, the show veered from the sublime to the ridiculous, with the sublime firmly in the lead... 80 per cent of it was very fine indeed, and the more gigs Robert Wyatt feels like undertaking the better. Wheel meet again. ●

CHARLES SHAAR MURRAY

NICK ROGERS/DAILY MAIL/REX/SHUTT

"It's a Magical Thing" in the same issue

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

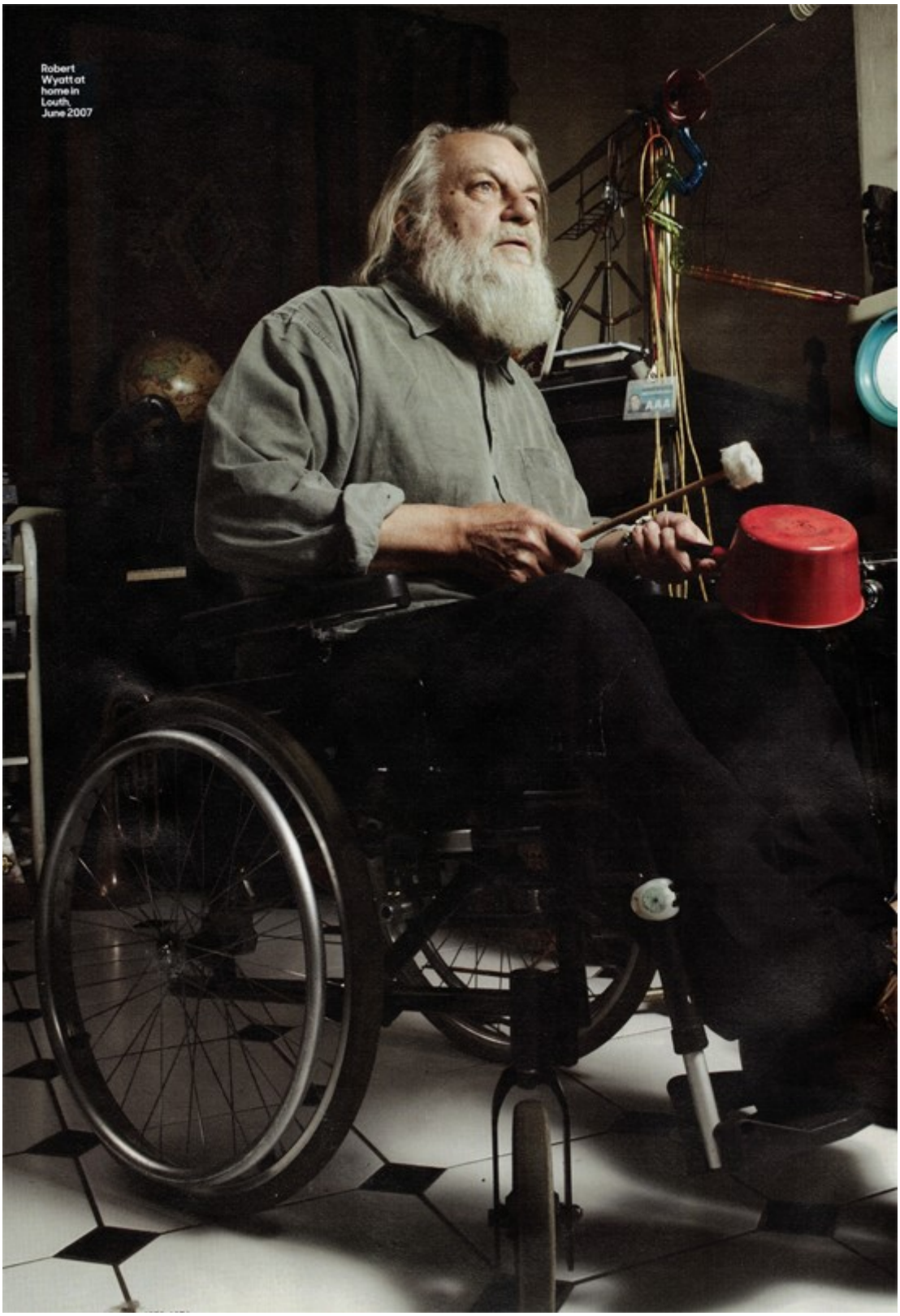
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

"It's a Magical Thing" - The Best of NME 1970-1974 - August 2018





> Zoom

With his own magnificent work, and far-reaching connections, **ROBERT WYATT** is the spiritual godfather of NME GOLD 1970-74. In an exclusive interview, JOHN LEWIS hears the retiree expound on the period: Slade, Floyd, policemen's moustaches, Eno, and the art of the song. "I'm biased in favour of Floyd," he says, "because I get on so well with them..."



IT'S fair to say that Robert Wyatt had an eventful time between 1970 and 1974. "I got chucked out of a band," he says today, down the phone from his home. "I formed another. I fell out of a window. I spent seven months in hospital. I turned into a singer-songwriter. I played at the Proms, and I appeared on *Top of The Pops*. Oh, and more importantly, I met Alfie [*Wyatt's partner, artist Alfreda Benge*], and we're still together."

His orbit included key figures of the period - from Hendrix to Mike Oldfield, from Phil Manzanera to Eno, from Pink Floyd to Henry Cow. "Some of these friends ended up phenomenally successful," he says. "But none of them feel famous when you're in their company. It's all quite random, how you end up knowing these people."

Wyatt's life was changed forever on June 1, 1973 when, at a party for Gong's Gilli Smyth and "Lady" June Campbell Fraser in Maida Vale, he fell from a fourth-floor window while heavily drunk. He's still not entirely sure if it was an accident or a suicide attempt, but it's something that he remains incredibly positive about. "Alfie says I've coped with it by being in denial," he says. "It's been a successful strategy."

Friends rallied around. Pink Floyd played a benefit for him, John Peel asked listeners to send regards, the model Jean Shrimpton gave Robert and Alfie a car. The actress Julie Christie bought them a house in Twickenham, which they lived in for more than 15 years.

Today he and Alfie live in Louth, Lincolnshire. After an Indian summer to his career - including the Mercury-nominated album *Cuckooland* in 2007 - he announced his retirement from music in 2014. "Me and Alfie bumble around town. We watch telly together. It's all very civilised."

How the devil are you?
Well, the correct answer to that question should always be "I'm absolutely fine, thank you". The actual answer is that we tend to fall apart in our seventies, and I've made things more difficult for myself by breaking my back 40 years ago, ha ha. And I've had to consider that, for all the benefits of breaking my back, there are drawbacks that I hadn't anticipated. But I'm fine, I'm well looked after and well fed, and Alfie's just made me some fantastic fish paste, so what more can I ask for?

The period between 1970 and 1974 was a pretty eventful and turbulent one for you..
Yes. For me, it ends happily with the Drury Lane concert in September 1974. This was a fundraiser for me, after my accident, and it does sum up the story so far for me in a very happy way, so I have a great nostalgia and affection for it. Because of the occasion it very

vividly conjures up all the people I worked with during that period. The introduction is by John Peel, and there's all these wonderful musicians working on it - Nick Mason from Pink Floyd and Laurie Allan on drums, Mike Oldfield and Fred Frith on guitars, Dave Stewart on keyboards, Ivor Cutler, the trumpeter Mongezi Feza and the saxophonist Gary Windo. It's a great window into a whole musical scene at that point in the 1970s, and snapshot of my life. I didn't really do live gigs after that, so there is the nostalgia of that too.

How did that gig come about?
Luckily, other people did all the work for me. A key figure on that project was Dave Stewart, from National Health and other bands. He is absolutely brilliant at scoring things for people who couldn't write music, for publishers. He went through *Rock Bottom* and arranged the entire thing. We played the album, in its entirety, then added some other bits and pieces to make it a full, proper-length concert. It was a frighteningly good bunch of musicians. What I liked about it was, if you form a group, it becomes a thing, an entity. Whereas, doing a one-off thing like that, it's a bit like making a film. So we'd have Laurie Allan on drums for one thing, Nick Mason on drums for another, or Mike Oldfield and Fred Frith sharing the guitars. We had that variety of noises available.

You go back a long way with Pink Floyd...
Oh yes. We didn't really tour with them, but we shared the bill with them in lots of London gigs in the early days, and then they took off, quite rightly, with two great pop singles - "See Emily Play" and "Arnold Layne" - and entered a different league. Soft Machine bashed around, we got gigs, but it was on a different scale. Occasionally on the continent we'd be put together on bills. But we were so different that we weren't at all competitive, because there was no rivalry. We got along exceptionally well. We had little in common, musically, but I know that Kevin Ayers and Daevid Allen were both very influenced by Syd Barrett, his guitar approach, that slide guitar thing. And I was very much inspired by Pink Floyd's lovely organ player, Richard Wright. He really knew how to play organ in a way that you're not trying to do Jimmy Smith, you're just playing a wash, creating an atmosphere that enhances an instrumental. I thought he was absolutely brilliant at that, and I credit him for that unobtrusive but utterly essential role he had in the band. And Nick [*Mason*] is a wonderful, funnyman, and a terrific producer.

I'm biased in favour of Floyd, because I get on so well with them, and they've been lovely to me. When I had my accident, I think they found out about it through a mutual friend, David Gale, a friend of Alfie's, I think it was Roger Waters who said, we must do a charity concert for Robert and Alfie. Alfie and I didn't have any money at the time. So it was a fantastically helpful thing for them to do. It took away the panic from coming out of hospital and so on. I always liked Floyd. They were great people, funny, generous, and they always make stunning records.

Prog rock was becoming massive around the first half of the 1970s. What did "prog" mean to you initially?
The first time I heard the term "prog rock", I assumed it was short for "programmatic rock", ha ha. In the way that classical music purists believe that rot started in the 19th century when composers in Russia, England, Spain, France, Brazil, and so on started weaving folk songs and narrative themes into their music, and called it "programme music". I thought that was quite wonderful, but a lot of people were very snobbish about it. So the first time I heard the phrase "prog rock" was when Soft Machine came back to England having been in the States for all of 1968. I thought, 'Oh that's nice, music that refers to other things and weaves narrative themes into music.' I was baffled to discover it was used to describe bands like us! It was like when I heard about a "Canterbury scene". I thought, 'Oh, that's nice, I'd like to hear some of these bands who come from up the road.' I later discovered that it meant us! Prog started to develop all these weird connotations - references to Arthurian legend, pig Latin names, all that business. And, as Paul Weller might say, "I'm not having that!" So, for me, it was back to writing about cups of tea and real things, however trivial and silly. I've been a bit nasty about prog rock in the past, but I should stress that every
one I met in that world was absolutely lovely. It was just a different world from mine.

There was a lot of overlap between your work with Soft Machine and End Of An Ear and the jazz-rock of bands like Lifetime and Return To Forever. What did you think of that?
I can see why people would say that but, to be honest, I don't even like jazz rock, not very much. That self-conscious jazz thing of, ooh, let's grow our hair, get some electric guitars, give ourselves a name with mystical, cosmic connotations rather than being the Fred Bloggs Quintet. I found it very embarrassing, the jazz musicians were trying to get in on this scene, thinking, 'Oh, it's not fair, we can play better than these rock musicians.' They always reminded me of the police in disguise at rock festivals, looking out for druggy

people to arrest. The long hair was a bit too coiffed, the moustaches a bit too neatly clipped, the shoes a giveaway, the flares just a bit out of date. They always stood out a mile.

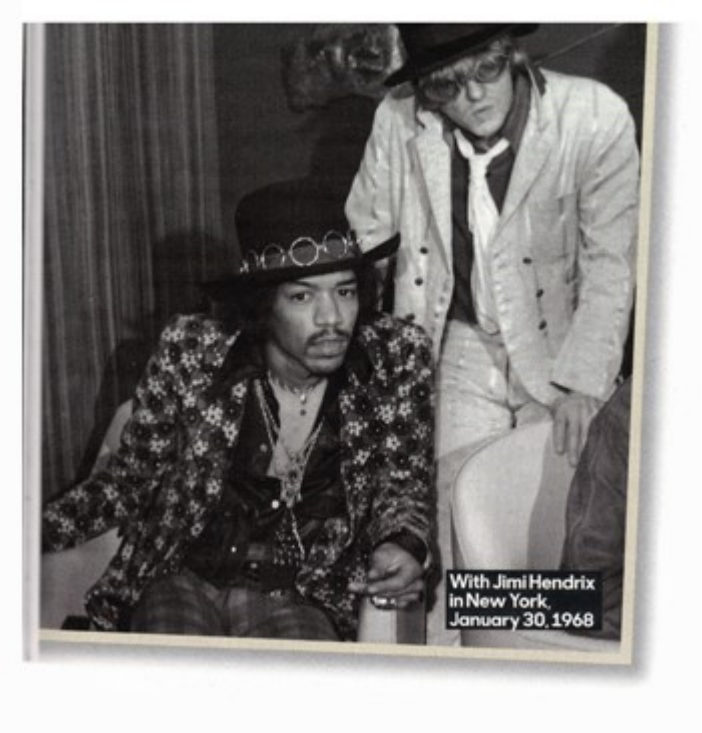


> Zoom

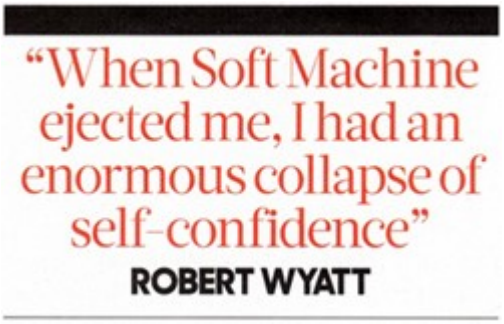
You've always had an interest in the song...
Much as I love free improv and all that stuff, song and dance is absolutely the basis of music. There's a quote from Charles Mingus that the further music gets from song and dance, the further it gets from really *mattering* in some way. Obviously, I love listening to every kind of experimental music, in the classical world, in the jazz world, in the avant garde world, rock'n'roll, pure noise, all of that, and it's all very exciting. But, to me, music is based in some kind of social function, and that's song and dance. I think it was Stravinsky who said that the song is the one thing in music for which there is no other equivalent in any other artform. So, compositional structure you can compare with architecture, for example, and you can compare timbral effects with, say, brushstrokes in painting. And so on. But the thing that makes a tune a tune - there is no equivalent, it's a magical thing. If you can hold one down and capture it long enough to put it on record, that's a wonderful thing.

Is that what inspired your version of "I'm a Believer"?
Part of the decision to record that was sociological mischief. I've always said that the only difference between pop and rock was that pop was for girls and they changed the name to rock for boys. It's like calling perfume "after shave"! I didn't like the emergence of a kind of class hierarchy of genre in music. I hated it in the old days, when classical critics would say that jazz isn't proper music, blah blah blah. I've never believed that any idiom is any intrinsically superior or inferior to any other. It's like a really good fried-egg sandwich can be much better than the worst posh French meal.

So, with "I'm A Believer", not only is it a Monkees tune - it's by Neil Diamond. Very good entertainer, catchy songs, but had no status at all outside that world. At the same time, I liked the chords I heard on jazz records, so I thought it would be fun if the pianist Dave MacRae played the kind of chords that McCoy Tyner might play. He's a very classy musician, he played with Sarah Vaughan, for fuck's sake!



At the start of the 1970s, you were living in a house in Hampstead with some interesting characters...
Yes. The singer-songwriter Linda Lewis was one of them, God bless her. She had an electric piano, and would sit there like a little bird, singing away, which was lovely. The flat actually belonged to Ian "Sammy" Samwell, who wrote "Whatcha Gonna Do About It" for the Small Faces, among many other songs. There was a lovely young American women, very unkindly called Toad - I don't know why so many lovely women get these ridiculous nicknames, like John Peel's Pig. There was Jeff Dexter, the quintessential underground DJ. And there was also the artist and writer Caroline Coon - her thing at the time was running Release, a legal organisation supporting people who were doing drugs and being harassed by the police. She, of course, inspired the Matching Mole song "0 Caroline", but it was also about other things. It was a fascinating environment, but a dark time for me.



This was around the time you got kicked out of Soft Machine?
Yes. I was very, very unhappy. I mean, it had to happen, but I had taken the Soft Machine for granted as a little family. It had formed from friendships that dated back to infancy, from 10 or 11 years old. You can fall out with your family, but you can't divorce them. So, when Soft Machine ejected me from that family, I had the most enormous collapse in self-confidence from which I've never really recovered, to be honest. And I always think they were right, looking back on it, to throw me out. I was too drunk, they were more grown up, more sophisticated, everything. But nevertheless, it felt like being exiled from a country, to somewhere where nobody spoke your language. I was very disorientated, and nervous, and anxious. I had been a rotten dad - my son had been born in 1966 and I wasn't being a proper dad to him, so in many ways it was a good thing when Pip Pyle took over my role in the family when he moved in with my ex-wife, Pamela. So it was a dark time, but I was very grateful to have a place to stay, and immensely grateful to the people in that house who put up with me and helped me get through it.

With Matching Mole, did you find it difficult to run a band?
Well, I found out that I can't be told what to do, which is what annoyed Soft Machine, but at the same time I can't tell other people what to do! I'd end up telling people to do what they like, which is ridiculous, really. The thing is that musicians always need direction. As it happened, I was lucky to be working with such great musicians - Bill MacCormick on bass, Dave Sinclair and then Dave MacRae on keyboards, Phil Miller on guitar - who wrote some wonderful bits and pieces. But part of the problem was that we were dead broke. Me and Alfie hadn't accumulated enough money for us to put down the deposit on somewhere to live - all that money immediately went into Matching Mole, and I never did get enough

money to buy a place to live. I've been dossing ever since. I'm now dossing in my wife's house!

You also started working with Brian Eno at around this time...
Yes, I've been pondering what we have in common. With elephant herds, when an unruly and aggressive male gets ejected from a family or a herd, it's called a rogue elephant. Sometimes these rogue elephants get together. And I see me and Brian Eno as like that -a couple of rogue males, misfits from bands who didn't know what to do with them, who left those bands slightly unhappily. We got on really well, still do. What I loved about him is we have absolutely opposite tastes, musically. I don't think he likes what I do at all! For him, jazz is appallingly cluttered and filled with too many notes. But we get on well talking theoretical and discussing things. He was the perfect person to hang around with in the studio. I found him absolutely invaluable. I also used to like hanging around his place, sometimes I'd join in on different things. He did a record called *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)*, on which I did bits and pieces, and then there was *Another Green World*. I seem to remember doing a little on that, and changing my name to that of a female Labour MP on the credits, just because I thought there should be more women involved in this music. Anyway, I'm there doing some percussion and vocal things. Brian is very underestimated as a singer. I wish he'd sing more. I've got him singing this century on a record called *Cuckooland*.



***Rock Bottom* was actually written before your accident, wasn't it?**
It was. I had just started going out with Alfie. She was working on films - she'd studied filmmaking and editing and so on - and she had a modest role, working with her friend Julie Christie, who was doing a film with Nicolas Roeg in Venice, which turned out to be *Don't Look Now*. It was too early in our relationship to risk being apart, so I went with her, even though I never usually take holidays. She was on set all day, and I didn't have much to do, so Alfie found a little keyboard in a little Venice shop - an organ called a Riviera. I found a stop on it that just so went wonderfully with the water around me in Venice. So there I was, on the island of Guidecca, just off one of the big canals, with this rippling water dancing around me, making sounds on this Riviera organ. Once I got the sound, the songs just wrote themselves. So most of it was written before the accident. There were bits I finished while I was in hospital - the ending of "Sea Song" I wrote on a piano in the hospital - it was based on "Red Is The Colour" by Nina Simone.

What are your memories of performing "I'm A Believer" on *Top Of The Pops*?
I had a run-in with the producer of *Top Of The Pops*, Robin Nash. Anyway, he's dead and I'm not, so I won. Ha ha! He said, do you have to sit in the wheelchair? It doesn't look nice on a family programme. He wanted to put me in some wicker armchair. I told him to fuck off, and he told me I'd never work on the programme again. I should have said that I'm too

posh to care. Which I am. Ha ha.

There was a similar issue when the rest of the band, before the Drury Lane concert, were photographed in wheelchairs, in solidarity with me, on the front cover of the *NME*. Some people thought that was tasteless. I quite liked it.

I mean, I could make more of it and become a disabled rights activist. I get into trouble with disabled groups for not being militant about disabled rights. My answer is that I can't be an everything activist! One person kindly said, well, the fact that you've done more since your accident than you did before should be encouraging enough for disabled people! It shows you that the world doesn't come to an end.

The accident did change your career: do you think it pushed you in directions you might not have explored?



Absolutely. I cannot regret it, I honestly can't. I mean, it's possible that the next incarnation of Matching Mole could have been a really great band, had we made a third album. Particularly the brilliant Francis Monkman on keyboards - he was an incredible musician, so much better than was necessary in that context, and I'm proud of what came out of our short collaboration.



But yes, I was pushed into a new career. I'm very bad at repairing and looking after things. I always thought, as a drummer, when my drum kit falls apart, I'll just stop drumming. And that pretty much happened with my kit sometime around 1973 or '74, which was actually one that Mitch Mitchell had given me at the end of a Hendrix tour in 1968, so it had already had a bit of a battering. But, being Mitch Mitchell, it was a wonderful kit. So everything I played on after 1968 was on Mitch Mitchell's drum kit, which might interest some drum anoraks!

Did your inability to play the drums push you into singing and songwriting?

Definitely. I first got interested in songwriting while writing a long piece for Soft Machine's *Third* (1970), called "Moon In June", made up of lots of fragments of songs I'd written. Previous to that, on the second Soft Machine LP, *Volume II* (1969) I'd got lots of fragments of Hugh Hopper's pop songs, and turned them into a kind of suite on the first side of the album called "Rivmic Melodies". The one with the alphabet song and "Pataphysical Introduction" and so on. I enjoyed that so I thought I'd do that with my own songs. "Moon In June" was a revelation for me. Playing most of the songs by myself for about 10 minutes, then the others join in. Of course, being a drummer, in a band, you can't spend a lot of time playing the keyboard live. So it wasn't until I was actually physically unable to play the drums that I actually started to explore that side of things. And I always enjoyed singing. Originally, when I started singing, I tried to be like Van Morrison, but I realised this wasn't going to happen. I'd try and sing like that wonderful singer in the Small Faces, Steve Marriott - " Whatcha Gonna DO About It"! - but I just couldn't do that mid-Atlantic thing convincingly at all. So I dropped all of that pretence and I took the risk of just singing how I talked.

What were your inspirations as a songwriter?

The trombonist Annie Whitehead once asked me where I got my tunes from. I said, I have a very good record collection! Ha ha. In each of my songs you might find fragments of, say, a Curtis Fuller solo, or a Duke Ellington tune, or something. People who don't listen to jazz won't see how disgracefully plagiaristic I am! So many jazz records are just so rich in arrangements. Listen to the way that Gil Evans arranges for Miles Davis, for instance, how

he finds places to go and things to do. Listen to his arrangement of "Porgy And Bess" and hear what he gets out of the tunes when he rearranges. It is remarkable. That's how I try to make music in my head, though it rarely comes out like that.

But, as I say, if you can hold one down and capture it long enough to put it on record, that's a wonderful thing, and that can be enough. There are pop musicians who can just play well enough to accompany themselves playing their own song, and that's absolutely fine. That's pretty much what I do.





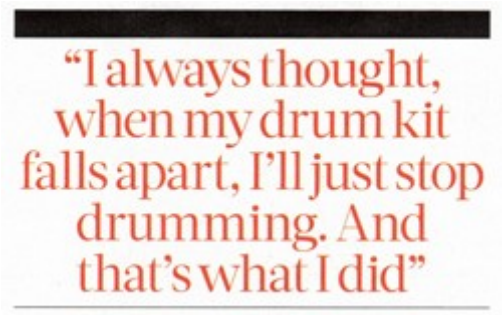
> Zoom

Have you heard that John Peel apparently had two pictures up in his kitchen - one of the Liverpool manager Bill Shankly, and one of you?
Someone told me that recently and I was quite tearful. I really loved Peel. Like Brian Eno, we didn't always agree about music, but he played tons of interesting stuff and, as people, we got on great. I do remember once that we were at his place once, and Alfie started watching an Arsenal match on telly, and he walked straight out for a walk and came back in a bit of a huff! But that's the only difficult moment with him. I got on really well with him and with his producer John Walters, a very funny man. I didn't spend as much time with them as I'd have liked - I'd always back off from getting to know people on that side of the music business. It felt a bit like payola, a bit of emotional blackmailing. I'd worry that they might feel obliged to play your record even if they don't want to. It felt unethical to me. But now he's dead I think, 'Oh fuck, why were you so silly?' But Alfie and I did used to go to visit him, we went to his wedding, and we got on great with Sheila. She's great, lovely family. And I love hearing his son on BBC6Music, sounding exactly like him.

Did you ever read the music press at the time?
I appreciate what they do. Brian Eno always says, jazz is just about faith - he reckons how much you enjoy it depends entirely upon how much you believe in it, especially with free jazz. My answer to that was always that rock is just about sociology. It's a lot to do with young men bonding, being a gang that audiences can identify with. The temperamental

singer, the mad drummer, the taciturn bass player, and so on. The music weeklies were great at that sociological thing. Plus, as the editor of *NME* once said, there's got to be a great new band every week because there's got to be a cover each week!

What do you do with your retirement now?
Scandalously little. You know what? Any highfalutin' ideas about being an artist have been shattered. Now that I've had to give up smoking and drinking, I can't be bothered. I lived entirely on artificial stimuli. So I now just hang out with Alfie doing absolutely nothing, while she keeps us alive. But I like my little town. I go around, get a coffee, and me and Alfie we watch telly together. I loved watching the World Cup, it was fantastic. I still watch the latest comedies - whereas the music I listen to is very global and often outside the Anglo-American world, my favourite comedy is all British. I'm a big fan of Stewart Lee's TV show, which you'd probably expect. I love *Would I Lie To You?*, I love anything with David Mitchell and Bob Mortimer. Milton Jones is a tremendous stand-up. I love his stupid one-liners. I watch old episodes of *The IT Crowd* and *Spaced*, and the comedies with that lovely woman who co-wrote *Spaced*, Jessica Hynes, you know, W1A and Twenty Twelve. I always look out for new sitcoms on Channel 4 and the BBC, and check out the comedy on Radio 4.



How was playing live, with Paul Weller, last year?
I was completely caught off guard by that request. And I was completely caught off guard by how long it was since I'd done it. I was pleased to be asked. Paul's been so great. He'd be like, come on Rob, you can do Glastonbury. I certainly couldn't even consider doing that. I'm a bit like, the less I do, the less I do wrong at the moment. I've had a wheel-on part when I helped produce a Brazilian record for Monica Vasconcelos, revolutionary songs from the 1960s. So, I keep my hand in with things like that.

What music are you listening to?
I used to buy old remaindered CDs from the Woolies in Louth. Since that shut down, I've lost that physical contact! But I'm always finding interesting stuff on YouTube. I'm a bit of a Russophile and I came across an enchanting Russian choir called White Gold who just make YouTube videos on the streets and in cafes around Moscow. They use these wonderful, full-throated Slavic harmonies. A bit like that amazing Bulgarian choir, Le Mystère Des Voix Bulgares, remember them? And I like reinvestigating stuff I liked in the early '70s. There's a terrific old Soviet jazz musician called Vagif Mustafa Zadeh, an Azerbaijani pianist, his daughter Aziza is also brilliant. But Vagif, he was amazing. A very florid pianist, a bit like McCoy Tyner, he plays piano like a cimbalom. I remember hearing him on Radio Moscow in the 1970s. If I'd know he sold records here at the time I would have championed him! I've also been listening to Julia Boutros, a Lebanese Christian diva, I love that Arabic singing - the power and the passion, blimey.

"I'm not concerned with whining" in the same issue

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The World spins - Shindig! - Issue 75 - January 2018



THE WORLD spins

The pace of social change during the '60s was too fast for some and too slow for others. Conflict was rife as teenagers all over the world enjoyed newfound freedoms just as political events surrounding The Vietnam War, Civil Rights and the threat of nuclear holocaust began to shape the music they were listening to. After 1968, rock'n'roll would never sound the same, as **JOHNNIE JOHNSTONE** discovers



In political terms, 1968 was an extraordinary year. American youth had beengalvanised by the Washington demonstration of October '67, before The Tet Offensive in the first month of the new year heightened opposition towards The Vietnam War. Civil rights protests escalated into full-scale riots in the urban ghettos following the assassination of Martin Luther King in April, and the killing of RFK in June only intensified a mood of overwhelming despair. Protest in popular music had been largely confined to folk music but bands like The Fugs and Country Joe & The Fish had already made overtly political statements on record.

But it was in '68 that rock and radicalism became inextricably intertwined. In Detroit and Ann Arbor, the rise of John Sinclair's White Panther Party was soundtracked by The MC5, and African-American music would change beyond recognition, becoming infused with righteous indignation and a growing pride in black consciousness. The era of Soul Power had arrived. That radicalism wasn't simply the preserve of American youth. In Europe too the barricades were shaking, and music had a part to play in events winch saw huge anti-war demonstrations in London and wliich would bring France and Czechoslovakia to the brink of revolution.

If, during the '60s, London (via Liverpool) had become the epicentre of the music and fashion world, Britain was still by and large a fairly conservative country and the counterculture rarely provided any substantial threat to the establishment. Young people may have joined marches but the records they bought gave little encouragement to their subversive dreams. They seemed more content to take pills and dance 'til the early hours of the morning. When Lennon sang about 'Revolution' and the Stones of "fighting in the street", the sentiments were not only non-combative but unmistakably sardonic.

But on the continent things were different. In West Germany, '68 proved to be year zero for rock music, with the birth of krautrock. This was partly fuelled by German teens' rejection of the values of their forefathers. Their country had an unspeakable past, so much so that more often than riot, German bands opted to articulate their feelings without using words at all. What could one say? The touch paper was lit by the killing of West Berlin student Benno Olmesorg by a police officer, triggering the '68 protests, and after The Essen Rock Festival that year trie musical revolution would follow. Meanwhile in France, the political situation had reached boiling point. France was a unique proposition. There was — particularly amongst more radical elements — an uneasy relationship with rock 'n' roll and consumerism.

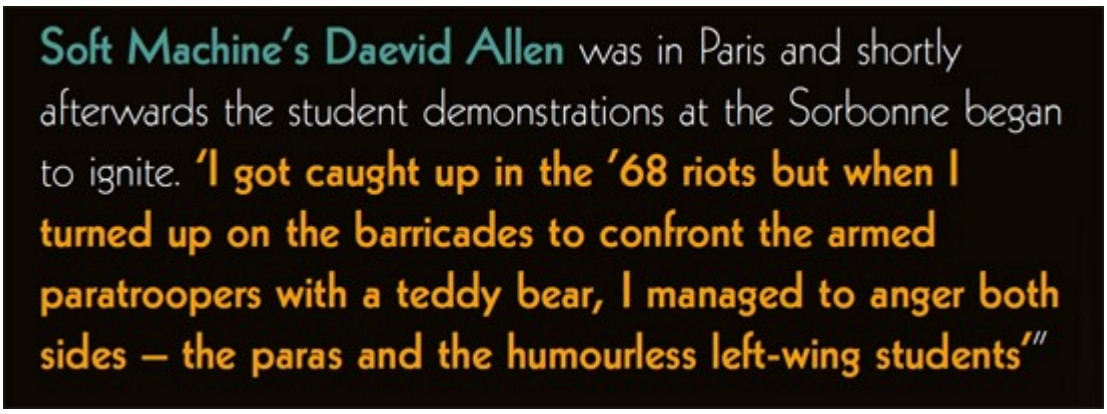


Sure, teenagers bought Beatles records like anyone else, but rock music was often considered symptomatic of the problem rather than the antidote to it. The writings of Sartre and de Beauvoir were *de rigeur*, and the French ideology of high culture contributed to a uniquely anti-American mindset, so that cultural protest was more likely to be found in university, cafes and street theatre than at rock concerts.

The French pop charts were a peculiar mix of traditional chansons, easy listening and pop, with the odd aberration. For instance Greek band Aphrodite's Child enjoyed a 14-week stint at the top of the charts with the mildly baroque 'Rain And Tears', 10 weeks longer than 'Hey Jude' managed, but at the moment the shit hit the fan in May, almost surreally it was Tom Jones' 'Delilah' at the summit. In many ways rock and radicalism were separate entities in France, but one British rock band would manage to penetrate the cultural barriers, to find themselves caught up in the May events: Soft Machine.

Before Aussie-born Daevid Allen arrived in the UK, he had spent time in Paris nurturing a love for the jazz lie heard there in the city's cafes. It would be to Paris he would return after forming Soft Machine with

fellow jazz lover Robert Wyatt, Canterbury scenester Mike Ratledge and Kevin Ayers, whom he had first encountered in Ibiza. Ayers' more commercial sensibilities counterbalanced the more experimental *avant-garde* dimension to the band's sound, concocting a perfect potpourri for goatee-scratching French students. The Ayers-penned 'Love Makes Sweet Music' was one of the first British psychedelic releases (February '67) and Soft Machine toured Europe soon after, performing trance-inducing 40-minute renditions of 'We Did It Again' in St Tropez and the capital, thus making them darlings of the Parisian hipsters. Upon their return to the UK, Daevid Allen was refused entry to the country and returned to France where lie formed Gong with his partner Gilli Smyth, a poet and teacher at Sorbonne University. While Soft Machine toured the States in early '68 supporting The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Allen was in Paris and shortly afterwards the student demonstrations at the Sorbonne began to ignite. Strikes had brought the economy to a virtual standstill and as the events unfolded on television screens across the globe, Allen instinctively was drawn to the heart of the action. "I got caught up in the '68 riots but when I turned up on the barricades to confront the armed paratroopers with a teddy bear, I managed to anger both sides — the paras and the humourless left-wing students," he told Aidan Smith in 2009.



Allen was ridiculed as "a beatnik" and decanted to Majorca for a time before eventually returning to Paris where he would work on Gong's debut album *Magick Brother* in '69. His former band-mates had beaten him to the punch with their own landmark debut, made without their founding member, and released in October '68. Soft Machine returned to play Paris after the threat of revolution had subsided, but if the political aspirations of French youth had been quashed, the country was in the midst of huge social upheaval, which transformed attitudes towards rock music. By the end of '68, France's most celebrated cinematographer and auteur Jean-Luc Godard had filmed *One Plus One*, a film featuring images of The Rolling Stones recording 'Sympathy For The Devil' juxtaposed with footage of The Black Panther Party's military manoeuvres. By '69, the French musical landscape had been transformed by the events of '68 and the influence of Soft Machine and Gong was not hard to discern in the new progressive sounds of Magma and Ange. The Western influence had been be insidious but France's social revolution softened attitudes and the music would win out in the end. The revolution would not be televised, so what could a poor boy do, 'cept sing in a rock 'n' roll band?

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

All His Thoughts In Focus - Shindig! - Issue 74 - December 2017





songbook

All His Thoughts In Focus

SPENSER TOMSON examines **MATCHING MOLE'S 'O CAROLINE'** and wonders why, 20 years after it was released, this oft-overlooked classic was the perfect cover for a bunch of weirdy Welsh wonder kids

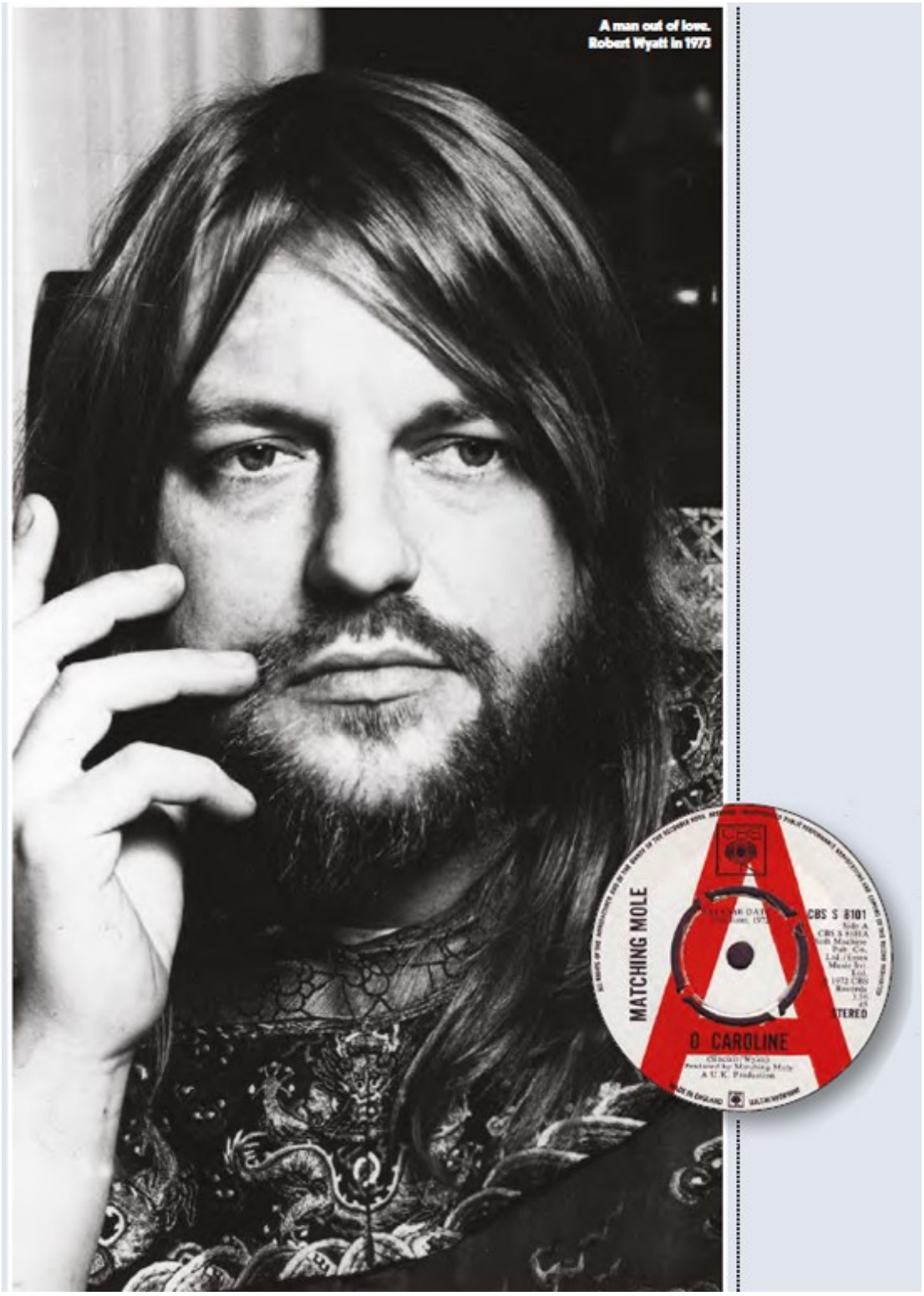
Written in 1971 and released as a single the following year,'O Caroline' is the musical product of Robert Wyatt and Dave Sinclair, the latter having left Caravan (for the first time), only to be coaxed back from his travels via a telegram from the former. While playing various bits and pieces to each other in the early days of Matching Mole, Wyatt heard Sinclair's tune and asked if he could provide the lyrics. Listening now to their self-tided album, it's almost unimaginable that the words were ever separate from melody — they seem bound together, wrought from the

same emotion, destined for the same fate.

On the surface, it appears to describe Wyatt's love for Caroline Coon, an artist and activist with whom he was sharing a tempestuous relationship. Marcus O'Dair's superb biography *Different Every Time* makes it clear that the early '70s were an incredibly difficult period for the ex-Soft incredibly difficult period for the ex-Soft Machine man. Wyatt's gradual ejection from the band resembled a love affair turning cold, each party a magnet twisting from its attracting pole towards the repellent. Kevin Avers had left, (albeit amicably, to pursue his solo projects) and this indicated the direction the rest of the band was headed. While Daevid Allen and Mike Ratledge were aiming for a more complex, jazzier sound, Wyatt was very much into developing his "pop" voice.

"When you form a band like Robert did", suggests Coon, "you are in love with your band, you *are* the band. It is your identity. And when the band fractures, your heart breaks and your identity is pulverised. It can feel like the most crucial, fecund years of your life are reduced to nothing". Wyatt himself describes the song as "totally metaphorical" and like "looking at an old tattoo". Indeed, if one were to remove the chorus or replace Caroline's name with that of his old outfit, it would read like a letter of unrequited love to Soft Machine, their name instead of hers etched on Wyatt's arm below anchor or skewered heart. Indeed, the very name Matching Mole grasps at two opposing emotions; as a phonetic pun on the French translation of Soft Machine, Wyatt is reforming that outfit under his own terms, a move possibly designed to needle at his former collaborators. But at the same time, it barely disguises his longing and loss — a loving nod back to the creative bond they once shared.

There have been surprisingly few covers of the song, possibly because of Soft Machine's relatively niche appeal or perhaps because the stark sentiment of its lyrics is just too personal — perhaps a cover of the song would be like going for a drink with your best friend's ex — to put it mildly, a little bit awkward. But one or two brave souls have given it a try; besides a nice version from early '90s indie kids Horse Latitudes and a niiiiiiiice take by France's Orchestra National de Jazz, a lo-fi beauty of a thing appears on the Gorky's Zygotic Mynci album, *Tatay*.



It is a dazzling, weird and utterly bonkers collection of songs; released on Ankst in '94, it comprises a heady mix of Welsh-language pop and wonky psych, some parts of which were unaltered from home-recorded versions of the previous two years. Alongside the Matching Mole cover there is, confusingly, another piece named 'O Caroline'which is entirely different. "Euros' 'O Caroline' might be a way of showing he could write a song as beautiful as any of Wyatt's," says Emyr Glyn Williams, co-founder of Ankst Records. She continues, "I remember them saying that Kevin Avers' *Shoot At The Moon* was the best record ever made — so clearly they had a strong love for the Canterbury/Soft Machine/Kevin Ayers period."

That fact that *Tatay* includes a cover of'O Caroline', their own tune of the same title and a song named'Robert Wyatt' could be interpreted as an attempt to construct their own version of Soft Machine. Williams continues. "Importantly, their first producer Alan Holmes was a very knowledgeable musician who loved all these bands as well, and that led to a lot of freedom in

expressing ideas and experimenting with recording techniques. It gave a sense of total freedom for the band whilst recording at Gorwel Owen's studio - so maybe they fed on the 'perceived' historical notion of group freedom they imagined would have existed in the original Canterbury Scene."



> Zoom

When asked about the appeal of Gorky's version, Williams says, "The effect it physically has on me — from the first drum machine to the woozy organ, I'm helplessly in thrall to it. I also love it because it's the original cassette demo version (done at home) with minimal studio polishing — as they couldn't replicate the 'feel' and also the specific quality of the vocal sound."

Where Matching Mole lead the listener up the garden path, Mellotron flute and piano unfolding in the shade while an irregular metronome beat flutters like a heart being squeezed, Gorky's version begins with a recording of the band bickering at what might be some ungodly hour. Perhaps it's a tour bus, a recording studio or in the ethanol haze of an early, post-party morning. Either way, its beauty stems from the fact that it seems to concern the decision to boil a kettle.

Alan Holmes (the producer of *Tatay* mentioned previously by Williams) describes how he came to be involved. "One day in '92, Euros Childs phoned me to ask if I would produce their new album. Of course I jumped at the chance to work with them and Euros sent me a cassette of demos that included a version of Matching Mole's 'O Caroline'. I was taken aback that these young people had recorded a version of a song that was one of my very favourites when I was their age, but had thought to be long forgotten."

'O Caroline' appears on **Bob Stanley & Pete Wiggs Present English Weather**, out now on Ace and *Shindig!*'s best compilation of 2017

So, just as the original lyrics could be a coded love letter to his old band members, Gorky's cover version of'O Caroline' is itself a love letter to Wyatt, Ayers, The Soft Machine and Matching Mole, all of whom are owed a huge creative credit by GZM. By covering the song, they are not only highlighting the aesthetic connections to which they aspire, but revealing an honesty, purity and wit that would come to define their work up until their split in

2006.

Spencer Tomson

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Shaping the '70s: Simon Draper and the Story of Virgin Records - Red Bull Music Academy - October 12, 2017

Shaping the '70s: Simon Draper and the Story of Virgin Records

Virgin Records was the most popular and avant-garde record label of the '70s. But it wasn't Richard Branson that signed the Human League, Can and Mike Oldfield. This is the untold story of the man who did – and changed music forever

October 12, 2017
By Simon Reynolds



Mention the name "Virgin" today and most people will think of travel: by airplane, or, if you live in Britain, by train. There's also Virgin Mobile, the wireless communications company. Older music fans recall the Virgin Megastores. Those have long gone, but Virgin Records –

the retail chain's sister company – lingers still, albeit in a half-life state, as a division within the conglomerate EMI, itself now swallowed by the Universal Music Group.

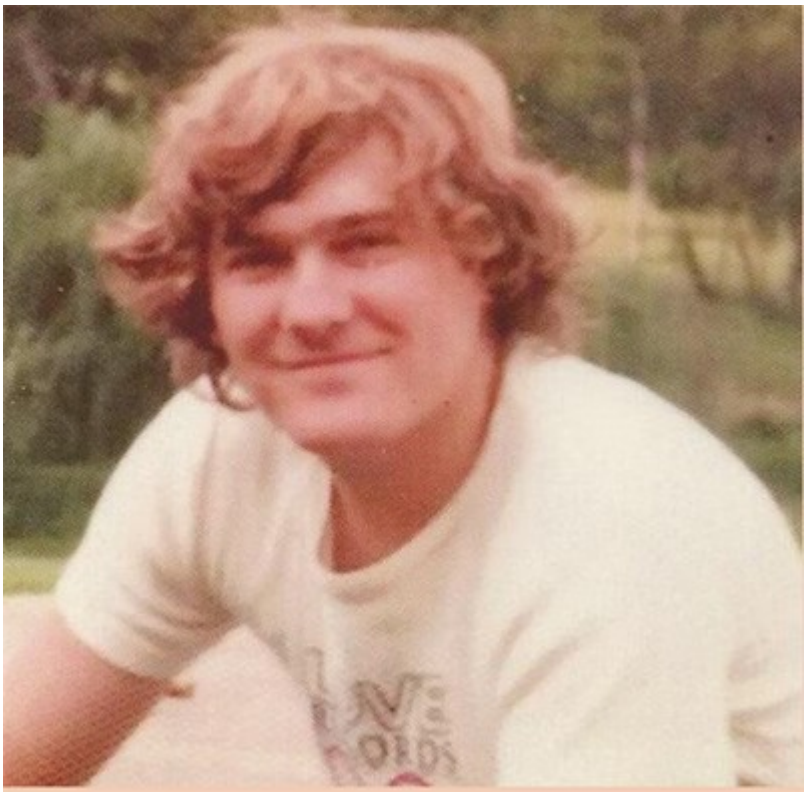
Whichever of the 150 or so Virgin Group companies you're talking about, the brand has always been synonymous with a man and a face: the preternaturally youthful-looking, perpetually grinning Richard Branson. Assiduously cultivated but not wholly without basis, his image is that of an anti-Establishment entrepreneur, a risk-addicted maverick. Alongside his billion-dollar business empire, Branson is famous for his trademark beard and casual sweaters, his dangerous escapades in high-altitude ballooning and for having bought one of the Virgin Islands. In recent years, much of his energy has gone into a bid to pioneer commercial spaceflight with Virgin Galactic.

Back at the beginning, though, Virgin was identified not with space tourism but with space rock. And the record company was really the brain child of someone whose un-Branson-like reserve and lack of flash has ensured he's always kept a low profile. Simon Draper – the 20-year-old virtual stranger to whom Branson handed the aesthetic helm of Virgin Records at their first meeting in 1971 – is a name known to industry insiders and serious scholars of rock biz history. But few of the music fiends who cherish landmark albums like Robert Wyatt's *Rock Bottom*, Faust's *The Faust Tapes* and Public Image Ltd's *Metal Box*, or who had their young minds blown by avant-pop Brit hits like Flying Lizards' "" and Japan's "," know about Draper's role in nurturing these artists.

During the first decade of its existence, Virgin could stake a strong claim to being the coolest record label in the world.

In its first phase of existence, Virgin put out some of the most uncompromisingly experimental music ever to loiter on the outskirts of the rock mainstream, including records by Can, Henry Cow, Gong, Tangerine Dream, Hatfield and the North, Ashra's Manuel Göttsching, Steve Hillage, Lol Coxhill and Slapp Happy, to name a few. From 1973-1976, the label operated as kind of "audio Arts Council," in the words of Al Clark, rock critic turned early Virgin press officer – a reference to the British institution that subsidizes minority-interest artists. In Virgin's case, the funding resources came not from the government and taxpayers, but from the general public's enthusiasm for Mike Oldfield's Tubular Bells, the label's early, unexpected blockbuster hit. Then came punk: Virgin quickly adapted to the new wave and post-punk climate, signing Sex Pistols (and their breakaway offshoot Public Image Ltd.), Magazine, Devo, XTC, OMD, the Human League, Simple Minds and more.

During the first decade of its existence, Virgin could stake a strong claim to being the coolest record label in the world. And that was all down to the taste and vision of Simon Draper.



Simon Draper © Courtesy of Simon Draper

Phoning Draper at the London office of his book publishing company Palawan, which he founded after leaving Virgin in the early ’90s, what’s immediately striking is how *young* he sounds. Clear and well-spoken, with a hint of shy hesitancy, Draper’s voice makes it easy to imagine him as the 20-year-old student who arrived at Branson’s fledgling record mail-order company Virgin in early 1971 to ask for a job.

Draper had just finished an English and Politics degree in his native South Africa and came to England planning to embark on another bout of undergraduate study. He and Branson were second cousins but had never met before; in fact, Branson didn’t even know of Draper’s existence until he turned up at the Virgin office in West London. All that Draper was looking for was temporary work to tide him over until the start of the next academic year. Instead, he got a job that would last 20 years and make music history.

Two of the hallmarks of a great businessman are a knack for spotting talent and an ability to delegate responsibility to those who know better. Over lunch at a Greek café in Paddington, Branson quickly realised that Draper was the music fiend his company desperately needed. “He discovered that I knew a lot about music,” says Draper. “I was an avid collector of records and I’d had my own radio program when I lived in Durban.” Impetuously, but with uncanny clairvoyance, Branson offered the task of forming Virgin Records to his cousin. This was to be just one component of a planned empire that would also encompass a recording studio, music publishing, management, a retail chain: a vertical slice across almost every layer of the record business. “Richard’s vision was to be involved in every aspect of it,” recalls Draper. “He told me at that first meeting: ‘we’ll do the lot.’”

In ’71, though, this was just big Branson talk, and Draper’s initial role was as chief buyer for Virgin Mail Order. Branson had formed the company after the UK’s Retail Price Maintenance system was abolished, clearing the way for retailers to offer discounted goods. Hawking its wares through full-page adverts in the country’s leading weekly music paper *Melody Maker*, Virgin established a reputation for its cheaper prices and – as Draper’s influence kicked in – for stocking cool imports from America and Europe. “In those days things would often get released in America first and there’d be a long gap – six or eight weeks, maybe even longer – before they came out in the UK. That gave us a window for selling tons of stuff – Zappa, Captain Beefheart, Little Feat. Then there was the krautrock – things like Tangerine Dream.”

Virgin Mail Order wasn’t Branson’s first enterprise venture. In 1968, aged 18, the aspiring mogul launched a national magazine targeted at college kids, *Student*. Selling progressive

rock was a logical extension of the student connection, for the UK's university venues were the principal live circuit for the post-psychedelic scene then known as the Underground. Asked about Virgin's links to the new university-educated market for expansive long-form rock that had consolidated by 1970, Draper says, "*We were* the market, ourselves. Not Richard, because he wasn't really interested in music – he had the long hair but that was about it. But everyone else who worked at Virgin was passionate about it. More often than not after work we'd all go straight out to listen to live music. And smoke a lot of dope!"

Some accounts of the company's early days say that it was all set to be named Slipped Disc, but then one of the team suggested Virgin, on the grounds that the staff were all "complete virgins at business." Draper remembers it differently: "virgin" was meant to suggest "brand-new," counteracting any assumptions consumers might have that the cheaper prices indicated that the records were used. "I don't think 'virgin' was about lacking business experience. Although we all did. Richard and I were both 20."

The label logo, created by Roger Dean, who was soon to become the leading album cover designer of the prog era, latched onto another meaning of "virgin." The naked girl-child with long flowing tresses, turned into Siamese twins by a mirroring effect, evoked Garden of Eden innocence, and further identified Virgin with the long-hair underground of serious music heads. Now cheesy and distinctly suspect, but at the time thoroughly attuned to the post-hippie zeitgeist, the Virgin girl appeared at the top of the full-page mail-order ads and before long would be swirling on turntables as the label at the center of the platters.

Draper's A&R approach emerged organically out of his activity on the retail side of the company, which in addition to the mail-order company included the early Virgin record shops, one of which was located on the main drag of the boho neighborhood Notting Hill Gate. In line with the company's laid-back aura, which projected the idea that Virgin came from the same generation as their clientele, the shop encouraged customers to hang out, providing bean bags to sprawl on and spliff up. "To shop at Virgin was an experience rich with the ambience, and often the aroma, of an evening relaxing over Red Lebanese or Afghan black in one's pad," the journalist Mick Brown once recalled. "Not surprisingly some people stayed all day and never got 'round to buying a thing."

After a hard week's work running the mail-order company, Draper would work in the Notting Hill Gate shop on Saturdays. From his conversations with customers, from request letters sent in by the mail-order clientele and from his own ardent record-buying, Draper developed a sense of where the gaps in the music market were that could allow Virgin to develop a distinctive identity as a record label in an already crowded progressive music market: "Customers would write in and say, 'Can you get us this record?' All the krautrock groups that we signed, like Faust and Tangerine Dream, came about that way, because we were getting so many enquiries about weirdly named groups from Germany."



You will probably have discovered by now from Music Week or your Island and EMI rep that we are about to launch our own independent label. We thought that we would let you know clearly what will be happening with our label before you get snowed under by all the leaflets, brochures and general publicity that the reps will thrust upon you.

Naturally, we shall be doing our best to promote and publicise our records. As retailers ourselves, however, we have often been painfully reminded that even the best publicised records are not fully backed by a grass roots sales service. We are confident that Island's excellent distribution, backed up by EMI, will get you the records you want. But, if by chance, you're having difficulties, or just want more information, please get in touch with us direct, by phone or letter, and tell us your problems.

In case this is the first thing you've heard about the label, we shall be releasing four albums on May 25th: Mick Oldfield's Tubular Bells V2001; Gong's Radio Gnome Part 1.The Flying Teapot V2002; Steve York's Camelo Pardalis V2003, all at a recommended price of £2.19 (with the price structure of a normal Island ILPS album). The fourth album, Faust Tapes by Faust VC501, will be selling for 48p, but your mark-up will stay at 33 1/3%. In any event, you can get all the immediately relevant details from your rep.

Yours faithfully,

Richard Branson

VIRGIN RECORDS, 130 NOTTING HILL GATE, LONDON W11 TELEPHONES: 01 229 0131/3208

Courtesy of Simon Draper

Faust's *The Faust Tapes* was among the first four releases that launched Virgin in May 1973. There was also *Flying Teapot* by Gong, the trippy outfit formed by ex-Soft Machine member Daevid Allen, and *Manor Live*, a jam session involving motley prog and Brit-blues journeymen captured at Virgin's residential recording studio in the village of Shipton-on-Cherwell. But the record that really counted, putting Virgin on the map and making its adventurous signing policy financially viable, was Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*.

"When I started to look around to see what you could sign to a record label, it was a bit frightening really," recalls Draper. "We had no track record, so we couldn't really poach any of the bigger names. All we had to offer was the image of the record shops, which was sort

of charismatic. One day I was down at the Manor, and one of the engineers – Tom Newman or Simon Hayworth – played me a demo." Being a connoisseur of weirdo music, Draper recognized the name Mike Oldfield from the credits of solo albums by Kevin Ayers, formerly the frontman of the Soft Machine. He'd been obsessed with the Softs since reading an article about them in the jazz magazine *Downbeat* and had followed what ex-members like Ayers, Daevid Allen and Robert Wyatt had done afterwards.

Draper's knowledge of out-jazz and experimental music also enabled him to hear an affinity between the hypnotic patterns of *Tubular Bells* and minimalist composer Terry Riley, whose work he'd loved since being initiated in the wonders of *In C* by a Durban architecture professor. "That first 15-minute demo of *Tubular Bells* was extraordinary – and Mike had played all the instruments himself, overdubbing by putting bits of cardboard over the recording head of his Akai tape machine. So when finally the button was pushed on the record label and Richard said 'You've got to come up with some acts,' Mike was the first person I called. And at that point he was working in the pit orchestra for *Hair*, as reserve guitarist! He'd been trying to get a deal and been turned down by everybody, so he was astounded when we said 'Would you like to go and start recording the album? You can use the Manor.'"

A virtually all-instrumental album, divided into two parts that lasted 25 and 24 minutes each, didn't seem like an obvious commercial smash waiting to happen. But the sales team of Island, who had agreed to distribute Virgin, responded with a spontaneous ovation when Draper played them *Tubular Bells*. The support of John Peel, BBC Radio's resident champion of the underground, was crucial. Invited to dinner at Branson's houseboat, which was moored in the canals of Little Venice in West London, Peel was wowed by the album and four days later played the whole of side one on his late night radio show *Top Gear*. He introduced the record with a list of all the instruments played by Oldfield – "grand piano, glockenspiel, a couple of different kinds of organs, bass guitar, electric guitar, speed guitar, taped motor-driven amplifier organ chord, mandolin-type guitar, fuzz guitar, assorted percussion, acoustic guitars and a variety of other things" – and at its conclusion 25 minutes later described *Tubular Bells* as "certainly one of the most impressive LPs I've ever had the chance to play on the radio – really a remarkable record," and further hailed it as "an incredible start" for the new Virgin label.



Mike Oldfield - Tubular Bells (Live at the BBC 1973)

As the record took off in the UK, Oldfield was arm-twisted into performing its live premiere at Queen Elizabeth Hall on June 25th, 1973. Fearful that *Tubular Bells* couldn't be recreated onstage, even with a cast of dozens, Oldfield agreed only when Branson offered him a bribe:

his own Bentley. Then Tubular Bells was picked up for the soundtrack of *The Exorcist*. The album was licensed to Atlantic in America and they put out an edit from the LP's first side as a single, reaching #7 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. Oldfield followed up his multiplatinum global hit with adventurous but commercially successful albums like *Hergest Ridge* and *Ommadawn*. A year before punk, he was voted Britain's Best Guitarist by the readership of *Melody Maker*, and many serious pundits believed the Oldfield approach – long-form, quasi-classical instrumental music – was set to be the future for rock. Over the next several years, there was a major label flood of similarly large-scale albums – epic in conception, dense in texture and narratively themed – from artists like Jeff Wayne, Vangelis, Godley & Crème, Alan Parsons Project and Dave Greenslade. Virgin naturally entered the fray with long-players from David Bedford, who had played alongside Oldfield in Kevin Ayers' band, the Whole World, and would arrange a symphonic version of *Tubular Bells* recorded with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the new middlebrow represented by *Tubular Bells* – exquisitely played, cleanly produced, intelligent but unchallenging, eminently usable as background music – was *The Faust Tapes*, also one of the first four Virgin releases and a legend in its own right. Picking up on the most hallucinatory studio practices developed by the Beatles and Zappa, combining them with Velvet Underground levels of abrasion and attack and infusing the whole with a spirit of absurdist tomfoolery equal parts Dada and Fluxus, Faust had already released two gloriously out-there albums via the German branch of Polydor. For their Virgin debut, the bright idea arose to release the album priced at 48 pence – the cost of a single, and less than a third the price of a regular LP. Neither Virgin nor Faust would make a penny, but a potentially huge number of listeners could be turned on.

Draper isn't sure whether it was Faust's charismatic producer/spokesman Uwe Nettelbeck who came up with this marketing ruse, or Richard Branson himself. The latter had a fixation on the discount concept that ran through his whole career, from the mail-order company to Virgin Atlantic, which took as its model the low-fare approach pioneered by Laker Airways. The marketing ploy was also used in 1974 with Virgin's Crisis Tour, a name that played on the feeling that Britain was on the verge of collapse, beset with strikes, inflation, shortages in shops, rising unemployment and dark whispers of national decline and a possible military coup to restore order. To cheer up young rock fans feeling the pinch, Virgin offered bargain-rate admission to a series of concerts around the country featuring acts like Henry Cow and Hatfield and the North – all you had to do was cut out the coupons in the *NME*.

Whoever came up with *The Faust Tapes* pricing scheme, it worked wonderfully: somewhere in the region of 50,000 copies were sold. Admittedly, many purchasers played the record just once; there are tales of spontaneous Frisbee-throwing contests using Faust's most avant-garde statement ever. Nonetheless, the record was an aesthetic triumph, both sonically and in terms of its design. "Nettelbeck was a fan of Bridget Riley," says Draper, referring to the pioneer of Op Art: swirling, geometrically intricate paintings that disoriented and played tricks on the eye. Although she disliked the association of her deeply cerebral and rather solemnly motivated work with the faddish foppery of psychedelia, Riley agreed to permit the reproduction of her canvas "Crest" on the cover of *The Faust Tapes*.



Then, in the autumn of 1973, Faust toured the UK in the company of Henry Cow, whose spiky and severe prog rock had a bracingly anti-capitalist edge. "Those concerts were amazing," recalls Draper. "For the gig at the Rainbow Theatre in London, Faust bought about 30 television sets and stacked them up, all showing the same thing – an opera singer, I think - and then they had this guy that they'd picked up doing roadwork near the venue and he was jackhammering away at this huge lump of concrete onstage."

Somewhere between Faust's absurdist cacophony and Oldfield's accessibility lay the serenely pulsing electronic mindscapes of Tangerine Dream. Virgin's alliance with the band was sound business logic: the mail-order company had been selling something like 15,000 copies of their early albums like *Atem* on the German label Ohr. Speaking just a few years before he passed away in 2011, Edgar Froese recalled Draper phoning him in Berlin "to say John Peel was playing *Atem* to death. Two days later I sat on the stairs of the Virgin record shop in Notting Hill and signed a contract which was in power from 1973 to 1983. Ten years of roller-coaster experiences began!



Tangerine Dream's Virgin debut *Phaedra* marked the group's full-blown shift into a purely electronic trance-rock sound, propelled by Moog-bass pulsations and undergirded with metronomic drum machines. As with Oldfield's music, the influence of Terry Riley and Steve Reich was audible; Philip Glass, another maven of minimalist systems-music, would actually release several albums on Virgin. But with Tangerine Dream and their spiritual kinsman and

German compatriot Klaus Schulze (who also soon signed to Virgin), the mesmerizing patterns were inextricably tied up with post-psychedelic rock culture. Their albums, which generally consisted of four long tracks or sometimes just a pair of side-long epics, were meant as eyelid-movies for stoned immersion. *Phaedra* went Top 15 in the UK on its February 1974 release and a flurry of follow-up albums and Froese solo efforts swiftly followed, while Tangerine Dream became a fixture of the UK concert-hall circuit and successfully toured Europe and America.





Courtesy of Simon Draper

Draper reckons Virgin actually coined the term "krautrock" as the name of an imports section in the mail-order catalogues and full-page ads, further pinpointing its author as John Varnom, who wrote advertising copy for the label. If Germany was a strong contender for Virgin's spiritual homeland, its main rival was Canterbury, a university town in the South of England. That was where the Soft Machine hailed from and out of which spawned the Canterbury Sound: a rubric for an incestuous cluster of post-psychedelic jazz rock outfits

who were sometimes endearingly whimsical and sometimes forbiddingly abstruse, and generally had either a direct connection to or a marked affinity with the Softs.

Matching Mole was the band Robert Wyatt formed after his bitter expulsion from the Soft Machine. Matching Mole themselves dissolved after two albums for CBS, and Wyatt started to form a new group involving prog luminary Francis Monkman of Curved Air and various Canterbury-aligned musicians. "We were trying to sign that band," recalls Draper. "We spent time with Robert and he came to the Manor and did some canoeing on the river Cherwell." But then, during a party at the mansion-block flat of socialite and Virgin recording artist Lady June, Wyatt tumbled out of the window of the bathroom when attempting to evade his enraged wife Alfie. The accident left him paralyzed below the waist, unable to play drums again or participate in a touring rock band. So instead of signing the planned Canterbury supergroup, Virgin took on Wyatt as a solo artist. *Rock Bottom*, his 1974 debut for the label, is a heartbreakingly poignant allegory of Wyatt's emotional regression and gradual self-rebuilding during his recovery from the accident, couched in a blurry oceanic sound that recalls Miles Davis's *In A Silent Way* and Jimi Hendrix's "1983... (A Merman I Should Turn To Be)."

After this avant-pop triumph, Virgin managed to turn Wyatt into a pop star – albeit a minor one, and only briefly – when they badgered him into releasing a cover version of the Monkees' "I'm A Believer" as a single. "Robert had mentioned in an interview that he'd love to record that song and I thought, 'Wow, fantastic idea,' and we kept on at him about it," recalls Draper. The single became a hit and Wyatt was invited to perform on *Top of the Pops*. "That's when the producer of the show said that terrible thing about, 'Couldn't they have something more attractive on the stage than a wheelchair?'" Wyatt was on the verge of storming out but was cajoled into going through with the performance, which went out to 10 million-plus viewers in September 1974.



Robert Wyatt - I'm A Believer (Top Of The Pops 1974)

By 1975, Virgin had established a distinct niche in the British progressive market as the premier home for European cosmic rock and the Canterbury style of jazz-tinged English eccentricity. For Draper, this strategy had an Oedipal undercurrent insofar as it was necessary to distinguish Virgin from the label he most admired, Island, then widely considered the best record company around. "To me they were the epitome of what a label should be," says Draper. But Island had already cornered the market in a certain kind of British folk/jazz/blues troubadour (Nick Drake, John Martyn, Richard Thompson, et. al), so Virgin had look elsewhere to create an identity.

"We didn't want to sign people who were with other companies or had been with other companies," Draper recalls. "We thought we knew better. It was extreme arrogance!" He immediately goes on to say that in the early days Virgin had no idea what they were doing.

"I look back and the people we were signing – like Robert Wyatt – were all older than us." He recalls going to see Hatfield and the North play at the Royal College of Art and being picked up by a female friend of the band who thought he was simply a cute student. "When I turned up in the dressing room backstage later, it was very embarrassing for them. People in those days had stereotyped ideas of what a record executive should look like, and it wasn't me."

One thing Virgin had in common with Island was location: Both companies were based in London's equivalent to Haight-Ashbury, the Ladbroke Grove / Notting Hill Gate area. Rife with head shops and macrobiotic restaurants, the neighborhood had been home at different points to Marc Bolan, Jimi Hendrix, Nick Drake and Hawkwind; it was where you could find the offices of underground press papers like *International Times*. Draper lived in Ladbroke Grove pretty much from the minute he arrived in the UK. After a period on the houseboat in Little Venice, Branson also moved to a side street off Portobello, the most bustling and bohemian road in the Grove, buying a bright red house off Peter Cook (the comedian who would later record for Virgin a series of legendarily obscene albums with Dudley Moore). Then Virgin itself moved its offices to a building in Vernon Yard, another road just off Portobello. "Pretty soon, a lot of the people in the company moved to the area because it made sense to live close to where you were working."

Portobello and its environs are nowadays almost completely the preserve of the monied: the Saturday street fair continues, and retains here and there its old flea market quality, but the streets are otherwise dense with boutiques, delicatessens, fancy restaurants, chic bars and organic Fair Trade cafes. Back in the early '70s, though, it was a scuzzy and edgy area, teeming with squatted houses and unlicensed venues. "There were lots of big houses, but they were divided up into flats," recalls Draper. "Whereas in recent times, they've been turned back into houses for rich people. Back then, though, it was a really hip area to live. And then you had the whole reggae connection with so many of the people who lived there coming from the Caribbean originally."

Virgin would follow Island's footsteps in signing up Jamaican artists. Along with enthusiasm for the music, another impetus was discovering that U-Roy's talk-over records sold hugely well in Nigeria as exports, which offered a quick fix to Virgin's cash-flow problems. "We signed some more artists and soon we were chartering planes to take stuff out to Nigeria, loaded with albums. Then we started our own reggae imprint, the Front Line."

Another area where Virgin built on Island's innovations was the creation of a label aura through record design and advertising. Whether witty and playful or trippy and mysterious, the album covers, concert posters and adverts worked through an inclusion/exclusion effect. A good example would be the series of label samplers Island released at the end of '60s and start of the '70s, such as *El Pea*, which featured a close-up photograph of a legume in ultra-vivid green. The stoned-to-say-the-least humor of such visual puns offered a generationally-targeted code to be decrypted by turned-on cognoscenti. Hipgnosis, the name of the company that rivaled Roger Dean as the prog era's leading designer, spells out how it worked: "hip" as in hipster, "gnosis" as in secret knowledge. "We had a lot of fun with the advertising," says Draper. "My favorite out of the ones I came up with was the campaign for Tangerine Dream with the melting vinyl records – inspired by Salvador Dali's 'soft watches,' obviously."

From the marketing to the label's logo, from the far-out sounds engraved in the vinyl platters to the enigmatic artwork wrapped around them, from the roster's lank locks to the company's Ladbroke location, Virgin could not have been more quintessentially early '70s.

And then punk happened.



© Zawodsky / The Sex Pistols / Virgin Records

Initially, punk seemed like an inexplicable affront to everything that Virgin represented. "Indescribable noise" is how Draper once described the sound of the Sex Pistols. "We all went to see them at the 100 Club," he recalls now. "That was the gig where Sid Vicious bottled someone. I found the aggression really off-putting."

Like most denizens of the progressive realm represented by labels such as Island, Harvest, Charisma and others, Draper had assumed music would continue on its ever-upward path of sophistication. Fusion was the prevailing ethos at the mid-decade mark: rock's destiny was to keep on hybridizing and hyphenating itself with classical, jazz, folk and world influences. "*Music Week* was doing a series of interviews with A&R people in 1976, asking what they were listening to," Draper recalls. "I said 'Keith Jarrett's *Arbour Zena* and Joni Mitchell's *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.'"

Punk erupted in the midst of all that maturity and musicianship, a teenage rampage of crude energy stomping on the prevailing ideals of subtlety and sensitivity. Skinning up and drifting off to album-side-long dreamscapes suddenly seemed decadent and disengaged, a retreat from the political urgencies of the present. The crisis time demanded not discounted admission to a Hatfield and the North concert, but proper crisis music.

It was Branson – always more attracted to rock for its ability to cause a social commotion than to sonic voyages of discovery – who realised Virgin simply *had* to sign the Sex Pistols to stay relevant. Draper came around to the idea after hearing the debut single "Anarchy In The UK," which was released on EMI: "I realised I'd made a huge error." He'd also seen and liked the Buzzcocks when they played at the Screen on the Green, and by the end of 1977 had signed lead singer Howard Devoto's new band, Magazine.



Having the Sex Pistols on the label proved to be a trial for someone used to dealing with genial, easy-going longhairs. Because of the company's hippie image, Virgin was anathema to manager Malcolm McLaren, for whom "liberal" was a pejorative and who feared that Branson's tolerance would effectively defuse the threat posed by the Pistols. So he kept coming up with ever-more outrageous stunts – like recording the single "Nobody Is Innocent" with convict-on-the-run Ronnie Biggs, an exile in Brazil, and further pretending escaped Nazi Martin Bormann also appeared on the record – all in the hope of getting dropped by Virgin, just like EMI and A&M had previously done. "Malcolm was testing us all the time," Branson recalled years later. "He would come in with an advert that was pushing it to the extreme to see if we'd run it. And we would!" That only infuriated McLaren further. Draper in particular found McLaren's aggressiveness hard to deal with.

Having the most controversial and talked-about band in the world – *the* public face of punk – on the label did serve to totally and almost instantly change Virgin's image. The old Roger Dean logo was swiftly replaced by a new wave-compatible one based around a signature, which would become the enduring icon for the company, appearing on the tail fins of its airplanes to this day. The Virgin roster was ruthlessly purged of its least commercial pre-punk oddballs and restocked with short-haired, angular-sounding signings like Devo, XTC and the Skids. Mike Oldfield naturally retained an honorary prominence, but grew increasingly resentful of the upstart newcomers. The final straw, according to Draper, came when Virgin only managed to get one of Oldfield's later albums licensed in America because the label in question really wanted XTC. "It was a bargaining tool. Mike went really berserk – I think he decided then and there that he was leaving us whenever he could."



XTC - Go 2 Hipgnosis / XTC / Virgin Records

XTC were easily Draper's favorites of the new breed. "I had to fight tooth and nail against other record companies to get them. But the whole of Virgin loved XTC as people because they were so entertaining and creative – everyone became friends with them." Public Image Ltd, the band John Lydon formed after leaving Sex Pistols and shedding the "Rotten," were more problematic. "They felt obliged to be antagonistic. Keith Levene, the guitarist, was really difficult to deal with." Yet before punk, Lydon had been an avid listener to Virgin-aligned music, loving artists like Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band (who Draper had signed for a run of return-to-form albums in the late '70s), and even outright proggers like Pete Hammill and his band Van Der Graaf Generator, who were on Charisma. These kind of avant-rock influences were audible in Lydon's piercing vocals for PiL, in the tripnotic grooves churned up by Can-worshipping bassist Jah Wobble and the fractured abstraction of the guitar work from Levene, a secret admirer of Steve Howe from Yes.

Lydon and Draper would eventually bond over that least punk of things: hi-fi. "In my office I had this massive pair of towering Buckingham speakers, about four feet tall. They belonged to me, not the company, and John loved listening to them. Eventually I sold them to him." Another reason Lydon might have warmed to Draper was that he bankrolled the recording, in top-of-the-line studios, of three of the most uncompromisingly avant-garde albums ever released by a mainstream rock label: *First Issue, Metal Box* and *Flowers Of Romance*.

"I can remember when PiL presented us with the debut single, 'Public Image' – it was just dynamite, and you thought: 'This is going to be a #1 hit. Here we go, this is the Sex Pistols, reincarnated, better. Onward!' But then they brought us *Metal Box* and you thought, 'We're getting something else.'" As it happens, buoyed by awestruck reviews and Lydon's stature as a post-punk prophet, *Metal Box* sold surprisingly and reassuringly well, despite the hefty price charged on account of the striking tin canister in which it was encased. "Death Disco," the single that preceded the album and appeared on it renamed "Swan Lake," was actually a Top 20 hit, and even the unhinged "Flowers Of Romance" – a tribal stampede of drums overlaid with scraping violin and shrieking Lydon – secured PiL a *Top of the Pops* appearance.



Public Image Ltd.- The Flowers Of Romance (Top Of The Pops) 1981

By the end of the ’70s, Branson’s focus – never very tethered to music – had drifted away to other ventures, including an ultimately doomed attempt to establish a rival London listings magazine to *Time Out* called *Event*. He left Virgin Music entirely in the charge of Draper, who swapped his earlier title A&R Director for Managing Director. The label then entered its most prosperous period yet, with the worldwide breakthrough of the Human League and Culture Club, the rise of Simple Minds from an art-rock curio to stadium conquerors and Virgin’s acquisition of its prog-era friendly rival Charisma, which gave them three of the most successful acts of the ’80s: Phil Collins, Peter Gabriel and the band they both came from, Genesis.

In their very early days, when they went by the name the Future, the Human League sounded like Virgin wannabes: a shoestring Tangerine Dream, recording a 97-minute track titled “Last Man On Earth” and experimenting with computerized systems for random lyric generation. Even after shifting towards short songs and tunefulness, their first two albums for Virgin – *Reproduction* and *Travelogue* – had a geeky science-fiction-fan air that promised “cult group” status at best. But when the group fissured owing to irresolvable personal friction, with one faction keeping the original Human League name and the other half forming Heaven 17, Draper suddenly found he had two pop groups on his hands. Martin Rushent, the producer who’d honed the Stranglers and Buzzcocks into pop-punk hit machines, showed Human League how to tighten their dance grooves and sharpen their hooks, and suddenly they were topping international charts with “Don’t You Want Me” and “(Keep Feeling) Fascination.”

“That’s one of those miracle moments when it all takes off,” remembers Draper. “Dare started taking shape and you suddenly realise, ‘There’s not one hit on this record, there’s five or six.’ You’ve just struck gold. That was very exciting – but a completely different thing from what we’d had before at Virgin.”

The company kept expanding all through the ’80s, opening branches in European countries and then launching Virgin America. It was solid business sense, but it meant a loss of aesthetic control for Draper. “Suddenly you’ve got all these companies saying, ‘We can’t get bigger just on the product that you supply us with. We need to have French acts, German acts.’ So they’re signing Eurovision Song Contest-type acts. Or the Canadian label wants to sign a heavy metal group. Suddenly the criteria became not musical excellence or excitement anymore. We became more of a mainstream record company. Virgin America had a brilliant A&R guy, Jordan Harris, and they did some wonderful things, like reviving Roy Orbison’s career. But in the States it’s very much all about the bottom line. So the days were really long gone of us being the cutting-edge record company.”

In a sign that Virgin had become a major label, capable of sparring with the most

heavyweight music corporations around, Branson pulled off his long-running dream of signing the Rolling Stones (something he'd tried before in the early '70s). Janet Jackson was another high-profile, huge-advance signing. Then, in 1992, Branson sold Virgin Music Group to EMI for a figure just shy of $1 billion. Draper stayed on for half a year or so to smooth the transition, but he had lost interest in the music business long before that.

Shrewdly, at a much earlier stage of the company's existence, Draper had pressed for and secured a 20% share in Virgin Music, using the truthful expedient of informing Branson that he was seriously considering moving with his Chilean girlfriend to her homeland. That fateful stake made him a very wealthy man following the EMI deal. Draper was free to pursue his other passions – modern art and motor racing – to the hilt. He built up valuable collections of paintings and cars. He launched Palawan Press, a publisher dedicated to deluxe, expensive photo books about cars. Like Virgin in its earliest days, the company sells by mail-order only. "We do the books in a way that's never been done before. People like them."



The Human League - (Keep Feeling) Fascination

The bygone informality of the '70s record biz is encapsulated in the odd couple partnership between Richard Branson and Simon Draper. During Virgin's golden age, they managed to maintain a marriage between the usually opposed imperatives of enterprise and aesthetics, meshing Branson's dynamism and ambition with Draper's taste and sensitivity to the needs of the artists.

In our conversations, Draper repeatedly stresses that Branson didn't have a clue about music and in fact didn't particularly like music, or even listen to it. When he did intervene in the decision-making process at Virgin, Branson's impulses were sometimes spectacularly misguided.

"With *Tubular Bells*, we took it to Cannes for the music business trade fair Midem and played it to various people. Most people in the industry didn't get it, because it had no vocals. And one record executive actually said 'It's great – but you've got to put vocals on it.' And when we got back Richard tried to get Mike to put some vocals on it – missing the point entirely!"

Other legendary tales of Branson's misconceived gambits include an alleged attempt to get Lydon to abandon PiL and reunite with Steve Jones and Paul Cook by playing him the sub-Pistols tunes that his erstwhile bandmates were recording for Virgin as the Professionals. Branson is also said to have tried to persuade Devo that they should take Johnny Rotten as their new frontman, even going so far as to engineer a meeting between both parties in Jamaica, where the ex-Pistol had flown out with the Virgin boss to help him pick reggae

artists for the Front Line imprint.

Draper doesn't recall either of those stories, but he does say that Branson "had certain things, bees in his bonnet, that would tend to recur. For instance, after 'I'm A Believer' was this sort of interesting hit single for Robert Wyatt, Richard would often suggest to other people that they should record 'I'm A Believer.' You have to understand, Richard knew *zilch* about music. When he did *Desert Island Discs*" – the long-running BBC radio show in which a famous guest discusses their all-time favorite pieces of music – "we had to tell him what records he liked!

"The music thing with Virgin was just accidental – it wasn't because Richard liked music particularly. He could have been doing anything – and he can do anything. He's an entrepreneur." Branson, for his part, has admitted as much, telling *The Face* magazine in 1984 that "I'm more cynical than 99 percent of the people who work for Virgin. Simon loves records and his whole involvement is through that. With me it's different. It's not a love of music."

"Our relationship worked well," Draper continues, "because it was his drive and ambition – his lack of fear – propelling it, but he needed someone else to make the label credible. There was this tension between doing things that were exciting and interesting, and being successful. I had a lot of freedom to do what I wanted, but equally Richard would keep me on my toes, because he wanted the success. I was constantly having to fight against him wanting to sign things I considered rubbish."

The Branson/Draper symbiosis was a prime example of an archetype that flourished from the late '60s onwards, made the '70s a rich and teeming-with-possibility decade for music and only really faded in the hard-headed '80s: the aesthete-entrepreneur. Draper and Branson split those functions and faculties across two chalk-and-cheese individuals, but in other record-biz figures of that era the two impulses coexist in the same body. Just like the kind of upper middle class, well-educated bands that started coming through with Pink Floyd and Soft Machine and their ilk, most of these art-minded businessmen came from posh backgrounds. They loved the music and loved elements of the counter-culture (the sex, the drugs, the hair), but they weren't looking for a revolutionary transformation of society. They enjoyed the buzz of making deals and breaking bands, the hustle and hype. Some pretty much learned the biz on the job; others had picked up a sense of how worldly things worked from their monied backgrounds. For a surprisingly long period, these operators were able to sustain the fiction that the record business was not really a business at all. That somehow Art and Money, boundary-busting masterpieces and the bottom line, could coexist fruitfully.

"I had no business experience when we started," recalls Draper. "My mother and father are teachers and really I should have ended up in academia or in the media. But the music business in those days... I remember an article in the *Financial Times* during the '70s that said music publishing was the easiest way to make money known to man. We saw that with Virgin Publishing, when we signed Sting. This was before the Police, when he was in a band called Last Exit, who weren't that great – but we could see that he was great. You can't fail to make a lot of money out of something like that."

"The atmosphere was great back then – the fact that you didn't need to be a professional, it was all intuitive," Draper continues. "And the record business attracted people of that sort really, driven mainly by love of music."

Draper says that since he left Virgin a quarter-century ago he's never once been tempted to go back into the music industry. When he talks to his friends who are still involved, he finds that they are struggling. "They don't like the record business as it is," Draper says in his mild, understated way. "So many aspects of it aren't... great."

(Header image © Courtesy of Simon Draper)

>> The article on the Red Bull Music Academy website

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

A conversation with Robert Wyatt - Swench.net / Tales from the East Pier - August 7, 2016

A conversation with Robert Wyatt

Tales from the East Pier

This is an unpublished interview with Robert Wyatt, perhaps best known for his cover of 'Shipbuilding' by Elvis Costello and being a member of Soft Machine. I spoke to Robert in 2007 about his album Comicopera. We had a fascinating and lovely chat.

Robert Wyatt-Ellidge is one of the last true enigmas left in British music. In an age when generic conservatism is frighteningly rife and the onslaught of tacky celebrity culture has tarnished creativity, Wyatt is like a beacon of hope from a lost era, defiantly soldiering on and still releasing remarkable and unclassifiable solo records since 1970.

The latest inimitable slice of Wyatt is *Comicopera* – an ambitious and diverse album divided into three acts. Recorded at home in Louth, Lincolnshire, it's also his first with Domino Records, which means Wyatt is now an unlikely label mate of the likes of Franz Ferdinand and Arctic Monkeys.

Born during the final few months of the Second World War in Bristol, Wyatt grew up near Dover and was taught the drums by a visiting American jazz drummer called George Neidorf. After stints in the Daevid Allen Trio and the Wilde Flowers, Wyatt formed Soft Machine with Kevin Ayers and Allen. Soft Machine blended psychedelia with jazz fusion, becoming one of the most revered acts in prog-rock while Pink Floyd were bringing it to a wider audience. They were briefly managed by Damon Albarn's father Keith. After four years of touring and three albums, Robert recorded his first solo album entitled *The End of an Ear*.

Fusion groups such as Centipede and Matching Mole followed, but in 1973 at a party in Maida Vale, London, Robert fell from a third floor window. Paralysed from the waist down, Wyatt was confined to a wheelchair. Pink Floyd staged two benefit concerts compered by John Peel and raised in the region of £10,000. Meanwhile, Wyatt decided that his days as a band member were over.

His first solo album since his accident, *Rock Bottom*, is a far more accomplished work than The End of an Ear. Indeed, he has often said since that he doesn't even consider his debut as part of his "canon." Ivor Cutler contributed to a track called "Little Red Robin Hood Hit the Road" and a lot more people listened up and paid attention. He married the poet, lyricist and illustrator Alfreda Benge in 1973, whom he still lives with in Lincolnshire and

affectionately refers to as Alfie.

Wyatt scored chart success with covers of "Shipbuilding" by Elvis Costello and "I'm a Believer" by the Monkees. When he appeared on *Top of the Pops*, a BBC producer maintained that a man singing in a wheelchair was not suitable for family viewing. Famously, Wyatt "lost his rag but not the wheelchair" and the appearance continued without pandering to any ludicrous demands.

In 2001, Wyattt curated a Meltdown extravaganza that included Ivor Cutler, Baaba Maal, David Gilmour, Elvis Costello, Tricky and the Raincoats. In 2003, he received a Mercury Music Prize nomination for the whimsical *Cuckooland*, an album that ranks with *Rock Bottom*, *Shleep* and *Ruth is Stranger than Richard* as one of his best works.

His oeuvre is one of the most dazzling and uncategorisable in modern music and free of any token nods to eclecticism or fusion for its own sake. His work is also consistently brilliant. The release of *Comicopera* is thrilling news, further accentuating the magical and mercurial brilliance of the one and only Robert Wyatt.



One of the most interesting things about Comicopera is how well it functions as a complete piece. The art of album listening has been somewhat adversely effected by downloading culture, so I'd be curious to know if this in any informed your ambitions and intentions for this album?

I've got used to wearing comfortable set of clothes even if they're not very fashionable clothes. I was brought up with the old two-sided LPs and I like that format. On my last record (*Cuckooland*) I split it in two. I still think in 20 minute chunks. I'm glad that you noticed that it is meant to be listened to as a whole, because it's a kind of a journey or some sort of idiot's pilgrimage.

In *Act III – Away with the Fairies*, you stop singing in English.

Well, that's one of the ways that I'm away with the fairies! I'm very English. I'm very happy with so many things here and I like a cup of tea. What irritates me are boring council meetings and boring streets to walk down, but that's nothing to go to war about. I do enjoy the cosmopolitan music scene which is why there is an instrumental track on there celebrating that called "The Town Square". However, I can't really wallow in happiness when we're fighting our wars against defenceless people to the East. As a taxpayer, it irritates me and that's putting it very mildly indeed. It's a very odd idea to spread democracy by going around and bombing people.

As a British citizen, does Gordon Brown's appointment as Prime Minister make you feel in any way more hopeful or optimistic?

It's bit too late for me to shift my opinions on governments. It seems to me that the purpose of a Labour government is to look after the shop while the Conservatives go off on grouse-shooting holiday for five years. The basic problem remains that we're still relying on the control of other countries for the supply of basic resources in one way or another. In Iraq, they'll have a terrible dilemma of withdrawing without it looking like they've been defeated. We're being beaten in Afghanistan and Iraq. That's the unbearable truth and we should have learnt that a hundred years ago. You can't just eradicate other people and replace them with replicas of yourself with impunity. However, it's reassuring to have an adult speaking on behalf of the country rather an adolescent retard from pre-school, but that's just a personal opinion. I don't analyse things politically. I suppose I do view them artistically. It's like looking at the sea. The journalist looks at the ships on the sea and what happens to them. What the artist has to do is look at the undercurrents and shifting waters. While I'm sifting around in the gloom, somebody else is looking at all the chopping and changing on the top.

Even though there is a lot of love, loss and war on *Comicopera*, I don't find it a depressing album.

There are a few comic moments on this record although they probably escape most people's attention. People think I'm depressing because of the beard and the wheelchair. If they could see me as I really am in my head, which is some kind of reckless little monkey scampering around in the trees, they'd be much closer to the mark quite frankly. I get pissed off like we all do. I get puzzled and frightened. Tragedy isn't funny, but I do think the best way to see life is as some kind of vast cosmic joke. People who perpetuate evil don't tend to be monsters, they're just hideous people who shouldn't be allowed at the controls. We haven't worked that one out yet, as wonderful as human civilisation is. We haven't learnt how to get the right fucker at the controls. Countries like England have always had empires and are always prone during a weak moment to suddenly think they have to do all that again. I have to distance myself from that aspect of England and that's what the third act is all about. Both my son and my daughter have married into families of Irish descent and I'm delighted. My son has married a Birmingham-Irish woman and my daughter has married a Canadian Irishman called Patrick Burke. I've got got four grand-daughters, sorry, I mean three and a grandson! I think. Well, four of those little pinky things that squeak. Now, they're all being brought up as Catholics, which is a bit of laugh considering their Granddad doesn't believe in anything! But I don't have too much of a problem with religion. I suppose it brings a sense of security, community and continuity in the face of a difficult world. I'm glad that my son and daughter have extended the gene pool. I'm not worried about immigration. This is an island, so I'm more worried about in-breeding. So that's my connection with Ireland, apart from being a big fan of Samuel Beckett and Oscar Wilde, but I'm sure everyone says that.

This is your first album on Domino which is an extremely well-respected and label. Does this new relationship excite you?

I can't believe my luck. We had to leave the last record company because it was taken over by a vast anonymous gang from across the Atlantic so we scuttled off. I'm glad they've got a great reputation. I don't follow music as closely as you do, but I can tell you that as people they're just terrific. They're bright, funny, intelligent and they work really hard. They have a similar spirit to Geoff Travis and Rough Trade. They've struck gold a couple of times lately, which has given them a profile that good people don't always get. I'm so lucky to be able to benefit from that.

I came across an interesting quote on a blog that claims you are the one performer in England that everyone respects and loves; the punks, the art-rockers – everyone…

I don't quite understand that to be honest. I don't mean to be falsely modest, but I have great difficulty doing what I do. Heath Robinson used to draw all these mad machines that wouldn't work and sometimes I feel my records are a bit like that. I do the best I can. Whenever I hear one of my records on the radio, I wince with embarrassment. I think, "Take that off and put on a proper record!" I'm baffled really, but it's nice when people say nice things about me. Some of my contemporaries got terribly paranoid about punk, but I thought Johnny Rotten was great. He made me laugh out loud and I thought he was a wonderful singer. I just couldn't see the problem people had with him. When people get older, they sometimes forget that every generation will find its own subculture and these tribal divisions make life interesting. I've always welcomed it and they never had me

waving their finger at them in some kind of school-masterly way. So, maybe there isn't this feeling that I'm some disapproving elder looking down upon them. I know exactly how they feel. I felt that way too.

That's funny when you say you feel uncomfortable hearing your music. Of course, your name has become a verb, as "Wyatting" refers to the practice of putting weird music on a jukebox with the aim of clearing a pub.

If someone put on one of my records in a pub it would certainly alienate me. I'd be straight out of there. Put on Girls Aloud or James Brown. Anything else. For fuck's sake, who wants to hear an old man with a beard when they're trying to have a drink? However, I do try and make tunes and I don't go out of my way to be obscure. Most of tunes tend to be light pop songs, they just tend to go on a bit. I like jazz solos and I like moments of complete anarchy and freedom, but it's always anchored in songs for me.

I don't know exactly what the Cuban track "Hasta Siempre Comadante" at the end of the album, is all about as I don't know any Spanish, but I believe it is concerned with Che Guevara?

That's right. The instrumental part was recorded by some Italian musicians. It's a remix of a piece I did some years ago for a fundraising CD for the Italian equivalent of The Morning Star (English socialist newspaper) called Il Manifesto. I resurrected it and remixed it with new vocals. They play it so beautifully.

The last track on *Ruth is Stranger than Richard* is called "Song for Che".

Yes. This is my second song for Che and the second one I've done by the songwriter Carlos Puebla. He only died recently. He was a Cuban folk legend of the post-revolutionary years.

One of the most beautiful tracks is "Just As You Are". Monica Vasconcelos' voice is amazing. Who is she?

Isn't she lovely? She is an amazing Brazilian lady and she has a record of her own called *Hih*. We did a swop. Instead of payment, we appeared on each other's records, which is something I do from time to time. I used to do that with David Gilmour and Brian (Eno). She got Alfie to write her some music and I wrote some lyrics. She normally sings in Portuguese so when she sings on "Just As You Are" there is a touch of innocence in the way she sings and a real sensual knowingness. She was the yin to my yang! *(chuckles)*

Brian Eno pops up too. You've been working with him for a long time and you played on *Music for Airports*.

Yeah, he plays keyboard on the first track and sorted out the cymbal sounds. I used his voice as an 'Enotron' on "Out of the Blue". Incidentally, on the very first copies of the CD, I left out Beverly Chadwick's name who played baritone sax, which was my mistake entirely. There was so much going on that I just slipped up and forgot. I'm not so good at all the practical stuff afterwards.

I love "Out of the Blue". I think it's my favourite track on the album.

It's a nice example of how me and Alfie can work together in a way that is almost spooky. She just came in with the words and they just matched. You'd think we had it prepared. I suppose we've been preparing for it in living together for 35 years.

I believe you did a live show recently in Lincoln.

Oh look, I don't know how that one got out. There is a young bee-bop drummer called Dylan Howe who is brilliant. The nearest he came to us was Lincoln which is an hour and a bit up the road. He persuaded me to play for a little bit, but it wasn't my show. All I did was mutter a chorus. It's no big deal. I didn't even get onstage. I haven't sung onstage since 1982. The only other time I did something like that was with David Gilmour a couple of years ago, but again I just skulked in the corner and did a bit of grunting and muttering.

Is making albums more important to you than playing live? It certainly seems to be that way for Kate Bush and Scott Walker.

I suppose it is. When David Gilmour plays, people appreciate what it is but some people come up to him and they can get quite abusive about the fact that it's not Pink Floyd. Ray Davies goes crazy because anytime he appears audiences just want him to do 'Waterloo

Sunset'. I don't have that problem. I do my songs and people expect and respect that. Then I move on to something else. I enjoyed playing live and I loved live drumming in particular. Sure, there is a buzz involved but I don't envy people who have to go on tour. I work more like a painter. I like working with small groups within this domestic intimacy.

I believe you're very inspired by painters.

I'm married to someone who has an M.A. and went to art college for ten years. I like doing little cartoons and stuff. I look at paintings all the time. Right in front of me now is a Basquiat print that Alfie bought me for my birthday. It's beautiful. I'm also looking at the cover of *Comicopera* and that's beautiful too. I still love art. As a teenager, the only thing that I found interesting that grown ups did was painting. The painters of the first half of the 20th century were my bread and butter really. I love sculpture too. More recently, I could spend a whole other life only looking at older painters – from Caravaggio right back to Giotto. They're gob-smacking. There is just so much. I'm quite happy with my little art books because I find art galleries a bit difficult. Plus, you're not allowed to smoke in them, which I know is sensible so I'm not complaining. I find the luminosity of wet paint comes back when you see paintings reproduced on television. I went to see a contemporary Japanese art exhibition in the Hayward Gallery in London recently. It was wonderful and full of witty and bright ideas. I was entranced by it. I also saw some David Hockney portraits of his mother lately which were fantastic. They were the best series of portraits of someone getting older that I've seen since Rembrandt. I get a lot of brain food from painting, but it's not what I do.

What was it like to work with Bjork on her *Medulla* album?

I just think she's magical. What can I say? It was like being visited by an angel from the top of a Christmas tree who comes down for while, sits on your shoulder and has a chat. I was completely in a daze. She is a beautiful bit of magic that floats about the earth like Stevie Wonder or Nina Simone. Me and the missus were thrilled to have her in the house. I don't listen to much rock music, but someone like that cuts right through. I still think I'll wake up one day and realise it was all just a dream.

You've worked with a lot of amazing people throughout your career, such as Mike Oldfield and Ivor Cutler.

It's amazing. It's been my life really. It's like she came out of nowhere and went back to nowhere. Well, not nowhere because she went back to Iceland obviously! I knew Ivor so well. He used to come round every week. We'd have some food and have a laugh and he'd potter off. Occasionally, we worked together, but to me he was just Ivor. It's the same with anyone else. I've been lucky to have these great friends independent of their stature in the outside world. Personally, I'm more concerned to work with people who aren't well known enough such as Monica. Some people are lucky enough to have struck some kind of common chord that resonates around the world, but other people haven't. How people have resonated around the world means very little to me. What I'm concerned with is whether they have some kind of gift that they can share with me even just for one song. To me, Paul (Weller) is just Paul. He is such a smart dresser, even when there is no one around to see! I love him. They're just people. Like Brian Eno with his bicycle. He just makes me laugh. You should hear his jokes. Actually, you shouldn't because they're disgraceful. Most of the time I hang around in our little town which is miles away from any media-attended event. I spent most of my time talking to Alfie, my Mother in Law Loreanna and Stan, who sells sausages in a bun with a cup of tea from his van for £1.20 in the market square up the road. We go to supper with our friends Alan and Patricia and Jane and Martin. None of them are musicians. Real life is anonymous. It just happens that a few of my friends are dead famous. It puts me off asking sometimes. I asked Paul's missus Sharon if he could play and she told me he was off on tour. I felt a bit shy about asking him after hearing that, but she just said, "Come on Robert, don't be a moron! Paul would love to do it!"

Your hometown sounds amazing. It must be a very conducive environment for creativity.

It is because there is no pressure to do anything. It's a homely market town. It's easy to live in and I can get around with great ease in my wheelchair within a ten minute spin around the block. In a place that might seem to have everything like London, I can't really do that. It's like toy town. It's like a toy train set with the butcher, the baker and candle-stick maker. It's got a few thousand people in it and a few industries that make cardboard packaging and plastic spoons. The people are friendly and very nice. There is a plumber next door and a shopkeeper on the other side. It's more than good enough for me.

Do your neighbours know who you are?

There is a woman down the pub called Maureen who said to me, "Robert, I know you're a celebrity, but I don't think anyone knows what you do." I just said, "Let's leave it at that Maureen. Don't worry about it. I'm celebrity for sure. Give us another drink." They've got a vague feeling that I must be something or other, but nobody really knows what it is because I'm not on *Emmerdale* or anything like that so they're a bit puzzled. There is a little record shop up the road called Off the Beaten Track and they know what I do. It's really nice little shop. I wheel up there and get my old jazz records. They feed the local youth their rock records and I just sit there having a cup of tea.

Thanks so much for the chat Robert. Sorry, I've just realised that I've ran way over time.

Oh, that's alright. I've still got my cup of tea going.

>> L'interview sur le site de Swench

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt - Record Collector N° 449 - January 2016

ROBERT WYATT



The Wilde Flowers 2CD is on Retroworld, 8 January, and *RC* asked the prog supergroup's mainstay, **Robert Wyatt,** if there are any other projects that he did that fans may not be aware of? "I tried writing a song for Paul Weller, which never surfaced, and I recorded a 10-minute instrumental for Jean-Pierre Muller's art installation, 7 By 7, which he asked us not to release separately."

With whom would you like to make a split 7"?
Archie Shepp.

What was your favourite record shop when you started out?
Collet's, on London's Shaftesbury Avenue. It had Ray Charles records on the jukebox, and a box marked "Rare as hen's teeth" in which I found a Japanese Blue Note LP of Kenny Dorham's *Whistle* Stop.

What was your first record?
Louis Armstrong's Skokiaan, maybe.

Did you ever *write songs under the influence?*
Goodness me, yes. When *didn't* I would be a much shorter list! Wine's a nice way to kickstart work. Brandy, one long solitary weekend, led to Blues In Bob Minor.

Are your family musical?
My pa, George Ellidge, played piano, and I started singing Christmas carols and funny songs like Little Brown Jug with him. My grandma, Annie Morgan, sang songs such as Come Into The Garden, Maud.

What would you ask your music hero?
Archie Shepp. I've met him several times and asked him about jazz saxophonists from the 40s and 50s that he listened to, such as Ben Webster and Al Sears, I'd ask more about that.

What record are you looking for?
Anything by Syrian vocalist George Wassouf, and the renegade concert pianist, Valentina Lisitsa. Culture from the front-line.

Which band *would you most like to see in reality TV?*
The Unthank Sisters, *if* it was on the BBC. The only channel that I tune into regularly with adverts now is Russia Today.

Which* of your songs *is the most personally meaningful?
Old Europe. Just me and Gilad Atzmon playing a nostalgic song about Paris. More poignant than ever.

What *backstage incident makes you laugh or cringe most?*
In New York, my friend Caroline Coon tried to take a quick photo of Miles Davis backstage, and he hissed, "tell that bitch to get that thing outta my face".

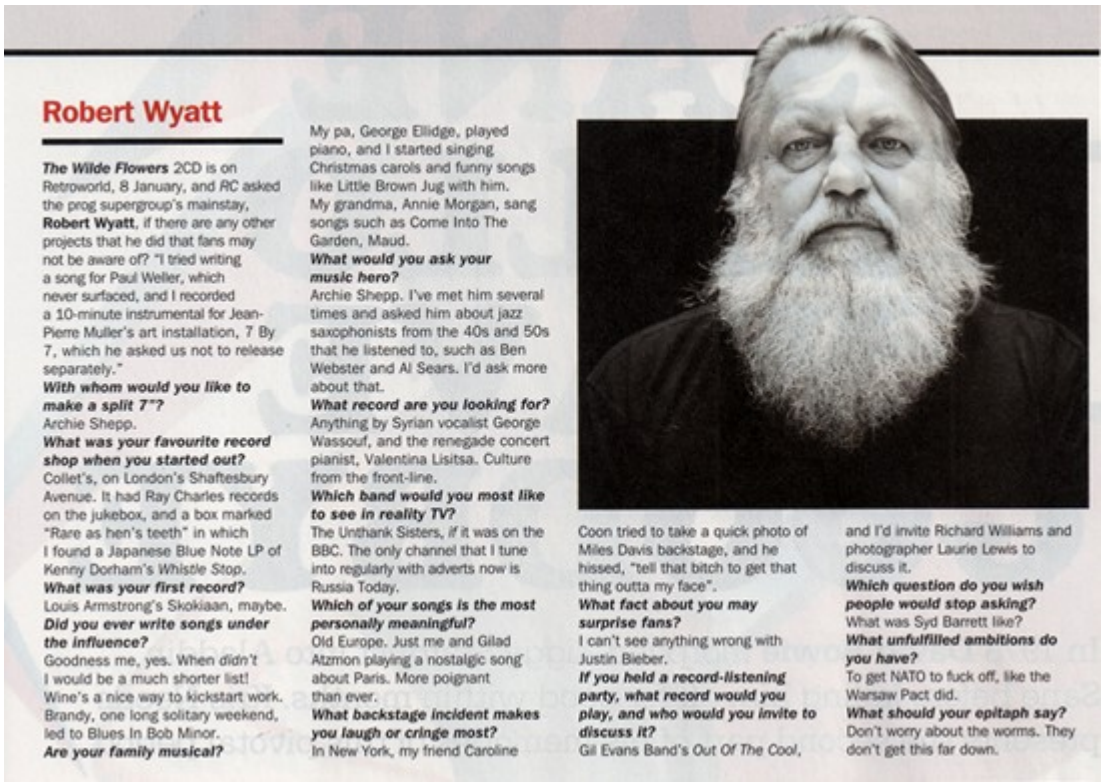
What fact about you may *surprise fans?*
-1 can't see anything wrong with Justin Bieber.

If you held a record-listening party, what record would you play, and who would you invite to discuss it?
Gil Evans Band's Out Of The *Cool,* and I'd invite Richard Williams and photographer Laurie Lewis to discuss it.

Which question do you wish people would stop asking?
What was Syd Barrett like?

What *unfulfilled ambitions do you have?*
To get NATO to fuck off, like the Warsaw Pact did.

What should your epitaph say?
Don't worry about the worms. They don't get this far down.



Robert Wyatt

The Wilde Flowers 2CD is on Retroworld, 8 January, and *RC* asked the prog supergroup's mainstay, **Robert Wyatt**, if there are any other projects that he did that fans may not be aware of? "I tried writing a song for Paul Weller, which never surfaced, and I recorded a 10-minute instrumental for Jean-Pierre Muller's art installation, 7 By 7, which he asked us not to release separately."
With whom would you like to make a split 7"?
Archie Shepp.
What was your favourite record shop when you started out?
Collet's, on London's Shaftesbury Avenue. It had Ray Charles records on the jukebox, and a box marked "Rare as hen's teeth" in which I found a Japanese Blue Note LP of Kenny Dorham's *Whistle Stop*.
What was your first record?
Louis Armstrong's Skokiaan, maybe.
Did you ever write songs under the influence?
Goodness me, yes. When didn't I would be a much shorter list! Wine's a nice way to kickstart work. Brandy, one long solitary weekend, led to Blues In Bob Minor.
Are your family musical?
My pa, George Ellidge, played piano, and I started singing Christmas carols and funny songs like Little Brown Jug with him. My grandma, Annie Morgan, sang songs such as Come Into The Garden, Maud.
What would you ask your music hero?
Archie Shepp. I've met him several times and asked him about jazz saxophonists from the 40s and 50s that he listened to, such as Ben Webster and Al Sears. I'd ask more about that.
What record are you looking for?
Anything by Syrian vocalist George Wassouf, and the renegade concert pianist, Valentina Lisitsa. Culture from the front-line.
Which band would you most like to see in reality TV?
The Unthank Sisters, *if* it was on the BBC. The only channel that I tune into regularly with adverts now is Russia Today.
Which of your songs is the most personally meaningful?
Old Europe. Just me and Gilad Atzmon playing a nostalgic song about Paris. More poignant than ever.
What backstage incident makes you laugh or cringe most?
In New York, my friend Caroline Coon tried to take a quick photo of Miles Davis backstage, and he hissed, "tell that bitch to get that thing outta my face".
What fact about you may surprise fans?
I can't see anything wrong with Justin Bieber.
If you held a record-listening party, what record would you play, and who would you invite to discuss it?
Gil Evans Band's *Out Of The Cool*, and I'd invite Richard Williams and photographer Laurie Lewis to discuss it.
Which question do you wish people would stop asking?
What was Syd Barrett like?
What unfulfilled ambitions do you have?
To get NATO to fuck off, like the Warsaw Pact did.
What should your epitaph say?
Don't worry about the worms. They don't get this far down.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

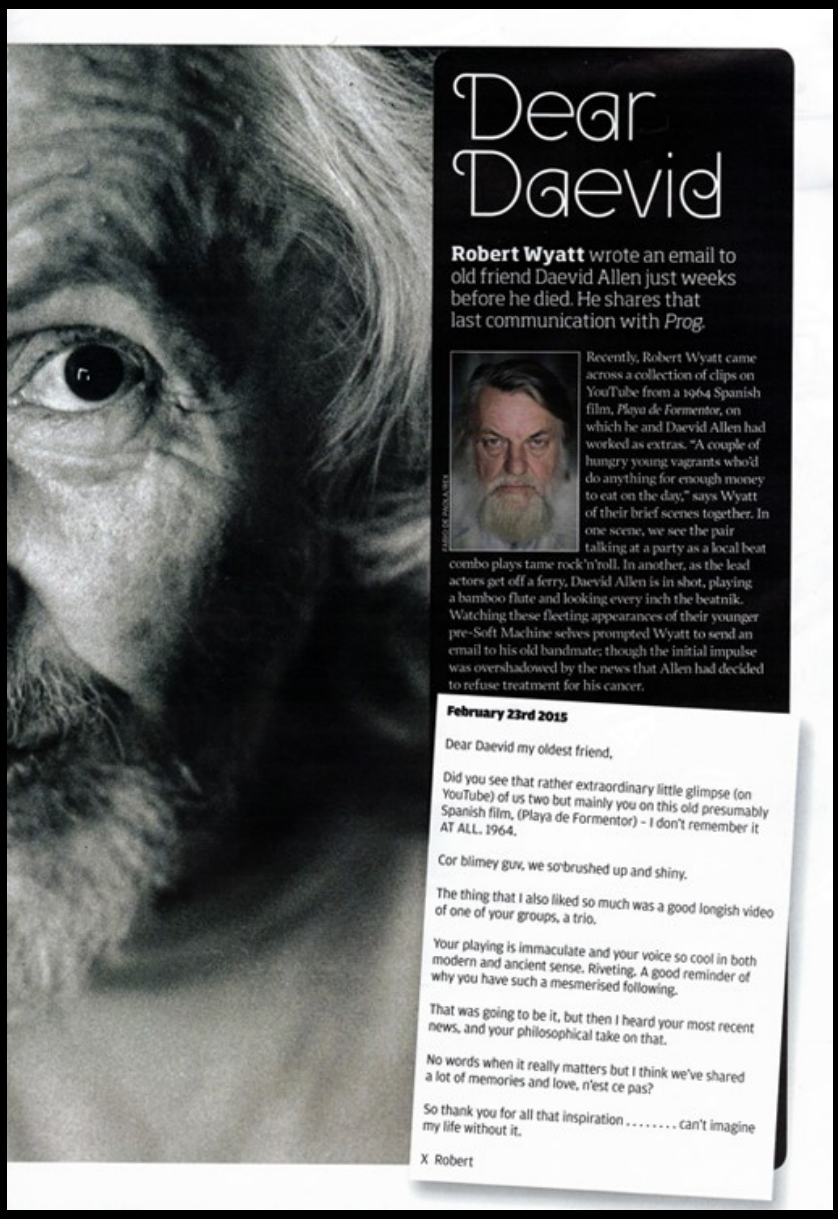
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Dear Daevid - Prog - April 2015

DEAR DAEVID



Dear Daevid

Robert Wyatt wrote an email to old friend Daevid Allen just weeks before he died. He shares that last communication with *Prog*.

Recently, Robert Wyatt came across a collection of clips on YouTube from a 1964 Spanish film, *Playa de Formentor*, on which he and Daevid Allen had worked as extras. "A couple of hungry young vagrants who'd do anything for enough money to eat on the day," says Wyatt of their brief scenes together. In one scene, we see the pair talking at a party as a local beat combo plays tame rock'n'roll. In another, as the lead actors get off a ferry, Daevid Allen is in shot, playing a bamboo flute and looking every inch the beatnik. Watching these fleeting appearances of their younger pre-Soft Machine selves prompted Wyatt to send an email to his old bandmate; though the initial impulse was overshadowed by the news that Allen had decided to refuse treatment for his cancer.

February 23rd 2015

Dear Daevid my oldest friend,

Did you see that rather extraordinary little glimpse (on YouTube) of us two but mainly you on this old presumably Spanish film, (Playa de Formentor) - I don't remember it AT ALL. 1964.

Cor blimey guv, we so brushed up and shiny.

The thing that I also liked so much was a good longish video of one of your groups, a trio.

Your playing is immaculate and your voice so cool in both modern and ancient sense. Riveting. A good reminder of why you have such a mesmerised following.

That was going to be it, but then I heard your most recent news, and your philosophical take on that.

No words when it really matters but I think we've shared a lot of memories and love, n'est ce pas?

So thank you for all that inspiration ..... can't imagine my life without it.

X Robert

> Zoom

A Life Less Ordinary - Prog - April 2015

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY





Whether with prog-jazz pioneers Soft Machine or on his own dreamlike solo albums, **Robert Wyatt** has always followed his instincts. Recently retired, he looks back on an "improvised life" in music.


A Life Less Ordinary

Whether with prog-jazz pioneers Soft Machine or on his own dreamlike solo albums, **Robert Wyatt** has always followed his instincts. Recently, as he looks back on his "improvised life" in music

Words: Rob Hughes

"The music I heard in my head didn't really exist in the real world," says Robert Wyatt, trying to explain the unique otherness of his recorded work. "Elements of my ideas were already out there — an attraction to hummable tunes, for example — so I was neither trying to be different, nor trying to sound familiar. I'm not interested in following a tradition, but nor am I interested in being esoteric. I just follow my undirected instinct wherever it leads me."

> Zoom

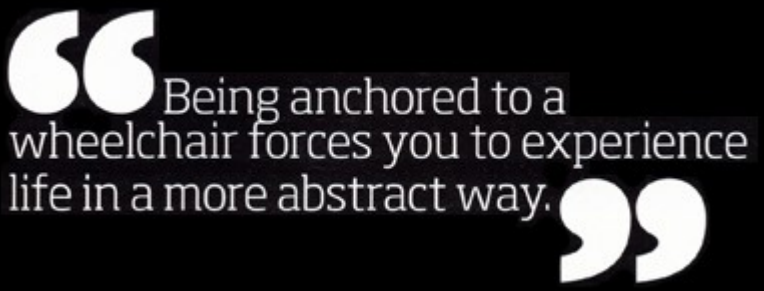
Wyatt's instinct has rarely let him down. In a career that he brought to an unexpected close in 2014 with the announcement that he was retiring from music, Wyatt has produced some of the most strikingly original work of the past half century. His, he says, is "an improvised life". One fuelled by jazz, socialism and an absurdist slant on the world around him.

It's an approach that first found expression with prog-jazz pioneers Soft Machine in the mid-60s. Though he's keen to dismiss the notion that they were part of a broader Canterbury Scene. "There were a few musicians I played with from around there, but I don't remember a 'scene'," posits Wyatt, who turned 70 in January. Instead, he feels, Canterbury was more emblematic of a very English variant on freeform jazz and psychedelia. Referring to their countercultural days at London's Roundhouse and UFO Club, Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason described the Softs and Pink Floyd as "the twin house bands of the London underground". "I always found the underground a more realistic place to be," says Wyatt, recalling. UFO. "There'd be bodies all over the floor, film projections on various surfaces, and a right old racket coming from the stage. There was a timeless feel, altogether rather dreamlike."

Wyatt's memories as singer/ drummer of Soft Machine, for whom he contributed such stellar moments as *Moon In June*, are bittersweet. By his own admission, he'd become a liability by the time of 1971's *Fourth*. An obstinate boozer and wild stage presence (flailing, shirtless, from behind his kit), he was utterly at odds with the restrained disposition of fellow Softs, bassist Hugh Hopper and keyboard player Mike Ratledge. In autumn '71, Wyatt quit to form Matching Mole. Though, as Hopper admitted later, Wyatt was effectively "pushed out of what he felt was his own group".

The episode forms one of the most moving passages in Marcus O'Dair's recent

book, *Different Every Time: The Authorised Biography Of Robert Wyatt*. In it, Wyatt confesses that he still has nightmares about being squeezed out of Soft Machine. "It is strange, even to me," he says, trying to make sense of the residual trauma. "Something to do with the humiliation of rejection, when it's rejection from the people you got together with in the first place, I guess."



Post-Soft Machine, two events changed him forever. In early 1972 he met artist Alfreda Benge, who was to become his wife, muse and lyricist. It also coincided with the beginning of Wyatt's devotion to Communism, with politics serving as "the missing protein" in his music. Then, in 1973, came the drunken fall from a window that left Wyatt paralysed from the waist down. The effect, he says, was truly liberating, in that it narrowed his career choices and made him concentrate on being a singer. He calls the accident a neat dividing line between adolescence and the rest of his life: "Your youth is a period of maximum physical potential. Suddenly being anchored to a wheelchair forces you to experience life in a more abstract way. You become more reflective."

Aside from his expressionistic blend of free jazz, folk, classical and world music, what truly sets Wyatt apart is his exquisite voice. Reedy and tremulous, there's a haunted vulnerability and disarming candour to his singing, which his friend Brian Eno compares to "a poor innocent cast into a complicated world".

There are very few precedents for Wyatt's singing voice. "I try to make the most of what's doable with it," he offers plainly. But one chief inspiration was the late English tenor and Benjamin Britten collaborator Sir Peter Pears. "I didn't warm to opera singing, but Peter Pears had a gentler vibrato, which suited Britten's adaptations of folk songs in particular. They were probably the first records that got to me as a toddler."

The sheer breadth of Wyatt's solo work is dizzying. As an extension of his modus operandi — "I do like to rummage around what's been done in the past and find a different take on it" — he has reworked pieces by such disparate artists as John Cage and The Monkees, and recorded with Henry Cow, Eno, Phil Manzanera, Syd Barrett, Björk and Ryuichi Sakamoto, to name but a few. "I think of it as alternating dictatorships," he says of his myriad collaborations. "On my records, I hope the musicians I invite will trust me to put it all together in my own way. Conversely, when employed by others, I try to do what they would like me to do."

Stick a pin anywhere you like, from 1974's *Rock Bottom* to 2OO7's *Comicopera*, from Soft Machine's 1968 debut to 2010's three-way alliance with Gilad Atzmon and Ros Stephen, *For The Ghosts Within*, and all of these albums are freighted with Wyatt's rare brilliance. For all the genre-hopping, Wyatt's work occupies a distinct corner entirely of its own. "My identity doesn't feel threatened by cultural variety," he says. "Such differences as there are seem to me to highlight the specialness of each. Underneath, what we have in common with others warms the heart even more. My heart, anyway."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Robert Wyatt - Q N°343 - February 2015





No sooner has Robert Wyatt welcomed Q into his home than he's apologising for the long journey. Since he and his wife Alfie moved to the Lincolnshire market town of Louth more than 20 years ago, he's felt like he's a world away from the heart of the music industry so he greets visitors with a mixture of gratitude and surprise.

"I can't believe Björk was sat where you are," he says, marvelling across his dining table, cup of tea in hand. "We sat and played Sun Ra records. I was truly starstruck. She has magic to me."

The house is as welcoming and characterful as its inhabitants. The walls are decorated with Alfie's designs for Wyatt's album covers and a picture of Che Guevara with a sticker reading "Smoking cures stress". On the mantelpiece near the table there's a ruby wedding anniversary card and a Russian doll of sour-faced former Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev.

Wyatt's song with Björk, Submarine, is one of several collaborations that he's collated on the second disc of a new compilation called Different Every Time. "I like the sense of being employable," he says cheerfully. "It's reassuring."

A companion to Marcus O'Dair's new authorised biography of Wyatt ("big and thick, like me," says the singer). Different Every Time winds a typically unorthodox path through Wyatt's unique career but still can't do it justice. In the 40 years since an accident confined him to a wheelchair, the former drummer has created a soundworld where surrealist whimsy coexists with fierce political conviction, English eccentricity with globetrotting curiosity, good humour with fathomless sadness, audacious experimentation with pop clarity, a big brain with a warm heart. His friend Brian Eno has compared Wyatt's unmistakable voice to "a poor innocent cast into a complicated world".

In person, the 69-year-old is as intriguingly paradoxical as his music. Despite his accomplishments, he's modest to the point of masochism. He's effortlessly erudite about anything from Picasso to Palestine, but merrily describes himself as "thick as shit". He projects wisdom and optimism, with a jovial chuckle that convinces you all's right with the world, yet he's suffered from depression and anxiety. You can tell some subjects are still painful from the way he chain-smokes Chesterfields and tugs at a fleecy white beard, which suggests both Karl Marx and Santa Claus. His life has been fascinating but not easy.

"When people say they like my records," he says, "I think, 'If you knew how hard it was to make those records you'd be even more impressed than you are!'"



> Zoom

Robert Wyatt-Ellidge's childhood was both blessed and cursed. His parents, a music-loving industrial psychologist and a freelance journalist, were unusually cosmopolitan for post-war Britain. They took young Robert to continental Europe, schooled him in modernism and jazz, and ran a nurturing, bohemian household: one of Robert's four half-siblings, Julian Glover, is an actor who currently plays Grand Maester Pycelle in Game Of Thrones. "I was never a rebel against my parents," says Wyatt. "I liked them very much."

When Wyatt was 10, however, his father developed multiple sclerosis (he died eight years later), and his enforced retirement meant they needed lodgers to keep their ramshackle Kent house going. Life at a rural grammar school didn't suit him at all. "I know people where education was their introduction to the outside world," he says, thoughtfully puffing away. "Perhaps for me it was a narrowing down. I got cultural claustrophobia."

He dropped out at 16, the same year his parents emigrated, leaving him to fend for himself with various menial jobs, a failed attempt at painting and "dossing" around Europe, where he got "a real sense of what it's like being a nobody, an alien, and how you're treated." He found his calling playing drums in what he quaintly calls "beat groups".

"There was no great weight of historical precedent saying what it should be like," he says. "To that extent I think all British rock music is punk music: fools rushing in where angels fear to tread."

In 1966, after a short spell fronting The Wilde Flowers, Wyatt formed Soft Machine, who became popular with the "heads" thanks to their endless jazz-rock odysseys. Alfie once described them as "too much happening all at once for too long."

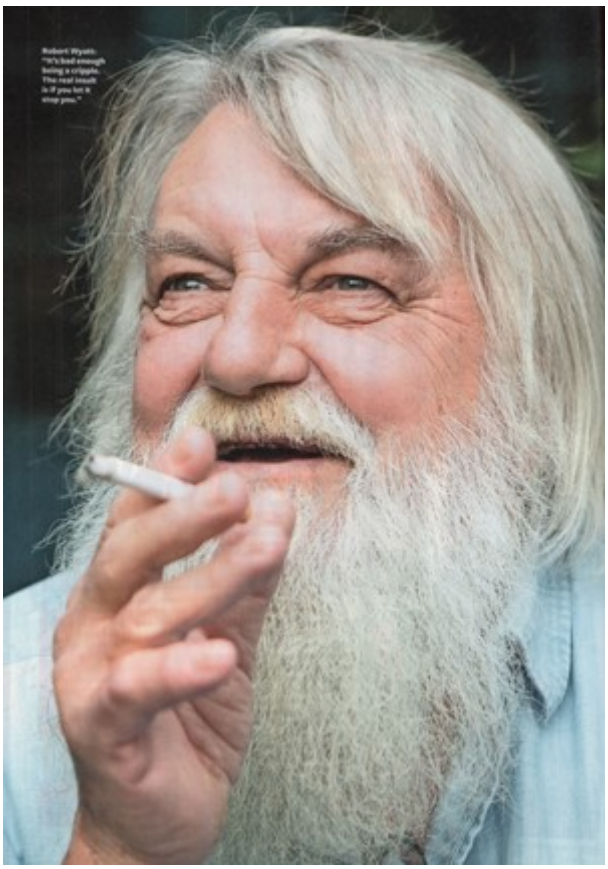
"Yeah," Wyatt laughs. "Well, it's a phase to go through. I did get carried away on drums. Every time I had an idea I would play it. I've regretted that since. The drummers I listen to now are the ones that leave space."

Soft Machine toured America with The Jimi Hendrix Experience in 1968. Wyatt was drinking with Hendrix when the news broke that Martin Luther King had been assassinated. "We were playing in Newark and Hendrix dedicated a song to 'a friend of mine who just died,'" he says, his voice trembling. "I'm getting tearful now. It was just... fucking hell. They were such a kind bunch. What I liked about Hendrix was he was almost embarrassed by his apparently effortless superiority."

Wyatt, for his part, was embarrassed by the term "progressive rock". His journey as a music fan, from the avant-garde to pop, was the reverse of most prog-rockers'. "My discovery wasn't the obscure or the esoteric. It was the joy of playing for dancers and the idea of music as a service, like a restaurant or a caff. So I always found the *[progressive*] idea presumptuous. And also there was something vaguely racist in the idea that what Little Richard and Chuck Berry did was rock'n'roll but then it progresses. Well, actually, fuck you! "

Soft Machine burned through members fast and in 1971 it was Wyatt's turn to get ousted by bandmates who hated both his singing and his drinking. He admits he was "getting right out of order" but at the time he was traumatised. "It's amazing how it recurs in nightmares," he says heavily. "It was that sense of having given my youth to developing this thing and then being rejected by it. It was emotionally shattering."

Wyatt formed a new band, Matching Mole, whose name was a barbed pun on the French translation of Soft Machine, and his love life was looking up. After breaking up with Caroline Coon, the artist and activist who inspired Matching Mole's beautiful O Caroline, he met Alfie. Born Alfreda Benge in Nazi-occupied Poland in 1940, she was an artist and aspiring film-maker. Wyatt soon realised she was "the one".



> Zoom

In 1972, the film director Nic Roeg invited Alfie to Venice to work on the thriller Don't Look Now, which co-starred her old friend Julie Christie. Alfie bought Wyatt a toyshop keyboard so that he could compose while she was on set. He thought the Venice songs, inspired by his new love, would comprise the third Matching Mole album but Robert Wyatt has led a life of two halves and the first half was about to come to a violent end.

On 1 June, 1973, Robert and Alfie went to a party at a West London flat. Wyatt proceeded to get drunk and fall four storeys while trying to climb down a drainpipe. He can remember hearing a distant scream after he hit the ground. Later, a friend told him, "That was you." Submerged by painkillers for

six weeks, Wyatt awoke to learn that he'd broken his 12th vertebra, paralysing him from the waist down, at the age of 28. After three months, he was finally allowed out of bed and began playing the piano in the visitors' room, fleshing out the Venice songs to match the visions in his head. "It's a landscape," he says. "There are rivers spreading out into deltas, there's mountainous bits, there's rough terrain. It's embarrassingly literal."

Wyatt agrees that it's strange that this injury set him back less than being fired from Soft Machine. "Alfie says, 'Robert lives in denial and who'd be so cruel as to knock him out of it?'" he laughs. "There was a pride element. It's bad enough being a cripple. The real insult is if you let it stop you." (Later, Alfie tells me, "I think the one thing missing from the book is the incredible aggravation of being paraplegic. Because he doesn't make a fuss about it, nobody notices.")

On a pragmatic level, Wyatt needed to earn a living and he couldn't drum any more so he became a reluctant singer-songwriter. His Rock Bottom album was released in 1974, on Robert and Alfie's wedding day. Produced by Pink Floyd's Nick Mason, it's an extraordinary piece of work: dreamlike, playful and deeply moving. Mason also produced Wyatt's first detour into the Top 40, a strangely intense version of the Monkees hit I'm A Believer.

Wyatt is a passionate pop fan who watches The Voice and tried to book Hear'Say for his 2001 Meltdown festival. He wanted to make a point with I'm A Believer.

"I was very uncomfortable with having fans who said, Tour music is so much better than all that banal pop music.' It sounds like a socialist thing to say but pop music is the music of the people. It's the folk music of the industrial age. If you don't respect popular culture you don't respect people, in which case your political opinion is of no great value."



Wyatt has always been well-loved.

Friends such as Pink Floyd, Christie and her boyfriend Warren Beatty all offered financial support after the accident, and many more have collaborated with him over the years, including Brian Eno. "Old male elephants who get rejected after a tussle can sometimes form little gangs of their own," says Wyatt. "That's what rogue elephant means. I think me and Brian became rogue elephants. I love him, I really do. He's all heart."

Never a prog-rocker in spirit, Wyatt immediately loved punk ("funny and terrific") and 2-Tone ("much more interestingly politically than anything in the "60s"), and found a new generation of people to work with, including The Raincoats and Scritti Politti. In 1982, Madness producer Clive Langer asked Elvis Costello to help him out on a song with Wyatt in mind and Costello came up with Shipbuilding, a heartbreaking vignette of a working-class community affected by the Falklands War.

When the demo tape landed on Wyatt's doormat, he responded with his usual humility. "I thought, 'What is it they think I do that makes them think I could do this?'" His low-key vocal, which made Langer burst into tears, made Shipbuilding one of the most tender protest songs ever recorded.

Politics consumed Wyatt during the '80s. He guested on benefit singles such as Working Week's Venceremos (We Will Win) and the SWAPO Singers' The Wind Of Change, composed the soundtrack for an animal rights documentary, joined Labour-supporting musicians collective Red Wedge, and recorded an LP of protest songs, Nothing Can Stop Us. On Matching Mole's Gloria Gloom he had asked, "How long can I pretend that music's more relevant than fighting for a socialist world?" Now he had his answer.

"I had been a leftist musician but I became a singing leftie," he says. Having once believed

that art was "the point of life", he now fretted that it was a decadent luxury. "I think I'm going to be worrying about this for the rest of my life," he says. "At worst, I think it's decorative and the more of a sewer society is, the more gloriously distracting the art has to be. That's part of what human inventiveness is - trying to make something lovely out of shit. The world as compost."
He also joined the Communist Party of Great Britain when it was at its lowest ebb. He takes time to explain his complicated reasons for signing up to a lost cause. "It's partly nostalgic affection for the loser," he says. "I couldn't have joined it when they thought they were winning. I wanted to give these ideas a decent burial at least." When the young modernisers drifted towards what became New Labour, Wyatt stuck with the old guard. "I thought, I'd rather sink in your ship than stay afloat in theirs."'



5 ROBERT WYATT
AT LAST I AM FREE
Single (1980)
Wyatt greeted the '80s with a slew of politicised cover versions, including this haunting reading of Chic's veiled protest song.

6 ROBERT WYATT
SHIPBUILDING
Single (1982)
Elvis Costello and Clive Langer created an anti-war song like no other. Wyatt's empathy and intimacy made it a heart-shaking masterpiece.

7 ROBERT WYATT
THE AGE OF SELF
Old Rottenhat (1985)
"They say the working class is dead, we're all consumers now." Wyatt's communist principles ring out clear and strong on this tense riposte to Thatcherism.

8 ROBERT WYATT
HEAPS OF SHEEP
Shleep (1997)
Insomnia drove Wyatt to despair but he explored it with typical good humour on this warm and playful collaboration with Brian Eno.

9 BJÖRK
SUBMARINE
Medúlla (2004)
Björk travelled to Louth to fully immerse herself in Wyattworld and join forces on this disorientating collage of multi-tracked voices.

10 ROBERT WYATT
JUST AS YOU ARE
Comicopera (2007)
Co-written with Alfie, a touching, country-inspired duet with Monica Vasconcelos about a long, imperfect marriage.

This period ended with 1991's Dondestan, whose title track called for a Palestinian state. It's a subject about which he is still fiercely passionate, at the cost of some "desolately sad" rifts with Jewish friends. "Nobody's called me anti-Jewish that I know of but there is a sense that you cannot support these people." Years later, a music snob ruined a night in his local pub by playing Dondestan on the digital jukebox and christened this sonic trolling "Wyatting". The staunchly anti-elitist Wyatt was dismayed. "I would never do that. It would be so rude! How could you enjoy it? It would cut you off from the communal thing."

After Dondestan and his move from London to Louth, Wyatt was floored by the most devastating depression of his life. "I had something of a nervous breakdown," he says quietly. "And for once Alfie said, 'Look, I can't deal with this. I've done everything I can for you.' It was really bad. I went quite mad from sleep deprivation."

With help from an NHS counsellor, he threw himself into a new album, 1997's Shleep, like it was a life raft. It was the first of a remarkable trilogy, followed by 2003's Mercury-nominated Cuckooland and 2007's Comicopera. With the help of Alfie and friends such as Eno, David Gilmour, Paul Weller, Roxy Music's Phil Manzanera and saxophonist Gilad Atzmon, he created the most wondrous music of his life. Then he gave up the alcohol that had given him the courage to make it.

"I think the recklessness that had fired me in the past began to dwindle," he explains. "Alcohol took me back to my reckless youth and the further away I was from *real* reckless youth, the more alcohol I needed just to get that level of chutzpah." So he quit. He hasn't made a record since.

While Wyatt poses for Q's photographer, I talk with Alfie. She discusses his new compilation ("If I did a Robert collection, it would be all the things that irritated everybody"), his politics ("He's a good communist; he doesn't underestimate people's intelligence") and his creative lull since Comicopera. "It's strange because I've never known him not to be fussing over a tune in his head. It's as if he's got it all out."

Does Wyatt think he'll ever make another album?

"No," he says. "I'm just amazed that at last I got records made that I can really live with, that don't make me wince."

Having played just one solo concert, 40 years ago, he thinks stage fright and logistics would make a Kate Bush-like concert resurrection even more unlikely. "It would be undoable," he shudders. "It's appalling, just the thought of it."



So Wyatt's career, apart from his occasional guest appearances, seems to be over. This is very sad for his fans, but less so for the man who never expected to achieve as much as he has.

"I can't believe my luck that with my attitude problem I nevertheless got all that done," he says, tugging his beard. "The extraordinary thing is that at the age where rock musicians are meant to die of a drug overdose I almost died." That was a trajectory he could've imagined. What he could not imagine was the life that he ended up living, wheelchair-bound. It was a "marathon" he couldn't think of enduring. "I'm a sprinter."

Dorian Lynskey
Portraits : Michael Clement

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt at 70: happy birthday, Old Rottenhat! - The Guardian - 27 January 2015



Marcus O'Dair

The Guardian

"It'll probably knock 10 years off your life, 20 if you smoke." This is how Robert Wyatt recalls his consultant's brusque verdict after he fell from a fourth-storey window in 1973 and, at the age of 28, found himself paralysed from the waist down.

Wyatt does smoke – or rather, he is forever giving up: he must have quit five times or more in the time it took me to write his biography. And yet, on Wednesday, he turns 70 – and, apart from the fact that he still has to keep one leg extended parallel to the floor, after breaking an ankle in the summer, he seems to be in rude health.

No one else occupies Wyatt's cultural co-ordinates. There's the sheer diversity of musicians he's worked with: Brian Eno and Paul Weller, David Gilmour and Jerry Dammers, but also contemporary artists including Björk and Hot Chip and such avant-garde jazz luminaries as Evan Parker and the late Charlie Haden.

In non-musical terms, too, he sits in the centre of a singular Venn diagram: Marxism, paraplegia, alcoholism (or, as he prefers, dipsomania – though he's been sober for the best part of a decade) and the surrealist pseudoscience of 'pataphysics make up just some of the interlocking circles. Not least for his 1974 solo effort Rock Bottom, which still regularly features in lists of the greatest albums ever made, it has been an extraordinary career, and an extraordinary life. I interviewed a lot of musicians for the book, but there were also cameo roles for Julie Christie, Jean Shrimpton, William Burroughs, Richard Branson, Robert Graves and Georges Braque. I don't think the last two, in particular, appear in many popular music biographies.

Eno puts Wyatt in his top two musicians, while Weller names him his favourite ever collaborator. Alexis Taylor from Hot Chip is such a fan that he wrote the press release for Wyatt's most recent solo album, 2007's Comicopera. What's particularly remarkable is that Wyatt has achieved all this while scoring only two top-40 hits, neither of which he wrote himself. There was I'm A Believer, written by Neil Diamond and made famous by the Monkees, in 1974, and then Shipbuilding, written for Wyatt by Elvis Costello and the producer Clive Langer, and released in the wake of the Falklands war. He hasn't played a headline gig since 1974. And to state that his singing is a long way from the traditional

"good voice" is putting it mildly: reedy, forlorn and high-pitched, even if years of smoking have shifted his range downwards, Wyatt himself says he sounds like "Jimmy Sommerville on Valium".



Prolific and prodigiously talented ... Robert Wyatt. Photograph: Richard Saker

Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Wyatt hasn't drifted to the right politically as he has got older. Also unusually, he has found himself perhaps more recognised than ever in the past decade and a half. Like David Bowie, Patti Smith and Ornette Coleman, he has curated a Meltdown festival in that period. He has also been nominated for a Mercury prize and guest-edited the Today programme on Radio 4. Although he dropped out of school before completing his A levels, Wyatt boasts two honorary doctorates.

Although he describes his own creative gestation period as elephantine – 18 months rather than nine – Wyatt has in fact amassed a sizable body of work over his 50-year career. There are four studio albums with Soft Machine, two with his subsequent band, Matching Mole, and, depending on how you count them, about 10 albums as a solo artist, not to mention any number of live albums and radio sessions.

He has also been a prolific collaborator, which is why we decided to accompany the book with a compilation album, also entitled Different Every Time. Wyatt says now that he has retired, although he has made a guest appearance on at least one record that has still to be released. But even if there are no more albums under his own name, we can be grateful for the catalogue already amassed – and for the fact that, back in 1973, the consultant got it wrong. Many happy returns, Old Rottenhat.

Marcus O'Dair is the author of Different Every Time: the Authorised Biography of Robert Wyatt, published by Serpent's Tail

>> L'interview sur le site de The Guardian

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

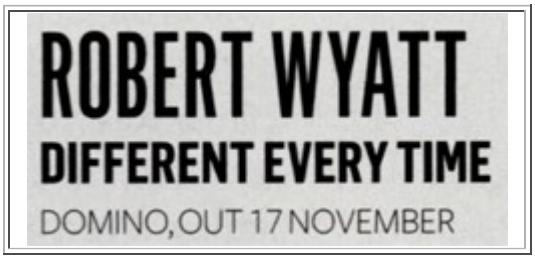
Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soft Touch - Q N°341 - December 2014







Anyone embarking on a survey of post-war bohemia wouldn't have to look too hard among the hand-thrown pots and off-grid esoterica before they came across the distinctive figure of Robert Wyatt. The Mallorca commune of poet Robert Graves; the pastoral prog hideouts of the Canterbury Scene; London's psychedelic hotspots; the greatcoated milieu of '80s political radicalism: the 69-year-old former drummer of Soft Machine has been present at them all. A fall from a window in 1973 left him in a wheelchair, diverting his career further into here-be-dragons territory. He emerged as a powerfully idiosyncratic and influential solo artist, becoming a totemic figure to avant-gardists and art-rockers, sought out by Brian Eno or Elvis Costello, Björk or Hot Chip.

This compilation is divided into two parts: the first is an overview of his work from Soft Machine through to his last solo album, 2007's Comicopera, while the second documents his extensive collaborations. It might not be the very best place for the uninitiated to start - first track, Moon In June, from Soft Machine's 1970 album Third, is a tremendous burst of lusty experimentation but 19 minutes of labyrinthine jazz-prog doesn't exactly roll out the welcome mat. It's also a shame there's not more from Wyatt's 1974 masterpiece Rock Bottom, represented here only by a mercurial live version of A Last Straw - but everything included adds another piece to Wyatt's singular puzzle.


Q Review REISSUES

SOFT TOUCH

Singular art-rock outlier's career compiled.

ROBERT WYATT

HIS WONDERFUL VOICE HAS AN ANCIENT, FOLKLORIC QUALITY TO IT.

His wonderful voice has an ancient, folkloric quality to it, something of the hedgerow and the milk-pail. It can also be intimately conversational, or eerily abstract. On 1972's Signed Curtain - recorded with Matching Mole, the band he formed after leaving Soft Machine - he sings "this is the chorus or perhaps it's a bridge/Or just another part of the song I'm singing". It's not just arch whimsy: it underlines his voice's status as an instrument in its own right. His appeal to Björk, who worked with him on Medulla's Submarine, or Hot Chip, who join him on We're Looking For A Lot Of Love, is clear: that flickering, ethereal timbre could, at times, be lifted from Aphex Twin or Boards Of Canada's unsettling sonic arsenal.



Despite the unmistakably English vowels, though, Wyatt often takes a global perspective - Brazilian jazz singer Monica Vasconcelos appears on Comicopera's love song Just As You Are, for example - while a jazz-born ability as an interpreter of other people's work is also shown brilliantly on his stately spiritual treatment of Chic's At Last I Am Free. Once a member of the Communist Party, his political convictions chime out too. "They say the working class is dead/We're all consumers now," he sings on the mournful pattering of 1985's The Age Of Self, and he appears alongside Tracey Thorn on Working Week's

Venceremos (We Will Win), a none-more-'8Os track drawing attention to the political situation in Chile. Most famously, there's Shipbuilding, written by Elvis Costello and Clive Langer. It's a protest song of rare humanity, largely due to the ominous stormy thump of the bass bearing down heavily on Wyatt's frail vocal.



> Zoom

In the middle of Moon In June, Wyatt smacks down the fourth wall and addresses the listener across the years. Music-making, he sings, is "Background noise for people scheming, seducing, revolting and teaching." That's the pragmatic view, but as this compilation once more confirms, Wyatt demands, deserves and ultimately abundantly repays, the fullest attention.

Victoria Segal



Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

End Of An Ear + Robert Wyatt - Album By Album - Uncut N° 211 - December 2014



ROBERT WYATT calls a halt to his musical career. " We're just getting through the day now..."



SOME SAD NEWS this month - Robert Wyatt has revealed to *Uncut* that "after 50 years in the saddle" he won't be making any more music. Wyatt puts the decision down to declining health and a desire not to tarnish his legacy, but he admits he feels "a bit weird" about stopping.

"I thought, train drivers retire when they're 65, so I will, as well," Wyatt, now 69, tells *Uncut*. "I've stopped, I don't really know why actually. And I do feel a bit... weird about it, but life is physically much harder for me and for [*Wyatt 's wife*] Alfie. It's getting a bit scary, and I can't sit around, messing around, thinking up new tunes in that, really. We're just getting through the day now, and trying to have bits of fun when we can. "At the moment, I've broken my foot and I'm sitting on a bed with my foot up. It happens, these things."

Though he hasn't released a solo album since 2007's acclaimed *Comicopera*, Wyatt has remained active with collaborations, most notably on *For The Ghosts Within*, a 2010 album he made with Ros Stephen and Gilad Atzmon.

"I've had 50 years in the saddle, I've enjoyed them, and I've enjoyed the stuff I did towards the end, in this century, at least as much as anything I've done before. So I don't feel like I've done nothing... I always felt, in quite an old-fashioned way, you've got to do stuff. Not just have a nice time out, but actually get stuff down, accumulate material. I was

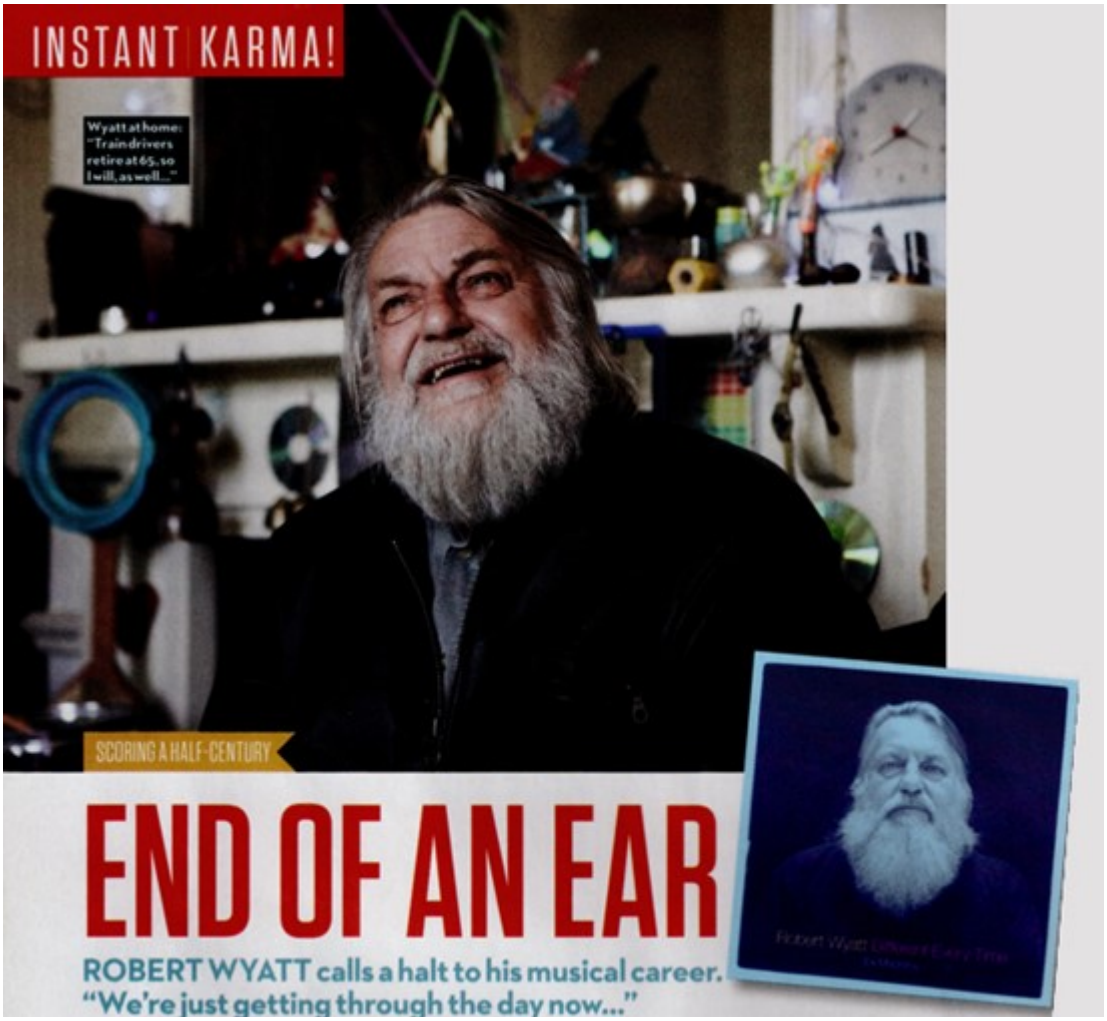
only 28 when I broke my back, [*so*] I didn't know if I would still be able to work in a decade's time. So I did want to work and get stuff done. I've always had that, 'til very recently."

The news makes the release of compilation *Different Every Time* later this month more poignant - it seems the two-disc set now truly spans his entire career, from drumming in Soft Machine and Matching Mole, to his solo work after being paralysed from the waist down in 1973. The second disc features Wyatt's collaborations with the likes of Björk, Nick Mason, Hot Chip and Phil Manzanera.

"I'm very surprised I'm in this state, it isn't a state I imagined being in, but I nevertheless here I am," Wyatt says. "I never really got the hang of [*music*] as a job, to be honest. I just sort of kept trying to do stuff. But faculties are failing, and I don't want to churn out stuff that isn't quite right."

Wyatt is keen to stress that he has "stopped" rather than retired, and now plans to focus even more on his interest and involvement in left-wing politics. "I would say I've stopped, it's a better word than retired. Fifty years in the saddle, it's not nothing. It's completely unplanned, my life, and it's just reached this particular point. Other things have happened - I'm more taken up by politics, to be honest, than music at the moment. Music tags along behind it. There is a pride in [stopping], I don't want it to go off. Performers say leave the stage five minutes before they want you to leave, rather than five minutes after!"

TOM PINNOCK





SINCE SHOOTING FROM sleepy Canterbury to the clubs of London's '6os psychedelic underground as drummer and occasional vocalist with Soft Machine, Robert Wyatt has remained one of England's most idiosyncratic, thoughtful and fascinating artists. "When you're working I as a musician, you're in a dream world that's beyond rational explanation," he tells us, outlining a unique approach that has over the years seen him feted and assisted by rock royalty, including various members of Pink Floyd and Roxy Music. "So what comes out comes out." Though it sadly looks unlikely that we'll see any new music from him (see page 8), Wyatt is delighted to talk us through his varied catalogue -from Soft Machine and Matching Mole to his acclaimed solo records - with his customary wry humility still very much intact.
"I'm an old man now... But it's very, very nice for me that you take an interest and you think other people want to read about this!"

TOM PINNOCK



Wyatt in furs: Soft Machine in 1968, with Kevin Ayers, left, and Mike Ratledge, right

SOFT MACHINE
THE SOFT MACHINE

PROBE/BARCLAY, 1968



The toast of London's underground scene, Wyatt, bassist and vocalist Kevin Ayers and organist Mike Ratledge bashed out their debut while on tour with Hendrix in the US.

Robert Wyatt: Although we were a rock band, all the music we'd listened to live had been jazz, so the idea of extending songs with improvisations seemed totally natural to us. The original intention was to get together and do Kevin's songs. He was the only one in the group who wrote proper songs – I think he could easily have been up there, in terms of success, with people like Donovan and maybe Ray Davies. But he got landed with us and waylaid a bit, though I think he enjoyed the ride for a year or so. We weren't really a recording band until we made an obligatory first record in the middle of a tour of the United States. It was just done in quite a rush. How long did it take to record? About as long as it sounds. We had a few weeks off in New York, around when we toured with Hendrix, before getting back on the road again, so we went into the studio and did a live gig, really. It's pretty ramshackle for a debut record by an aspiring band. Our management had offered us a record producer who had guaranteed hits, he'd done The Yardbirds and Donovan. But they said, he will decide what tunes you'll do and how you'll do them. We thought, well, what's the fun in that? So we turned that down. After that the management were really pissed off with us, so they just let us carry on in our own way.

SOFT MACHINE
THIRD

CBS, 1970



Wyatt's last album with the increasingly complex Soft Machine featured his first foray into solo work, the 20-minute, multi-part "Moon In June".

Kevin had left at the end of '68 to do what he should have been doing, and Mike surfaced as the voice of the group as he developed his organ playing skills. Mike or [*bassist*] Hugh Hopper had started writing pieces more directly influenced by the jazz of the day. The difference was that we were incredibly loud, and there's no way I know how to play drums like a jazz musician and be heard at that volume, so what came to my rescue was watching Keith Moon and thinking, 'That's the way, yeah.' Just fucking get on with it! We experimented with tape on *Third*, there were people we knew who'd been doing tape stuff – Terry Riley, the BBC Radiophonic Workshop and Delia Derbyshire. We took it in and used it in our context. Artists and musicians are just trying to stave off boredom really, so we tried to do stuff that interested us, whatever it was. I'd been working on my own when I could. 'Cause I can't write music, it's easier to just play it yourself rather than showing it to someone else. On "Moon In June", I used all the keyboards that happened to be in the studio, to try to keep it varied. It was my attempt to do an extended piece that wasn't just about improvisation, but was composed all the way through. So it was a bit of a mountain climb for me, but it turned out to be useful for later on in my life. It was the start of what I would later do.

MATCHING MOLE
MATCHING MOLE

CBS, 1972



The first of two LPs that year from Wyatt's new "democratic" group, originally featuring his Wilde Flowers bandmate Dave Sinclair on keys, guitarist Phil Miller and bassist Bill MacCormick.

I thought I could carry on as the drummer in Soft Machine and as a vocalist and songwriter doing stuff in recording studios, but I think I'd become too drunk and irresponsible to work with, frankly. What was humiliating was that I sort of agreed with them. But I look back on it and think it sort of worked out. I didn't go straight to solo stuff after Soft Machine as I didn't think you could have a full life's work just writing songs. I thought, working life as a musician is being in a group. I thought it was the law, you know, all young men must go into a beat group. Just like 10 years before that, young men had to go into the army, then they cancelled national service and invented beat groups, so they could carry on the tradition of sending young men over to conquer Hamburg. With Matching Mole, there was an attempt to be a democratic unit, though I did take it over with my bloody Mellotron at the end of things. Phil Miller wrote lovely pieces, but they weren't completed, so they were perfect vehicles as launch pads for improvisation. Dave Sinclair was uncomfortable, he just wanted to do songs, but I really liked what he did on organ, I thought he was lovely on it. So he only lasted for that record. I thought it was a good band, but we had no money, and the business was ramshackle. It was very hard to develop, we really were poor.



Wyatt's desk job: recording his solo work in 1974

THE UNCUT CLASSIC



ROBERT WYATT
ROCK BOTTOM

VIRGIN, 1974

After 1970's jammy, uneven *The End Of An Ear* came Wyatt's solo debut proper, and the first he made after being paralysed when drunkenly falling from a third-storey window. Features a host of guests, including Mike Oldfield, Hugh Hopper, Ivor Cutler and Mongezi Feza.

People say, it must have been awful when you broke your back, and I say, not really. It just set me on another more fruitful path. Alfie [*Benge, now Wyatt's wife*] and I hadn't been together long when she got this job of going to Venice and making *Don't Look Now*. I was still a biped and tagged along. They hired a flat on Giudecca, one of the non-touristy islands, and plonked me there. Alfie got me a little keyboard to keep me busy whilst they were. Then I had my accident, and for the first time ever I had to spend a lot of time just sitting back and going over ideas in my head as opposed to desperately trying to make something happen immediately. So I was primed by the time I came out of hospital. It's partly therapy in a way, because when people become disabled they can become very internalised and feel cut off from the world. I'm not brave, I just pretend it's not happening and think about something else. So that's what *Rock Bottom* enabled me to do. [Richard] Branson came up to the hospital, bless him, and said if you want to make a record when you come out you can record one for us, so that gave me a specific thing to come out and do. I thought because I don't have to work in a group I can ask different musicians to be on each track. It was a kind of freedom I hadn't thought of before. Nick Mason was great as producer, he was very funny. I've always got on with other drummers, we can speak to each other really. We were quite used to our lowly place in the hierarchy. Alfie thought the music I'd made before was too congested, so she got me to listen to things like *Astral Weeks* by Van Morrison and said look how he leaves the space. So *Astral Weeks* was an influence on the sheer spaciness of *Rock Bottom*. I wanted to make the most enjoyable, rich records I could make, and if that means me doing something then I'll do it, but if I think someone else could do it instead, I'll get them to do it. My voice is one of many, it's got some things it can do and other things it can't do. So just find somebody else who can, no problem. I say no problem, but when you have to find people who have their own character, their own way of doing things, but also don't mind having a go at your own stuff, that does narrow it down.

ROBERT WYATT
RUTH IS STRANGER THAN RICHARD

VIRGIN, 1975



***Rock Bottom*'s jazzier, more playful follow-up, with Wyatt co-writing with numerous collaborators including Phil Manzanera, Bill MacCormick and Fred Frith.**

Rather like with the second Matching Mole one, with the second solo one I felt I should hand it over to the other musicians, I thought it'd be fairer. So there's a long piece on it, "Muddy Mouth", which is basically Fred Frith's piano piece which I really loved, so I put words to that. It's lighter than *Rock Bottom* because I was hanging about with people in a studio and having a laugh. It just sort of lightens you up a bit, takes the weight off things. And unexpected accidents of a delightful nature can happen. On "Team Spirit", George Khan, a wonderful tenor player, does the solo, and I got Brian Eno in, who hates jazz, to try and fuck it up as it went on. George plays so beautifully, and Eno's definitely trying to drown it out with computer noise and echo, but it's a battle that neither of them wins, so you get the best of both worlds. I think it's amazing, that bit. Laurie Allen [*on drums*] is pure jazz on that, and Bill MacCormick is very nimble, so aside from me just playing the piano chords, my favourite bit is the bit I'm not really on at all. It makes me laugh every time I hear it.



ROBERT WYATT
NOTHING CAN STOP US

ROUGH TRADE, 1982



A compilation of Wyatt's politically aware Rough Trade singles, including the Elvis Costello-written "Shipbuilding" and a cover of Chic's "At Last I Am Free".

Virgin put me on a retainer so I could write, but I thought, 'This is dishonorable as I'm not sure I'm ever going to come up with anything, I'm just accumulating a debt.' So I said, "Look, I'm knocking it on the head." Branson was really cross and upset. It took us over a decade to pay off the debts, which is why Virgin wouldn't let me make an LP for anybody else during that time. It wasn't 'til Rough Trade said let's just do some singles that we found a way out of that. During that time, I found that there's more authentic and real things happening in politics than in music. While rock musicians were posing as victims of the establishment, there were people out there who really were victims, in Africa or South America, so I thought I would celebrate those people. Things like that overwhelm me, in terms of what goes on in my head, more than, you know, thinking up a nice little tune or something. I didn't plan to put these on an LP, they're quite topical and throwaway. Around that time, Swell Maps, Ben Watt and Scritti Politti came along and asked me to do a couple of things for them. Very nice people. So that surprised me – apparently, I had been heard! I certainly didn't feel guilty when I was charged as being a rock dinosaur, because I hadn't been successful enough to be a rock dinosaur. My records are all quite scruffy, so I already had a lot in common with punk when it came along.

ROBERT WYATT
SHLEEP

HANNIBAL, 1997



After releasing two more albums sparsely recorded on his own, and battling depression in the early '90s, Wyatt returns with a host of guests, and a new lyrical collaborator...

People said to me, why don't you get other musicians on your records? And I said, well, I can't afford to hire them. And they said, just ask people, there'd be people who wouldn't mind playing. I didn't really know who, but people turned up, old friends like Brian Eno and some wonderful new ones like Paul Weller. And then the trombonist Annie Whitehead and saxophonist Evan Parker came along. It was a treat. It became a sort of imaginary group in the end. I was recording at Phil Manzanera's studio. That was a breakthrough. I'd always been clockwatching, as it's very expensive, recording. But Phil said, "Look, we'll set a price for it, I still did have ideas, you know, and I wanted to try stuff out. But the key thing that came up in the last of my solo things was that Alfie – who had already been doing my covers – started writing these poems and verses. She'd always done that, but I started using them because I found I came up with much more music than I had words. And her words were a revelation for me, they completely expanded what I could do. Singing words from outside that weren't standards by other people, but nor were they devices I had come to rely on, they had a completely different approach. That became my group, me and Alfie, and without that I don't really know what I'd have done.

ROBERT WYATT
CUCKOOLAND

HANNIBAL, 2003



Wyatt's surprising rejuvenation continued with this synth-led LP, inspired by jazz drumming and the finest painters.

Billy Higgins came up with the avant-garde in the '50s, but he always liked to swing. His beat got lighter and lighter – there were some gossamer-light cymbal things he was doing, just a gentle swing. So that gave me ideas. Plus you could do a lot only using the top of the kit, without the use of legs. So I started using cymbals again. I know a lot of rock people thought, 'Well, there's the problem right there, Robert, if you cut out all those jazzy cymbals, and just had a rock steady beat there, you'd have sold loads more.' And I thought, yeah, but of what? It was lovely that Dave Gilmour was on this. I always think of Floyd as real aristocrats of music, not just a group who are up for a blowing session here and there. Paul Weller put the idea in my head, and David was up for it. But I was a bit embarrassed, 'cause at one point he said, "Robert, what's that chord?" And I had to say, "I

then just do it as long as it takes", which was a fantastically generous thing to do. I found that don't know, David!" He was lovely, a gentleman. I was interested in becoming a painter long

before I was interested in becoming a musician. If you think of painters like Turner, his work is awash with smoky effects which you can only just see things through, and I was impressed by that. I do a bit of that myself on *Cuckooland*.

ROBERT WYATT
COMICOPERA

DOMINO, 2007



Perhaps his final solo album, this three-part epic moves from hazy introspection to political disenchantment, ending in a celebratory, foreign-language finale.

I didn't start with a concept, I start doing stuff I want to do and look at the shape of it afterwards. And having got these bits and pieces, I thought I'd put them into three sections. So it did end up as a concept but it wasn't devised as one. This is the album of mine that I least wince to when I'm playing it back. I managed to remember what made me wince about my previous records, and studiously avoid doing those particular things, including not burying the voice – thank you, David [*Gilmour*], for that advice! I think it helped that the musicians I worked with, although there were some new ones, had really got the hang of what I'm on about. Jamie Johnson, who was starting out when I first worked with him on *Shleep*, had become a very experienced and skilled engineer and was very quick and very funny too. Dave Sinclair was on this too – it was lovely, a link with the past. I still think it's terribly difficult to focus political ideas into songs. What's on my mind will come through in the lyrics, but that doesn't suddenly make me a frontline activist. I salute people like Billy Bragg, who has put himself out there to talk to people, but I haven't done that. There's nothing in my music that reaches out to people who wouldn't normally listen to it. It's like dreaming about politics, in a way.

Wyatt's ***Different Every Time*** *compilation is out on Nov 17; the biography of the same name is out now*

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

I'm A Believer - Jazzwise - Issue 191 - November 2014

I'm A Believer



Throughout Robert Wyatt's prolific, often profound, musical life, a deep love of jazz has been the conduit between his own celebrated jazz-rock legacy with Soft Machine and Matching Mole, his individualistic, highly imaginative solo career and the deep world of jazz music and musicians he has become involved with along the way. Inspired by its inherently rebellious, left-leaning nature, jazz has also fuelled his political beliefs as well as his music's magpie-like eclecticism, while his distinctly melancholic, engagingly forlorn vocal style has won him a legion of die-hard fans outside the mainstream. Marcus O'Dair's newly published book - *Different Every Time: the Authorised Biography of Robert Wyatt* - explores his jazz inspirations and continues here as Wyatt reveals how jazz has been with him from childhood onwards

I first interviewed Robert Wyatt for a national newspaper podcast in 2008. When I later contacted him to ask whether he would let me write his biography, he left a voicemail in response. He agreed to the proposal, he said, for two reasons. *I hadn't asked* whether Syd Barrett was mad. And I had asked about jazz. Wyatt is not a jazz musician in any strict sense of the term, and his influences stretch from pop (sometimes mischievously mainstream) to South American folk. Yet jazz, in particular, has been fundamental to his half-century of making music.

Born in Bristol in 1945, Wyatt was introduced to the music of Fats Waller and Duke Ellington by his dad, George; an interest in more contemporary, avant-garde artists, meanwhile, came via his older half-brother, Mark. He was soon bashing away on pots and pans, before moving onto a full trap kit. Through the poet Robert Graves, a family friend,

Wyatt met Ronnie Scott in the early 1960s, and was soon visiting the saxophonist's eponymous club in Soho to watch the likes of Charles Mingus and Sonny Rollins. "As an atheist," he declares, of Mingus, Rollins and their ilk, "they're the nearest to Gods I've ever had."

This secular reverence has informed almost Wyatt's entire output, even as far back as 1963. That was the year he emerged, playing Beatnik-style jazz with the Daevid Allen Trio (fronted by Allen, who had previously lodged with Wyatt's family in Kent, and featuring former schoolmate Hugh Hopper on bass). The Wilde Flowers, with whom Wyatt played during the mid-1960s alongside the likes of singer-songwriter Kevin Ayers, were a very different act, aimed more squarely at the dancefloor. But even then, Nat Adderley and Herbie Hancock numbers began to creep in alongside the Small Faces and Kinks covers.

It was from 1966 that Wyatt began to achieve prominence, as drummer and sometimes vocalist with Soft Machine -alongside Allen, Ayers, and keyboard virtuoso Mike Ratledge (another former schoolmate). The band originally played soul-infused psychedelia but, during gigs, their 'freak-out' sections drew on jazz. As Soft Machine's line-up evolved, as it did at an unusually fast pace, the jazz element increased: there was a power trio era, featuring Hugh Hopper and reminiscent of Tony Williams, John McLaughlin and Larry Young in Lifetime. Then the band borrowed Keith Tippett's horn section, including alto saxophone and saxello player Elton Dean, and moved further towards jazz-rock fusion. Soon Soft Machine became entirely instrumental. Wyatt - odd one out due to his continuing interest in song, as well as in alcohol - departed in 1971, but not before the group had supported the likes of Roland Kirk, Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis.

Wyatt's next band, Matching Mole, began with a definite move towards song, but jazz arrived with the recruitment of New Zealander Dave MacRae, whose rippling electric piano was reminiscent of Joe Zawinul. In his various extracurricular projects, meanwhile, Wyatt was already playing with a number of other jazz musicians, including Lol Coxhill, Keith Tippett and South African exiles including Mongezi Feza.

Paraplegic from 1973, when he fell from a fourth-floor window, Wyatt was obliged to musically reinvent himself. No longer able operate hi-hat or bass drum, he morphed from singing drummer into a singer who also played keyboards, percussion and, more recently, trumpet and cornet too. *Rock Bottom*, released in 1974 and regularly cited as one of the finest albums of all time, showcased this new mix of jazz - Gary Windo on tenor sax and bass clarinet, Mongezi Feza on trumpet - with the dour surrealism of Scottish poet Ivor Cutler.

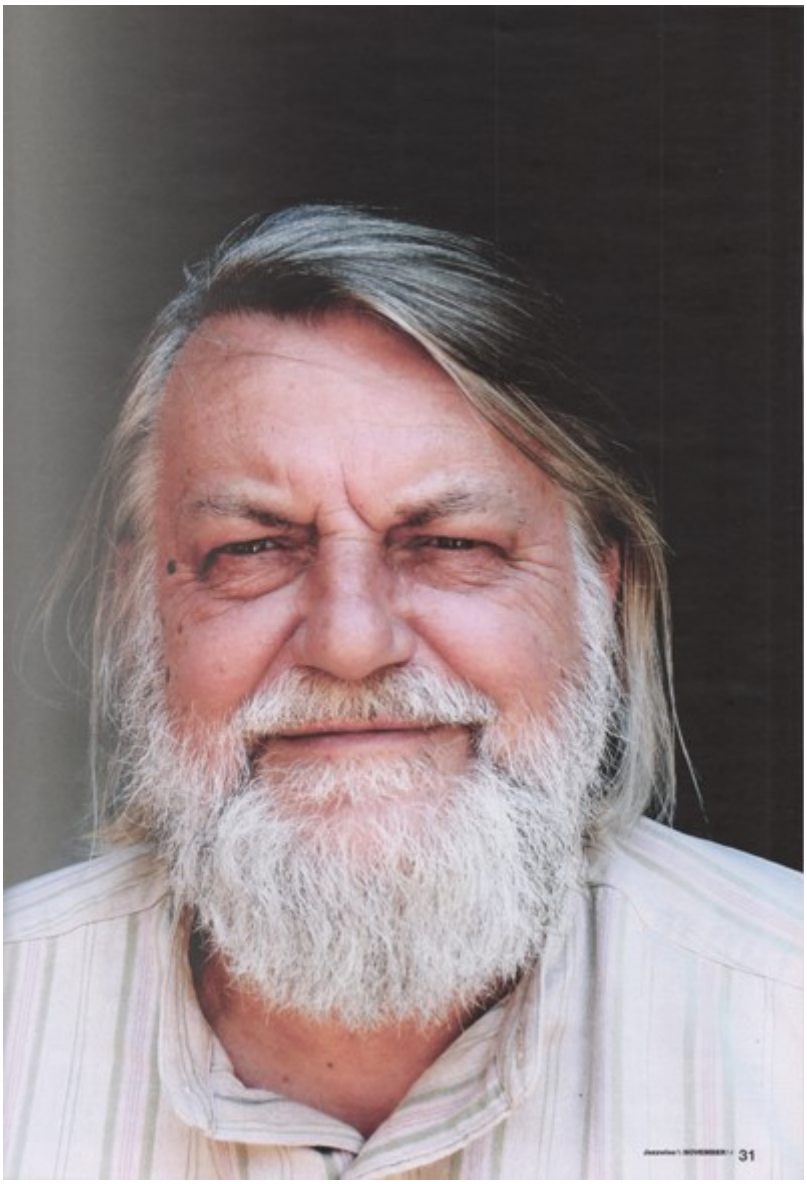
A similar mix has been evident on Wyatt's subsequent releases: 1975's *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard* featured Mongezi Feza and saxophonist George Khan, and a Charlie Haden number appeared in the track list. *Nothing Can Stop Us*, released in 1982, featured bassists Peter Ind and Ernest Mothle and trumpeter Harry Beckett - and featured a version of 'Strange Fruit'. *Cukooland*, which was shortlisted for the Mercury prize in 2004, found Robert namechecking Parisian jazz haunts Le Chat qui Peche and Rue St Benoit (home of Club St Germain) and covering Antônio Carlos Jobim. *Comicopera*, released in 2007, featured bossa nova vocalist Monica Vasconcelos and steelpan/vibraphone player Orphy Robinson. And so on.



"Just being there, being on stage with Charlie Haden, with Carla (Bley) there to hold my hand and surrounded by these brilliant youngsters – Shabaka Hutchings and Jason Yarde and so on – being allowed there. It was a transcendental moment."

'Shipbuilding', a top 40 hit in the wake of the Falklands War, drew on jazz too. Clive Langer, who co-wrote the tune with Elvis Costello, had been inspired by Wyatt's version of 'Strange Fruit'. "'Shipbuilding' is an odd song in that sense," explains the producer. "Pop people think it's jazz, and jazz people think it's pop."

A number of jazz musicians have been particularly important to Wyatt over the years: players of the calibre of Evan Parker, Annie Whitehead and Gilad Atzmon appear more than once in his discography. As a guest musician, meanwhile, Wyatt has worked on several occasions with composer/pianist Carla Bley and composer/trumpeter Mike Mantler. Along the way, he has worked with everyone from Steve Beresford to Larry Stabbins. As recently as 2012, to the enduring delight of drummer Clive Deamer, Wyatt popped up on the Get The Blessing track 'American Meccano'.



> Zoom

Much of Wyatt's favourite jazz is as old as he is. "In 1945, the year I was born, Miles Davis made his first record with Charlie Parker," he reflects. "As much as I love everything beforehand in jazz, from Duke Ellington back to Louis Armstrong, I feel that these are my people; this is where I come in. And it *is*, actually, where I come in. Almost to the month, from the moment I'm born, stuff happens. I can trace my life through it, and I still do."

As a fan, however, Wyatt's tastes extend both forwards and backwards from that point. He is currently going through "a period of almost weepy nostalgia" for British trad: Acker Bilk, Ken Colyer, even Temperance Seven. Yet he also keeps up with newer artists. When he curated the Southbank Centre's prestigious Meltdown festival, back in 2001, Wyatt's line-up included Orphy Robinson and Matthew Shipp as well as John Surman, Jack DeJohnette,

Keith Tippett and the veteran Max Roach. "That was virtually one of the last gigs he did," recalls Wyatt of the bebop pioneer, "and he was obviously really struggling. Once he sat at the drumkit he was all right - but even then, he was struggling. The poignancy of that, for me, cannot be overestimated."

Jazz has been important in Wyatt's relationship with his wife and creative partner Alfreda Benge, better known as Alfie, who worked behind the bar at Ronnie Scott's while an art student in the 1960s. Jazz was also important in Wyatt's politicisation: records such as Roach's *We Insist!*, as well as *Freedom Suite* by Sonny Rollins, 'Fables of Faubus' by Charles Mingus and 'Alabama' by John Coltrane, paved the way for his membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain. The "quite unnecessary" death of Mongezi Feza in 1975 was also a key turning point in this regard.

Musicians who shared his love of jazz and his politics - those who represent "the voice of the oppressed, to put it crudely" - have always had a particular appeal. One such was the late Charlie Haden, who told me in 2010 that Wyatt was "a musical genius". The feeling was mutual: the previous year, Wyatt overcame his severe stage fright to join Haden (and other musicians including Carla Bley) for an extremely rare guest appearance at the Royal Festival Hall.



projects, meanwhile, Wyatt was already playing with a number of other jazz musicians, including Lol Coxhill, Keith Tippett and South African exiles including Mongezi Feza.

Paraplegic from 1973, when he fell from a fourth-floor window, Wyatt was obliged to musically reinvent himself. No longer able operate hi-hat or bass drum, he morphed from singing drummer into a singer who also played keyboards, percussion and, more recently, trumpet and cornet too. *Rock Bottom*, released in 1974 and regularly cited as one of the finest albums of all time, showcased this new mix of jazz – Gary Windo on tenor sax and bass clarinet, Mongezi Feza on trumpet – with the dour surrealism of Scottish poet Ivor Cutler.

A similar mix has been evident on Wyatt's subsequent releases: 1975's *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard* featured Mongezi Feza and saxophonist George Khan, and a Charlie Haden number appeared in the track list. *Nothing Can Stop Us*, released in 1982, featured bassists Peter Ind and Ernest Mothle and trumpeter Harry Beckett – and featured a version of 'Strange Fruit'. *Cukooland*, which was shortlisted for the Mercury prize in 2004, found Robert namechecking Parisian jazz haunts Le Chat qui Peche and Rue St Benoit (home of Club St Germain) and covering Antônio Carlos Jobim. *Comicopera*, released in 2007, featured bossa nova vocalist Monica Vasconcelos and steelpan/vibraphone player Orphy Robinson. And so on.

'Shipbuilding', a top 40 hit in the wake of the Falklands War, drew on jazz too. Clive Langer, who co-wrote the tune with Elvis Costello, had been inspired by Wyatt's version of 'Strange Fruit'. "'Shipbuilding' is an odd song in that sense," explains the producer. "Pop people think it's jazz, and jazz people think it's pop."

A number of jazz musicians have been particularly important to Wyatt over the years: players of the calibre of Evan Parker, Annie Whitehead and Gilad Atzmon appear more than once in his discography. As a guest musician, meanwhile, Wyatt has worked on several occasions with composer/pianist Carla Bley and composer/trumpeter Mike Mantler. Along the way, he has worked with everyone from Steve Beresford to Larry Stabbins. As recently as 2012, to the enduring delight of drummer Clive Deamer, Wyatt popped up on the Get The Blessing track 'American Meccano'.

Much of Wyatt's favourite jazz is as old as he is. "In 1945, the year I was born, Miles Davis made his first record with Charlie Parker," he reflects. "As much as I love everything beforehand in jazz, from Duke Ellington back to Louis Armstrong, I feel that these are my people; this is where I come in. And it *is*, actually, where I come in. Almost to the month, from the moment I'm born, stuff happens. I can trace my life through it, and I still do."

As a fan, however, Wyatt's tastes extend both forwards and backwards from that point. He is currently going through "a period of almost weepy nostalgia" for British trad: Acker Bilk, Ken Colyer, even Temperance Seven. Yet he also keeps up with newer artists. When he curated the Southbank Centre's prestigious Meltdown festival, back in 2001, Wyatt's line-up included Orphy Robinson and Matthew Shipp as well as John Surman, Jack DeJohnette, Keith Tippett and the veteran Max Roach. "That was virtually one of the last gigs

From top:
Robert Wyatt mid-1960s; Topless drumming with Soft Machine 1967; Soft Machine with Hugh Hopper, Mike Ratledge and Robert Wyatt 1969; Soft Machine with L-to-R Elton Dean, Wyatt, Hugh Hopper and Mike Ratledge in 1970. Photos courtesy Robert Wyatt and Cuneiform Records

From top:
Robert Wyatt mid-1960s; Topless drumming with Soft Machine 1967; Soft Machine with Hugh Hopper, Mike Ratledge and Robert Wyatt 1969; Soft Machine with L-to-R Elton Dean, Wyatt, Hugh Hopper and Mike Ratledge in 1970. Photos courtesy Robert Wyatt and Cuneiform Records

"Just being there, being on stage with Charlie Haden, with Carla there to hold my hand and surrounded by these brilliant youngsters - Shabaka Hutchings and Jason Yarde and so on - that was a moment in heaven for me," recalls Wyatt. "I have no idea what it sounded like, whether it was any good. But I don't care. Just being there, being allowed

there. It was a transcendental moment." Haden, says Wyatt, is one of his "undying allegiances", a phrase he also applies to Roland Kirk and Archie Shepp. So it was a particular delight to join the latter (alongside Anthony Braxton, Arvo Part and Tim Berners-Lee) to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Liege in 2009.

Jazz has also been an important influence on Wyatt's own musical voice, not least in his use of percussion following the accident, when he has tended to use either the flick of brushes on snare or a vocal 'tch' to replace the sound he can no longer make by stepping on the hi-hat pedal. "If you ever watch Billy Higgins on film," says Wyatt of the man who played on the original recordings of both Herbie Hancock's 'Watermelon Man' and Lee Morgan's The Sidewinder', "the older he got, the less he compressed the hi-hat to make it snap - to the point where, in fact, the two hi-hat cymbals don't seem to be hitting each other at all. He just seems to press his foot down and they squash air. When people think of drum technique," Wyatt goes on, "they think of people playing very, very fast, or clever little tricks. But these touches of pure class, craftsmanship, these are the elements of drumming I've got interested in as a paraplegic, because they're not about the full kit. They're closing in on a much more close, intimate side of drumming."

As a singer, meanwhile, Wyatt talks of the influence of horn players - and of the vocalese of Mimi Perrin and Les Double Six, who set lyrics to horn melodies previously played by artists such as John Coltrane. "I've often said I'm more influenced by the way Coltrane plays ballads than by the way anybody sings, and people might think it's a bit unlikely," says Wyatt. "But if you hear Mimi Perrin sing 'Naima' you'll think, 'Oh yeah, I can see why'. It's not how I think anyone else should sing, but how / should sing."



he did," recalls Wyatt of the bebop pioneer, "and he was obviously really struggling. Once he sat at the drumkit he was all right – but even then, he was struggling. The poignancy of that, for me, cannot be overestimated."

Jazz has been important in Wyatt's relationship with his wife and creative partner Alfreda Benge, better known as Alfie, who worked behind the bar at Ronnie Scott's while an art student in the 1960s. Jazz was also important in Wyatt's politicisation: records such as Roach's *We Insist!*, as well as *Freedom Suite* by Sonny Rollins, 'Fables of Faubus' by Charles Mingus and 'Alabama' by John Coltrane, paved the way for his membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain. The "quite unnecessary" death of Mongezi Feza in 1975 was also a key turning point in this regard.

Musicians who shared his love of jazz and his politics – those who represent "the voice of the oppressed, to put it crudely" – have always had a particular appeal. One such was the late Charlie Haden, who told me in 2010 that Wyatt was "a musical genius". The feeling was mutual: the previous year, Wyatt overcame his severe stage fright to join Haden (and other musicians including Carla Bley) for an extremely rare guest appearance at the Royal Festival Hall.

"Just being there, being on stage with Charlie Haden, with Carla there to hold my hand and surrounded by these brilliant youngsters – Shabaka Hutchings and Jason Yarde and so on – that was a moment in heaven for me," recalls Wyatt. "I have no idea what it sounded like, whether it was any good. But I don't care. Just being there, being allowed there. It was a transcendental moment." Haden, says Wyatt, is one of his "undying allegiances", a phrase he also applies to Roland Kirk and Archie Shepp. So it was a particular delight to join the latter (alongside Anthony Braxton, Arvo Pärt and Tim Berners-Lee) to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Liège in 2009.

Jazz has also been an important influence on Wyatt's own musical voice, not least in his use of percussion following the accident, when he has tended to use either the flick of brushes on snare or a vocal 'tch' to replace the sound he can no longer make by stepping on the hi-hat pedal. "If you ever watch Billy Higgins on film," says Wyatt of the man who played on the original recordings of both Herbie Hancock's 'Watermelon Man' and Lee Morgan's 'The Sidewinder', "the older he got, the less he compressed the hi-hat to make it snap – to the point where, in fact, the two hi-hat cymbals don't seem to be hitting each other at all. He just seems to press his foot down and they squash air. When people think of drum technique," Wyatt goes on, "they think of people playing very, very fast, or clever little tricks. But these touches of pure class, craftsmanship, these are the elements of drumming I've got interested in as a paraplegic, because they're not about the full kit. They're closing in on a much more close, intimate side of drumming."

As a singer, meanwhile, Wyatt talks of the influence of horn players – and of the vocalese of Mimi Perrin and Les Double Six, who set lyrics to horn melodies previously played by artists such as John Coltrane. "I've often said I'm more influenced by the way Coltrane plays ballads than by the way anybody sings, and people might think it's a bit unlikely," says Wyatt. "But if you hear Mimi Perrin sing 'Naima' you'll think, 'Oh yeah, I can see why'. It's not how I think anyone else should sing, but how *I* should sing."

This jazz influence, which has bubbled away for 50 years, came most fully to the surface on Wyatt's most recent album, *For The Ghosts Within* – credited to a trio of Wyatt, Gilad Atzmon and violinist Ros Stephen from Tango Siempre and Sigamos String Quartet. Here Wyatt tackled several standards head-on, his approach sometimes unorthodox – he whistled '"Round Midnight' and hummed 'In a Sentimental Mood' – but utterly sincere.

Having loved the modernism of bebop and the potency and politics of free jazz, and been delighted to join younger musicians such as Shabaka Hutchings and Jason Yarde for the Liberation Music Orchestra gig, Wyatt has more recently warmed to the vocal jazz of an earlier era. "Somebody said to me a few years ago," he recalls, "'How would you like to end up?' I said, 'Sitting in a piano bar playing old standards'. I can't, but I seem to be drifting that way on my cornet. I just sit in my front room, just finding the notes, accompanying a really slow singer, to accommodate my technique – like Nat 'King' Cole and Julie London. When all the other brain cells have died off, I hope to be left with enough to do that. And I'll die happy."

Different Every Time: the Authorised Biography of Robert Wyatt **by Marcus O'Dair will be published by Serpent's Tail on 30 October. An accompanying compilation album, also entitled *Different Every Time*, will be released by Domino Records on 17 November. Robert is also appearing in conversation with Marcus at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London on 23 November, as part of the EFG London Jazz Festival.** ■

From top:
Robert And Alfreda Benge; Robert with Gilad Atzmon and Ros Stephen 2010; At the fair 2010; Receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Liege with L-to-R Tim Berners-Lee, Dutch musician Dick Annegarn, Anthony Braxton and Archie Shepp 2009. Photos courtesy Robert Wyatt

This jazz influence, which has bubbled away for 50 years, came most fully to the surface on Wyatt's - most recent album, *For The Ghosts Within* - credited to a trio of Wyatt, Gilad Atzmon and violinist Ros Stephen from Tango Siempre and Sigamos String Quartet. Here Wyatt tackled several standards head-on, his approach sometimes unorthodox - he

whistled "Round Midnight' and hummed 'In a Sentimental Mood' - but utterly sincere.

Having loved the modernism of bebop and the potency and politics of free jazz, and been delighted to join younger musicians such as Shabaka Hutchings and Jason Yarde for the Liberation Music Orchestra gig, Wyatt has more recently warmed to the vocal jazz of an earlier era. "Somebody said to me a few years ago," he recalls, '"How would you like to end up?' I said, 'Sitting in a piano bar playing old standards'. I can't, but I seem to be drifting that way on my cornet. I just sit in my front room, just finding the notes, accompanying a really slow singer, to accommodate my technique - like Nat 'King' Cole and Julie London. When all the other brain cells have died off, I hope to be left with enough to do that. And I'Il die happy."

Different Every Time: the Authorised Biography of Robert Wyatt by Marcus O'Dair will be published by Serpent's Tail on 30 October. An accompanying compilation album, also entitled *Different Every Time*, will be released by Domino Records on 17 November. Robert is also appearing in conversation with Marcus at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London on 23 November, as part of the EFG London Jazz Festival.

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soundtrack of my life: Robert Wyatt - The Guardian - 26 October 2014

The Guardian

Interview

Soundtrack of my life: Robert Wyatt

Interview by Jude Rogers

The prog-rock pioneer on his love of jazz, falsetto singing, the thrill of meeting Bulgarian folk singers and why Pharrell Williams is as good as any of the 60s soul greats

Robert Wyatt was born in Bristol in 1945 to a psychologist father and BBC producer mother. At 21, he joined prog pioneers Soft Machine; at 25 formed his own group, Matching Mole; at 29, he fell out of a fourth-floor window while drunk, at a party, permanently paralysing himself from the waist down. His solo career proper began a year later, with 1974's dreamlike *Rock Bottom*. He has had two top 40 hits: a cover of the Monkees' I'm a Believer, which he fought to sing in his wheelchair on *Top of the Pops,* and the song Elvis Costello wrote for him, Shipbuilding, which became Rough Trade's first top 40 hit. In recent years, he has collaborated with Björk, Paul Weller, Hot Chip and Brian Eno, continuing a relationship that began when he co-wrote 1/1, the piano track on Eno's *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. Wyatt's authorised biography, *Different Every Time*, is published next week by Serpent's Tail, and a compilation of the same name follows in November on Domino. He celebrates his 70th birthday in January.



Singer/musician Robert Wyatt at his home in Louth. Photograph: Fabio De Paola



THE SONG THAT PROVES I'M NO REBEL

Every Day I Have the Blues by Ella Fitzgerald and Joe Williams with Count Basie (1956)

In the 50s, young people were rebelling against their mothers and fathers. Not me. I inherited a love of mainstream jazz from my father, whose youth was rudely interrupted by having to serve in the second world war. He loved Fats Waller, Duke Ellington and Count Basie's band, who I thought were wonderful. His arrangements weren't complicated or sophisticated, because most of his band couldn't read music, but their simplicity was fantastic. This is from the first EP I bought, four tracks on a piece of plastic. I still think this is a knockout duet.



THE TRACK THAT MADE ME REALISE IT WAS FINE TO SING HIGH

Ooo Baby Baby by the Miracles (1965)

I used to have a very high range, but not any more. That's the cigs and so on. But in the 1960s, even someone as quintessentially English as me loved Motown. I'd play this in breaks between rehearsals with Soft Machine, probably on my Dansette. I found it nice to hear songs and how they were done. Also, there were so many testosterone-fuelled voices back then, mainly because of the influence of the blues, but Smokey's light falsetto was different. It came from a line of African-American music that's gentler, but just as crucial – from the tenderness of doo-wop, and from gospel, to which so many things return. I have so little testosterone that I'm verging on being a different sex altogether. Ooo Baby Baby's got no guitars in it either and I love that. English rock is all about beer and guitars. That's why I don't really fit in. I'm much more wine and keyboards.



THE ONE THAT REMINDS ME OF MY WIFE

You Are the Sunshine of My Life by Stevie Wonder (1974)

The reason that I stayed with Alfie [his wife, English artist Alfreda Benge] more than one night was that there wasn't enough time to play her record collection! We celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary this year, so I suppose we'll have to divorce when it finally runs out. When we were first together, we both loved Sly and the Family Stone's *Stand!* – it had a bit of Hendrix about it, but mixed more with jazz. It was so fantastically inventive. Then came our love of Stevie Wonder, who was such a wonderful musician from day one. So many blind musicians are, because education at specialist schools in America is often more advanced and sophisticated. Also, those musicians are just concentrating on sound. This song reminds me of mine and Alfie's honeymoon and the feeling you get when you finally find a friend. It makes you realise how lonely you were before.



THE RECORD THAT TURNED ME INTO A FANBOY

Ostana Kera, Kleto Sirache by Kalinka Vulcheva (1974)

In the 70s, being a communist basically meant going to charity fundraisers all the time, for striking Turkish miners, striking British miners, anti-apartheid. I remember going to one for [socialist newspaper] the *Morning Star*, and you'd get records at these things from eastern Europe and Cuba. My favourites were by a Bulgarian folk singer called Kalinka Vulcheva, who had an extraordinary voice and style of singing, very beautiful and unusual. I met her after the cold war, at a folk concert in Whitby, quite by chance. Alfie spotted her – Robert! It's Kalinka Vulcheva! – and I shivered at the thrill of meeting her. She panicked when I asked for her autograph because she could only write it in Cyrillic. To hear things from across the world, and then meet the person with that voice, was quite something.



THE RECORD THAT MADE ME THINK ABOUT POSSIBILITIES IN MUSIC

Folk song arrangements by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears (1948)

This was something in my dad's collection again, on a 78. A 78! His was of Scottish songs, from recordings Britten did with the tenor Peter Pears. The tunes in them are wonderful, but the chords sound so strange to us now – and that strangeness is what interested Britten. The thing about avant-garde musicians is they're not just about looking forward. They also look back, far beyond that which other people do. It's like looking at primitive paintings and trying to speak their language.



THE RECENT SONG THAT IS AS GOOD AS THE 60S CLASSICS

Happy by Pharrell Williams (2013)

When I'm not watching Russia Today, obviously, I'm watching pop TV. Even my son's embarrassed by the infantilism of my tastes, but there's some good stuff out there now. Pharrell Williams's Happy– that's absolutely fucking knockout. Williams is as good as any 60s soul singer and the song is brilliantly put together. It's a great drum track, and there are only four chords or so, but they're just enough. It's really subtly done, absolutely spot-on. My granddaughter tells me I should totally disapprove of that other song he did, though. With someone else... something lines?

Blurred Lines! That’s the one. Take it from me that I don’t like that one at all.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt Reflects on the Making of ’68 - Downbeat.com - April, 26 2014

ROBERT WYATT REFLECTS ON THE MAKING OF '68

In his almost 50-year career, British multi-instrumentalist Robert Wyatt has been involved in a stunning variety of projects. His recently unearthed album ’68 (Cuneiform Records) is a four-song psychedelic journey, recorded in 1968 in Hollywood and New York. Wyatt used studio space provided by guitarist Jimi Hendrix and multi-tracked his parts on piano, organ, bass, drums, percussion and vocals. One song, “Slow Walkin’ Talk,” even features Hendrix on bass.

Wyatt first came to prominence in the late ’60s on both sides of the pond as a founding member of the band Soft Machine. In 1968, the group opened for The Jimi Hendrix Experience for two extensive tours in the U.S., and later that year Wyatt began recording the demos and musical sketches that would eventually become ’68.

In the years that followed, half of the album surfaced; the other half, thought lost until recently, has been brought together with the other material for the first time and is now available on CD and limited-edition blue vinyl (a white vinyl version of the LP has sold out).

In recent years, Wyatt has worked with contemporaries like saxophonist Evan Parker, the Sigamos String Quartet, trombonist Annie Whitehead and the always mercurial Brian Eno. His 2010 collaboration with saxophonist Gilad Atzmon and violinist Ros Stephen, ... for the ghosts within’ (Domino), mixes standards and original songs, illustrating Wyatt’s idiosyncratic way of bringing different musical worlds together.

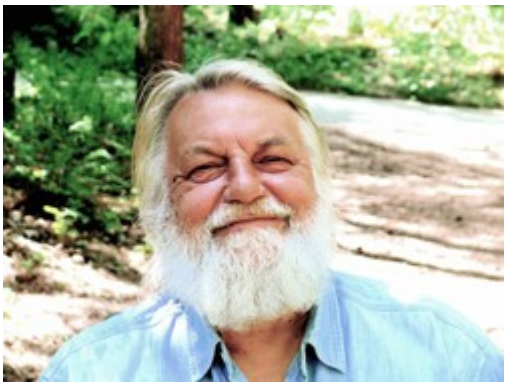
Wyatt recently spoke with DownBeat about his lifelong interest in jazz, as well as the creative period that produced his 1968 sessions.

DownBeat: In 1968, you went into studios in both Hollywood and New York City to record some demos, creating sketches that would eventually include two long suites. And now we have ’68.

Robert Wyatt: I don’t know about the importance exactly, but it certainly took me by surprise to hear it all. I hadn’t remembered how much I’d obviously worked over the material before it emerged in public in the following years. I’m relieved to find that, if anything, I erred on the side of spontaneity during these forgotten—by me, at least—workouts.

DB: What about working with Hendrix and his playing at these sessions?

RW: I do, unsurprisingly, remember that I was awestruck by Jimi Hendrix. We'd heard him play night after night on those long tours around North America. He was much more considerate of his audiences than his public image suggests, a real professional who wanted to make sure that even the listeners far at the back of the venue got their money's worth. In some ways, he was even too modest. For example, he didn't rate his own wonderful singing … "Somebody's got to do it" seemed to be his attitude! So shy, behind the pyrotechnics. But every single time he dropped the tempo to sing, "There's a red house over yonder," it brought tears to my eyes. I was thunderstruck when he dropped in on my demo sessions to lay down a bass line on a little blues track I was recording, Brian Hopper's "Slow Walkin' Talk." I was so grateful that my modest attempt was so magically enhanced by his presence. I should add: This has only become apparent thanks to the conscientious cleanup work on the original dusty acetates by Canadian Mike King.

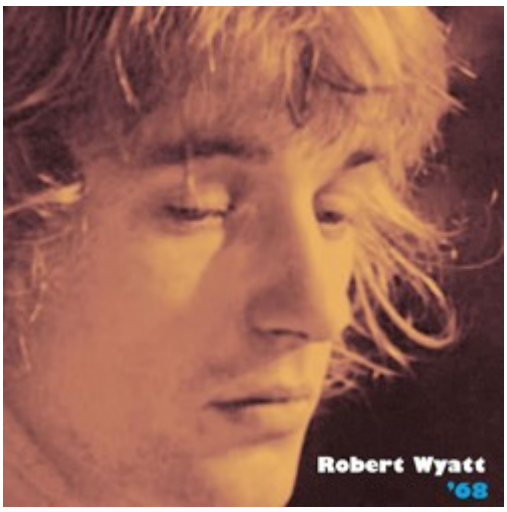


Multi-instrumentalist Robert Wyatt has an idiosyncratic way of bringing different musical worlds together. (Photo: Alfreda Benge)

DB: This was your first real solo outing.

RW: After the tour, I stayed with the Experience in Los Angeles, in a rented spread in Benedict Canyon. Hendrix had hired a studio complex nearby, with more capacity than he needed, so he invited me to use a spare studio to try things out. I had no group around by then, and used the opportunity to work alone on new material, multi-tracking on drums, voice and the instruments available—piano, organ and the occasional bass guitar. Hendrix, perhaps taking a break from his own work, dropped by one day to see how I was getting on, offering to play some bass on the thing I was working on. When I returned via New York back to England, those recordings got lost in the shuffle—only to have been unearthed recently. Steve Feigenbaum, who had already released some of my retrieved experiments on his adventurous Cuneiform label, took on the task of having those recordings cleaned up and released. So, '68: The title refers both to the recording date and to the funny coincidence that it was released last year, when I was, in fact, 68.

DB: How did Soft Machine approach the studio?



Robert Wyatt's '68 (Cuneiform) was recorded in Hollywood and New York and features Jimi Hendrix on one track

RW: The combined sound was not predetermined. It really did become a journey into uncharted territory. To this day, when I invite musicians to help me make a record, it's their uniqueness that I want. I still like to celebrate the special character of each participant. That may be why, even when I'm starting off with a simple pop-song framework, the result rarely fits into some preordained marketing category.

DB: In the July 11, 1968, issue of DownBeat, contributor and musician Mike Zwerin covered the emergence of Soft Machine with a band interview and story. What do you remember about Zwerin the writer?

RW: Michael Zwerin, who became a great friend, was an expat working for the International Herald Tribune in France, and had seen [Soft Machine] play in St. Tropez. He also took me to lunch with the wonderful saxophonist Paul Desmond, which was, for me, a mind-blowing occasion. I think Mike was maybe just relieved to meet a British rock musician who loved jazz.

DB: John Coltrane was a big influence then, and still is.

RW: The year Soft Machine was launched was the year John Coltrane died [1967]. Saint John, as far as I'm concerned. And I'm reminded of what happens in the forest when a really giant tree falls. Suddenly, there's a clear patch in the undergrowth, where lots of little saplings busily take over the space, hurrying towards the sunlight: life reaffirming itself. But such giant trees don't spring up overnight. So our emergence into the sunlight was always haunted, in my mind, even in the irreverent gush of youth, by the incomparable beauty of what we had lost.

John Ephland

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

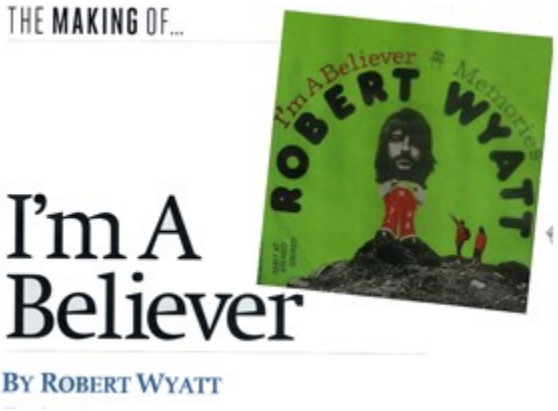
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Making of... I'm A Believer - by Robert Wyatt - Uncut N° 201 - February 2014





How Canterbury's jazz adventurer turned out a hit Monkees cover, tiring out Pink Floyd's drummer and battling *Top Of The Pops* in the process... "The show side of pop? I can't be bothered!"

FROM THE PSYCH pop of early Soft Machine to the cerebral jazz-fusion of Matching Mole, by 1974 Robert Wyatt was intent on following his own singular muse. You would imagine, though, that even Wyatt's closest collaborators were shocked when he decided to release a cover of The Monkees' Neil-Diamond-penned "I'm A Believer" as his debut solo single. "No, Robert has always been most peculiar," laughs Pink Floyd's Nick Mason, who produced and played drums on the recording, "so nothing very much surprises me with him." Wyatt has been in a wheelchair since June 1, 1973, when he fell out of a window at a Maida Vale party. But rather than hindering him creatively, his paralysis allowed the drummer to put down his sticks and concentrate on singing, keyboards and songwriting, crafting the experimental, pastoral *Rock Bottom*, produced by Mason and featuring Fred Frith and Richard Sinclair. Far from starting a more commercial era in his career, though, things didn't run smoothly after the release of "I'm A Believer". An appearance on Top Of The Pops led to arguments with the show's producer and threats of a ban, then Virgin refused to release his follow-up single. The irrepressible Wyatt wouldn't have had it any other way, though - the only reservation he has about the track is his own "jigging about" when miming on TV. "If you're going to do it, do it properly, like Wilko Johnson... I just thought, note to self, don't do that anymore. "But we all learn from our mistakes," he says, mock-philosophically. "That well-known saying - well, not that well-known, because I made it up - 'we live and learn, but in that order, unfortunately.'"

TOM PINNOCK

ROBERT WYATT: I'd said in NME or *Melody Maker* that I really liked pop music - to me, it's the folk music of the industrial age, it's what people sing and dance to on a Saturday night. Simon Draper at Virgin, he saw this and he called my bluff, saying "Would you do a pop song?" I'd intended to do "Last Train To Clarksville", 'cause I like that, but I got

muddled up.

NICK MASON: I met Robert at UFO, then we did some gigs together - we certainly spent time together in New York when Soft Machine were touring with Hendrix. We were all holed up in the same hotel there in 1968. Then I produced *Rock Bottom*.

DAVE MACRAE: Was I surprised Robert was doing a Monkees song? Working with Robert, surprises were the norm! He has great mental energy always looking for new ways to express his ideas.



RICHARD SINCLAIR: In The Wilde Flowers with Robert, I remember doing things like Chuck Berry numbers, so "I'm A Believer" wasn't anything unusual from Robert. He always wanted to be a popular singing artist. Blond-haired quite good-looking, bouncing about - he liked that idea of entertainment, still does!

WYATT: One of my friends said, "But Robert, is it a great song?" In one exhibition, Peter Blake had a lot of paintings by monkeys, and somebody said to him, "Oh, they're not very good paintings." He said, "Well, they're pretty good for monkeys! " So for a Monkees song, it's a pretty good song. I don't feel the need for any hierarchies [*in music*] and there was a slight statement I was making about that. Not being in a group you can do one-off things, have a particular band for a particular thing. And for "I'm A Believer" it was the right group.

FRED FRITH: Robert used to show up at Henry Cow gigs and never failed to say nice things about us. Bill McCormick and Francis Monkman approached me about joining the reforming Matching Mole, but then Robert had his accident and that was the end of that. I visited him in hospital and we became close. Henry Cow had opened for Pink Floyd on numerous occasions between 1969 and 1972, so Nick and I had brushed shoulders. I'd had the unnerving experience of David Gilmour sitting at my feet checking me out while performing... I think Robert and I felt an affinity on many levels, musical, political and especially a shared enjoyment of life's absurdities.

WYATT: I did take the liberty of buggering around with the chords to "I'm A Believer". I played the piano part to Dave, and he played what I played him really. Dave's great like that, he can just sort of do anything. Amazing man.

MACRAE: Robert would certainly have indicated what he wanted played and I may have thrown in an idea. I think the arrangement was largely osmotic and a natural process.

Robert has great mental energy, and this energy acted as a catalyst in generating ideas from others involved.

WYATT: I wouldn't have thought the recording took any longer than a day, maybe another day for mixing? I would have thought I'd have done the vocals after, especially as there is some double-tracking there. I remember there was a bloke from Neil Diamond's publisher who hung around all the time, not doing anything at all, and I thought, "That's an easy job.' He just traipsed around after us. "I'm from the publishing company." Just helping himself to the freebies knocking about...

MASON: Producing Robert didn't entail an enormous amount of hard work. He really just wanted a bit of assistance in the technical side. But I certainly didn't need to tell him anything about how the music went.

WYATT: Nick made some crucial decisions. He's also funny. He used to come out of a take and you'd say, "That's great." And he'd say, "Yes, it does a bit, doesn't it." A very funny man!

MASON: We probably did the backing tracks in an hour or two. We spent longer putting Fred's stuff on than anything else, the violins and so on. That was all Fred's idea, we let him loose on it.

FRITH: There was the instrumental break which they didn't have a plan for, so I wrote the string arrangement on the spot and recorded it. Then I finished up with the lead guitar stuff, which was a first take, just doing whatever came to me in one pass of the song, using my 1958 Gibson 345, volume pedal and Electro Harmonix Big Muff distortion - that was pretty much all I had. I remember Nick being super-complimentary about it and me feeling like a million bucks!

WYATT: Nick used to make this joke about a "Pink Floyd tempo". We said, " We're going to do it a bit faster," and it was the first time he broke into a bit of a sweat!



Moving away from Rock Bottom: Robert Wyatt in 1974

MASON: It was probably faster than all the Pink Floyd tempos throughout history. We always kept to about 70bpm max. My doctor told me never to play faster than my pulse

rate... But I was a lot younger and fitter, then, so it was fine.

WYATT: It hit No 29, did it? I'm too posh to think about charts... It's not the chart side of pop music that interests me, it's the music itself and what it means to people. There's a competitive edge to charts which I find very tiresome. Most of the records I liked, jazz records, probably sold about 5,000 tops, ever. I remember somebody advising me, "DJs would rather have the chorus first, if they're going to play it on the radio." I thought, "Hang on, wait a minute, music should be about expanding your freedoms and possibilities, not about contracting them."

FRITH: My brother [*sociomusicologist and journalist*] Simon was impressed when we appeared on *Top Of The Pops*! But my memory of it is mostly around the sadness and futility. Seeing The Tremeloes buttoned into awkward-looking satin suits and looking sulky and resentful as their manager told them what to do, just observing the pop game from close up. We had to be in the studio at 11am on call for rehearsal. We were hustled onstage at about 5.40pm and when we were supposed to run it through, everyone disappeared - union-mandated break - so we never actually rehearsed or had any idea what was going on.

SINCLAIR:I'd been on with Caravan in 1970, playing"If ICould Do It All Over Again...". It was funny doing it for Robert and his pop tune!

MASON: Pink Floyd had been on TOTP in '67. It hardly changed from its first to last show as far as I remember. The same slightly uncomfortable dancing and some DJ shouting. We appeared with Robert two weeks running, and the second week they didn't want us to show the wheelchair.

WYATT: The producer said, "I'm embarrassed by that wheelchair, it's not entertaining, can you go and sit in this wicker-work thing?" I told him to fuck off, and he said, "You will never work on this programme again" - but as I just told you, I am too posh to care, frankly. I mean, I can't wheel a wicker chair, and I need to be able to get out quick in case the cops are coming, for fuck's sake!

FRITH: Richard Branson went out and bought an antique wheelchair, and insisted that if the BBC was going to object to Robert's wheelchair, they surely couldn't object to this beautiful antique version. The whole thing was irrational to the point of absurdity, but Richard insisted and won the day, making the BBC look extremely foolish in the process. And, of course, Ian MacDonald made sure there was a picture in the NME afterwards.

WYATT: We were on the cover of the *NME*, all in wheelchairs, it looked great - most of us who played at my Drury Lane concert are on there, Mongezi Feza's just behind Julie Tippetts, and Mike Oldfield is there. Nick Mason's face is stuck on. It was a real laugh doing it, although there were, I believe, people who wrote to the NME saying it was a bit tasteless... I can't think why. I thought it was a very good idea.



Robert Wyatt with producer
Nick Mason in CBS, London 1974

Especially on steps - wheelchairs on steps are dangerous, they're rubbish! There are people in wheelchairs and with other disabilities, who I know from letters and so on, who were very encouraged that far from my career as a musician being over, it actually got much stronger in terms of my contribution to it. But there were others who thought that I should have been more militant and proactive in terms of disability rights and so on. And I accept that, but the fact is I'm not a professional cripple, I'm still just a musician.

FRITH: I remember almost nothing about Drury Lane [*Sept 8,1974*], except being told which movie stars were in the audience. But listening to it now, I almost prefer the live version of "I'm A Believer"!

WYATT: It made a good encore, it was a good laugh. We had Julie Tippetts singing, Mike Oldfield and Fred fiddling away at guitars, two drummers, Laurie Allan and Nick Mason, and Hugh Hopper on bass. And Gary Windo and Mongezi Feza doing little horn parts. Dave Stewart was on the organ, and he came up with that live fairground coda, and it's funny, because it was Drury Lane which, of course, 150 years beforehand, had music exactly like that.

MASON: That was the only time the song was performed - unless you count The Monkees. I remember it being fun, there were a lot of people who were fond of Robert there. It was very much a one-off show, and they're difficult as they're always under-rehearsed, but it was fun.

WYATT: My follow-up single was "Yesterday Man", a song by Chris Andrews. We never pretended to be reggae but it was obviously influenced by that feel, which was very much the heartbeat of London around that time.

MASON: Did I produce that? Right. I can't remember what happened to that.

WYATT: The boss of Virgin said it was a bit "lugubrious". I thought, 'Oh, that sounds good,' and I looked in the dictionary, and it isn't. He wouldn't put it out. I wouldn't have minded, but I had to pay for the recording. If you sold millions like dear Mike Oldfield did, then you still got a lot of money, but if you only sold, what did I sell in the end? 50,000? I'd never get any of that back because of the cost of the second LP and so on... So I just said I can't do this stuff with Virgin anymore. So they said, "Well, you're not doing anything with anyone else." So I didn't for a while, I just went into politics. But there's no money in that, of course - it's mostly charity donations at the *Morning Star* bazaar, so that's not making a living, is it?

I like pop music, but that show side of it, I can't be bothered. When you get to a certain profile in pop, you're told what to do and you have to fit into a format, and that was completely alien to me. So I couldn't have been a pop musician, really. I started out playing pop songs, but we made our own rules and did what we liked. No-one was gonna be pushed around by any of these people.



FACT FILE

- **Recorded at:** CBS Studios, London
- **Released:** September 1974
- **Personnel:** Robert Wyatt (vocals), Fred Frith (guitar, violin), Richard Sinclair (bass), Dave MacRae (keyboards), Nick Mason (drums)
- **Label:** Virgin
- **UK chart position:** 29
- **US chart position:** N/A

June 1, 1973: Wyatt falls out of a window at a party and is paralysed **July 26, 1974:** His second album *Rock Bottom*, produced by Nick Mason, is released – sessions for the "I'm A Believer" single begin after **September 8, 1974:** Wyatt plays an all-star concert at London's Drury Lane Theatre **September 20, 1974:** Wyatt and those featured on the song, with Andy Summers on guitar, appear on *Top Of The Pops* **September 28, 1974:** "I'm A Believer" hits No 29 – Wyatt's highest ever chart position

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt - Bomb N° 115 - Spring 2011

ROBERT WYATT by Shadia Mansour

Robert Wyatt's story is as compelling as the endlessly imaginative music that it yielded. Like that of the best songwriters, his work is a world unto itself, instantly recognizable, not least of all due to his high, quavering vocals and almost cubist approach to lyrics. Involved in every avant-garde of British music since the '60s—from prog rock to punk and postrock—Wyatt began his career as the drummer and vocalist for the Canterbury band Soft Machine, a seminal prog-rock outfit heavily into jazz time-signatures and modal drift. In 1973, Wyatt fell from the fourth-floor window of a friend's home, becoming paralyzed from the waist down. While recuperating, he began work on what would become *Rock Bottom*, a haunting album that relied heavily on keyboards and multitracked vocals as opposed to the full-band workouts of his earlier music. This is a sound that Wyatt has cultivated to this day, one composed of complex blends of pop, jazz, and world music in miniature, a la Brian Wilson's "pocket symphonies" even, though more immediate and British in their foregrounding of Wyatt's sophisticated and eccentric sensibility.



A better comparison might be to the concise, wildly surreal work of arty punk bands like the Swell Maps or The Homosexuals, groups with an obvious debt to Wyatt. By the early '80s, Wyatt had begun recording for the underground label Rough Trade, releasing a series of beautiful singles that reflected a newly found, fervent political awareness. In the '90s, he became something of a hero of underground musicians with the albums *Shleep* (1997) and *Dondestan* (*Revisited*) (1998) receiving rave reviews in publications like The *Wire* magazine and the sadly now-defunct *Popwatch*. His work since that time has been clever, restless, and typically brilliant. His latest record, *For the Ghosts Within*, a collaboration with Ros Stephen and Gilad Atzmon, is his first since 2007's politically charged *Comicopera*. Wyatt is an international

treasure whose work, though highly political, never ceases to function as musical art of the highest order. His wit, both sonic and lyrical, is boundless.

Recently, Domino Records reissued Wyatt's entire catalog, introducing his work, which sounds as current as it did the day it was recorded, to a new generation of ears. Wyatt and British-Palestinian rapper Shadia Mansour, who guests on *For the Ghosts Within*, communicated over email about the development of political consciousness, the song-writing process, and how an understanding of history informs one's creative practice.

————Clinton Krute

Robert Wyatt Good morning, Shadia. First, thank you for taking time out from what is probably a pretty active time in New York. I hope talking by email isn't going to make it too difficult.

Shadia Mansour Salam, Robert! Thank you for making this happen. Congratulations on your latest masterpiece *For the Ghosts Within*. It's an honor for me to be a part of it—it's inspirational to listen to. I want to apologize for my delayed response; I just got back from Detroit and did not want to answer your email in between shows.

You have been a loyal supporter of the Palestinian people and have expressed (metaphorically) your solid and principled stance against anything apartheid through your music for years. What has been more effective: music or activism?

RW I came to politics via my love of an earlier Black American idiom, jazz, which led me to the antiapartheid movement. I was born in 1945, when the relieved assumption was, I think, that Fascism, experienced as institutionalized racism, and the colonialist assumptions that depended on such hubristic delusions were totally discredited. But by the 1970s it became apparent to me—thanks, in part, to meeting Alfie, now my wife, who was much more politically inquisitive than I had been—that the victors of World War II, having neutered the competition, were at it again, inventing more devious rhetoric to cover their (our) traces. But I was always steeped in my parents' quasireligion: art. The rising tide of racism in England was simply ugly: racial pride in itself is natural enough, but the racist mindset promotes racially exclusive elites, and that's what gives me cultural claustrophobia. The art I loved most—jazz—was the fruit of the feverishly fertile cross-pollination of extremely diverse communities interacting in the United States. Racism was clearly a serious threat to the regenerating nourishment that the art I loved fed on. Not just jazz, of course. By then, there was no "either/or" about it: music and politics merged into one stream running through my life.

To me, a musician can be a witness, a more subjective one than a political activist. It's not for us to say what use we are to anybody, really. We can hope to encourage the wind behind the sails, but we are not the sailing ship. There are musicians and artists who generally feel disengaged from the human conflicts around them—some great ones, too. And there are those of us who feel impelled to participate in some way. Among painters, for example, Matisse worked his way through the rise of Fascism like a distant monk, his focus on living entirely through painting as an end in itself. By contrast, his friend Picasso got engaged publicly in the resistance, most famously with his painting commemorating the victims of the Fascist bombing of Guernica. I do think that Picasso's aesthetic activism was a valuable contribution to the war effort. But he had to live in exile from his beloved Spain to do it.

As for us musicians, it varies so much too, doesn't it? What we're trying to do in the first place… In my case, my exasperation about the cowardly evasiveness of our mainstream press drives me to think that if people in general knew more about history they'd be more likely to demand more honorable governments. I don't have any illusions about the effect of my making simple references to under-reported events and the people involved in them in my songs. For example, the sabotage of the democratically elected, secular government of Iran by the US and British governments in the early '50s, or the collusion by France, Britain, and the US in helping establish Israel's nuclear-weapons industry. If mainstream political writers aren't bothering to mention these things, who will? But I'm more convinced about your value in this respect than I am of my own.

I was raised in an "art is the fruit; the rest is the tree" sort of home. My father had been a pianist—he played Mozart, Debussy, adaptations of folk music, and 20th-century music, including Thomas Waller and Duke Ellington. But, professionally, he was what was called an industrial psychologist. My mother was a journalist and BBC producer/broadcaster. Most appealing to me as a boy were their art books: from Cézanne and Manet to Braque, Picasso, Chagall, and Paul Klee. And, crucially, I was stunned by what I saw at museums and art galleries bringing us non-European artifacts from Mexico, the Pacific, Near-and-Far-Eastern Asia—the world beyond.



Photo by Alfie Wyatt.

There's a nice quote from Auden, something like "We are all recruits of our time," and although in a decent world, I think I could happily live my life like a pleasure-seeking child, I find that the ugliness of so much reality puts my personal search for pure beauty in a rather inadequate light. So I reach out to others not because I think I can change reality but simply to find comfort out there, the warmth of fellowship in adversity. It sounds a bit pretentious, perhaps, but it's very simple, really: I do what I do because that's all I can do.

I'm interested in the bridges you cross, not only by being bilingual, but also, for example, between rap culture, Black Roots, and your Arabic-British life, the inspiration of Lauryn Hill [a former member of the Fugees] and Palestinian survivors. Was it the sound or the political implications that hit you first?

SM If I'm totally honest, I'd have to say I was primarily driven by politics, especially with what had gone on and was going on in Palestine and the rest of the Arab world. I got into music at an early age, singing at the peaceful rallies I attended, protesting against the daily abuse of the Palestinian population. And I got into Arabic hip-hop around the same time that 9/11 happened. That event changed the face of what "Arab identity" represented and gave birth to what I describe as a newly dignified Arab. A new form of resistance and

determination was blossoming in the West, and I was part of the early days of that change. I found discipline in Public Enemy's music, their form of resistance was intellectual, and they managed to speak in a universal language. Hip-hop was a shelter that became a community and which has now become almost a religion in its own right.

RW BBC Four did an open-university documentary series about schools in Syria, a country with communities of Palestinian refugees. In one of two episodes focusing on Palestinian schoolchildren, a couple of girls were fighting for the right to rap to cautious older Palestinians. How easy is it for you to reassure more traditional Arabs of your relevance?

SM I would want them to be reassured of the importance of equality and respect between males and females, first and foremost. How can we ask for a free Palestine if we are not free from each other? Having said that, Arabic hip-hop is still young and is a lot to digest for the more conservative figures in our community. With reason and patience we can get to that point in which we can give each other a chance to use our voices in a productive and effective way without holding ourselves back.

RW Rap liberated the language used in songs—there's been Black American song for years, but rap allowed street vernacular, as well as the real concerns of "the street," a big new space. Do you find that by extending song into "speaksong" your Arab vocabulary is somehow liberated?

SM Two of the most crucial elements in hip-hop, in my opinion, are what you are saying and how are you saying it. Arabic hip-hop has played a huge role in bringing the Arab vocabulary down from its high horse and more level with ordinary people who want certain things to be "told how it is." I think we have also liberated ourselves in the process.

RW Is there any tradition within Arab poetry or song/music that connects with rap? Rap in Arabic sounds so natural.

SM Absolutely, I learned about the beauty of our culture mostly through song and poetry. If you take a look back at sixth-century pre-Islamic poetry, you will notice many familiar elements which hip-hop shares today: resistance, pride, passion, knowledge. Our roots are a part of who we are, even though we are not always aware of it.

What is your approach to writing lyrics, Robert?

RW Two ways: if the tune comes first, I try to imagine words that seem to belong to it. Occasionally, I have some words that seem to need music. I have no reliable approaches or methods for this. It just has to come to me; I work on the assumption that if I do what feels right instinctively, there'll be an organic coherence to it. I don't work from plans, theories, manifestos. They're retrospective. There is no explanatory equivalent to making what I do.

You have achieved something rather rare, a joined-up working life; your vocal talent matches your message organically. Many artists struggle with this: the (apparently contradictory?) pursuits of trying to be a true witness of real life "out there" and the impulse to make magic through the freedom of the imagination to invent. Do you consciously struggle to reconcile the truth (which can be ugly) and beauty?

SM Anyone who is not actually living under the circumstances they preach about will be taken less seriously than if they were. I have borne witness to the truth and have tasted the realities of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. You only need to cross an Israeli checkpoint to know what sheer humiliation feels like, or wake up to house demolitions in Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem, or visit children in youth centers in camps without electricity or clean water. But more importantly, truth is truth, no matter who spreads it. The bottom line is, it's not about us artists, it's not about where we are from, it's bigger than all of us…It's the message and the impact.

RW Tell me about your performance with Lowkey for the Norman Finkelstein events. How did the writer and activist find you?

SM Norman Finkelstein's support of my and Lowkey's work has only motivated us more. We were invited to perform alongside him for the launch of his book *This Time We Went Too Far* in New York last May. It was a very diverse crowd, but nonetheless, very welcoming. I have to be honest: I never thought for one minute that I'd ever see Mr. Finkelstein waving his hands side to side and rocking out to Arabic hip-hop.

How did you discover Arabic hip-hop and what inspired you to add it to the song "Where Are They Now"?

RW It was Gilad Atzmon [an Israeli-born reed-playing musician; antiracist and anti-Zionist, now a Londoner], who for a while had been working on the little ditty "Dondestan" (an imaginary state whose name comes from the Spanish for "where are they/you") that I'd done on an eponymous solo record.

His inspired idea to ask you to bring it to life gives *For the Ghosts Within* an extra dimension, especially following Tali Atzmon's [Gilad's wife] title track. We talk about rap, but what terrific singing you both come up with. Not for the first time, I have a lot to thank Gilad for, including his work on my previous couple of records.

SM How was it to work with Gilad?

RW Lovely. *For the Ghosts Within* is an extension of a project that Ros Stephen and Gilad had worked on before, based on an old Charlie Parker with strings record. They wanted to extend the format with voices. It's their project and I'm simply a guest. I'm very happy to have been asked! Gilad keeps me on my toes—he's a fast worker and doesn't sit around wondering what's next. It's great for me because, not doing live work, I miss that sense of urgency. He seems to live every second to the hilt, but unlike some action men, he's constantly updating his philosophical take on things.

SM How do you feel about the current state of the music industry today (dating back to when you began)? Do you think artists and musicians are starting to speak out more? Which direction do you see it going?

RW I don't know enough about the state of the music industry to speak much about it. There'll always be music, and people listening to it, so I don't fret too much about it! I've only remained connected to the "industry" via a few specific individuals who work in the independant part of it, who for some reason empathize with what I'm up to and try and make it possible for me to operate. (Without them I'd be sunk.) My lack of academic refinement means I'm not really eligible for most arts funding, so I've had to make a living via the music marketplace; but my dealings have been with these few sympathetic people—the "industry" itself has always seemed some distant, foreign thing.

Inevitably I get to hear recent music, but I don't search for it. My record collection hasn't changed a lot in 50 years. It's more a museum than a fashion display. I'm basically fueled by the ghosts within… I really admire a young Palestinian couple known as Tashweesh: Ruanne Abou-Rahme (film) and Basel Abbas (soundscapes). I witnessed them not long ago; Ruanne's shifting, semiabstract images work perfectly with Basel's multilayered sound effects. And I like the American guitarist Mary Halvorson. There's a wittiness in her approach that reminds me of my jazz hero, Thelonious Monk.

SM The birth of hip-hop was hugely inspired by jazz. Do you think there is still that bond between the two?

RW My missus, Alfie, suggested to me that the blues and such folk idioms are closer ancestors of rap than jazz, although you could say jazz liberated notes like rap liberates words—the way they can tumble free of their formal structures. My favorite art usually has that tension between geometry and chaos.

>> L'interview sur le site de Bomb

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

This Is What Happens - Shindig ! - January-February 2011

The Soft Machine

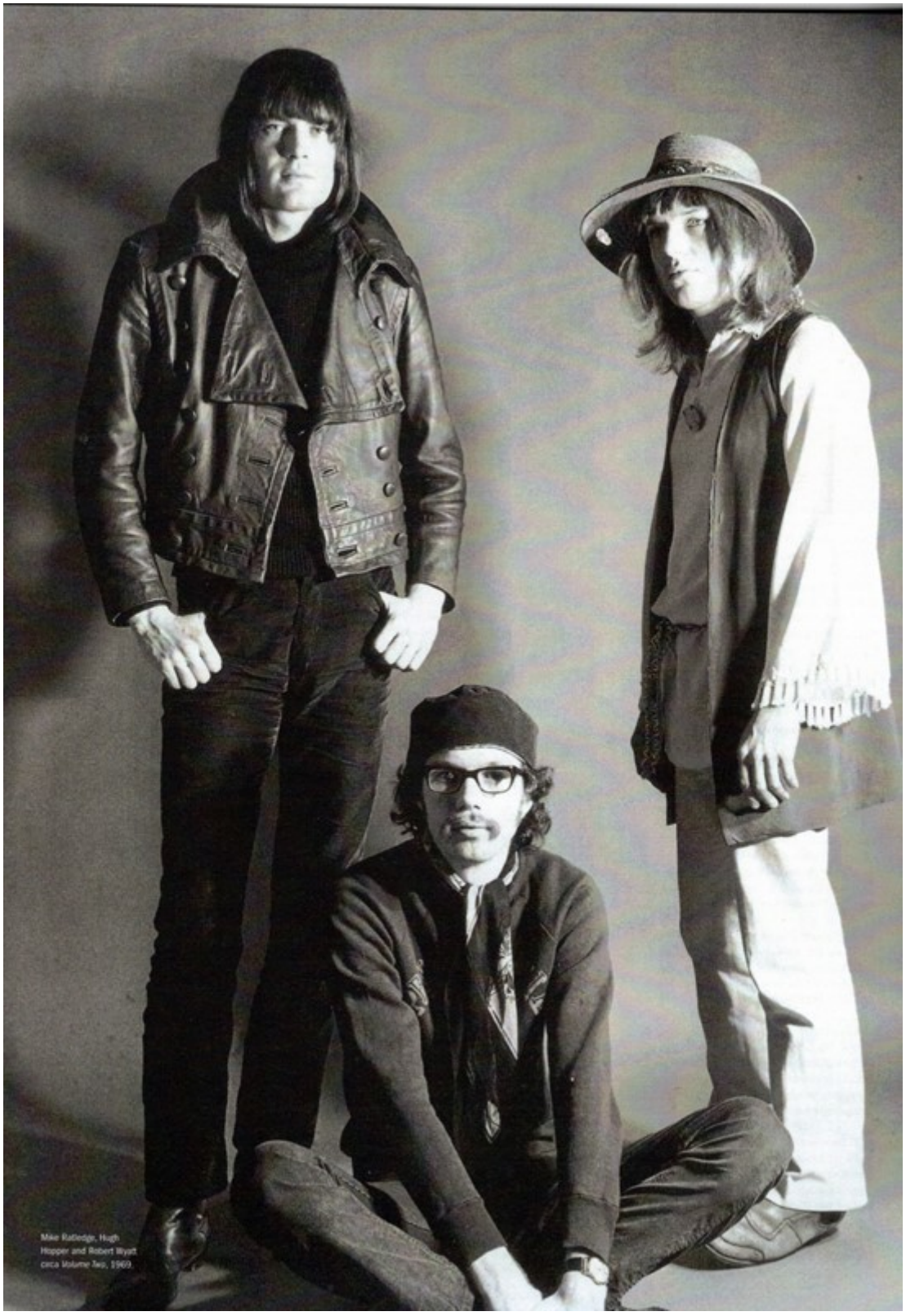
Is it jazz ?

Is it psych ?

Is it pop ?



Article complet (PDF)



Mike Ratledge, Hugh Hopper and Robert Wyatt circa Volume Two, 1969.

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS

They outgrew their humble beginnings as Canterbury beatniks to become one of Britain's two most important and iconic underground bands of the late '60s before embarking on a singular jazz-rock odyssey that imploded in the mid-70s with not one of their original members intact.

"We could have made a really good LP," said Robert Wyatt. "Been in the charts and been in those films about the '60s – and we blew it."

LINDSAY BENSLEY delicately traces the evolution of THE SOFT MACHINE

It's sometime in 1967 (nowadays it's always sometime in '67 in my head) and I'm in our living room listening to our Pye transistor radio, tuned into one pirate station or another, when I should be doing my homework. Luckily, my sister is in the front room spinning her Dionne Warwick platters, while mother is away with the fairies in the garden tending her rose bushes, so I'm able to listen to whatever illegal station I choose. Suddenly, I hear 'Love Makes Sweet Music' crackling through the ether, a godsend to flaming youth if ever I heard one. While the name of the group makes little impression at this stage, the song receives frequent airplay and eventually lodges itself firmly in the junk room of my mind.

Nowadays it sounds like a lost anthem for that unforgettable summer, though at the time I thought it an energising atomic particle of pop that made me want to jump and shout and tell the world. But I was soon to learn that such danceable ditties were rarely encountered in The Soft Machine songbook. This was a band intent on reinventing the world in their own image, who would become the *wunderkinds* of the underground; whose "out there" musical musings prompted Phil Manzanera to claim: "Soft Machine were the grooviest, coolest psychedelic band of the era".

And behind their artistic ambitions there lurked an intelligence to match even impressed music critic and ribald raconteur, George Melly: "Soft Machine for a start are not only verbally precise but exceptionally literate, with a keen and specialised interest in pataphysics, Dada and surrealism." Soft Machine lived life while others like myself looked on in dumbstruck awe.

Formed in '66, the group were briefly called The Bishops Of Canterbury, before guitarist Daevid Allen suggested they should change their name to Soft Machine after the drug culture novel by William S Burroughs. Besides Australian-born Allen, already an intergalactic guru, the line-up also comprised Kevin Ayers and Robert Wyatt, who were soon joined by Mike Ratledge upon his return from Oxford University after gaining an honours degree in psychology – a qualification that would come in useful during his tenure, if only for self-analysis.





In September of that year they played the notorious Star Club in Hamburg, and though they had secured a three-night booking, a hostile audience ensured the contract was never fulfilled. Back in London they began to make regular appearances at The Marquee Club before a more receptive crowd, often supporting The Pink Floyd Sound, while also securing regular gigs at The UFO Club in Tottenham Court Road. In December they went into CBS Studios in London to record with Kim Fowley. Little came from this session except 'Feelin' Reelin' Squeelin'', a lugubrious ditty penned by Kevin Ayers, whose deadpan delivery became his trademark.

A month later they entered Advision Studios to record 'Love Makes Sweet Music' with producer Chas Chandler, who thought the band had some degree of commercial potential. Released at the end of February '67 on Polydor, 'Love Makes Sweet Music' was coupled with 'Feelin' Reelin' Squeelin'' to become a favourite among pirate DJs including John Peel, who featured the single frequently on his *Perfumed Garden* slot for Radio Caroline. Although it missed the hit parade by miles, it did make #26 in the Radio London chart.

In April, they again returned to the studio, this time to De Lane Lea under the guidance of Russian-born impresario Giorgio Gomelsky. These sessions, though funded by Gomelsky, were never released until Charly Records did so in the '70s. And while Allen has always expressed his displeasure with his contributions, these are nevertheless the most comprehensive recordings of the original line-up that survive.

The band at this stage of their development were still a wayward creation, and while Gomelsky – a multi-media visionary – had failed to coax the best from them, he fared far better with The Brian Auger Trinity and the heavenly-blessed Blossom Toes, both of whom he signed to his own Marmalade label.

Undeterred, Soft Machine accepted an invitation to appear in The 14 Hour Technicolor Dream at Alexandra Palace at the end of April. This sight and sound extravaganza, which also featured The Pink Floyd, The Move, The Pretty Things and The Crazy World Of Arthur Brown among others, brought the group to the attention of the media.

Mike Ratledge and Kevin Ayers at an early Softs gig.



The band spent the summer of '67 performing in France, mostly around St. Tropez, though usually without any noticeable financial gain. Half-starved and sleeping rough on the beaches, they were on the verge of quitting when a local theatre promoter secured them a series of gigs including two weeks at Eddie Barclay's Psychedelic Night where they even managed to perform Ayers' one-line mantra, 'We Did It Again', for over an hour, and also played in the nude at Jean-Jacques Lebel's Sunlove Happening on the Cote d' Azur.

Towards the end of August the band returned to England minus Daevid Allen, who was refused entry on the grounds that his visa had expired. Allen, unfazed, formed the intergalactic Gong who still record and tour the solar system and beyond to this day, attracting universal praise.

The Softs continued to perform as a three-piece and the following February an enthusiastic Chandler encouraged the group to embark upon a two-month American tour supporting The Jimi Hendrix Experience. While the band had already established a rapport with Hendrix – Wyatt and Ayers having previously guested on 'Stone Free' back in November '66 – American audiences did not always feel the same empathy, and were not averse to booing and heckling to express their impatience to see The Man With The Guitar!

It was an ill-conceived tour, set up by Jimi's manager, Mike Jeffery, who paid little attention to anyone's interests but his own. A dubious character who claimed affiliations with The Secret Service, Jeffery is alleged to have defrauded both The Animals and Hendrix of substantial earnings, and to have frequently used threatening behaviour with the aid of a handgun to make his point. Though it is almost impossible to say anything positive about Jeffery, he nevertheless secured Soft Machine a

recording contract with ABC/Probe Records.

So in April, at the end of their 50-date tour, they entered Record Plant Studios in New York to record their first album. With Tom Wilson as producer, the band spent four days recording a selection of their songs interspersed with a smattering of improvisations. Wilson, known for his work with The Mothers Of Invention and The Velvet Underground, appears to have been somewhat diffident and allowed the band a free hand, and they were not afraid to experiment with the studio technology to hand.

The resulting album was however an uneven affair. There are perusable moments; 'Hope For Happiness', 'Why Am I So Short?', 'Save Yourself' and 'We Did It Again', but the instrumental duets between Wyatt and Ayers on 'Joy Of A Toy' and 'Why Are We Sleeping?' provide the highlights. If nothing else, the album displays how sharp the interplay between these musicians had developed, and is often cited as an example of proto-jazz-rock come prog, even if some of the outings here do not reach a satisfactory conclusion.

In May the band returned to England and immediately enlisted guitarist Andy Summers, fresh from his stint with the short-lived Dantalian's Chariot (known by band members as Charabanc), Zoot Money's earnest riposte to psychedelia. Though they were briefly the darlings of the London underground scene, Summers was keen to engage with more non-traditional music makers on their own terms.

Taking up residence with Wyatt in his mother's house in West Dulwich, a sort of commune of extended family and friends, Summers recounts in his forthright autobiography, *One Train Later*: "The atmosphere in the house is a mix of cultured bohemianism and tribal village. Eating, shagging, smoking and drinking, and making music are all laced with scathing remarks to one another about diminished intellect."

Summers, however, soon adapted to the lifestyle and the group spent several weeks in rehearsals. "In its best moments the music of The Soft Machine at this time is a swirling rush of dense, washy keyboards, repeated vocal lines, and drum patterns that fall outside any traditional song formats. In the vernacular of the moment, it would be called 'trippy'." These rehearsals often went on long into the night, usually ending with Wyatt and Summers smoking too much hash and falling on the floor in a fit of giggles. They made indeterminate progress.

In July they returned to America to headline a few shows before joining Hendrix for a second US tour together. As before, because of the *avant-garde* stance, their set would sometimes attract hostility from both audience and promoters alike, especially when Ayers insisted upon performing 'We Did It Again' *ad nauseam*.

After this fractious short tour they ended up at The Chelsea Hotel in New York, where it fell to Wyatt to inform Summers that Ayers insisted he quit the band. Ayers claimed that he wanted to return to the three-piece format, though Summers has always believed – and with good reason – that Ayers resented his superior musical ability.

Supporting Hendrix, with whom they struck up a close friendship, they embarked upon an intense two-month tour, finishing up at Los Angeles. The unrelenting touring took its toll upon Ayers, who also expressed his dislike of the jazz-based workouts they now favoured. Without a hint of animosity, the rather louche Ayers decamped to Ibiza whereupon he set about forging a solo career and nurturing his predilection for the fruit of the vine.

In December the first Soft Machine album was finally released in the US and soon after in France and Holland where it gained good reviews and healthy sales, though its release in the UK was indefensibly delayed until the early '70s. After a brief hiatus, the band reconvened at the beginning of '69, drafting in their long-suffering roadie, Hugh Hopper, to replace Ayers on bass.

"The atmosphere in the house is a mix of cultured bohemianism and tribal village. Eating, shagging, smoking and drinking, and making music are all laced with scathing remarks to one another about diminished intellect."

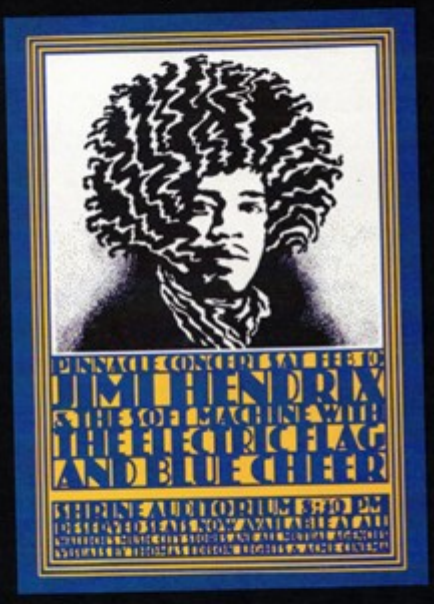
Hopper, a more than capable replacement, already had a long association with Wyatt. Both had been part of the Canterbury scene since the early '60s. In '63 they formed The Wilde Flowers with Hugh's elder brother, Brian Hopper on guitar and sax, Richard Sinclair on rhythm guitar and Ayers as vocalist. Later additions included Richard Coughlan and Pye Hastings, who would later team up with Sinclair to form Caravan.

Like Wyatt and Ratledge, Hopper had a yearning for jazz, and in particular that of the post-war era of Mingus, Monk, Davis, Coleman and Coltrane *et al*, and with the departure of Ayers these influences began to permeate their playing more frequently.

Under contractual obligation to ABC/Probe, they entered Olympic Studios throughout February and March '69 to record their second album. More cohesive than the debut, it is underpinned by Wyatt's off-the-wall witticisms, though you can't help wondering if he's making them up as he goes along.

Divided into two segments, 'Rivmic Melodies' and 'Esther's Nose Job', there are moments that capture their budding musical maturity and give some indication of the direction they intended to pursue, with 'Hibou, Anemone And Bear', 'Dada Was Here', 'Pig' and '10:30 Returns To The Bedroom' noticeably signposting their intentions.

Volume Two was released in April '69 to favourable reviews, and the band began to attract more attention from the media and public alike. Jazz-rock music was the fad at this point in time and Soft Machine were fast gaining distinction as one of its most competent exponents. Back on the road, gigging with renewed enthusiasm, they were seen at London's 100 Club by an equally enthusiastic Syd Barrett, who invited them to partake in recording sessions for his first solo album, *The Madcap Laughs*. In May '69, they joined Barrett at Abbey Road to record 'No Good Trying', 'Love You' and 'Clowns And Jugglers' (later retitled 'Octopus').



In June, The Softs recorded their first *Top Gear* session for Radio One at Maida Vale, and in between regular gigs – including dates at Ronnie Scott's – they also assisted Ayers on sessions for his début album (which many justifiably regard as his best), *Joy Of A Toy* for the nascent Harvest label, before forming Kevin Ayers & The Whole World with fellow earthlings Mike Oldfield, Lol Coxhill and David Bedford.

Gradually The Softs' poppy proclivities gave way to more malleable jazz-rock fusions – much lengthier workouts with titles such as 'Mousetrap', 'Backwards', 'Eamonn Andrews', 'The Moon In June'. In October they expanded the line-up to a seven-piece with the addition of Marc Charig (cornet), Nick Evans (trombone), Lyn Dobson (soprano,

tenor sax and flute) and Elton Dean (alto sax and saxello). Their gigs were well received as they toured across England, France and Belgium, building up a strong following, while major record labels began to take an interest and they were eventually signed to CBS.

But the logistics of touring as a seven-piece outfit soon proved financially unrewarding. Electrical amplification also proved a bugbear for the horn section, who found if difficult to balance their sound with a powerhouse drummer and dominant keyboard player. Increasingly disenchanted, Charig and Evans left at the end of the year to join Chris McGregor's Brotherhood Of Breath.

In early January '70, the band were recorded at Fairfield Halls, Croydon and at Mothers Club, Birmingham by CBS, and this material would be used on their next album. By March, Dobson – his nerves now frazzled thanks to the lunatic lifestyle – also quit,

Robert Wyatt, Hugh Hopper and Mike Ratledge standing by the dock of the bay.



"I resented it for a while... I got cross... I used to feel about Soft Machine the way Palestine feels about Jerusalem – this once was mine."

finding brief solace in The Keef Hartley Band.

Reduced to a quartet, it would not have been unreasonable to presume this would have limited The Softs' possibilities, but nothing could have been further from the truth. This unexpected turn of events gave the band a renewed impetus, and created the legendary line-up that would produce some of the most enthralling and innovative music of the band's long and convoluted history. "I think we all soon realised the chemistry was right," recalled Dean.

Hopper, with an ear for a metallic riff, was now composing some of his best material, though Ratledge was the most prolific, and relished writing in complex time signatures that challenged both band and audience alike. The interplay between each member now gave the group a definable sound, which fortuitously coincided with the British jazz scene reaching its peak at the beginning of the '70s.

A trad jazz enthusiast in his teens, Dean later secured work as a member of Bluesology with Marc Charig, alongside numerous alumni including singers Marsha Hunt and Long John Baldry, guitarist Neil Hubbard and a struggling pianist named Reg Dwight, who would later pinch Dean's Christian name and Baldry's middle name (and his vocal mannerisms) to invent an entirely new persona. Unhappy with the pop music scene and backing talentless acts like The Paper Dolls, Dean and Marc enrolled at The Barry Jazz Summer School in South Wales at the height of the psychedelic movement of '67. Here they met Keith Tippett and Nick Evans, and the four discovered much common ground – and thus formed The Keith Tippett Group.

Tippett, already a formidable jazz pianist, had gained a grant from The Arts Council to compose a new work that ultimately resulted in the group's début album, *You Are Here... I Am There* for Polydor, under the watchful eye of the far-sighted Gomelsky. Something of a hidden horde of bright baubles, it is a brash and determined musical statement by four of the best jazz players the UK has ever produced, and while quoting from Stan Tracey to The Beatles and all points in between, it possesses much original input. Dean, it must be said, would probably have been content to continue along this path had not Ratledge intervened and offered him the chance of playing in a more commercial jazz-rock outfit. In April '70 Soft Machine entered IBC Studios, London to commence work on their next album. Recording continued into May and the album was eventually released in June as a double album entitled *Third*. At a time when only established names such as The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix or Pink Floyd released double albums, *Third* was indeed an ambitious project, made more so by daringly featuring one grand opus per side. Hopper contributed 'Facelift', an energetic workout cut and spliced from the two live concerts recorded earlier that year – it's The Modern Jazz Quartet, Spontaneous Music Ensemble and Liberation Orchestra rolled into one nation under a gleeful groove: mesmerising stuff!

'Facelift' was also remarkable for being the first time that most people, like myself, encountered Dean playing the saxello. A variant of the soprano sax, to which it is physically similar – but for an upturned bell – its tone is not dissimilar to that of the Indian shehnai – which is in itself derived from the pungi, that stock-in-trade instrument of the snake charmer.

Wyatt's sole contribution, 'The Moon In June', is an effervescent eulogy from the illegitimate son of Mr G Chaucer (droll-teller), wherein by turn he confesses to being homesick and lovesick from his "hair to his heels". It was an almost entirely solo effort by Wyatt, who began work on the suite back in '67 and recorded some parts in New York at the end of their second American tour. Hopper and Ratledge make but minimal contributions to the piece (Wyatt mans the keyboards and bass for the most part), although jazz violinist Rab Spall provides a solo – doctored by Wyatt the Fizzy Wizard to resemble an out-take from Clanger Land – which makes a fitting coda.

Both the remaining compositions were furnished by Ratledge. 'Slightly All The Time' is one of his most compelling pieces – Zappaesque in parts with occasional quotes from Kirk and Coltrane, it interweaves tortuous time signatures to stunning effect. Ratledge and Dean produce some truly hair-raising solos throughout – and is that Wyatt playing the hi-hat with his hands? – while Jimmy Hastings (brother of Pye) offers support on flute and bass clarinet.

'Out-Bloody-Rageous' is no less arresting. Influenced by Terry Riley's hypnotic *Rainbow In Curved Air*, Ratledge employs tape loops to introduce another series of discursive solos by both himself and Dean before fading out in another tape collage.

Impressively tall, impossibly lean, his eyes invariably hidden behind a pair of modish sunshades, Ratledge looked every inch The King Of Cool – yet Warhol he wasn't. Reserved, reticent to the point of being monosyllabic, he never looked at ease in the spotlight and disliked touring intensely. Irrespective of his long-term involvement with Soft Machine and his undeniable musical contributions to the band, Ratledge remains something of an enigma entangled in a conundrum and wrapped up in a Gordian Knot of emotions. Nothing about him was ever predictable. Unlike his contemporaries Keith Emerson, Brian Auger and Dave Greenslade, who all preferred Hammond, Ratledge opted for a Lowrey Deluxe organ. When this was fed through a fuzzbox, he was forced to play legato to avoid intervals that would otherwise produce feedback. And so, more by accident than design, he invented his own distinctive sound, even if it frequently resembled a Stylophone on steroids.

Lauded on all sides upon its release, *Third* was the nearest the group ever came to anything approaching commercial success,

yet cracks were beginning to appear in the band's facade. Wyatt's sing-along songs were being increasingly sidelined in favour of hard-nosed instrumentals. Dadaism was dead and the Goon age was gone: they would never play vox pop again. However, unvoiced musical differences within the band did not disrupt the touring schedule. They continued to play regular dates at Ronnie Scott's and also found time to appear at The Holland Pop Festival ("the Dutch Woodstock") with the likes of Dr John, Canned Heat, Santana, Tyrannosaurus Rex *et al* – the resulting movie was later released as *Stamping Ground*.

In August they became the first "pop" band ever invited to play The Proms at The Royal Albert Hall. The rock press saw this as a prestigious gig and fawned at their feet, though the classical establishment were by and large appalled by the decision to allow a pop group to defecate upon their sacred turf. The straight-laced and stuffed shirt brigade of Radio 3 didn't like them, but ignoring their detractors, The Softs commenced recording their next album, *Fourth*, in October '70 at Olympic Sound Studios, with sessions continuing into November. Released the following March to favourable reviews, the album includes guest appearances by the ever-dependable Nick Evans, Marc Charig and Jimmy Hastings, with the addition of Roy Babbington on double bass and Alan Skidmore on tenor saxophone.

The bulk of the material was contributed by Hopper via the stately 'Kings And Queens' and 'Virtually', a four-part suite that took up all of side two. 'Teeth', the sole offering from Ratledge, is perhaps the best-conceived piece here. With fine structured and improvised contributions from both band and guest musicians, it sounds like a blueprint for what British jazz-rock fusion could and should have become.

A few weeks prior to the release of *Fourth*, I was finally able to catch the band in concert. A chance to see the classic line-up of Wyatt, Ratledge, Hopper and Dean was an unparalleled pleasure, and remains one of my most memorable gigs. In the absence of a stage, the band set up on the dance floor, with the audience seated all around. Granted an opportunity to watch the band at such close quarters proved a rare treat, and this level of intimacy contrarily enhanced their mystique.

Stripped to the waist, his long blonde hair flying as he pummelled the drum kit, Wyatt was the only animated figure, reminiscent of The Wild Man of Borneo (minus the necklace of fingers), while you could easily have mistaken the other band members for serious Zapata lookalikes or the Plymouth Brethren. Yet these four just men were the component elements who could make music to soothe or stir the senses in equal measure. One lanky youth in the crowd stood up and began idiot dancing; a relatively new pastime then, and I had never witnessed such a spectacle before. I even bought a pint of Adnams Best Bitter (a Suffolk ale for a Norfolk swain?) – it was that sort of evening.



Hopper, Wyatt, Elton Dean and Ratledge not long before the drummer's departure.

Oddly enough, the band's vigorous live performances did not in any way reflect their internal strife at the time. Even Dean admitted he was once removed from the unspoken discord. "I was too busy concentrating on the music to fully comprehend the personality issues going on around me. It was never discussed – there were no blazing rows. I got on well with Robert most of the time, we were good mates for a while, although we did have a bit of a disagreement during a tour of the States shortly before he quit. It's funny, but some of the best improvisation we did was during the period leading up to Robert's departure. If he wanted to carry on with the songs he never really said so. We didn't rehearse much or discuss direction, we would go on tour and things would happen, pieces would be written by Mike and Hugh and we would play them."

Depending on which version of events you care to believe, Wyatt was either sacked or quit the band in August '71. "Towards the end there was no collective identity," adds Dean. "The others didn't see the same things as I in the band. I was more interested in absurdity as a liberating element than them." Wyatt expressed bitterness over his departure for several years afterwards, but on the BBC's recent *Prog Britannia* he appeared more philosophical. "I resented it for a while... I got cross... I used to feel about Soft Machine the way Palestine feels about Jerusalem – this once was mine." For whatever reasons, it is certain that the band's more studious approach to music did not suit a loose-limbed drummer like Wyatt who longed to sing the body electric. "We could have made a really good LP. Been in the charts and been in those films about the '60s – and we blew it."

Wyatt wasn't wrong. Soft Machine made jazz-rock fusion that was both accessible and listener-friendly, a rare feat in itself that others of their ilk were unable to accomplish. Wyatt's exit signalled the end of an earful of amazing music and sounds. Soft Machine had the potential to become a household name – like Fray Bentos or Threadgold's Throughgrip Garterettes. Ah, the sawdust and horses, the roar of the greasepaint, the smell of the crowd, it should all have been theirs, in that brief shining moment, there and then. If only the engine of time had a stop button... SI



Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Haunted by Ghosts - Haaretz - October 15, 2010

HAARETZ

Haunted by ghosts

Self-proclaimed anti-Israeli saxophonist Gilad Atzmon and prog rock legend Robert Wyatt have joined forces to make musical magic and "political noise."

By Yaron Frid Oct. 15, 2010



Robert Wyatt and Gilad Atzmon, Ros Stephen

In 1963 a baby was born in Israel. In 1972 a man fell from the third floor (or the fourth - views are divided) in England in the middle of the night. Both of them took off on the wings of music, and life would one day organize a surprising encounter between them.

This is a sad story with a jolting soundtrack made of the howl of a saxophone and the wail of a clarinet. It's a story of displaced persons who have no other country, featuring war criminals, Nazi-hunters and God in a cameo role, tempered by large daubs of irony and a few crumbs of hope.

Morning. Rain. Rail strike. Soho, London. Who is the huge chuckling fellow in the Italian cafe who is polishing off a schnitzel sandwich (washed down with tea) and welcomes me with comments like "There is no light at the end of the Israeli tunnel"? Or, "I think there is something untenable, simply untenable in the fact that the Jews, who suffered so much

racial discrimination, should establish a state that is founded on race laws." And, topping the charts, "I am dead against the existence of the Jewish state." It's still early in the morning, let me remind you. I-am-dead-against-the-existence-of-the-Jewish-state-and-pass-the-sweetener-please. Good morning to you, too, Gilad Atzmon.

The fact that the cafe is across from Ronnie Scott's famous jazz club offers a subtle hint about Atzmon's identity. He is one of the most acclaimed and in-demand jazz musicians in the world and he only enhances his glory - or totally destroys it, it depends whom you ask - when his mouth isn't otherwise occupied with a saxophone (or a schnitzel).

Atzmon says he is dealing not with politics, but with ethics. Maybe in his case it really isn't just a matter of semantics. Or cosmetics. But we're here to talk about music. And about beauty. "This beauty which simply spills out of you," he says, "effortlessly, unconsciously, in the most wonderful moments of creativity, and when that happens you understand that you are only the carrier of the spirit, of something bigger than you, over which you have absolutely no control. I have no connection with that beauty, I just eat schnitzels. I am only the messenger. I don't look for the beauty, the beauty finds me and through me finds its way into the world."

And plenty of beauty finds its way into the world in "For the Ghosts Within," the new album by Atzmon and his musical partners, which has already earned rave reviews in the British music press, with praise such as "the surprise of the year" and ecstatic descriptions of angels entering the listener's heart. On the album Atzmon joins forces, as performer, composer, arranger and musical producer, with Ros Stephen and Robert Wyatt.

This is the great Robert Wyatt himself. Cult figure, one of the fathers and pioneers of progressive rock. The one calls the other a genius ("We have a mutual genius pact," Atzmon chuckles), while Wyatt says, "It's a huge honor for me and not at all self-evident that Gilad agreed to work with me. He is an amazing musician, amazing." But judging by the people Wyatt has worked with - Jimi Hendrix, Mike Oldfield, David Gilmour, Paul Weller, Syd Barrett, Brian Eno, Bjork (a "heavenly creature," Wyatt sighed) among others - it's clear that the honor is also definitely Atzmon's. He has performed with Paul McCartney, but the collaboration with Wyatt, 65, a unique object of admiration who cuts across tastes, generations and categories (just ask Radiohead's Thom Yorke), is something of a step up and a certificate of honor that further cements Atzmon's status in the British music industry.

Wyatt is the hippie enfant terrible who became a white-bearded guru, a kind of secret national treasure, a genuine survivor who is almost unclassifiable. A drummer in Soft Machine (from which he was thrown out - to this day he maintains "there is nothing worse in life than humiliation") and in Matching Mole, he was reborn as a singer-songwriter after falling out of that London window during a drinking binge that lurched out of control. (Pink Floyd immediately rallied to the cause and organized a benefit concert for him.) The fall left him in a wheelchair for life.

Few musicians have done all he has done - psychedelic, punk, post-punk, avant-garde, fusion and now "clean" jazz with his own twists.

Wyatt is married to Alfreda (Alfie) Benge, who came to England from Poland as a childhood war refugee. She does the artwork for his album covers, once wrote a searing song about his alcoholism (he has since kicked the habit, or maybe not) and calls him an "overgrown baby," while he calls her "the dark side of my moon." He records his albums, which are like nothing else and are always received as an "event," in a studio in his home. He has a distinctive tremulous voice (a kind of trademark), which the composer and musician Ryuichi Sakamoto called "the saddest sound in the world." Wyatt has survived periods of bottomless, suicidal depression, and for entire decades avoided performing live. ("I think it's stage fright," Atzmon says.)

In an interview with the Guardian in June 2009, Wyatt selected Atzmon as the "greatest living artist" and noted that he was "born in Israel, which I prefer to call occupied Palestine." Atzmon, for his part, says Wyatt is "a genius of the kind that Kant described so well - a genius who seemingly has no part in his own genius, who creates beauty as though ex nihilo. Everything he touches sounds new and completely different and utterly his own. He is totally transparent and through him you see the light."

Tranquillity of the storm

Their love story began "about 10 years ago," Atzmon says. "At some festival, a woman named Alfie came over and said her husband is a musician but is very shy and loves my music and would like to talk to me. 'Sure, no problem,' I said. Robert approached, said he

was an amateur musician or a crappy musician, something like that, he's very modest, and gave me his card. I had no idea it was him and I put the card in my pocket without looking. Afterward someone asked me what I'd talked about with Robert Wyatt and I said, 'Fuck! That was Robert Wyatt? I grew up on his music!'"

They invited each other to guest on their respective albums, including Wyatt's acclaimed "Cuckooland" (2003) and "For the Ghosts Within." (The song "The Ghosts Within" contains more than a hint to Palestinians sitting under olive trees, awaiting redemption, on the banks of the River of Shame.) The album is on the trendy Domino label - its bands include Arctic Monkeys. Wyatt takes the role of the house singer, performing thrilling covers of jazz standards such as "In a Sentimental Mood" together with new material written and arranged by Atzmon and the violinist Ros Stephen. The result is almost a family affair (Gilad's wife, Tali, sings a marvelous solo, Bob's wife, Alfie, wrote powerful lyrics and Ros's partner is one of the musicians). Tender and melancholy, the album is only part of the panoply of illusive and elusive contradictions of Atzmon, who is haunted by ghosts and demons, filled with gentleness and rage, naivete and depth, stubbornness and openness, storminess and tranquillity.

"The first time I invited him to play on an album of mine," Wyatt recalls, "Gilad warned me that it could be trouble. I don't think he deliberately looks for trouble, it finds him. That didn't scare me. I have been called a 'Stalinist' and a 'traitor' and worse, simply because I didn't agree with the British government's foreign policy. But that's nothing compared to the systematic character assassination being done on Gilad. He takes so many risks with his remarks, most of which are then taken out of context or presented in a twisted way so that his true intention isn't understood correctly.

"I sometimes feel a need to protect him," Wyatt continues, "an almost paternal instinct - after all, he's my son's age. The friendship with him is one of the most important and meaningful things that have happened to me in life. I truly love him. And I admire his courage. Some will call it reckless or uninhibited, but he dares to say things that no one else would. I would die of fright. He gets threats to his life, but I hope they are not serious. He doesn't enjoy the manifestations of hatred toward him but he doesn't care if he causes grief or anguish, because that's his truth, and contrary to politicians or diplomats he is committed to his truth. He's so sweet, really, he wouldn't hurt a fly, and I like his chutzpah, I think it's fantastic. There's something about him from the tradition of the great Jewish comics, like Lenny Bruce, who were never afraid to make people angry."

It would be a big mistake to assume that Atzmon's music is marginal and negligible compared with all the other noise he manages to make nonstop as a popular and prominent pro-Palestinian, anti-Zionist activist. The music is important, superb, surpassingly sublime and acknowledged as such by international awards.

"My shows are always sold out, wherever I appear in the world," says the busiest jazz artist in Britain, almost drily. But in the same breath, who are we kidding? Even when Robert Wyatt sings "At Last I Am Free" on the new album, not to mention the Arabic rap ("People dying of thirst / People are dying of hunger / We haven't forgotten / And we won't forget until the day we return") which leaves no room for doubt, or the "Palestinian shepherd's flute," one of the instruments Atzmon plays on the album according to the liner notes, the noise always penetrates, if not through the door then through the window - not that Atzmon goes out of his way to expel it.

Pathetic and absurd

Gilad Atzmon was born in Tel Aviv in 1963 and grew up in Jerusalem. "It was a regular secular childhood," he says, "with a right-wing Jabotinskyite grandfather. I wasn't ashamed of him, no way. I understood where he was coming from. I understood where I was coming from." Most of his military service was spent in the Air Force orchestra, after a stint as a combat medic. "In the first week of the Lebanon war in 1982 I saw a lot of wounded soldiers, but contrary to the rumors, that was not the turning point in my life. I think the big change actually started in the orchestra, when we went to Ansar, that concentration camp" - a prison built by the Israeli army in Lebanon - "and then I realized that I was in the wrong army."

In Israel he played and was a musical producer with the singers Yardena Arazi - talk about diversity: chapter one Arazi, chapter two Wyatt - Si Himan and Yehuda Poliker, among others.

"Poliker opened my ears to Greek music and influenced me musically. My music is popular in Greece - more than his, I'd say - but Greece, like the whole world, is falling apart, so it doesn't help me very much."

In 1994 Atzmon planned to study abroad, in New York or Chicago, but in the end found a university in England with an interesting program combining psychoanalysis, philosophy and art history. "I didn't have some five-year plan to leave the country or anything like that," he recalls. "The truth is that I was worn out from everything: from the country, from music, from life. Everything wore me out. I didn't want to play or produce anymore. I thought of starting a new career as a commercial pilot. I wanted to be like the El Al pilots, who bow to the applauding passengers after landing [he chuckles]. I liked flying planes but I wasn't good enough at it.

"I was 30, and thought I would focus on an academic career. But then I fell in love with London, which was like a small village - it has changed completely since, and not for the better - and the local music scene gave me so much love. So I said to myself: We'll play jazz for the jazz, we'll live for art. We don't need a lot of money, we have everything we need. So we'll stay. And we stayed."

"We" is Atzmon and his wife, Tali, a fine singer and a stage actress with a burgeoning career. They met - we promised you irony, we deliver - at the Hasidic Song Festival in Israel. "I didn't like Israel and what was happening there but I wasn't politically involved in any way. I also didn't understand the Palestinian idea, the true story. Somehow things happened and I started to speak and write in all kinds of forums, and suddenly I was all over the place. I was a private person with all kinds of private opinions who suddenly became public because people wanted to hear what I had to say. I think people feel that I am telling the truth, that I am not rewriting facts for anyone, that I don't have to lie because I am not part of any political body. I am Gilad Atzmon who represents Gilad Atzmon and that's all. At first I was seen as a nice Jew who was badmouthing Israel, which the goyim liked. But it didn't take me long to understand that I am not a nice Jew, because I don't want to be a Jew, because Jewish values don't really turn me on and all this 'Pour out Thy wrath on the nations' stuff doesn't impress me."

So you are pouring out your wrath on the Jews.

"I saw 'Metzitzim' a few days ago. You know where Uri Zohar is today [Zohar, the director, actor and screenwriter, is now an ultra-Orthodox rabbi and teacher], and he was the ultimate secular person, the absolute ultimate. Why are secular Israelis afraid of Uri Zohar? Because he left them alone in the dark to cope with questions like Why am I here? Why do I live on lands that are not mine, the plundered lands of another people whose owners want to return to them but cannot? Why do I send my children to kill and be killed, after I myself was a soldier, too? Why do I believe all this bullshit about 'because it's the land of our forefathers' and 'our patrimony' if I am not even religious? What the fuck? That is something the secular Jews simply cannot cope with. They are deathly afraid of those questions. I see more truth among the settlers than among the biggest secular Jews in the country.

"The Israelis can put an end to the conflict in two fucking minutes. Netanyahu gets up tomorrow morning, returns to the Palestinians the lands that belong to them, their fields and houses, and that's it. The refugees will come home and the Jews will also finally be liberated: They will be free in their country and will be able to be like all the nations, get on with their lives and even salvage the bad reputation they have brought on themselves in the past 2,000 years. But for Netanyahu and the Israelis to do that, they have to undergo de-Judaization and accept the fact that they are like all peoples and are not the chosen people. So, in my analysis this is not a political, sociopolitical or socioeconomic issue but something basic that has to do with Jewish identity.

"Think for a minute about the dialectics of Jewish identity, about 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Who is your neighbor? Another Jew, of course. In other words, from the moment you were chosen to be the 'chosen people' you lost all respect for other peoples and for the other as such.

"Take, for example, the way gays are treated in Israel. It smacks so much of 'Look how liberal we are, we have homosexuals in Israel.' Max Nordau [Zionist leader, 1849-1923] wrote about the emancipation of the Jews, about how the Europeans don't really like Jews but like themselves for supposedly liking Jews. I find a lot of similarity between Jews and gays as separatist, marginal philosophies. It's very interesting.

"There are interesting values in Judaism, and the proof is that the Palestinians' greatest supporters are the Jews of the Torah, Neturei Karta [an ultra-Orthodox sect]. Our problem - and it took me time to understand this - lies with the secular Jews, and even more with the left-wing Jews. The idea of left-wing Jews is fundamentally sickening. Totally. It contains an absolute internal contradiction. If you are leftists it doesn't matter whether you're Jewish or not, so on principle when you present yourselves as leftist Jews you are

accepting the idea of national socialism. Nazism. That is pathetic. That is why the Israeli left has never succeeded in doing anything for the Palestinians. The absolute absurdity is that it's actually the right wing that is leading toward a one-state solution and a final-status agreement."

Illogic and wonder

Atzmon played into the hands of politicians such as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who in a debate with President Shimon Peres quoted Atzmon by name, to the effect that "Israeli barbarism is greater than [regular] cruelty." Atzmon has been accused from every possible platform of disseminating vitriol against Jews. He, though, maintains that he "hates everyone in equal measure." He's also been accused of self-hatred, but he is the first to admit this, and in comparison with Otto Weininger - the Austrian Jewish philosopher who converted to Christianity and of whom Hitler said, "There was one good Jew in Germany, and he killed himself" - he is even proud. "Otto and I are good friends."

Seriously, though?

"What seriously? I am married to a Jew, I work and play in a band with Jews. I have adopted a Palestinian identity, true, but to accuse me of anti-Semitism is ridiculous. Part of my success derives from the recognition that I am 'from there.' I do not try to hide that or blur it or deny it. I look, speak and behave like someone from there."

I address him in Hebrew and he replies in English with a distinctly Israeli accent, interspersed with Hebrew. He is sometimes amazed at some of the excellent Hebrew words he comes out with.

The hybrid language is intermittently amusing. Asked, for example, if he misses Israel, he replies, "I don't miss the medina [the state], I miss the eretz [the land/country], and elaborates: "When I started missing the soil, the landscapes, the scents, I understood that what I actually miss is Palestine. Palestine is the land and Israel is the state. It took me time to realize that Israel was never my home, but only a fantasy saturated in blood and sweat."

He speaks of "sweat" but really means "tears." It's a sad story, as we noted.

His children, Mai, 14, and Yan, 10, have no Jewish friends. Yan was not circumcised and bar or bat mitzvahs are out of the question. Atzmon's computer does not have Hebrew. He says he writes, thinks and dreams in English. He will not set foot in Israel until it is again Palestine.

Doesn't it hurt to cut yourself off like that? To burn all the bridges?

"No, but maybe it's true what all my girlfriends before Tal said when they dumped me."

What did they say?

"That I'm an emotional cripple."

Is that true?

"Maybe, but I didn't dump myself. I live at peace with myself." He apparently reserves his emotional intelligence for his art. There are no cripples of any sort in "For the Ghosts Within." In the music, they all fly to the highest places possible, perhaps touching the divine. Genuine talent, like passion, can't be faked. The problem is, then, only the grating noises - that's how they sound to many people - that the man haunted by ghosts and demons produces outside the recording studio.

Wyatt, playing the Dalai Lama, expresses amazement at "Gilad's struggle against racism and oppression of all kinds, and in his life's work, the search for the meaning of Jewish identity. Gilad is a traumatic but optimistic example of a widespread phenomenon of migrants who try to push aside their tribal circumstances and try to reconnect to the world and to humanity. That is what the Jews in the Diaspora have always done. Look at their contribution to world culture. Ronnie Scott was from a Jewish immigrant family from Russia, and there are also the Gershwin brothers and Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen and Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein, not to mention Jesus and Karl Marx, two nice Jews who made a bit of a mess in the world.

"Gilad's point of departure is humanitarian, not real estate. Thanks to him I learned to be more tolerant of religion, every religion, and show it respect. Thanks to him, for example, I have no problem with the fact that Evyatar Banai, a terrific musician whom I met a few

years ago, became religiously observant, just as I hope he has no problem with my political opinions. Gilad believes that religion is a spiritual affair and not a license to plunder olive groves from someone else, and that is something I can connect to.

"The problem," Wyatt continues, "arises when religion's illogic becomes the basis for politics. Religion is based on illogical legends: Jesus' mother was a virgin and Father Christmas comes down the chimney bringing toys. That's all very nice but it cannot be a serious foundation for politics that is supposed to make the real world run. It is unthinkable to take lands that are not yours only because it's written in the Bible - meaning the Old Testament, which is based on tribal mercilessness - that God said they are yours. And what about the other peoples? What were they told? Which God distributed what land to them? And what if they read a different book? There's no way out of it.

"People use every excuse to screw the Middle East, visit colonialist guilt feelings on the Palestinians and compare them to Nazis, which is outrageous. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the toughest knot to undo that there is, but people like Gilad are truly dreaming of a solution and fighting to realize it in their lifetime."

You once called him "Don Quixote." Do you think he is fighting a lost battle?

"I called him Don Quixote in humor, and he has a great sense of humor. I knew he wouldn't take offense. Possibly his battle is lost, but the war on crime, for example, is also lost, yet I still want the police to go on fighting it. Gilad is an artist who is trying to find meaning in a chaotic and insane world. For him, as for me, politics is the most personal thing there is. He and I cannot remain silent in the face of wrongs, injustice and inequality. Not all artists feel a need to express themselves or act politically, and you can't force anyone to do that. During the Second World War, Picasso chose to sound his voice and Matisse chose to remain silent and disappear, and both were and remain great artists who enriched the world. Gilad likes to shock and surprise in everything he does, and his very existence enriches the world."

And that world, however broken and ruined and complicated, is the same world that stars in the song that ends "For the Ghosts Within" as well as Atzmon's concerts: "What a Wonderful World."

"The newscasts report only disasters and wars, and that's natural," Wyatt notes. "I was born at the end of the Second World War, and since then the world has not stopped fighting and falling apart before our eyes. But if we forget the existence of beauty and joy and love and all the rest, what's the point of staying alive at all? To say that the world is only screwed up is an insult to those who go to work every day and build homes for their children and cook meals for their friends. It's important to sing this song with full intentionality and seriousness. I can't sing it any other way. To sing it is to remember what we're actually doing here."

In praise of the spark

Atzmon, who has appeared and recorded with artists such as Sinead O'Connor, Ian Dury and Robbie Williams, this month is also launching "The Tide Has Changed," the latest album by his jazz group, the Orient House Ensemble, now celebrating its 10th anniversary. (The other members are Frank Harrison, Eddie Hick and Yaron Stavi, the son of Zissi Stavi, the legendary former editor of Yedioth Ahronoth's literary supplement). Among the instrumental tracks are "London Gaza" and "We Lament." Surprised?

Atzmon has even been accused of Holocaust denial.

"That is very imprecise," he says. "But I am fighting against all the disgusting laws and persecutions of those so-called Holocaust deniers - a categorization I don't accept. I think the Holocaust, like any historical episode, must be open to research, to examination, to discussion and debate. I am sorry that Hitler did not live to write a summary of the events in his own words. And I am not sorry that people throw eggs at the war criminal Tony Blair, who in the Nuremberg trials of the Iraq war will be brought to trial, inshallah, along with all those who fostered and financed that benighted and unnecessary war. And at the same opportunity, it might be a good thing if the Nazi hunters hunt down [Shaul] Mofaz and [Ehud] Barak, for example, and not all kinds of 96-year-olds who are barely alive. It's pathetic."

Atzmon can be sharp, focused and trenchant, and at the same time nonsensical and diffuse, so much "pro" but also so much "con" - coarse and refined, raucous and subdued, pedantic and professional to an extreme, making declarations like "I never did homework. I wrote my two books in two weeks each, vomited them onto the page, and the first one began as a joke."

The novels - "A Guide to the Perplexed" (2001; set in 2052, in the Palestinian state that has succeeded Israel) and "My One and Only Love" (2005; about a trumpeter who chooses to play one note only and also about Nazi-hunters; spot the obsession ?) - have been translated into 27 languages. There is something childlike, if not childish, in the guide for the perplexed being someone who is himself occasionally perplexed, who radiates personal charm, frequently chuckles and acts the smart aleck and the provocateur, with a proven ability to electrify and to hypnotize an audience.

"There is a spark in Gilad, a passion and a natural joy of the kind found in children," Robert Wyatt sums up. "His joy of creation is utterly pure. Picasso said that he tried his whole life to paint the way he painted as a child. Gilad hasn't lost that, I think. He remains filled with curiosity and filled with life in the most positive and delightful way."

"Let me make it perfectly clear," says Atzmon. "There is a war of liberation of the Palestinian people and I support it unreservedly. I also have guilt feelings. I tried to communicate with Israelis and I failed, and it's important for that to be said. I no longer know how to communicate with Israelis."

For someone who is so cut-off, Atzmon ("I'm a voluntary exile, but also a DP and a refugee from my homeland") sounds quite connected. Never mind "Metzitzim"; he also heard, for example, that Poliker came out of the closet and that Miri Aloni is busking on the street (though he'd like to know whether for ideological reasons or "only for the money").

Why don't you make a distinction between individuals and governments? For example, what happened with the Gaza flotilla was not "us."

"It was you."

It's not me.

"It is you. Unequivocally. When you live in a democracy, every crime committed by your government is a crime committed by you."

Even if I didn't vote for that government?

"Absolutely. In a dictatorship the dictator takes responsibility, in a democracy all citizens bear equal responsibility."

So what do we do? How do we fix it?

"That's the big question."

What do you want me to do, shoot Netanyahu?

"You said it, not me. And by the way, Netanyahu is a lot better for the Palestinians than Barak or Peres. I, too, as a British citizen, share in the crime of the Iraq war. But the British public at least expressed opposition to the war all along, whereas in Israel 94 percent of the nation supported Operation Cast Lead. On the one hand, you want to behave like a post-enlightenment state and talk to me about individualism, but on the other hand you surround yourselves with a wall and remain attached to a tribal identity. That's a cake you can't eat and have, too. There is a price to be paid and everyone is paying it, including me."

But Atzmon, who has been crowned successor to Charlie Parker, doesn't dwell on the price.

"Sometimes I ask myself what I need all these headaches for. And Tali says she married a musician and now she has a prime minister in her home."

You might not be sad that you lost us, but I'm sad that we lost you.

"That's all right, there's a place in the world for sentimental people. I know I have many readers in Israel and they know how to contact me."

I think about Gilad Atzmon the way that Arik Einstein thought about the girl he saw on her way to school in the iconic song: that to us, he is lost. Israeli public diplomacy lost someone who could have been one of its finest voices: articulate, charismatic, brilliant. The score, for now: 1-0, Palestine leading.

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

Robert Wyatt and "The Merry Dance of Shared Creativity" - A Necessary Angel - July 14, 2010

ROBERT WYYATT AND "THE MERRY DANCE OF SHARED CREATIVITY"

Robert Wyatt is that rare musician who has been making individualistic, quirky soulful music for years that has managed to resonate across a broad spectrum of listener, and engage some population of more youthful listeners with each successive generation. This is a good formula for making art live. Wyatt's songs have been covered by artists such as Elvis Costello (Shipbuilding), and he can count Brian Eno, Bjork, and Fred Frith amongst his collaborators over the years. For me, Wyatt's music has always hovered in the same beautiful universe inhabited by Scott Walker's muse. Always singular, by times poignant, wistful, infused with wonder, and delivered with the direct nature and good humor of a man who probably sleeps quite well at night.

Wyatt has long collaborated with his wife Afreda (Alfie) Benge, a noted artist, lyricist and poet, who has penned the words to many of Wyatt's tunes over the years. Our mutual friend Rob Ayling, noted photographer and Voiceprint records owner (the wonderful patron of a label that releases my work…. buy all thier stuff!) put us in touch for the interview. I was glad to have this discussion, if even only over e-mail, with one of the great singular talents of this or any age.



PH Robert, you have become known as an *artist's artist*, in that there are many prominent artists in mainstream pop culture that like to state you as an influence, and who view your work as seminal and essential to their own development. What do you think about that?

RW Percy, my record collection is more like a dusty museum than a 21st century update. I'm embarrassed to say, I know little about what younger musicians are up to. But of course it's reassuring to hear that some of them have heard what I've been trying to do…..and I'm especially grateful to those who've used my material. Most recently the *Orchestre National De France*, *Mop Meu Machiine* (also French) and the heavenly *Unthank*

Sisters, not to mention *Annie Whitehead's* band featuring *Julie Tippetts and Jennifer Maidman*, *Karen Mantler with John Greaves* (that last project not yet available on record), and several other kind hearted people.

PH I've been listening to your recording ***Comicopera***, and with each listen, come away with another layer of emotional connection. The story telling is rich, filmic, poignant, lyrical, and comical at times. Can you tell me a little bit about the creative process concerning the writing and recording of this album?



RW
Comicopera has several geneses. From scraps of paper with momentary thoughts onto recorded equivalents, scattered around my room-sometimes for years! The coherence comes in the editing. More than with previous records, I assumed that the pieces would take on a life of their own, without my interfering with a plan. The eventual sequence to become apparent in the studio (mostly in the last few years with the engineer I met at Phil Manzanera's studio, Jamie Johnson). And, perhaps from enjoying so many very old records, this time I really asked a lot of the musicians, I wanted to make a record of total music, not just "vocal with instrumental accompaniment", although the final order was guided by the lyrics, by what is being said. For a long time I've felt right making records with two 'sides' like records used to be. But for Comicopera, I found myself turning to the idea of music in three parts, like posh symphonies. But not very, eh?

PH It seems to me that it is often a perfect storm of circumstances that creates an audience for "difficult" artists. Pop culture is a fickle mistress, who is difficult to serve. How do you see the "canon" of your work fitting into the overall universe of all things "pop"?

RW Pop(ular) music is to me a great resource, and even One Hit Wonders can make at least one terrific record-But I'm not in the market competing for mass attention; I just have to shift enough records to earn a living. So a more apt comparison would be with a little local cafe, or baker's shop. (i.e. not the kind of retail outlet that depends on media saturation.) So when I was told that the most powerful disc-jockeys might not like Fred Frith's solo on I'm a believer my automatic reaction was, "who gives a fuck?")

PH Your particular musical gift always brings to mind our friend Fred Frith. Fred has a unique way of bending the strange around to the poignant when you least expect it. He does it through a sort of frenetic worrying torrent of sounds that break out at once into lyrical atmospherics and whimsy. You come to the poignant through seemingly indirect, observant, lyrical revelations. How do you conceive of a lyric like: ***"Cuckoo Madame with your teddy bear eye, yellow fingers clinging to the chain link fence. Bombers above you. Bombers behind you."*** ("Cuckoo Madame, from the album Cuckooland). I'm not sure what it means, but it makes me want to cry….

AB (This question was answered by Robert's Wife and Collaborator, Alfreda (Alfie) Benge)

All I can do is explain how this poem happened. The line you quote from ***Cuckoo Madame*** *was a totally accurate description of what my eyes saw. While watching from the window of a seaside chalet with no-one else around. She was, as described, grasping the wire on a fence with her yellow finger-like claws. Her eyes just like a teddy bear's glass eyes. Exactly the same colours. The first time Isaw her there was a bomber exercise going on in the air. The lovely peace shattered by horrible noisy low-flying jets. She sat there with bombers swooping overhead. She came regularly twice a day for over a week. I was on my own, and she was my only visitor. My first instinct was antagonistic. I knew there was a meadow pipit nesting nearby, and I knew cuckoos often used meadow pipits nests to plant their eggs. She was the villain.*



Then, I started to think about her and her life. She never saw her chick, had never seen her parents. A really solitary madam. Soon she'd be off to Africa , and later her chick would make the same journey all alone. No-one to guide it. What a lonely life. And what had happened in cuckoo history to condemn her to such a life? So I imagined being her. And remembering my first reaction, was reminded of the way people are judged without any attempt to understand them. It had recently happened to me, (it was quite traumatic) and no doubt happened to all the outsiders, strangers, foreigners that become hate figures. People who often have tragedies in their lives that we're oblivious to. Most of the stuff I do when words come first happen in a similar way. I try and look hard. That's how it starts. I try to pay real attention to something in the physical world, and often that will spark off thoughts about other things. It's like nature study with added daydreaming. But basically my eyes are OPEN. When the music comes first, I write with my eyes very SHUT, and my ears very OPEN. I Just dive into the music and try and drag out the words that are hiding in there. What film am I watching? 'Old Europe' for instance was definitely a black and white French film. The music absolutely dictates the subject matter. In Lullaby for Hamza, three notes just said 'lullaby' to me. So I wrote one for someone who needed one.

PH What has been the effect upon you of the almost total collapse of the music industry? Has your way of working, your audience, and the way your work reaches your audience helped you escape the carnage somewhat?

RW The record industry, like the leisure industry and the food industry, may boom, bust, do the hoochie-coochie, whatever, people still listen, play and eat. Been doing it for tens of thousands of years. Widespread 'free' downloading is a bit scary for us though, like all theft, naturally)

PH I am curious to know what young artists (if you listen to any) you think are creating significant work.

RW I'm well aware that there are lots of terrific musicians out there, young (and not so…) In all genres. Here and around the planet. And mass-market pop music seems as entertaining as ever- I've listened to Timbaland and Cheryl Cole, and think they're really good at what they do.(I'm not interested in the various snobberies around show-business.) It's all just people trying to do their best. There's room for all of us, I'd like to think..

PH Much like Scott Walker, you are an artist that the pop culture is always in the process of "catching up to"…it's a brilliant historical comment, but may mean that some potential benefits of the catching up will not be available until you are gone! What is your take on this phenomenon?

RW See 1 again! Plus, I know that I myself am still catching up on music from before MY time, from Plainchant (a liturgical chant form) to Paul Robeson. Even the 'originators' of British popular music as a global phenomenon based most of their original material on that of (mainly Black American) predecessors. Made it 'New', as every generation does. Or they simply spread the word, just with a different accent; it's all part of ***the merry dance of shared creativity.***

PH Your music is quite filmic and imagistic to me. Are you a film lover? How does the imagery of life as found in film, affect your work if at all? Have you had much music placed in film?



RW Yes indeed, I admire lots of film makers, and have been particularly affected by John Cassavetes (Shadows), Eisenstein, Ozu, Eric Rohmer– and many of the more widely known film makers from early Hitchcock to Mike Leigh. And Alfie (a qualified film editor and Robert's Wife) introduced me to the wonders of many films from around the world. Um…….where were we? Oh yes. Your actual question! I see my transition from live performance to making records as like the transition from live theatre to making films, Necessity being the mother of invention in my case.

PH I've always wanted to hear a duet between you and Marianne Faithful, this may seem wacky to some, but I think it would be fantastic! What artists would you like to collaborate with that you have not thus far?

RW I choose collaborators that the piece I'm working on seems to want. There are still people I'd like to do music with though, but I don't wish to embarrass them by naming them in, as it were, public! Oh, alright then, Sinead O'Connor.

>> L'interview sur le site de A Necessary Angel

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Captain Bob - The Word Issue 79 - September 2009



ROBERT WYATT'S HOUSE IS RIGHT IN the middle of the Lincolnshire town of Louth, yet it's protected enough by its thick walls and beautifully tended garden to feel like it's in the middle of nowhere. It's only when I spot the tiny ceramic head - complete with a pair of glasses and a badge (Robin - The Boy Wonder!) - that sits almost unnoticed by the front door that I know for sure I have the right place. I can't imagine many other residents displaying a similar sense of the absurd. Inside the front door, just to the left, is Wyatt's studio. There's a crisply melodic jazz record playing, keyboards dotted around and a grand piano in the corner. A soft breeze rolls in from the road, rustling the curtains. Wyatt rolls down the corridor dressed all in black, his hair long and swept back, his beard trimmed and white as snow. Around him, every wall is covered with paintings - his wife Alfie is an artist and lyricist - and drawings and artworks. A cushion embroidered with the cover of his 1984 EP collection sits by the telephone. In the breakfast room there's a stack of vinyl under the CD player that I'm powerfully drawn to but never get to flick through as we move swiftly on to the garden where we sit around a big table under a cherry tree. Alfie's mother, Irena, who lived here too, died suddenly a few days ago and a huge bunch of white lilies has been placed on her favourite chair.

"There's some of me that absolutely wishes I'd either had a lobotomy or not gone to bloody grammar school," Wyatt says, a cup of tea at his elbow. "Those schools are meant to be such great institutions, but I hated the whole experience. Provincial grammar-school boys are absurdly pretentious creatures. I've always tried to match up to the art that I loved, to get that into my music. Had it not been for that desire I would have very, very happily picked up from Eddie Cochran and Neil Sedaka and just done the very best, simplest pop songs I could. I love Ray Davies and Pete Townshend and I think if I could have not thought about it all so much I would have had a very happy life."

Wyatt loves a well-crafted popular song, so I ask if he can't write them or simply doesn't want to.

"Oh, I do *try* to make normal records," he says. "I get very crestfallen when



> Zoom

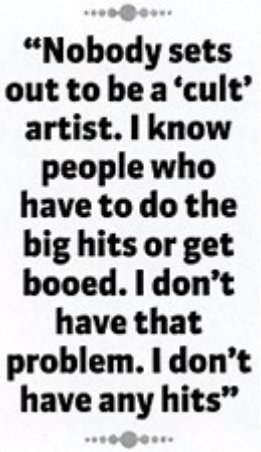
people say, 'That's a lovely song, Robert, it's just not pop as we know it...'"

NOW 64, WYATT IS A TRUE CULT FIGURE, SOMEONE who stands for more than just the music he makes. His parents were interested in art and politics and music - "They had garlic and pasta and olive oil *years* before it was popular!" - and he grew up with the idea that art was something that would repay the time you invested in understanding it.

"I didn't understand modern jazz or modern art," he says, "but I was *open* to it all." The first music he loved was on his parents'78s of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears ("He had a *lovely* light vibrato"); later he bunked off school to listen to Indian classical music and bebop. Music was always pointing the way forward.

"Ornette Coleman said there was no such thing as a wrong note," he laughs. "That *really* excited me! What *was* a wrong note? What would it sound like?"

Wyatt has been making his own music for the past 46 years, ever since he joined the Daevid Allen Trio in 1963. A year later he formed The Wilde Flowers with Kevin Ayers. In 1966 the two went on to form that most delicately prog of all prog legends, Soft Machine. Eighteen months later they were touring America with Jimi Hendrix.



"Oh God, that ridiculous late-'60s idea that there was 'progressive' music," he says now, half grinning, half frowning. "How stupid to think you could be *better*, more progressive than Haydn or Charlie Parker or John Lee Hooker. What *twats* these people were. There is no progression in music or art. There's change and different people being happy in different ways, but that's it."

In June 1973, aged 28, Wyatt fell from a third-floor window during a party for Gong's Gilli Smyth. He broke his back, meaning his career as a drummer was over (when he finds out the WORD photographer Sham is the same age, Wyatt immediately counsels him on staying on the ground floor at drunken parties), but a year later he recorded a performance of his hit version of The Monkees' *I'm A Believer* in his wheelchair and wearing what appears to be a denim dashiki for *Top Of The Pops*. Before it could be broadcast the footage was "lost" by the BBC and only found 30 years later.

"I wanted that record to make it plain that I wasn't part of any movement that thought it had grown out of pop music," he says.

Touring was over - his last major live appearance in London was recorded and finally released as *Theatre Royal Drury Lane 8 September 1974* a full 31 years after it happened. The years in between have seen seven albums - and as many compilations - of Wyatt's songs, each one endlessly inventive and full of incredible, individual ideas about how rock and pop and jazz might have sounded if history had only worked out differently, been kinder *or* crueller. Though the records feature friends like Brian Eno, Phil Manzanera and Paul Weller, he works primarily at home, on his own.

"I find being in any specialist group a bit claustrophobic," he says. "But sitting around with musicians is better than sitting around with other people in wheelchairs talking about urinary problems. What's really happened is as I've *physically* retreated I've mentally gone out into the world, but I'm not broadminded musically, I plough a furrow the same as anybody does. Making the music is a lonely place, but even more so in a group than on your own. In a group you have to negotiate the traffic otherwise you'll crash, but if it's an empty road then you don't need to worry."



> Zoom

Do you know where this music comes from, I ask.

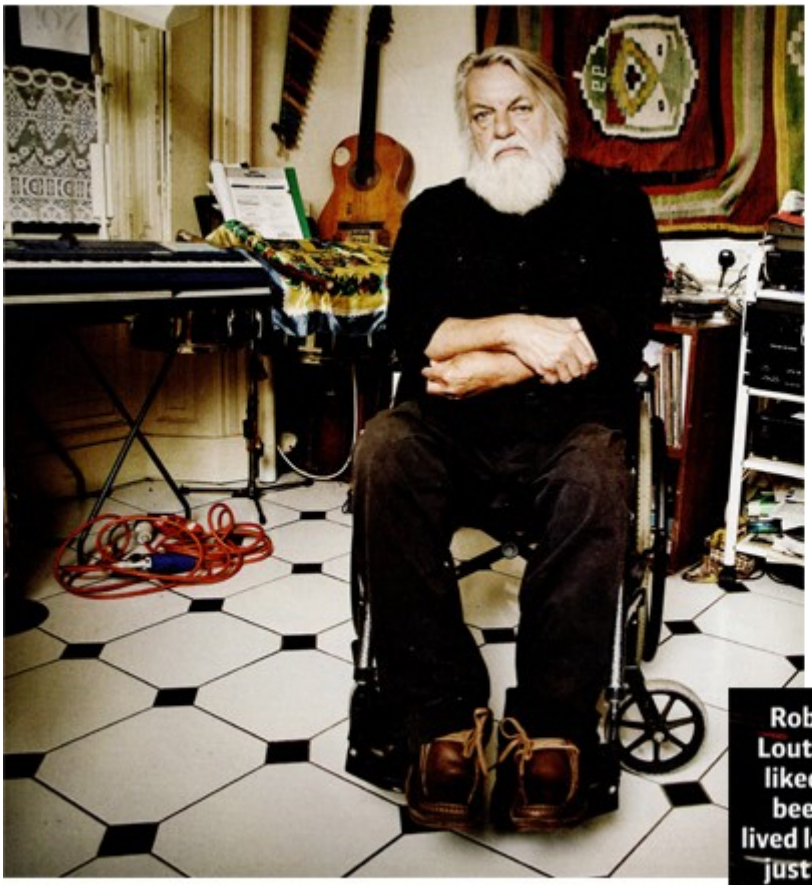
"Not really," he says, turning the now empty cup over in his hands. "It's doesn't feel like self-expression or invention. It's more like turning on a rusty tap and seeing what happens. But then you have to monitor it, editing what comes out until you don't wince when you hear it. You are on your own just as you are when you dream - you might meet people in your dreams but you can't get to them when you wake up. There is a *landscape*, a place I go, it's an aural landscape. There are harmonic skies of different hues, violet and green and blue. I hear harmonies like that and I see melodic lines as little sort of Giacometti, wiry things, drawings, but it's a living place, the whole place is alive and specific to me."

IT HAS BEEN 26 YEARS SINCE WYATT LAST TROUBLED the pop charts. *Shipbuilding* - later described by Elvis Costello as "the best lyrics I've ever written" - was a brilliant choice of song, a political folk piece given a jazz treatment, with this beautiful waver of a voice, this tremulous tenor, floating over the top. An *Old Grey Whistle Test* clip from 1983 shows Wyatt looking like Fidel Castro, his eyes pulled tight shut as he sings this "piece of completely escapist light entertainment". He has never rubbed up as close to the mainstream again. "

"No!" he laughs. "But as a democrat I accept that people like stuff I don't like. I always used to think you can like what you like, but if you like Cliff Richard you're *wrong* - but not any more. I was completely wrong about that; I think he's a very nice man, a good guy and he's managed his career immaculately. I saw him at the Royal Command show with The Shadows [in December 2008] doing *Move It* and they were just *terrific*. I'm glad I've lived long enough to realise how good that stuff is. Same with Chuck Berry - I never liked him at all, but he's wonderful. Wherever I've not liked mainstream culture I've been wrong. I've learned that, on the whole, people are right - if they like something it's because it's *good*".

In 2001 Wyatt curated the Meltdown season at the Royal Festival Hall. Brett Anderson, Elvis Costello, The Residents and Gorky's Zygotic Mynci all appeared. This summer he was back on stage at his hero Ornette Coleman's own event. "Jazz is a magical idiom," he says. "It has the visceral physicality of dance music, but it features people from other cultures let loose on European instruments - pianos, trumpets, trombones, saxophones -

doing things with them they weren't designed to do. Fats Waller reinvented the piano. Louis Armstrong reinvented the trumpet. Jazz has this incredible *richness*..."



Robert Wyatt at home in Louth: "Wherever I've not liked the mainstream I've been wrong. I'm glad I've lived long enough to realise just how good people like Chuck Berry actually are."

> Zoom

Meltdown is the perfect platform for someone like Wyatt, somewhere that every interest can be pursued. In the garden I mention how much I enjoyed the clip of him on stage with David Gilmour, reading Roger Waters' part from *Comfortably Numb* from a sheet of paper, like he'd never heard the song before. Gilmour looked delighted. "Ha! Well, David's *free*" Wyatt says. "He can do all the old hits, just not as we know them, but he does them. That works for him, he sees his history as a good thing, it gives him a secure base to go wherever he wants."

Would you have liked to have been in a huge band like his?

"I don't know," he says. "I'm glad the way things have worked out. I'm not on the road, so I can concentrate on new songs. I have time to work and I enjoy the freedom I have now, unencumbered by entourage and career structure."

"That *ridiculous* '60s notion of 'progressive' music. How can you be more progressive than Hayden or John Lee Hooker?"

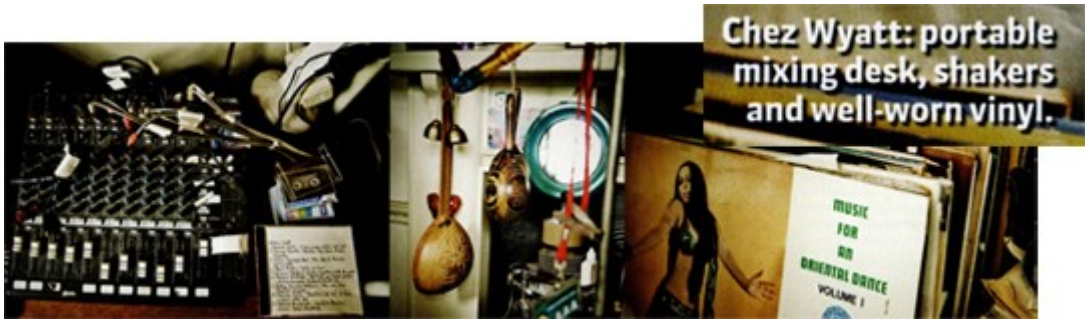
"Whatever it is they want," he says, "I'm very careful to try to thwart them at every step of the way. I don't want to be cornered. People say they can always tell my voice, so one day I'll release a record called something like *The Lost Tapes Of East Van Solihull* and I'll do a series of songs in other people's voices. I'll start with PJ Proby and move out from there. But nobody sets out to be a 'cult' artist - I certainly didn't. I know people who go on the road and if they don't do the big hits they get booed, and that must be terrible. I don't have that problem as I don't have any big hits, but that's OK. That's freed me up."

THE SUN HAS DROPPED AND THE TAXI TAKING US back to Market Rasen station sits idling outside. What is it that keeps you going, I ask as I pack up my bag.

"I suppose I always want another try at getting it right," he says, pulling on his white beard. "There are all these ideas left in the head - that's what keeps me going. I was brought up to think artists should behave badly because they were artists, but that's crap. Coltrane and Eric Dolphy behaved impeccably. I thought that behaving badly, getting drunk and being appalling and embarrassing was part of the licence that went with the musician's gig. Well, I was wrong and in my life I have had to learn first, then live. Even now there is lots of stuff I regret about how I am as a person, but, y'know, I'm not dead yet. There's still time to get it right."

A box-set of all nine Robert Wyatt albums plus his EPs is available now on Domino.

Story by Rob Fitzpatrick - Portrait by Shamil Tanna.



Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

An Audience with... Robert Wyatt - Uncut N° 242 - March 2009

AN AUDIENCE WITH...

ROBERT WYATT

The multi-talented former Soft Machinist answers back about war, whisky, Red Wedge and 'Wyatting'. *Interview by John Lewis*





Robert Wyatt is sitting in the front room of his townhouse in Louth, Lincolnshire. He's slightly exhausted after having some of his grandchildren over for Christmas. 'What kind of granddad am I?' he ponders. 'Well, I can be jumped on and forced to do anything. I just sort of sit there and I hope to accumulate gravitas by not showing resistance.'

But the 64-year-old is certainly not entering his dotage; instead he's enjoying what he describes as 'an Indian summer of work'. In the past 18 months he's collaborated with Billy Bragg, Hot Chip, Mike Skinner, David Gilmour, French pop god Bertrand Burgalat, Brazilian singer Monica Vasconcelos, German electronica maverick Barbara Morgenstern, David Byrne/Brian Eno and his old Soft Machine sidekick Kevin Ayers (the last two virtual collaborations in cyberspace). Oh, he's also released the acclaimed *Comicopera*, and found time to oversee the re-release of almost his entire back-catalogue on Domino.

"Still, it all feels so silly being an artist when the Israeli army are sending tanks into Gaza," he says, in a rare moment of glumness. "It seems such a whimsical occupation. What did you do in the war, daddy? Oh, I expressed my deep melancholy. Yeah, right. Fuck off!"

You always seem to have a cigarette on the go. How has it affected your voice?
Garry, Manchester
Oh yeah, they've probably knocked out about half an octave from my top range. But I'm quite happy now singing at the lower end. It's nice down there. The weird thing is that, although people say I've got a high voice, it's never actually been that high-pitched. Technically, I'm a baritone [starts playing a middle C on the piano and sings along]. I can get to about a fifth above middle C. But it's a light voice. It's a bit like Gerry Mulligan, he plays the baritone sax so lightly that you don't notice how deep the notes are. Same with Lester Young on the tenor- people think he's playing alto. It's very deceptive.

You were at the launch of Red Wedge in 1985, which surprised a lot of people. Why?
Sam, Swansea
I thought the people involved were really nice. Billy Bragg, Paul Weller, Jerry Dammers, Jimmy Sommerville - I like them all very much and I wanted to express solidarity with them. Billy is a practical person. He deals with what can be done in the real world with the real House of Lords, and so on.

Politically, I'm somewhere else, in some strange dreamland. But, occasionally, I live in the real world, too, and I also want to make things better. My involvement was counterproductive, of course. I think it was *The Sun* who discredited Red Wedge, saying, "It pretends to be a reasonable: democratic organisation, but it's supported by that communist Robert Wyatt..." So, sorry lads! I'll get back to Twickenham and twiddle my knobs...

When was the last time music made you cry?
Bertrand Burgalat
The tenor sax solo on "Stolen Moments" by Oliver Nelson had me hot behind the eyes when I heard it the other day. It's such an angelic and singing thing. Actually, Bertrand's music gets me a bit

STAR QUESTION



You covered the Chic song, "At Last I Am Free". How did you come across that?
Paul Weller
In the late '70s, the only radio station I listened to, apart from Radio Moscow, was Radio London, because they used to play a lot of black dance music, and I was just staggered by how good it was. Most people who listen to dance music do so communally, on a dancefloor, but I was listening on my own, in isolation, on headphones. There was much beauty in that stuff, even the ballads like "At Last I Am Free", which some people regarded as album fillers. Sometimes the production on those disco tracks was so polished that you can miss that it was actually a very human music with a lot of frailty. So my version of Chic is a bit like, say, Cilla Black doing Bacharach – it's done in a much more gauche way, but it brings out something else in the tune.

teary sometimes. He contacted Alfie to write some lyrics for him, which was great. Then I ended up singing on one of his tracks. Bertrand is a real one-off. It's not an English phenomenon, the Serge Gainsbourg-style writer, producer, auteur, but he's brilliant at it.

What's your favourite Dionne Warwick song?
Evan Parker
People will be surprised that Evan, a great, avant-garde saxophonist, is also a big Dionne Warwick fan, someone who filled in some of the gaps in my Bacharach collection. But the thing about musicians is that they're not corralled into ideological ghettos the way their fans are. "You'll Never Get To Heaven (If You Break My Heart)" comes to mind [*starts singing the entire chorus*}. It's an absolute knockout, a real bossa nova thing, but with wonderful harmonies. There aren't many song writers who match up to the great days of Cole Porter and Gershwin and so on, but Bacharach does.

There was a rumour that you were working with Mike Skinner - is that happening?
Jamaal, New York
We did record some stuff, but I don't think it was finished in time to go on his album. He came up to Lincolnshire, just him and his box of tricks. We went into the studio where I recorded Dondestan and other things, and sang on a track he'd written, which was really good I met him when we were both shortlisted for the Mercurys - along with Franz Ferdinand, Amy Winehouse, that nice English blues singer Joss Stone and The Croutons, or whatever they're called. They're all very good, but I thought he should win, as he'd already reached a mature, innovative musical identity. Even the way he speaks on record betrays a wonderful sense of musicality.

STAR QUESTION



I often recall something we would from time to time discuss over cups of tea in our happy little Dulwich home that, in our dreams of when pop success might come our way, we would all buy houses in warm and sunny spots abroad. I was the only one to do this. I wonder why? ***Kevin Ayers***
Kevin was born in Malaya and spent his childhood swimming in idyllic rock pools, so I can understand that he wanted to move somewhere hot and Mediterranean. I never did. Alfie [*Benge, Wyatt's wife*] would quite like to move to Spain, but I'm never really aware of my surroundings. I'm quite happy here. It's not that I'm particularly proud of being English, although I'd happily counteract any idiotic BNP notion of Englishness with a list of things that I love that just happen to be English, be it our love of nature or Winnie The Pooh or The Beatles or The Unthank Sisters or TV comedies like *The IT Crowd*. But geography really isn't that important to me.

What was your tipple of choice when you were a drinker?

Simon, Nottingham
Towards the end of my drinking career, I'd moved on from vodka and whisky. I think, stuck on my own, with nothing to live for, my desert island barrel would be very, very good whisky. But, about a year-and-a-half ago, I was advised to go to AA meetings, which I did. In terms of ticking the boxes, I'd definitely become an alcoholic, which means that when you start drinking you can't stop. I went for months and months of meetings, and I've completely stopped now. I do miss it, but I also apologise profusely if I have behaved appallingly to anyone over the last 50 years when I was drunk.

What do you love about Winnie The Pooh?
Pierre, Bournemouth
I maintain that the greatest crime committed by America - with the possible exception of the carpet-bombing of Laos - was the Disneyfication of Winnie The Pooh. But the characters in those original books are wonderful. I relate to Pooh, the way you can almost hear his brain struggling, the pleasure he gets from articulating such simple thoughts. Then there's Eeyore, who is such a splendidly depressive figure, the kind of person Hollywood would never create. Most of all, I like the sly dig at people who profess to be wise in the form of Owl, or "Wol", as he spells it. I think that anybody, whenever they look at a silly judge or priest or mullah or rabbi or politician, or any stupid bearded git who gives himself gravitas - including myself! - should remember that there's a bit of Wol there.


With Billy Bragg at the Red Wedge launch, 1985

With Loudon Wainwright III circa '74, and *(inset above)* with Brian Eno and Jools Holland at the Mercury Music Prize awards, September 2004

British rock'n'roll drummers - Charlie Watts, Keith Moon, Mitch Mitchell, Ginger Baker, yourself - were always frustrated jazz drummers. Discuss.
Charley, Dundee
Well, I'm not sure. I don't think they need or should go together. I think that rock musicians tend to make clunky and old-fashioned jazz drummers, and jazz drummers tend to make rather effete and precious rock drummers. I don't think they're that good at each other's jobs, on the whole. Ringo Starr was happy doing whatever he was happy doing, and was all the better for it. However, Ginger Baker was a jazz drummer who crossed over: I saw him play with the Graham Bond Organisation, featuring Dick Heckstall-Smith, and it was an absolutely phenomenal band. Same with Mitch Mitchell: I'm a bit biased because we were quite close friends, but he sailed perfectly from playing in Georgie Fame-style jazz bands to heavy rock with Hendrix. But with, say, John Bonham and Alan White - I don't hear much jazz in either of them but, gosh, you don't get too many better rock drummers than either of them.

STAR QUESTION



Which jazz musician influenced you the most?

Phil Manzanera, Roxy Music

Melodically, it's Miles Davis. Whenever I'm writing a tune or improvising, I think, 'Would Miles think that's a stupid note?' And if he would, I won't use it. That's the Miles in my head, of course, a tiny figure compared to the giant in real life. I also love Charlie Mingus' drummer, Dannie Richmond. But Jimmy Cobb is my biggest influence as a drummer. He plays on *Kind Of Blue*, and his style is essential to why that LP achieves lift-off. He formed a way of playing ride cymbals with the Count Basie band that was very even, no fucking around, just 1, 2, 3, 4. He'll put in the odd Roy Haynes-style crack or wallop, but his skill was, as Philly Joe Jones said, about "appreciating the length of the note you're playing". That sounds odd for a drummer to say, but it's very profound.

What was Ivor Cutler like?

Karen, Tooting, London

I'd known him for some time - we'd often get solo artists to support us at Soft Machine gigs, so it would be Loudon Wainwright or John Williams or Ivor. We became great friends. He used to visit us, almost weekly, when we lived in Twickenham, as he used to visit Kew Gardens with his mate, Phyllis, and they used to stop off at our place for sandwiches and cups of tea and listen to Bulgarian folk music, then off they'd go. He was wonderful company, funny, clever, very entertaining. He did me a big favour by singing on *Rock Bottom*, as he never usually sings other people's words. The song he sang required a kind of Scots Jamaican accent, which only he could do. He was very polite about it. He only left out one syllable.

How do you feel about inspiring the concept of "Wyatting" - where pranksters hijack pub jukeboxes and play "difficult" records to baffled patrons?

Richard, Crosby, Merseyside

I wouldn't do it. I've never tried to get myself heard where I'm not wanted. I just make records for the kind of people who like the kind of records I make. It's as simple as that. I've never had any need to reach beyond that or to make people listen to me or to expand my audience. There's plenty of music for everybody. If I was in a pub I'd put on a Girls Aloud record, or whatever anyone else wanted to hear. The last time I put stuff on a jukebox. I put on some Ray Charles. I wouldn't have thought that was offensive to anybody!

STAR QUESTION



What approach were you taking to music-making while making *Old Rottenhat* and the "Work In Progress" EP?

Alexis Taylor, Hot Chip

By that time, towards the mid-'80s, I was listening to Radio Moscow and going to Kurdish and Palestinian Liberation meetings. I was unsure if other musicians would go along with where I'd got to, politically and didn't want to embarrass them into playing tunes where they disapproved of the lyrics. We were short of funds and I was trying to do things almost entirely on my own. There may have been a bit of paraplegic politics in it, in honesty, to see what I could do unaided. So the music was simple, reduced to bare bones, and ideas and lyrics were distilled to their essence.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

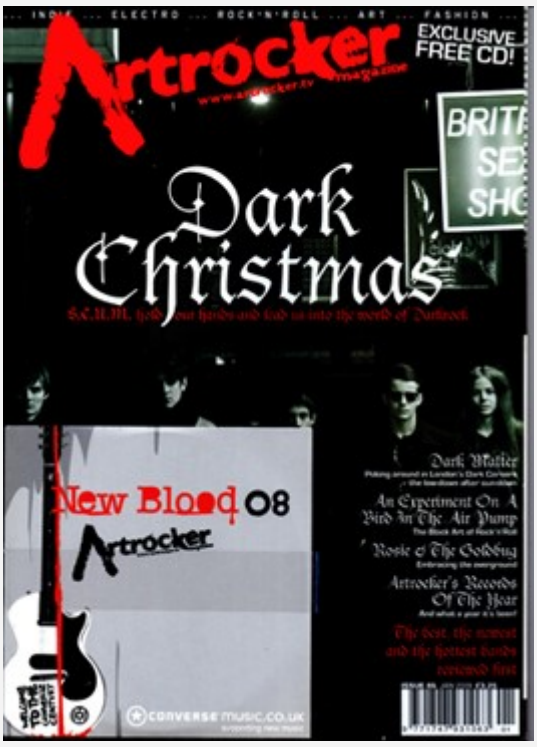
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt Revelatory Revolutionary - Artrocker - issue 85 - January 2009

ROBERT WYATT REVELATORY REVOLUTIONARY



Robert Wyatt was born in the south of England at the end of the Second World War and therefore probably qualifies to be your grandad. He may be the oldest living and currently recording credible artist to be featured in this column. The bulk of his albums have just been reissued by the cool folks at Domino Records, home of Franz Ferdinand and a ton of other Artrocker faves. Presented with nine albums (plus more not on Domino but equally as vital), how do you decide which ones to buy / blag / download / steal / ignore?? Ain't no search engine can help you better than the living breathing Hauser O'Brien who analyses Robert Wyatt's glittering career below.

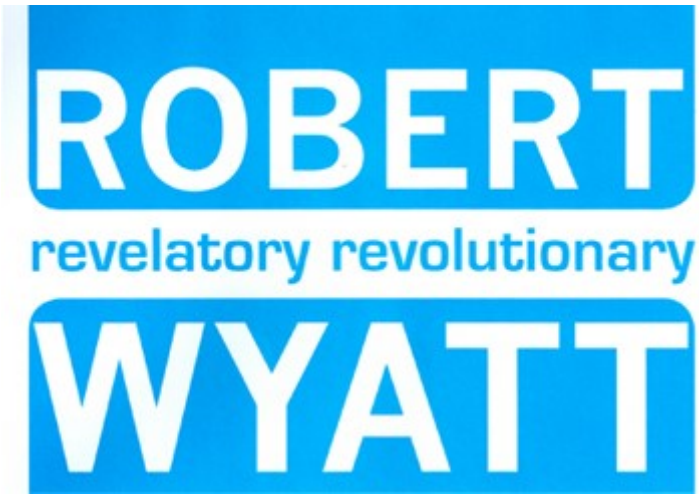
The Soft Machine (1968-1970) **The End Of An Ear** (1970)

In the late 1960s (mainly) English psych jazz rock avant gardeners Robert Wyatt (drums, vox), Kevin Ayers (bs, vox), Mike Ratledge (kybds), Hugh Hopper (bs) phoned up obscure cult deadpan cut-up author William S. Burroughs and asked him if they could nick the title of his abstract sci-fi novel follow up to Naked Lunch for the name of their band (which is more than I ever did). 'Yes' said Uncle Bill.

The first two Soft Machine albums featured a rapidly changing dreamscape mixture of out-of-step yet prescient pop songs from another world. Their curious melanges of music hall Beatles chansons, sad beatific balladeering, psychedelic rock, squeaky free improvised noise and far out jazz stylings, recorded mainly at the bottom of a muddy pond, fit right in there with the early Brits Floyd and kosmiches Faust. But with no guitar.

By the time of the cunningly titled 'Third' and, ahem, 'Fourth', they had lost pop monster Kevin Ayers and moved on to (vinyl) side-long improvisations, things of strangeness, beauty (and charm). Still with no guitar. Wyatt's incredibly rhythmic timekeeping backlined a driving pileup of revolution and beauty. The band inevitably became a self-indulgent wankfest - or an essential cog in the wheel of British progressive jazz fusion, depending on

how you look at it, after Wyatt left in 1970 to follow up work on his 'side project' solo album, 'The End Of An Ear'.



There's a reason he billed himself as an 'out of work pop singer' you know. Removed from the apparently stifling band scenario Wyatt produced a stunning recording of great beauty, a collision of strange furry creatures, children's piano, wordless vocal cornets, spiralling ecstatic ritual, tension, release and full on tribute poems to his roots. Thudding stomping jazz-rock instrumentals, soundtracks to journeys into the back of his mind, 'The End Of An Ear' is a bridge between an age rooted in itself, the 1960s, and a body of work that is timeless and fruitful. While The Soft Machine created noise art, this bridge takes Wyatt's music into a world of weird pop. Join us. Still no guitars by the way.

Rock Bottom (1974)

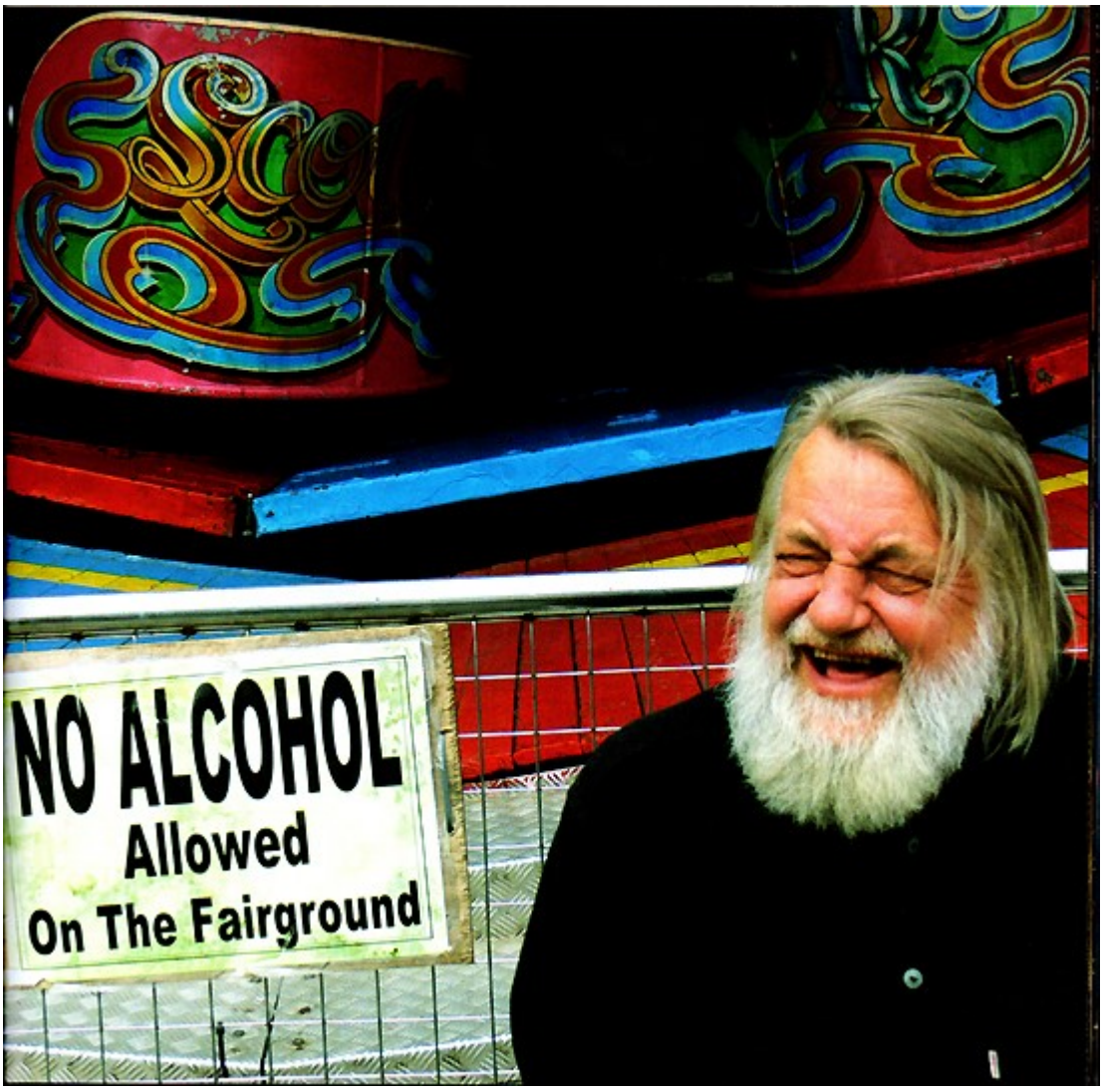
As any schoolboy knows, Robert Wyatt fell out of a window at a party in 1973 and has ever since been in a wheelchair. This would normally be a problem as using one's feet is usually considered to be integral to the process of drumming. However Mr Wyatt knows that drumming is not always about drums. As The Slits squawked, 'silence is a rhythm too'. And a piano is a set of 88 tuned drums. And a voice don't need no legs. And what a voice. We have to go on about his voice. Wyatt's voice. His unique timbre (you can always tell it's him). His southern accent. The way it swirls and dips and dives and wanders. The journeys around the world of music it takes, nabbing ideas from freeform doowop, sliding up a helter skelter to the stars, snatching a hook from a choirboy and swerving thru a muttering homeless hostel, ending up in a blues bar in the deep South with a chanting audience of African jazzers. Flying free, escaping the rules of normal vocalising. There before Bjork, a jazz voice made Artrock. This conceptual piece of communal personal exploration and grounds all Robert Wyatt's future work in a one-off template that probably is one of the closest examples of'art' representing 'life'. Or something. And one guitar, courtesy of hairy Tubular Bell Mike Oldfield, on one track, the stunning six minute closer, 'Little Red Robin Hood Hit The Road', segueing away into the curious poetic Highland meanderings of Ivor Cutler. Rock Bottom also heralds the appearance of his muse, sleeve artist and co-worker Alfreda Benge, an unbroken thread throughout his work. If you want to know about how to make a personal statement, get this album. In the great seventies rock tradition, most of this album can be found in extended wild live versions on Domino release, Theatre Royal Drury Lane'.

Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard (1975)

A game of two halves, 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard' comprises mostly a collection of covers. One of Wyatt's skills throughout his career is in reinterpreting other people's work (gotta be different - or better - or both). It doesn't matter a jot if you don't know the original version of Mongezi Feza's 'Sonia'. Just dig Wyatt's beatific shining vocal and the song's loping twisting rhythms. Kind of world art jazz rock. Not such an exciting personal experiment as it's predecessor, but still worthy nonetheless. And you can read into the word 'worthy' whatever you please.

Nothing Can Stop Us (1981)

And then it went on hold for a while. Wyatt wasn't to release another solo elpee until the middle 1980s. The only thing to keep the rabid fans at bay was a series of singles on Rough Trade cunningly created and curated to give credibility to this wonderful secret of English crumbling culture commentary. Wyatt cast off his vision and seer hat of the seventies and truly donned his political ideologue hat. The offkilter a capella (plus harmonium)barbershop quartet in a freaky hall of mirrors of 'Born Again Cretin' was a swerveball recognised by the artier postpunks. Chic's 'At Last I Am Free' is a weepy fragile eggshell. 'Stalin Wasn't Stallin", hails how the Bear beat former ally, the Beast of Berlin and heralds a multitude of left wing songs to come throughout Wyatt's future work including 'Red Flag' in case you didn't quite get the drift. 'Nothing Can Stop Us' is a primer in student revolution. In the eighties every student home had to have one. Now it's almost a missive from ancient history. During this period he had a hit with Elvis Costello's anti-Falklands War protest song, 'Shipbuilding', which can be found amongst a collection of EPs in this reissue frenzy.



Old Rottenhat (1985) **Dondestan** (1991) **Dondestan [Revisited]** (1993)

'Old Rottenhat' is a serious collection of perfect iron fist/velvet glove works. His gentle falsetto rides over undulating keyboards, singing of a message of revolution, anti-Western sentiment, left wing hooks all tied up with a bow of comradely whisting. Casio keyboards and drum machines wind down the road of excess, pointing out its failings and our duties. Every note, every harmony, every melody vital and pure. If you want church music but don't want religion, this is your bag.

'Dondestan (Revisited)' is a revised version of a previous album, released when the money ran out and then revisioned and reversioned by the revelatory revolutionary. Some

melancholia, some plangent loneliness, some agitation, a lot of ... space. Every note a winner, if you want to sit and weep to a ballad to the fallen, a paean to freedom, or a dark journey through your very soul. Still no guitars, by the way. Sorry about that.

Shleep (1997) **Cuckooland** (2003) **Comicopera** (2007)

And so, to the part where Captain Bob cheers up a bit, drops some of the revolutionary styling, and makes some darn pop music. With guitars. Really. Naturally not everything on his most recent three albums is upful and jumpin'. 'Shleep' passes like a dream, not surprisingly given old ambient pal and Artrocker hero Eno's involvement amongst a tribe of famous friends. Quite possibly the funniest Dylan tribute ever appears, in 'Blues In Bob Minor'. 'Cuckooland' is an excursion around the bars and musical styles of the world, smoky jazz, synth'd chorale, dramatic compositions that would happily sit amongst the characters of a David Lynch movie, while 'Comicopera' is perhaps one of the most, ahem, accessible albums of his lengthy career. Much more could, and should, be said about this incredible body of work. All you can do is go and explore. Pick up a smash hit collection ('His Greatest Misses' is a pretty good catch-all) or raid your local library. Smash and grab your cool friend's collection. Give Wyatt a listen. You'll be converted, convinced, or feel conned. Whichever way, every path is worth following.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt Interviewed: The Quietus Salutes An English Treasure - Thequietus.com - December 19th, 2008

The QUIETUS
WWW.THEQUIETUS.COM

Quietus Artists Of 2008

Robert Wyatt Interviewed: The Quietus Salutes An English Treasure

In an in-depth interview, Robert Wyatt talks to Jonny Mugwump about his life and political beliefs, getting nervous when recording with Bjork, and the importance of imperfection in music

One of the highlights of the Quietus' year was Domino's reissuing of the entire Robert Wyatt solo back catalogue, an almighty treasure trove of delights from one of Britain's truly outstanding and unique artists. He is, of course, gifted with one of the most sublime and idiosyncratic voices that was a real pleasure to hear wafting from my telephone receiver bright and early one morning...

Are you an early riser Robert?

"As a matter of fact yes. I was up at 5 this morning."

What do you do - do you go straight to work?

"Oh, I'm just panicking. Dawn panic is my speciality. Then I get up and watch strange late night drifting into morning TV programs and then maybe I try and go to sleep again for another couple of hours, but I'll still be up at 7 or 8."

So what are your working hours then?

"Early to rise, early to bed - I work peasant hours. The first job I ever had was working in a forest where you have to be in the forest at 4.30 or 5 in the morning and you have to

get up in the dark. Obviously you have to finish when the light goes which in the winter can be as early as 3.30, and then lunchtime used to be about 9.30 in the morning. That's my time still. In them olden days [laughs] before artificial light, then people had to live by the daylight - I feel that I'm a throwback to more primitive times anyway."

Wyatt could be nothing other than English. He is a product of ancient traditions and the industrial revolution. His voice feels part of the landscape; of sweetly melancholy open fields and moorland. I offer that the English landscape is at its finest in the morning.

"Yes, it's quite a secretive place. The world is so very different in the morning. In cities, if you're coming home from somewhere you can hear echoing streets and when you see the first commuters going to work and you're totally distant from that - you feel part of a different world and that can be very magical."



And the voice, your singing style seems plugged into those older cultures that sometimes can become apparent in these moments...

"I try and strip away various habits and mannerisms which popular singing has acquired. Accidents and habits occur and so styles change, which is of course necessary. But the first songs I ever sang were Victorian adaptations of folk songs which isn't the same thing as folk songs themselves but this is what I grew up with. We had a friend called James Reeves who collected these kinds of songs and there was a political element to it in the first part of the 20th century, you know reclaiming people's culture and that kind of thing. It wasn't so overtly political, though, more implied in the mere fact of taking this culture seriously.

"When I try and sing it's like a process of elimination and I try and avoid doing anything that I don't think is necessary. I feel like I work in a very primitive way. I like to know what the notes are, what the words are and what the most effective way of getting them across is. It's important that I try not to perform in an actorly kind of way and obviously some people must find that easy to work with. I try and recede as a character and almost disappear behind the note and the word rather than stand in the front trying to wave myself at everybody."

I suggest that this might partly be down to rock being the more minor influence in Robert's history. Even when touring with Hendrix, Soft Machine at their loudest were at the very least one half jazz outfit and that's certainly the closest

that he's ever sailed to those shores.

"Well, In the mid 60s I was in a dance band, singing and drumming and I was actually trying to sound like Van Morrison. When I hear these tapes if it wasn't for the fact that my name was on it I really wouldn't know it was me. I did try and do that stuff and never very convincingly and I didn't start finding me own voice until I started singing my own songs and it's not even a decision, it's just what happens after that."

And, going back to your voice, you've collaborated with many artists from quite a range of genres.

"I never seek collaborations other with than the musicians who play on my own records. I get asked often but I don't always say yes but I am surprised by some of the people who ask me to work with them. And I don't see any barriers between genres as such. You know, if you compare John Lennon to Mendelssohn it's quite simple that Lennon is a better composer and I just like him more. It doesn't matter that one is classical and the other is pop. But I'm always surprised at who wants to work with me, always flattered. And it's strange as I don't feel like a particularly flexible musician but it obviously suits some people and it's always nice for me as it stretches me and puts me into musical situations that I wouldn't have been able to think of myself."

One of my favourite vocals of yours was with mid the mid 90s pastoral techno outfit Ultramarine - the 'Kingdom' single and then further vocals on the sadly forgotten but truly excellent United Kingdoms album.

"Oh yes. Geoff Travis from Rough Trade introduced them to me and they gave me some lyrics that they had found which is in fact one of the earliest songs I'd ever sung. They were from the middle of the nineteenth century, early industrial revolutionary songs which was funny as what Ultramarine were doing was so new. I came up with a tune that would work with them and sang it and just thought I would give it a go and they put it out on their record."



And you had a recent notable collaboration with Bjork on the Medulla album. She's somebody who I feel you have many similarities with. You both tap into older traditions and skim across genres and manage to make highly idiosyncratic pop music that no matter what more experimental influences are at work still remains pop.

"Well thank you, yes. I was very touched and amazed that Bjork got in touch with us and that she came down here to record for a weekend. I just sang everything I could and put it all down on tape and in some ways wish I had sung less but I was very nervous so I just sang my little socks off. And it was lovely to have her in the house, it was very magical and she was everything you could have wished for. Her approach to things is just so entirely unlimited and open."

I think something that marks out your career is a sense of intimacy and the feel of them having a home-recorded quality Does this go back to Rock Bottom and the situation you were forced into because of the accident [when Robert fell out of a window and broke his back leaving him permanently wheelchair-bound] or was this a more conscious decision and change in style anyway form your previous work with both Soft Machine and Matching Mole?

"Well, Alfie was working in Venice on a film set [Don't Look Now] and I went with her and she had a keyboard which is what I wrote the majority of Rock Bottom on and then we got home and I was living in her little flat and I just had a notebook, a tape recorder and a

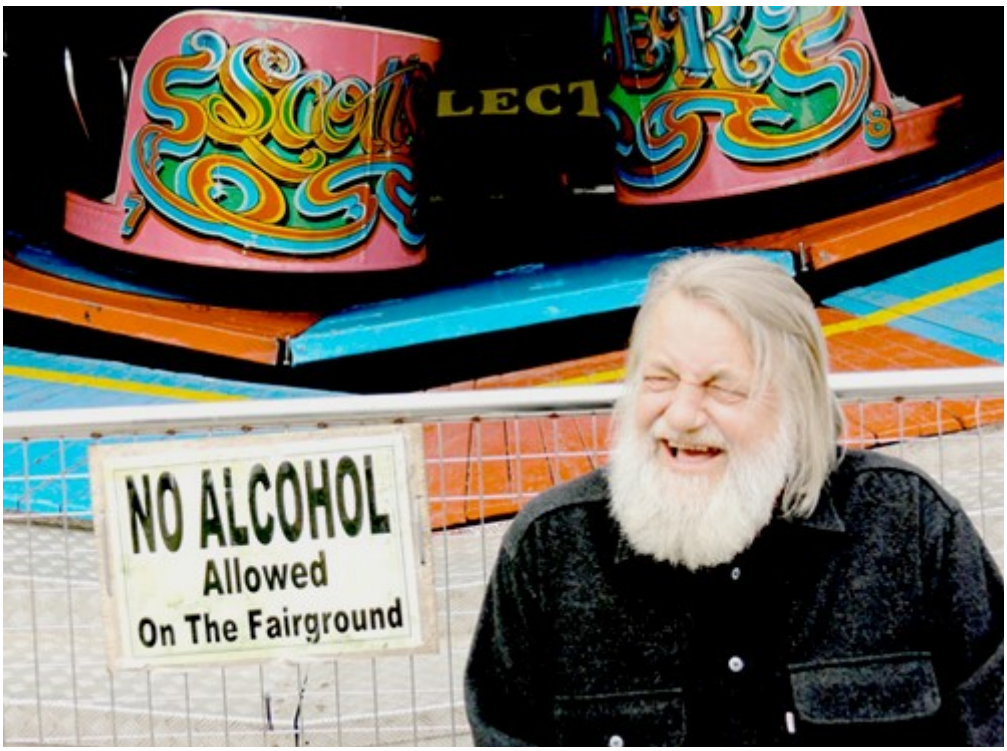
keyboard, music was much simpler those days [laughs]. People assume it was written after the accident but that's not the case at all. But essentially, I can't remember which parts were written when but it's a lot more detached in my mind from the real life circumstances. People tend to think its a lot more anecdotal than it actually is and that it was about my physical circumstances but its not as straightforward as that. I was only affected in the obvious sense of not being able to play drums or have a band anymore and in the end it was liberating as I had the freedom of not being in a group. And this is all good for the record, as you have to pay attention to the keyboard, the singing and the songs.

"Paul Klee has this analogy of a tree taking root in the soil and taking up water and chemicals and it comes out with whatever plants and leaves its going to come out with, depending on the chemicals. But also if the tree is an apple tree then it's going to come out with apples. The hospital experience and coming out of there was a mind over matter thing, though, and in the end I felt like it was just another silly practical thing I had to deal with. Obviously I had to get used to being in a wheelchair and everything, but otherwise I didn't let it get to me."

In the 70s your music began to become more explicitly political (although not entirely so). Why did this come about?

"Well I had always been politically motivated anyway but in the 70s I found a vicious drift to the right in the press and in politics. I'd been brought up in Post War Britain and this felt like a very positive time as it seemed that fascism had been beaten and we had a free health service and free education systems. I was born into this, so to see this return of nastiness and racism shocked me quite a bit. As things drifted more to the right I drifted more to the left.

"On the whole, I feel that the right wing forces have won and the left wing failed or fell into self-contradiction or whatever but I still feel a lot of victories were won for what we were fighting for. There's much less colour prejudice now, more tolerance and things like fair trade are a lot more prominent - animal welfare and things like that are no longer the preserve of fringe academia and are part of a daily debate. A person like Nelson Mandela being released was very important. But the fact is that the world is still run by rich investors and the old colonial countries in their guise of super-powers are still screwing the Third World and hiding behind this façade of bringing democracy to the heathen masses, which is obviously really depressing."



Did you hear about the recent BNP thing when all their identities were revealed online?

"Yeah I found that quite entertaining in a way. I mean they're not a serious political force but they were very scary in the 80s. I love the way that the bloke who runs it suddenly says: 'Well now you can see that we're in all in respectable jobs like teaching and the police', and everybody else is 'Well yeah, that's actually the problem mate' and they're bizarrely trying to show that they're not just working class or something. What a funny bunch. I mean they like to be exclusive in the old-fashioned sense and you know if they want to set up some peculiar incestuous whites-only enclave [laughing] then let them y'know, just don't let them anywhere near any kind of governmental system."

Your music is always in motion. It is always you but you restlessly play around, using familiar and unfamiliar musicians.

"I don't play live once I've done a song and 'cos I don't perform it over and over again for another six months, it's one way to keep myself interested. Even though I record in Phil's [Manzera] studio, the albums are homemade; they're not machine-tooled to the point of mechanical abstracts. I like paintings and I like seeing sticky marks on the painting so you can see the physical reality within the canvas. That can be a huge problem within classical music where the perfection becomes clinical. It's almost counter-productive to clean off every little speck of dust. Music doesn't come from a conscious narrative thing – it's not an analytical thing or at least it isn't for me - it comes from somewhere different like the world of dreams. You see, I like the fact that you're a person in sound trying to reach somebody else through sound and if you lose the imperfections you lose that human touch I think."

Jonny Mugwump

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Art-Rock's Grumpy Comedian - Mojo - december 2008



ART-ROCK'S GRUMPY COMEDIAN

By his own admission, Robert Wyatt's career has been a summation of his influences, from the outer reaches of jazz, to Ray Charles, Buddy Holly, and music from across the globe. "The underlying ideology of the kind of rock I was involved in was that we started out simple and we got dead clever" he says. "But I was brought up with dead clever. Since then I've been trying to get really simple."

As a child, Wyatt was encouraged to explore literature and music by his left-leaning, culturally enlightened parents. As a young drummer and singer he played in Canterbury band The Wilde Flowers and established himself in Soft Machine from 1966 until 1971. When he fell while climbing out of a window at a party in 1973 and became paralysed from the waist down, it spelt the end for the new line-up of his band Matching Mole, and his career as a kit drummer.

But luckily he was also a talented vocalist, keyboard player and songwriter, which he demonstrated on his first post-accident solo album, *Rock Bottom*, in 1974. Since then, his output has been a source of delight and fascination; his left-wing politics have never been far from the surface, but his consternation at human behaviour has been balanced by a peculiar *Joie de vivre*, and since the'90s an increasing number of his lyrics have been written by his partner - and album sleeve designer - Alfreda Benge. His choice of musical collaborators has included Ivor Cutler, Paul Weller, Annie Whitehead and Hugh Hopper, and he has additionally guested with such artists as Ben Watt, Ultramarine and, most recently, French popster Bertrand Burgalat.

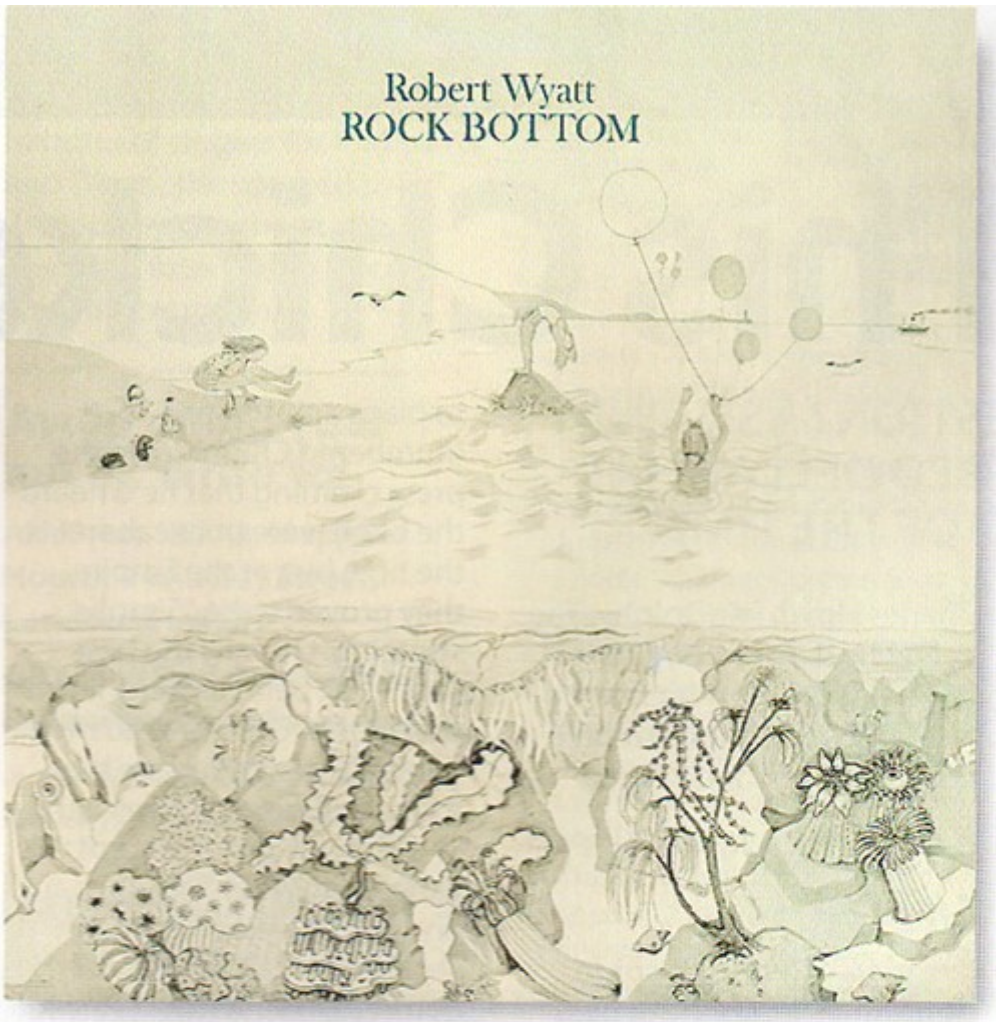
With his back catalogue reissued this month by the Domino label, it's time again to listen to Wyatt's lisping, pure-toned vocal style, memorably described by Ryuichi Sakamoto as the "saddest voice in the world".



Broadcasting from the gnome service: Robert Wyatt, one of the good guys.

Robert Wyatt

ART-ROCK'S GRUMPY COMEDIAN.
BY MIKE BARNES



1 Robert Wyatt
Rock Bottom

VIRGIN 1974, REISSUE DOMINO REWIGCD40 2008, £12

You say: "It's a musical trip into neverland and beyond." Mystic, mojo4music

An album of great originality, freewheeling musical invention and broad emotional range – albeit fed through Wyatt's allusive lyrical lexicon – and with some lovely tunes, *Rock Bottom* is a desert island disc for the Wyatt aficionado and deserves to be heard by everyone. Although inextricably linked to, and recorded after, Wyatt's accident, all the songs were composed beforehand. Produced by Pink Floyd's Nick Mason, it's a luxuriant world of childlike innocence – going back even further on the pre-speech syllables of Alifib – evoking a peculiar mix of joy and unease. Mike Oldfield, bass guitarist Richard Sinclair and drummer Laurie Allen all make telling contributions.



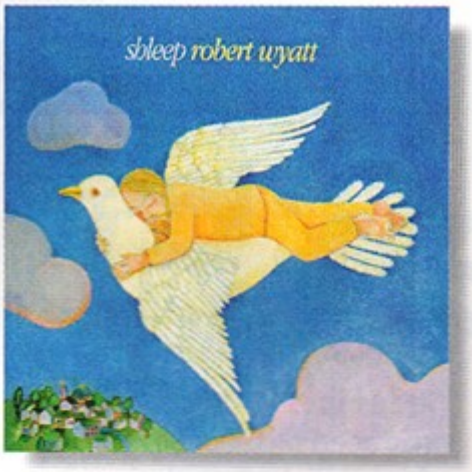
3 Robert Wyatt

Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard

VIRGIN 1975, REISSUE DOMINO REWIGCD41 2008, £12

You say: "A blissful record, a favourite since its release." David Squires, mojo4music

Darker than *Rock Bottom*, *Ruth* is hallmarked by brooding, melancholy songs and instrumentals. On Soup Song, the hapless protagonist hopes a "tummy ache will bring you to your knees" as Gary Windo spits out an acidic tenor solo. The violent, symbiotic relationship between the characters in Team Spirit reads like Samuel Beckett, while Brian Eno's treatments and George Khan's wig-lifting sax solo create an energised, blasted soundscape. Respite comes with trumpeter Mongezi Feza's joyous instrumental, Sonia, and the hypnotic, incantatory Solar Flares.



2 Robert Wyatt

Shleep

HANNIBAL 1997, REISSUE DOMINO REWIGCD45, £12

You say: "Beautiful, powerful collection, cohesively satisfying." WyattHarp, mojo4music

Wyatt's first for six years, *Shleep* was a revelation, a warm-blooded collection of songs, and lighter in mood than much of his '80s work. There was more of a pop sensibility on show, especially on Heeps Of Sheeps, written with Alfreda Benge and Brian Eno, and an unusually upbeat song about insomnia. The Duchess is a deliciously droll portrait of Benge featuring improvising saxophonist Evan Parker, and Blues In Bob Minor is a nod of sorts to Dylan's Subterranean Home-sick Blues. Wyatt had rediscovered the cornet, which he plays in animated fashion on September The Ninth.



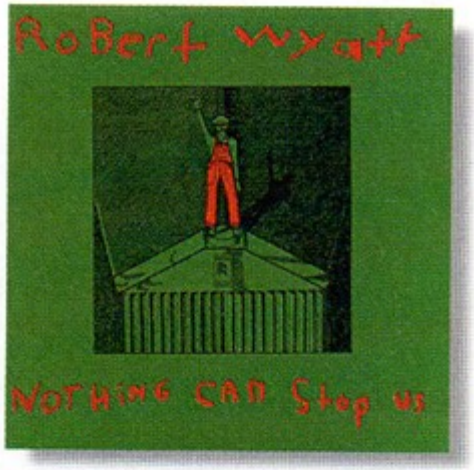
4 The Soft Machine

Vols. 1&2

PROBE 1968/9, REISSUE CHISWICK CDWIKD920 1989 £12.48

You say: "The Softs at their best, I love his drumming." Matt Harvey, via e-mail

Given his later solo career, it's fairly easy to overlook Wyatt's standing as one of the most exciting British drummers of his generation. But on the psychedelic jazz-pop of The Soft Machine's first two LPs his swinging, hyperactive style placed him somewhere between Elvin Jones and Keith Moon. On *Vol. 1* his vocals carry some naïve but charming inflections dating back to the soul covers he sang with Wilde Flowers. The more experimental *Vol. 2* finds him adopting his matey, vernacular style on Pataphysical Introduction and Dedicated To You But You Weren't Listening.



5 Robert Wyatt

Nothing Can Stop Us

ROUGH TRADE 1982, REISSUE DOMINO REWIGCD42 2008, £12

You say: "Best communist pop album ever. Still relevant." Stakhanov, via e-mail

Recently, Wyatt has opined that musicians shouldn't be expected to be political – instead, politicians should stop acting like rock stars. But as a communist activist in Thatcher's '80s, he was galvanised into recording a series of singles for Rough Trade, including Elvis Costello's Shipbuilding, Chilean socialist folk singer Violet Parra's Arauco, Billie Holiday's Strange Fruit and Stalin Wasn't Stallin', the wartime gospel paean to America's short-lived ally. The album, with its poignant reading of The Red Flag, proved political music need not be clichéd.



7 Robert Wyatt
Cuckooland

HANNIBAL 2003, REISSUE DOMINO REWIGCD47 2008, £12

You say: "One song will convince, a sad and beautiful record." Svenn, mojo4music

Cuckooland was created amid the rumblings of the Iraq war, which informs Alfreda Benge's lyrics to the poignant Lullaby For Hamza, about an Iraqi child traumatised by bombing during the 1990/91 Gulf War. A lengthy, varied collection – with a break of 30 seconds in the middle to give the listener breathing space – *Cuckooland* finds Wyatt in fine voice, despite self-deprecating claims that it was reduced to a "wino's mutter". His first duets on his own albums, with Karen Mantler, yield the brooding Beware and a bittersweet take on Antonio Carlos Jobim's Insensatez.



6 Matching Mole
Matching Mole

CBS 1972, REISSUE COLUMBIA 505478 IMPORT 2002, £10.49

You say: "Tight music-making, songs about songwriting!" Garth, mojo4music

After being ousted from Soft Machine in 1971, Wyatt formed Matching Mole with guitarist Phil Miller, bassist Bill McCormick and former Caravanner David Sinclair on keyboards, although the group's debut was ostensibly a Wyatt solo album. Instant Pussy sees the first outing of his trademark wordless scat singing, and the bittersweet O Caroline finds him wondering aloud about the efficacy of addressing her in song. Signed Curtain goes even further with its famous meta-lyric ("This is the first verse/ This is the chorus"). The full group numbers are an idiosyncratic mix of jazz and rock.

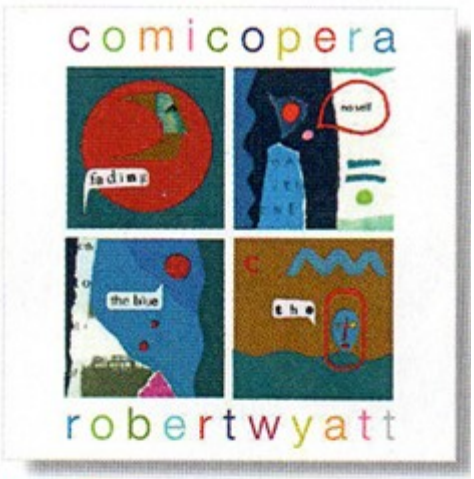


9 Robert Wyatt
His Greatest Misses

HANNIBAL VACK1282 2005, £9.05

You say: "Superb overview for the lucky newby. Excellent!" Carl Linge, via e-mail

With 17 tracks covering nearly 30 years from *Rock Bottom* to *Cuckooland*, *His Greatest Misses* is currently the newcomer's best point of entry. It's endorsed, though not compiled, by the man himself, but like a number of previous Wyatt compilations, it's heading for deletion – *Going Back A Bit* and *Flotsam And Jetsam* are now pricey and near unobtainable, a great shame as they contain a number of Wyatt's singles and collaborations, which often slip under the radar. Also available, the *EPs* box set is a curious mixture of singles, LP tracks and remixes.

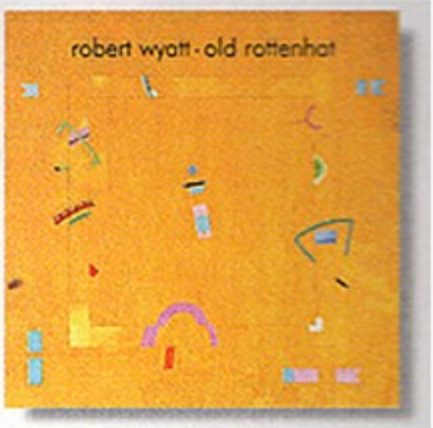


8 Robert Wyatt
Comicopera

DOMINO WIGCD202 2007, £12

You say: "Uneasy subject matter and lovely sounds – typical Wyatt." N Robinson, via e-mail

Wyatt's most conceptually bizarre album, *Comicopera* moves through a set of love songs into a series of slice-of-life tableaux that start out jocular and end up with the hatred felt by a victim of bombing in the Iraq war. It ends with a batch of brooding songs sung in Italian and Spanish as Wyatt was avoiding his native language in protest against Anglo-US warfare. So, no amusing denouement, then, but nevertheless it's one of his most accessible albums, for the most part full of melody and space. Just As You Are, a duet with Monica Vasconcelos, is disarmingly tender.



10 Robert Wyatt
Old Rottenhat

ROUGH TRADE 1985, REISSUE DOMINO REWIGCD43 2008, £12

You say: "His most melodic, well sung collection of tunes." Charlie Tokyo, via mojo4music

Horrified to hear that his music had been played on Radio Free Europe, Wyatt recorded songs that would be banned by all such right-wing media. His lyrical entrenchment was also reflected in his most musically and politically concentrated venture, a set of solo songs comprising voice, keyboards and percussion. Wyatt's assertion that his music is essentially funny might raise eyebrows when faced with songs critiquing liberal hypocrites and the US and Australian roles in supporting Indonesia's military presence in East Timor. But the luminosity of his melodies remains.

AvoidTHESE!

Robert Wyatt's debut 1970 solo album, the rambling, sketchy instrumental collection, *The End Of An Ear*, is definitely the odd one out in his back catalogue. There are also a huge number of Wyatt-era Soft Machine live sets, radio sessions and demo albums available on CD, but as the quality of these varies from the brilliant to the decidedly very ropey, all but the most devoted fans are advised to seek guidance here. The series titled *Canterburied Sounds* showcases rehearsal material of a widely varying sonic and musical quality dating back to the era of The Wilde Flowers and is consequently for religiously devoted fans only.



Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Inner Sleeve - Wire N° 297 - November 2008

THE INNER SLEEVE



ARTWORK SELECTED THIS MONTH BY ROBERT WYATT

Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln and others Angolan Refugee Rescue Committee benefit concert poster 1963

Design by St Clair Clement

I've had this poster for a benefit concert at the Town Hall, West 53rd St, New York City, 7 September 1963, for over 40 years. It's precious, and hangs on my wall.

I didn't get to New York until nearly five years after this concert, when my jazz heroes and heroines became sidelined. When the rock invasion took centre stage. So this poster creates an aching nostalgia for the jazz years that I grew to love from a great distance. Time and space having had no effect on the connection I experienced.

It's for a concert on behalf of the Angolan Refugee Rescue Committee, featuring the most authoritative modern jazz drummer and mentor, Max Roach, with his jazz ensemble (plus a 16 voice choir conducted by Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson - how I'd love to have witnessed that!) and the gritty but utterly sophisticated vocalist Abbey Lincoln.

The journey these two had already made in music is so interesting to me. Abbey Lincoln stepped into the limelight as a statuesque torch singer (appearing in *The Girl Can't Help It* I seem to remember), and even Max Roach had a glamorous movie moment (as the drummer duetting with Pearl Bailey in *Carmen Jones*). Then, just a few years later, with *We Insist!* - Freedom Now Suite, they emerged as perhaps the Malcolm X and Angela Davis of jazz culture.

I love this poster for the content, and for what it evokes, the tantalising prospect of a concert that I can only imagine, the culmination of an extraordinary era in the history of music, and the heyday of the civil rights movement.

Also, the form and style of the poster really appeal to me. The already archaic hand-set printing process, the use of wood letters, half tone blocks, and so on. The printer would very soon afterwards have been put out of business by new technology. And the vividness of the addresses for buying tickets, in the Bronx, Queens, Lexington Avenue - evocative stuff. Unlikely there's even a trace of those shops now.

This 1963 poster epitomises everything that came to matter to me as a fledgling musician, a poignant souvenir of what I still consider to be the Real Thing.

Robert Wyatt's back catalogue is reissued this month by Domino



> Zoom

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Robert Wyatt - Clash Q&A - 28.11.2008

Robert Wyatt - Clash Q&A

The celebrated musician talks to Clash

A staunch humanitarian with a high, keening voice that explores the outer reaches of both rock and jazz – it's safe to say that Robert Wyatt is an almost unique figure in modern music.



After a tragic accident left him wheelchair bound in 1973, Wyatt picked himself up and embarked upon a singular solo career. Sometimes flirting with the charts, but more often than not a lone voice crying in the wilderness, Wyatt seems to embody the curious eccentricity that makes English pop music so endearing.

The recent Domino re-issuing of his back catalogue has provided a new generation with an entry point into the work of this wonderful songwriter. From 'Rock Bottom', recorded in the aftermath of his accident, to 2007's double album 'Comicopera', the 63-year-old Wyatt remains a confusing, probing and above all engaging talent.

ClashMusic.com spent some time with this personable maverick. Here's what we discovered…

What is it about jazz that you find so enticing?

Well my parents used to listen to a lot of classical music and stuff, so what I liked about jazz was the motion, the urgency to it. Classical music I always think is like a lake or a sea or something, whereas jazz is more like a fast moving river.

What came first, the drumming or the singing?

Well it was drumming really. I was basically a drummer, and I only sang because somebody had to, really! Sometimes we had a singer and sometimes we didn't. There were some things that you could sing and play drums at the same time on. Like James Brown's 'I Feel Good', you know (sings) "I Feel Good!". One bar of singing and one bar of drumming! The harder the music got, the more jazzy it got. I mean when we started out we played club music and I sang, but then later on I concentrated more on drumming. Then in the '70s I mainly concentrated on singing, basically because I couldn't really drum anymore anyway.

And a visiting American soldier taught you how to play the drums?

He wasn't a soldier but he was a jazz drummer. He stayed at our house for a bit, and he taught us a bit of stuff. He was a bit of a drifter really. He taught me things like how to hold the sticks and that sort of thing. I didn't take him up on a lot of it but I was glad to know what I should be doing, if I wanted to do it.

The Soft Machine moved to progressive music, how did that come about?

Well, it happened because we were a live band really. I would have liked to have recorded more stuff in the studio, singles and stuff, but we didn't have the opportunity to do that, so we developed a live set where the improvisation aspect was extended. Eventually it just got longer and longer, until the songs were just points for starting off, and finishing. The type of audience we were playing to in the late '60s, I mean there was a really wide gap between the sort of people who listened to radio and the people who went to rock festivals and stuff. Almost like two different tribes, and we were playing to the type of people who went to festivals, outdoor stuff and things that went on for hour and hours. And the bands played accordingly. In retrospect there was a lot of space to be allowed to do new stuff, and in the venues we played there was no need to play songs that people recognised or anything like that. The idea was to just keep working out new ideas, and that just seemed to be allowed. We just played in places where that was welcomed, and when we played in places where it wasn't welcome we didn't get any work again.

'Rock Bottom' is regard as your first solo record. Could you describe the circumstances of this album?

What it was, simply, is that I spent about a year in hospital, and it gave me time to think about what I wanted to think about. In a way, oddly enough, the pressure was off. Having a band, and do we have enough money to keep going? Of course in hospital you don't have any of that stuff to think about, you think more abstractly. When I came out I was full of music, but I didn't really need a band as most of it I could just do on my own. So that's what I did. Then I got a few friends in to play the other bits, just adding bits and pieces. It was kind of liberating in a way not to have to put everything into a group format.

You have had hit singles, such as 'I'm A Believer' and 'Shipbuilding' – what emphasis do you put on this?

Neither of those really made money, so they weren't commercial successes in that sense; I just found myself in that situation. I mean, I've always liked pop music – I've got friends who don't but I always did. When you're a teenager and discover girls, pop songs are inexplicably linked to girls and wistful songs about them. I've always had nice sentimental, romantic things in my head when I think about pop records, and I've always wanted to have a go at them. I'm not a serious contender in the pop world though, as I don't look right and I don't sound right.

You mention your voice, is it true you can sing across multiple octaves?

It depends! Certainly when I was young I could get amazingly high and I can now get very low, but no longer get very high. So at no particular time have I been able to reach all those octaves, but I've been lucky in that as I get older I can reach the lower ones. So I can't do all those girl songs any more, but I can now do Johnny Cash songs that I couldn't do when I was younger.

You frequently work in a collaborative way – how does this work in the studio?

Well, I always try and do as much as I can by myself. I try to create the atmosphere of the songs and then invite musicians in. I sort of have an idea of the theme of the songs, how they're going to be, because if you get a band in and they have no idea of how it's going to work in their head then they won't really know how to play. I can't really write music well enough to tell people 'well just play that B flat and everything will be alright'. They have to be able to hear what it is. I do as much as I can, basic keyboards, bit of percussion put a vocal on and then I invite musicians in. Actually, mostly one by one, and then I put it together afterwards to make it sound like a group. I prefer working with musicians one to one, in a more intimate way. I mean, every musician works in a different way – jazz musicians are different than rock musicians. For example, if I'm working with a double bass player he might want it a bit quiet, but if you've got Paul Weller coming into the studio he likes everything incredibly loud. You'd have everything really loud for Paul, just for a day or so.

You seem to record sporadically, on your own terms – what prompts this?

Well, what I like about this bunch of records is that when you add it up there's quite a lot of stuff there. But I've still kept doing stuff on and off for 40 years, even if not all of it is very high profile. I've done lots of stuff that's not under my own name, working for other people. Even last year a record came out – I did a bit of harmony singing with Billy Bragg, which was nice, just to work with other people rather than preparing stuff for my own record. I don't earn a lot of money for my records so I can't just sit around making my own records unless I'm really ready. I have to really know that I've got enough material.

I'm not like Elvis Costello or something, one of these people who can just sit down and write songs, like Pete Townshend. These people can just come out with torrents of wonderful stuff. I don't find that I do – I have lots of ideas but I find that they're not always in recordable forms. You can compare it with something like the gestation period of elephants. You know, elephants are pregnant for 18 months – they have the same process, it just takes twice as long as humans.

You recorded an album of political covers called 'Nothing Can Stop Us' – what prompted this?

Well I'm quite interested in looking outside yourself. Not just yourself and your own concerns, but look at the world around you. One of the ways you can do this if by doing songs that might not get heard in a rock context – South American songs, or songs in a political context that don't get heard in one way or another. Billy Bragg does this brilliantly, he finds songs you'll never have heard of and does them in a way that makes you listen to them.

It's a way of showing off: I like singing songs in another language and quite a lot of political songs are Spanish. I'm not very good at it apparently, but I still like doing it. There are times in my life when it seems to me that the battle for justice is very intense, and music doesn't seem sometimes to be helping very much in this battle against injustice at all. So that comes out in my songs a lot. It used to always worry me, and still does now, that after Iraq and Afghanistan we are battering Pakistan. I know we're going after Al Qaeda but I bet we're still killing thousands of Afghan and Pakistani peasants at the same time. It just makes me feel a bit ill, you know. It just seems like there should be a better way of doing things sometimes.

Is it true you joined the Communist Party in the '80s?

It's true that I was a member of the Communist Party throughout the '80s, yeah. It sort of disintegrated towards the end. As a mass movement it was a failure but it was based on some great insights and I'm still very grateful for what I got from that. There were a lot of brave and good people who fought under the Communist banner, though you wouldn't know that from watching Hollywood films. But there were. In the Second World War it was the Communists who bore the brunt of the fascist onslaught, and they helped in other areas, in other countries. In Italy and France and so on they were the hardcore basis of the underground resistance movement. But anyway, I'm grateful to Communist Party for what I learnt from it – and the mistakes are so obvious they are hardly worth pointing out. But I think that it has to be said that the Communist Party came about for a reason – that the capitalist system around the world just wouldn't do, and still won't as far as I am concerned. There are still trade unionists being killed all around the world, from Columbia to the Philippines, and people are still being forced to work for the big companies. I still think its wrong, and it may be slightly old fashioned of me but I still think it's completely out of order - so I still stay on the left, while that problem remains. I think the fact is

there's an immense amount of wealth in the world, but the people who seem to do the hard work to make all that money always seem to be the last in the queue to get any of the benefits. And I think that's wrong.

'Comicopera' uses many different languages, why is this?

Well I always worry about sounding samey, so I like my records to kick against this one way or the other so its not just the same old thing with every release. And one of the ways I can do that is by using other languages. Some of the material is just unique to that language, the Cuban song and so on, just have a resonance as a language. The music itself is Spanish anyway.

That album also uses one of Lorca's lyrics – why did you choose this?

It's an excerpt from a play, but it is certainly a poem as all his writing was really poetry anyway. I was asked to do it, originally, the Lorca centenary people got in touch. Lorca comes from Grenada in Spain, a very Arabic town in its day, a thousand years ago, and he was working against Fascism in the early part of the last century. He wasn't involved with political groups but he did side with the Republic against the Fascist onslaught. The tribute record was full of people singing in Spanish, and so they asked me, but all the poems had already been snaffled by other musicians so I took this text from a play and just seemed to put the imagery – which is about underwater sea-scapes, nightmares – into the kind of thing I do anyway. There's a Columbian exile bass player on it, and he did some wonderful playing that sounds like whales underwater. I was very happy with that.

Do you view your own lyrics as poetry?

No, I wouldn't make those claims as there are people who write poetry who are experts in their language and I'm not. I never went to university. I mean, I was good at it at school but I never went on to study it at university. I wouldn't consider myself to be well read, even. I wouldn't claim to be a writer, as such, but I do work on it and try to make them singable. Going back a bit, but writers in ancient times used to chant their poems, which is just the same as singing really. There was a crossover between poetry and song, this ambiguous crossover – the Psalms for example. When you sing things you can change how they sound. You can sing things that work as songs but wouldn't necessarily work on the written page. Like 'Tutti Frutti' by Little Richard – it doesn't sound great, but it's a wonderful song! It works as something to sing. Quite a lot of Stevie Wonder, as well – if you write them down they are very sentimental and wouldn't work as poems but they just sing beautifully. (Wyatt's wife) Alfie is brilliant at writing stuff that, particularly for me as a singer, is just easy to turn into music. I find it very natural, and that's what I look for. And hopefully it means something as well.

Your wife creates the artwork, and you sometimes take an elaborate approach to packaging. How are these aspects linked?

One of the things I like about these re-releases is just seeing the amount of ideas she has come up with, when you see them all together. I'm very lucky. Ideally, Alfie in her mind knows that people can get free downloads and stuff from the net, so she wants to make people know that if they buy one of my records they will get added value in it in a way. A record won't just be a bit of plastic in a cardboard box with sound on it, but something that's actually a pleasure to have, just as a physical object. The extent that happens is a credit to Alfie, as an artist.

What is it that keeps you writing?

There still seems to be a frustration sometimes that I haven't said something right. Or Alfie sometimes says, "Why don't you do songs that people can dance do?" And I'm thinking, "Yeah, I ought to!" There's always stuff that I haven't done, or sometimes I'm sitting tootling on the cornet and a bunch of notes will pop into my head and I'll think, "Oh nice!" And that's it, really. I mean, I can't really do that much around the house apart from the washing up for Alfie, or washing potatoes. I don't pull my weight at home really, so if I don't make records I'm going to get in big trouble!

Is there anything new in the pipeline?

I've got bits and pieces, but to be honest we've been having a rough year to be honest. Alfie has had a lot of eye trouble, which has required regular visits to the hospital, and that's really frightening. Nothing you have to concern yourself with, but her mother's been

unwell and has been staying with us. So domestic stuff has taken up quite a lot of thought and time, we can't just sort of wing it and live for the music. We've got real life stuff to get through. I always find that to make music you have to be in this sort of zone, a particular place, I need to clear the ground, the air, the horizons. But our domestic situation is a bit muddy. There's always ideas in the air, you know, but nothing definite.

Robert Wyatt's back catalogue is reissued via Domino – get 'Rock Bottom', 'Old Rottenhat', 'Drury Lane' and more at all good retailers.

>> L'interview sur le site de Clash

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

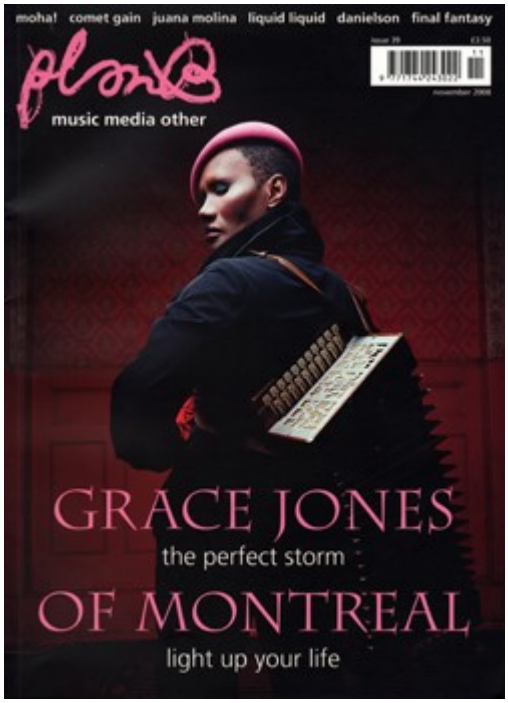
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Songs of experience - Plan B - issue 39 - november 2008

SONGS OF EXPERIENCE



Words: **Jon Dale**
Illustration: **Hanna Wieslander**

Robert Wyatt

Rock Bottom/Ruth Is StrangerThan Richard/Nothing Can Stop Us/Old Rottenhat/Dondestan Revisited/Shleep/EPs/ Cuckooland/Live At Drury Lane (Domino)

OK. Robert Wyatt. The first thing you should know is, every note on these records is a note you should hear. The second thing you should know is, Wyatt's masterpiece, *Rock Bottom*, heads up this canon: a gorgeously unsettling underwater song suite, it's limber, loving, sweet, turbulent, adrift on seesawing drones and deeply affecting. Got that? Good.

The legend of Wyatt rests on his first group, Soft Machine, and on ', but ultimately, this new reissue series highlights Wyatt's few truly solo records *Old Rottenhat* and *Dondestan*. Recorded entirely alone, they document his struggle with the global politics of the time and his discomfort with the grim reality of 'being English' under Thatcher's rule. They're knitted together with knotty piano, cheap keyboards and Wyatt's pattering percussion, which lends them the air of homespun arts and crafts; they frame Wyatt's sharpest invective against the global reach and repercussions of capital and Empire.

The Age Of Self, for example, is eerily prescient of neo-liberalism's rule (*"There's people doing 'frightfully well", there's others on the shelf/But never mind the second kind, this is The Age Of Self"*). But Wyatt's not partisan - he's aware of the hard left's internal struggles. The Age of Self mentions media magnate Robert Maxwell and *Marxism Today,* editor Martin Jacques in the same breath; Dondestan's 'CP Jeebies' comments on factional behaviour in the Communist Party.



Borrowing from Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme', *Old Rottenhat's* Gharbzadegi 'tackles cultural imperialism: listening to Wyatt's Eighties records, it struck me that here Wyatt performs 'solo' but assembles a cast of absent collaborators whose songs he interprets in response to cultural imperialism. I can think of few other performers with Wyatt's reach: who else has taken in songs from Peter Gabriel (on activist Steve Biko), or Elvis Costello and Clive Langer (on the everyday impact of the Falklands War), alongside songs written by La Nueva Canción singers Violeta Parra and Victor Jara, and Cuban folk singer Pablo Milanes? Who else would write a beautifully mournful song named 'Amber And The Amberines' after the US's dress rehearsal for full-scale invasion of Grenada and the Grenadines, in part hymning Grenadian Marxist political party, the New Jewel Movement?

If this is heady stuff, it's because these were heady times. But what times *aren't*? Listening back to this music can feel eerie, not just because Wyatt's voice is so close in your ear, but because the songs are reminders, rejoinders, diary entries - *journalism*, but not pejoratively so. If you need a crash course (or a hard lesson) in how to do politics in pop properly, here you have it - and if anyone tells you the writing is simplistic, the messages dated, then remind them that clarity communicates, and that in the Eighties, Wyatt was rare in his address of the 'wounds of Empire' via a clutch of songs and a wheezy old keyboard.



After these moments of loneliness, *Shleep* and *Cuckooland* return Wyatt to communal creation: with figures like Brian Eno, Annie Whitehead, Paul Weller and Phil Manzanera on board, it's a good crew. The politics are still there, but there's more address of the personal, the domestic. They're essential, of course.

But for now, I keep returning to Wyatt's Eighties period, for its sharpness, its sadness, and its political fury. Because these records contain songs that, in their baldness and honesty about the conditions of humanity, about the things people do to one another, about the abuse metered out in the name of Empire, tell you more about the world - *your world* - than most any other music I've heard. And Wyatt's found a way to navigate this world with a grace and an intelligence that's directly reflected in his songs: in their generosity and character and wit, but also in their unflinching, unsparing commentary.

So hear them all, and live a better life.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

'Staying Open to Possibilities': An Interview with Hugh Hopper - Eartrip Magagzine - Issue 2 - September 2008



"Staying Open to Possibilities": An Interview with Hugh Hopper

Bass-player and composer Hugh Hopper was one of the key members of the so-called 'Canterbury Scene': a loose, and disparate set of musicians who made up some of the leading prog-rock bands in the 1960s and 70s, such as Caravan, Gong, and the group in which Hopper was the bassist, Soft Machine. As well as appearing on some of the Softs' best known recordings, and in subsequent off-shoots such as Soft Machine Legacy, he played with the likes of Syd Barrett and Elton Dean, and has also been active in improvised and experimental music, often incorporating electronic textures into his work. In February 2008, he played a concert with the Delta Saxophone Quartet and drummer Simon at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, and we took the opportunity to interview him about his career and his current musical activities.



DG: *Perhaps we could begin at the beginning: how you started out, your early influences and musical experiences.*

HH: My parents were the usual middle-of-the-road classical: they both played piano, but just at home, as people did in those days. I was really influenced a lot by my brother, who was two years older than me. He started playing clarinet and then got into playing guitar, so I took up the bass, and a lot of my influence is from my brother, because, being two

years ahead, he heard things earlier than I did, and then I picked up on those.

So early days was rhythm and blues – Chuck Berry and stuff like that. And then I got involved in jazz, through Robert Wyatt and Daevid Allen. Really those have been the two threads of my life – rhythmic stuff and freer stuff as well, and also some modern classical and contemporary stuff.

DG: *What kind of modern classical?*

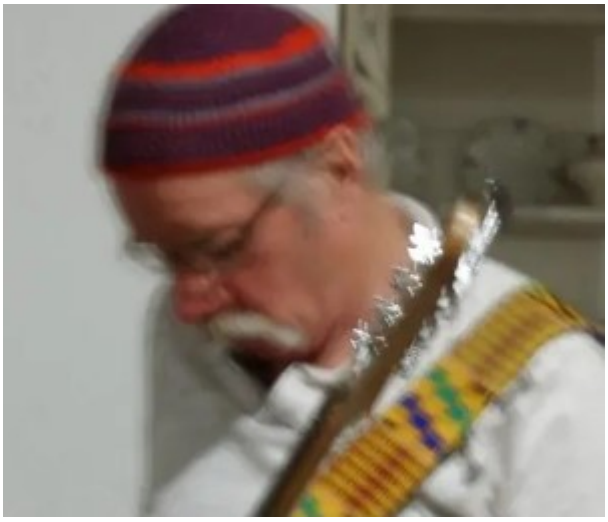
HH: Well, my brother exposed me to anything from Hindemith and Bartok to some of the more freaky stuff – Stockhausen and some of the more early electronic music.

NCT: *Which was really just emerging at that time…*

HH: Yeah, and of course it was really laborious in those days – you couldn't do it on a laptop. Nowadays Stockhausen could do in half an hour what it took him six months to construct from tapes.

DG: *That's get us onto compute technology I read that you and so on at the age of 13*

HH: No, that's a bit early, I would say a bit later than that. I got into loops and stuff when I was about 18, through Daevid Allen. I was living with him in Paris and he'd been working with Terry Riley and people who were working with the French Radiophonic workshop. So I learned a lot of that kind of stuff – soundscapes, loops, that kind of hypnotic stuff – from him. That was another important thread in my musical influences.



Hugh Hopper playing at Kettle's Yard. Cambridge in 2008

NCT: *Daevid Allen was also involved with some of the work of William S Burroughs. What was that relationship?*

HH: Well, Daevid met Burroughs and we were involved in playing some shows, like the ICA in London, where he was doing a reading and I was playing with David and Robert Wyatt. I think Daevid knew Burroughs really from Paris and we were just interested in that whole flow of things – the cut-up idea of Burroughs. I was 18 years old and that was a very important time for me, being surrounded by Beat poetry and the cut-up idea – completely different ideas of writing. I haven't read a Burroughs book now for thirty years, but at the time it was really a strong thing, and Daevid had actually worked with Burroughs – he used his voice, and that of Lawrence Ferlenghetti and some of the other Beat Poets, on some of his soundscapes.

NCT: *And he was influential enough for you to name the band The Soft Machine [after Burroughs' novel].*

HH: In fact, before I was in the band, they went through several names, and then somebody thought of Soft Machine. Daevid spoke to Burroughs and asked if that was OK and he said 'ah, I guess it's OK' – he didn't really care either way.

DG: *Well that bring us up to the beginnings of Soft Machine – maybe you could talk a bit about the Wilde Flowers?*

HH: Yeah, Wilde Flowers was our first semi-pro band in Canterbury. Like all semi-pro bands, we played about two gigs in our first year, and there was more hope involved than actual gigs, but we rehearsed a lot, as you do when you start a band. That was really the foundation of Soft Machine, Caravan, and Gong – those three bands started from the people who were in the Wilde Flowers. We started off trying to be creative, playing all sorts of new stuff – we all listened to Indian music and jazz – and it was a mixture of that with some things like the Stones and the Kinks. Eventually what happened was that it became smoother and smoother, and became a soul band and lost it creativity, but by

then people had left and it carried on without the originals.

NCT: *There seems to have been a really interesting trajectory, if you look at all the Soft Machine albums, partly because of these creative tensions.*

HH: Yeah, every album was different, depending on who was in the band. I think for just about every album there was a personnel change – at least one person had left. The first one was psychedelic songs. Really, there's an album missing, because there should be an album with Daevid Allen, Kevin Ayers, Robert [Wyatt] and Mike Ratledge, but Daevid had already left the band before the first main album was made in the States, so it was just a trio. Kevin Ayers wanted to be a poet and songwriter more than a musician; he got lumbered with playing the bass because nobody else would do it. After Kevin left, I joined, and Mike Ratledge, the keyboard player, became much more influential in the music – it was a lot jazzier and less psychedelic and folky. That was the way it flowed really – it became more and more jazzy with each album, and finally became a jazz-rock thing.

NCT: *By 'Third' and 'Fourth'?*

HH: Well, there was still a bit of the earlier spirit [on those two albums]. 'Fifth' was a weird one because it was very black – it had a black cover and it was a very dark record – and by 'Sixth' Elton Dean had left and Karl Jenkins was introducing more jazz-rock things. That was the last one I was on, and after that it became more of a Karl Jenkins thing.

NCT: *Whether you intended it or not, 'Third' is the most popular Soft Machine album.*

HH: Yeah, it's the one everybody always mentions. When we recorded it, it was right at the height of when we were really playing a lot of concerts, doing a lot of gigs, touring everywhere. For the actual sound of it, it's not that well produced – the stuff I've been doing since then has been much better produced. But, what it can say, it's just one of those things, it's a classic thing. When I'm in Germany, guys still come up to me and say 'this record changed my life' – it happens every time, which is great.



Part of the inside cover at for "Third": Elton Dean on the left and Hopper on the right.

DG: *What would you say is your favourite of all the Soft Machine albums?*

HH: I like bits of some of them. I like 'Third', obviously, and 'Fourth' – there's some good stuff on 'Fourth' – different things, I don't often listen to them. What I prefer really is listening to some of the live things which come out much later, because the studio

records…They're OK, they're interesting, but they don't have the real spirit of the band as it was live, because it was real hooligan band, it wasn't a quiet, polite band on stage. Sometimes I listen back to some of the tapes – terrible sound, but the energy is fantastic. There's this idea that it was a cerebral band, but it wasn't that all – we used to play through Marshall stacks on eleven, basically. We had earplugs, and everyone was deaf by the end – I still have tinnitus now. So yeah, I was glad when, in about the 80s, some of these archive records, the live ones, started to come out, even as bootlegs, which didn't have good enough sound; it was nice to hear what the actual energy of the band was like.

EARTRIP MAGAZINE
"A Journey For Your Ears."

DG: *There's this whole generic crossover thing we've touched on a bit earlier; I was interested in the fact that you played the Royal Albert Hall, at the Proms. It's hard to imagine something like that happening now – musicians associated with rock performing in a setting associated with the mainstream classical sphere.*

HH: It was one of the late night concerts after the main prom, and it was actually a concert of Tim Souster, who was a classical composer and knew Mike Ratledge, so he invited us to play as well. Before we played there was a whole piece with, I think, five pianos playing Steve Reich. So it wasn't the real mainstream prom, it was a late night one, but it is still quite rare.

DG: *Do you think people were more open to that sort of thing at the time?*

HH: Yeah, well people were more open to having a band like Soft Machine playing anywhere – we played in all the big halls several times. We played…I mean, you name it – Manchester, Leeds Town Hall – you couldn't do that now, people just aren't interested. So, yeah, it was a different atmosphere in those days.



L-R: Robert Wyatt, Hugh Hopper, Mike Ratledge

DG: *Also, as well as the relationship that Soft Machine had with classical music, there was quite a strong relationship with jazz.*

HH: Yeah, well it was because were interested in all those things, Mike Ratledge in particular. He didn't come up through rock groups, he learned to play classical piano and then became interested in jazz later. He wasn't a guy who'd learned through being in a pop or rock or blues band – he didn't know anything about that, it wasn't part of his life at all. So we had all those influences and that's the stuff we wanted to listen to – things like John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman.

DG: *And this was part of a wider trend.*

HH: There was a great crossover then: before that you were either a jazzer or you were a rocker and that was it, but in about 1969/70, there really was a possibility, people were putting on gigs that mixed things – it could be ethnic music or classical music or whatever, mixed – there were all kinds of experiments.

DG: *So the 60s was the time when it opened up.*

HH: Yeah, from 66/67 onwards – that was the time when things seemed possible.

DG: *Do you think there was any specific reason for that?*

HH: It was the time – politically things were changing , there was a lot more freedom, and suddenly you're allowed to do things which before people hadn't thought of doing. There was a feeling of liberty.

DG: *Moving on to prog-rock itself – do you think there was anything specifically English about it? I'm thinking of that very whimsical strain…*

HH: Yeah, you can't imagine many American bands sounding like that. Americans tend to be much harder, and probably play better, but not so whimsical and not so creative, in a sense. I think that's right, it is a very English thing.

NCT: *As you were saying, you started off in R & B and stuff like that. I was curious – who really influenced you as a bass player; who did you listen to?*

HH: Strangely enough, I've been more influenced by acoustic jazz players than electric players. Because I listened to all of those earlier things – rhythm and blues things, Fats Domino, Little Richard, James Brown and his bass players – it's all in there. But when I think about it, the people I would actually name are all jazz bass players – Charles Mingus, Ron Carter, people like that.

NCT: *How has being a bassist influenced your compositional approach?*

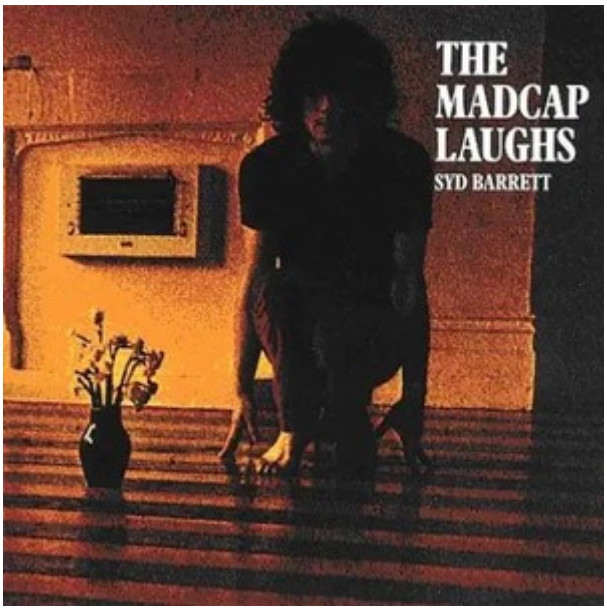
HH: It's hard to say, because they're both part of the same thing. The bass is important to me – when I hear music, I couldn't really imagine writing much music without writing something for the bass at the bottom of it. And also I see my role as a bass player not as a flashy soloist, and for me that's important, to actually be 'the bass player'.

NCT: *How in terms of how your compositions might have differed from those of someone like Mike Ratledge, or Elton Dean?*

HH: Well, they're simpler, for a start: I haven't got that kind of technical facility on the instrument. Of course, now, on a computer, you can write anything you like, at any speed you care to name. But yeah, it has been important.

DG: *I wanted to ask about Syd Barrett particularly, because you played on a couple of tracks on his album 'The Madcap Laughs', and because, despite only being there at the beginning, he was such a pivotal, influential figure. What was your experience of him?*

HH: I didn't know him very well. Because Soft Machine and Pink Floyd started when they did – '66, '67 – they were playing a lot of the same gigs, at the Roundhouse in London, and the U.F.O, so they were quite friendly: they were kind of rivals but it was a friendly rivalry. I came in later, so I didn't know him that well, but he came along to a gig we were doing in London in '69, and saw us afterwards and said, 'I'm doing a record at Abbey Road, do you want to come and play on the record?' So we went along, and he'd got the guitar and voice tracks down already. Of course he was very erratic, so it's not 4 bars, 4 bars, it's one and half, two –whoops – start off in another key! We're sitting there trying to learn this in the studio in Abbey Road, and we're still working on it when Syd pokes his head round the door and says, 'thanks, fine, that's it', and we were still learning it, but he was happy…He was very chaotic, and even then he was drifting a bit. It was a nice record, it couldn't be anyone else – he had his own total planet.



DG: *What do you think of this whole idea of the 'Canterbury Scene'?*

HH: Well, it's a journalistic thing. In fact, there was nothing much going on; we couldn't wait to leave Canterbury and move to London and have a real career. But it's a useful label – I use it myself. But ask different people what it means and it means completely different things. For me it means people like Caravan, Soft Machine and Gong, but then they're very different anyway: Caravan is songs and Soft Machine became much more jazzy, so what does it mean? It's a useful label, it's a journalistic label, which was applied after the event – Ian McDonald, of NME, actually thought of the label in about 1971, well after it had all happened.

DG: *Someone else I wanted to ask about was Elton Dean: obviously a very important figure but not that well known outside of particular circles.*

HH: He was a great jazz player, he really was. His real love was free jazz – he would have been perfectly happy freely improvising all his life, but he wrote some great tunes as well and was a great player in Soft Machine, In Cahoots, lots of bands – he did a lot of stuff with Keith Tippett. He lived the real jazz life, he drank and he smoke and he died as you do if you drink too much, but he lived it to the full, he was totally committed. And he was a good mate of mine – I was in lots of projects and did lots of tours with him. It wasn't a surprise when he died, because for the last ten years of his life he was on that path, but I'm happy to have played with him.

DG: *Thinking about free improv – we were talking with Mike Westbrook about free improv and how it relates to other genres. So, players you'd think of as, say, a straight-ahead jazz player or something, could play free improv as well, but a divide had opened up that wasn't there before – people had gone off into camps and so you had the free improve players…*

HH: I think that was always there, to be honest. There's always been a lot of snobbery within the jazz world, as there is in every other musical genre. Elton could do both things, he was a natural player, a very natural musician.

DG: *Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about 'Numero D' Vol' [Hopper's recent recording, from 2007, with saxophonist Simon Picard and others].*

HH: I was down in London with a guitarist called Mark Hewins. I was immediately knocked out by his sound, his melodicism, and I thought it would be nice to invite Simon [Picard] down to Canterbury to record, and the same with the other players. I've played with Charles Hayward in a couple of things, and Steve Franklin with In Cahoots. I just had the idea to get together with a group of players. It was completely improvised and cleaned up a bit later – we chose the best bits.

DG: *The project with the Delta Saxophone Quartet, how did that come about?*

HH: They weren't particularly into Soft Machine, but I had a book of sheet music, of some

of my tunes from Soft Machine, which was published in 1970, and somebody gave it to Pete Whyman, the alto player, and he just started playing with it. Then they farmed it out to arrangers to arrange these pieces, not necessarily from the music, but just that they had the idea of Soft Machine, so some of the music was very close to the originals and some of the pieces are completely re-interpreted. When they were near to recording they asked me if I'd like to play on one track, and since then we've done a couple of gigs and the album's come out [['Dedicated To You…But You Weren't Listening' (Moonjune, 2007)]. What's amazing is that they're not blasé jazz musicians – they love music, they love playing it, it's a real pleasure being with them. They're keen for me to play with them – it's nice. It's just one track on the record', but now we've worked on three or four new pieces – well, old Soft Machine pieces, but reworked.

DG: *Are there any other plans for the future? Any projects?*

HH: Lots, yeah. Yumi Hara, the Japanese piano player – I've done one gig with her, completely improvised, and there's a tour of Japan in June. There's also Clearframe, another improvised thing with Charles Hayward, Orphy Robinson and Lol Coxhill. I do this thing called Brainville with Daevid Allen and Chris Cutler; we played a few gigs last year, and we're playing in Italy this year. And there's also Soft Machine Legacy, which is ex-members of Soft Machine. So there's four or five different things going on. It's always up and down – I never know what I'm going to do in a years' time, but I like to stay open to possibilities.



Hugh Hopper at the Downtown Music Gallery in 2008

>> L'interview sur le site de Eartrip Magazine

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Canterbury Scene Pioneers 1 : The Soft Machine - Audion - Issue #54 - August 2008 (new edition in PDF format in October 2020)



Whoever it was that coined the term "The Canterbury Scene" was a lazy journalist, but it's a term that's been banded around so much that it's gained a meaning all of its own. At least to fans of progressive rock and jazz-fusion that is. In Canterbury, there is no definitive scene as such. Most people that live there would never have heard of it. Yet Canterbury was the hub where much of this scene came together. The"scene" largely stemmed from a band called The Wilde Flowers, and involved the bands Soft Machine, Caravan and Egg, and all the various offshoots and related projects that came out of these, amounting an enormous fertile world of music bridging many different genres.

THE SOFT MACHINE

Canterbury Scene pioneers 1: written by Alan Freeman

My introduction to The Canterbury Scene all happened by accident, and it's hard to recall exactly what came first. I know that I saw the Danish band Secret Oyster on The Old Grey Whistle Test on TV, and was immediately hooked by them. Scarcely a week or so later (so I recall) I chanced upon a concert at the Montreux Jazz Festival that sounded like Secret Oyster to me but obviously wasn't. It turned out to be Soft Machine, circa album number 8: BUNDLES. So, looking for a live album by them I bought Soft Machine SIX first, which surprised me I can tell you! That was the start of a rocky trail of discovery, covering an extremely wide range of musical styles, dozens of classics, some perplexingly bizarre challenges, and alas some pitiful disappointments.
But that's all part of musical exploration!



Wilde Flowers: Hugh Hopper, Richard Coughlan, Robert Wyatt, Brian Hopper

Wilde Flower years

So, way back in 1959 it all started in Canterbury with an unnamed quartet initiated by the brothers: Brian and Hugh Hopper. By late 1962 these had become The Wilde Flowers comprising: Brian Hopper (guitar, vocals, alto saxophone), Hugh Hopper (bass), Robert Wyatt (drums, guitar, vocals) and Mike Ratledge (piano) originally, with Richard Sinclair and Richard Coughlan (both later of Caravan) also featuring, as well as Kevin Ayers and one Graham Flight. In parallel to that, Australian Daevid Allen had a Canterbury based trio/quartet featuring the likes of Hugh Hopper, Mike Ratledge and Robert Wyatt. Recordings from some of these line-ups much later gained release on a few archive CD releases, and reveal their jazz roots.

Birth of the Soft Machine

I guess it was a surprise to all that knew of their early musical exploits, as when Soft Machine was formed in 1966 they'd moved away from jazz altogether to a "prog" psych-beat sound. Incidentally, they got their name from a William Burroughs novel, the "soft machine" being a euphemism for the human body. The original band was fronted by two songwriters: Kevin Ayers (bass, vocals) and Daevid Allen (guitar, vocals), with Robert Wyatt (drums) and Mike Ratledge (keyboards), and they soon relocated to London, becoming one of the hottest live bands around.

The original Soft Machine sound was borderline pop really, and they debuted with their one and only non-album single: *Loves Make Sweet Music* / *Feelin', Reelin', Squeelin'* (recorded in January 1967) a really dated record nowadays, if you ask me. It did however capture the spirit of the time. Gaining the attention of producer Giorgio Gomelsky they next recorded a number of demos at DeLane Lea Studios in London. The hoped for record deal never happened though, and the tapes remained in the Gomelsky vault for some time. These recordings later surfaced on two compilations on the French Byg records (later compiled as the album AT THE BEGINNING, which has since been issued with various other titles), but it's best to talk about them here. These recordings saw the distinctive Soft Machine sound taking form, but in small morsels, largely song-based, but with some early versions of what were later to become classics. Still a touch borderline pop to my ears, but also with some excellent moments, I deem it of curiosity interest only.

The Soft Machine were now getting quite a reputation on the London "underground scene" with regular gigs the UFO Club and The Roundhouse, and they also played at the celebrated "14 Hour Technicolor Dream" featuring their friends The Pink Floyd.

Now things take a weird turn. With a commission to provide the music for an avant-garde theatre project in St. Tropez (on the French Riviera) during the summer of '67, they stay a while in France. In September, on the way back to London, disaster - due to some irregularities with Daevid Allen's Visa, he was refused re-entry to England. So Soft Machine had no option but to return to England without him. Daevid thus remained in France, forming Bananamoon in Paris, and later the band that was to become his most famous project: Gong. But that's another story!

Back in London, Ayers, Ratledge and Wyatt decide to carry on as a trio. A wise move really, as there were really too many songwriters in the band with Daevid around, and with Robert Wyatt also flexing his vocal chords more, it could have become a bit much. Even without an album, their reputation was such that in February 1968, they went on a three month USA tour, as a regular support to the Jimi Hendrix Experience. Obviously a huge success, they soon secured a US record deal, recording their debut LP in New York in just four days in April.

The psychedelic years



The Soft Machine 1968: Robert Wyatt, Hugh Hopper & Mike Ratledge

Already Robert Wyatt was starting to steal the lead role from Kevin Ayers, with Robert's distinctly slightly off-key vocals greeting us on *Hope For Happiness*, a song which started the trend in Soft Machine for tracks to lead one into another, to meld, flow and juxtapose, breaking the rules of standalone track or song, sometimes with no pause, or merely a breather. Although, that said *Save Yourself* is an unashamed pop number that sticks out like a sore thumb! But it all fits together, especially so with the segued run of tracks that bring the album to a close. Yes, even with their album debut Soft Machine had it honed to a fine art. Remarkably one doesn't miss the lack of lead guitar. This is down to another key facet of the "Canterbury Sound" the distortion/overdrive organ and electric piano, giving such instruments the power usually associated with the lead guitar. When I first encountered it (Steve had bought a cheap second-hand copy doubleback, with the second album) I didn't quite know what to make of it. I know Robert's vocals threw me at first, and even then it seemed to be rather dated. But, how perspectives change, 30 years on it sounds no more dated, but more a fresh vital step to a now loved sound/style/genre of music. The only real Kevin Ayers song is the last but one track *Why Are We Sleeping?* the quirkiest psych-pop number on the album. Almost everything about THE SOFT MACHINE is engaging, amazingly crafted, with all sorts of neat tricks and surprises, the musicianship is also quite dazzling. Nowadays it is rightly regarded as a landmark classic.

Although the guitarless formula had worked well on the debut, they drafted in one Andy Summers (yes, the guy later in The Police) for the July-September US tour, although he never stayed around long, and also a rift set in, apparently with Kevin Ayers wanting to take the band in one direction, and Wyatt-Ratledge wanting to go elsewhere. In his place came their old friend Hugh Hopper, a much more explorative experimental musician, who would blossom during his tenure with Soft Machine. Kevin Ayers, on the other hand, would later embark on a solo career, debuting in 1970 with JOY OF A TOY (named after the second track on Soft Machine 1) which musically steps back to 1967 Ayers fronted Soft Machine sound, ranging from whimsical pop through to pure avant-garde. His band: Kevin Ayers And The Whole World was the starting place for two major solo talents, namely David Bedford and Mike Oldfield, whose instrumental work was the highlight of many a Kevin Ayers album. But, I digress, back to Soft Machine...

After only a month of rehearsals and a prestigious gig at the Royal Albert Hall, Soft Machine had already got an album's worth of material together. Aptly called VOLUME TWO it was much more experimental than the debut, an amalgam of half sung songs, joke diversions and many rip-roaring instrumentals, it all felt like a big album-long opus. Expanding the instrumentation, and further the Wilde Flowers roots was the Hugh's brother Brian Hopper guesting on saxophones, bringing a bit of jazz back into the mix. Although I said the album feels like one big opus, there is an odd track out midway through side two *Dedicated To You But You Weren't Listening* penned by Hugh Hopper (on acoustic guitar here) with Mike Ratledge on poignantly dainty harpsichord, with Robert singing in that fashion he was later to become famous for. After that, the final few segued tracks, starting with *Fire Engine Passing With Bells Clanging*, pretty much hints at the Soft Machine sound to come, heading to more experimental jazzy realms..

Shortly before the release of VOLUME TWO Soft Machine did a promotional concert at The Paradiso in Amsterdam, Holland. It was broadcast on the radio, and consequently a high quality bootleg LP appeared on the market. By high quality, I mean good radio mono, with some slight radio drift and noise, rather good for the time, but pressed on lousy cheap vinyl, and the bootleg CD that later appeared was transferred from an LP. Eventually it gained a proper master tape release on CD via Voiceprint. This gig just goes to show how intensely creative and finely honed they were as performers. It's basically a prequel to the album, with lots of little diversions, extra quirks and kinks in the arrangements, and a bit more

instrumental too. In all, a vital piece of early Soft Machine history.



SOFT MACHINE VOLUME TWO SPACED THIRD

It's all going weird

But now, with time on their hands, and in between record label contracts, the trio, aided by Hugh's brother guest/semi-member Brian Hopper (soprano/tenor saxes), spent a good few months experimenting with new ideas. The use of reverse tapes, echo and delay effects, etc., had all played a big role in the complexity of their recordings to date, but they wanted to take that aspect further. Mike Ratledge had been hooked by the experimental organ and tape delay works of Terry Riley and began to develop his own twist on that. This all led to SPACED a specially commissioned work created for a London multi-media event at the Roundhouse, involving ballet dancers, gymnasts and such-like, all purely avant-garde and abstract, it needed music to match. Unreleased until 1996 the CD booklet describes the use of lengthy tape loops spooled around their rehearsal rooms, days of work spent tape splicing and editing, all to make 1½ hours of music. It perplexed audiences, especially those that were expecting a Soft Machine concert, but it is weird even by today's standards! A music of dissonant organ/piano, bass and percussion, Robert Wyatt's larynx has a rest here, and instead he often seems to be destroying his drum-set, and the only real soloing is courtesy of Brian Hopper's sax, or the noises from Mike Ratledge's electric piano and organ, which he similarly seems to be abusing. Add to all that Hugh Hopper's bass on demented fuzzed and frazzled overload, it's enough to make the speakers groan and writhe! There are more melodic moments and rhythmic/looping bits too. SPACED certainly lives up to its name, it is really out there!

From Autumn 1969, a brass section was drafted in to supplement the band on stage. Many of these musicians came from Keith Tippett's band: Elton Dean (saxophones), Nick Evans (trombone) and Marc Charig (trumpet). There was also Lyn Dobson (flute, saxophone) from Keef Hartley's band. Of these Elton Dean became a permanent member for several years, changing the band's sound considerably.

January 1970 heralded what many class as the ultimate Soft Machine album, and in fact one of the all-time greats of the Canterbury Scene, namely THIRD, a landmark double LP, with just one track per side...

Hugh Hopper's *Facelift* is a collage of live recordings, and strongly features the winds section. Although who exactly is featured where, I don't know. Caravan's Jimmy Hastings (flute, bass clarinet) also guests on the album, and he's heard here. *Facelift* has the new patent of "the Softs" sound, namely Hugh's fuzz bass strongly featured, and also starts the album on a very weird footing. First we hear a subdued drone, joined by strangely mangled electric piano and dissonantly garbled organ, and whilst other instruments amble in the background a variety of winds (mostly processed electronically) writhe and splutter, leading into a vaguely drunken phase that then lurches into a patent Soft Machine riff, gaining focus, moving to a relaxed phase for a moment before going on to an almost Miles Davis like fusion drive, before returning to an organ/winds refrain heard earlier, added to and complicated by lots of clever backwards/wrong-speed tape work. In all, a patchwork flow of ideas that sew up into a complex suite.

Mike Ratledge's *Slightly All The Time* starts with another new aspect to the Soft Machine sound, a cool breezy ambling jazzy groove (based around various interlocked rhythmic patterns) topped by a variety of winds, changing, growing in momentum, gaining focus, changing again and so on. It includes the inset of Hopper's *Noisette* (not easy to identify where it is exactly until one hears later live versions) a work of similarly counterpointed themes, all put together like a complex jig-saw puzzle. This is all a hint of what they would take further on albums SIX and SEVEN.

According to a recent Robert Wyatt interview on BBC Radio 6's "Freak Zone" the first half of side 3's *The Moon In June* is Robert Wyatt solo. This would mean that Robert must also be

playing organ and guitar uncredited, as well as singing and playing drums. The song is indeed one of his strongest, and with very clever lyrics to boot, which he would famously rewrite from concert to concert to fit the venue, country, weather, time of year etc., the most famous being the BBC John Peel "Top Gear" session version. After the song, 9 minutes in, it's allchange, in fact several all-changes that bounce to and from the song theme until it's time to let-rip, quintessential Canterbury this, close to Egg or Caravan, with that patent keyboard sound, with Robert adding wordless vocal expressions. At 15 minutes, it's time to go weird again, and some, with strange pitch-shifting effects on the organ, scuttling violin. "Edgard Varese meets Sun Ra" is one description I've read!

The boldly named *Out-Bloody-Rageous* has never actually struck me as such, although it was pretty much ahead of its time, with even greater use of backwards tapes, tape delay, loops, deft editing, etc. It opens very slowly, with Mike Ratledge doing his own twist on the Terry Riley organ dervish style, which kind of cleverly steps into another slice of Soft Machine riffing (the type of thing the Dutch based Supersister also did) topped by a myriad of solos, which without warning drops into a decaying pattern of organ tones, before again gaining focus as a tripped-out space-jazz, that eventually storms along before returning to a Riley-esque phase as the finalé.

Innovative through and through. But, as you may have sussed, instead of titling loads of pieces and sewing them together, they had instead cut apart various pieces and then sewn them together in a cleverly jumbled fashion to make four suites. Because of this, the many live versions of THIRD material heard since are all quite different, as they went on to develop the compositions, with new musicians adding new ideas, and even some totally unexpected surprises. Material from THIRD can be heard on a good few excellent quality Cuneiform releases.



After this, Robert's role of lead singer became less and less part of the Soft Machine sound. Instead he started to experiment with the voice as an instrument, using electronic gadgetry, echo machines, ring modulator, etc., all taking a Soft Machine concert even further "out there!". One such gig was their unlikely inclusion at the BBC Proms, a classic concert indeed of quintessential Soft Machine.

Robert took all these experimental techniques to the next level with his "solo" debut THE END OF AN EAR on which Robert played drums, vocals, piano, and organ, aided by Soft Machine / Canterbury friends: Mark Charig, Elton Dean, David Sinclair (from Caravan) and others. Although the cover bears the words "out-of-work pop singer" it is certainly no pop album. THE END OF AN EAR is a weird outing from start to finish! I guess a lot of people, like myself, at first thought they'd put the record on at 45 rpm by mistake, as that's what it sounds like, and it still throws many that I've played it to in the UT shop. Elsewhere the record lurches into big band fusion, prog and totally twisted angular rock with clanking drums and avant-garde scat vocals to the fore. Amazing stuff, and still unique.

The jazz phase

album that I've personally never rated as one of their better ones. This is largely due to musical allergy of mine, I can't stand squawky free-jazz type sax playing, and it's an album on which Elton Dean was given far too much freedom for my liking. There's one track I don't like at all. But I won't harp on about it. The strange thing though is that much of the material is documented live as excellent versions elsewhere. Maybe that's down to Elton also playing electric piano giving him less time to idly burble rude screeches on the sax (witness the excellent "Beat Club" DVD included as a bonus with the GRIDES CD for proof of this). For me, FOURTH is the only low point in an otherwise almost flawless run of 9 albums. For some jazz fans, I know that this is their favourite!

The gradual "all change"

With a music more and more based around solos, and an increase in jazziness, it seems that Robert Wyatt had had enough, and he left in 1971 forming his own new outfit Matching Mole (the name comes from a play on "Machine Molle" the French for Soft Machine), featuring Bill McCormick from Quiet Sun, Dave Sinclair of Caravan, and Phil Miller from Delivery, amounting to a veritable supergroup where Robert could again flex his vocal chords. They released two fine albums, essential for fans of early Soft Machine, and later Robert became a successful soloist, releasing at least one classic along the way, the wonderful ROCK BOTTOM.

1971 also saw Elton Dean release his first solo album, which no doubt meant he got the jazz anguish out of his system, and hereon his playing in Soft Machine is quite different. Making use of effects and reverb, there's an air of Charlie Mariano and Klaus Doldinger to his playing on the next Soft Machine album FIVE. With former Nucleus drummer John Marshall joining, Soft Machine became much more tight and vibrant, inventing a whole new jazz-rock vocabulary of cross-genre rock and jazz innovation that was uniquely Soft Machine. The music on FIVE just rattles along, solo after solo, on top of infectious rhythmic drives that avoid the sterility of most jazz of the era. There are pauses and diversions, and lots more that keeps the music fresh even today. Unique black print on black cover too!

Yet, after lots of touring, radio concerts and sessions, Elton decided to leave and form his own band. In fact, he went on to work in all sorts of genres, from free-jazz and avant-garde through to prog. He also featured for a short while with the Dutch band Supersister, who no doubt thought of him when they were left in the lurch without a winds player. Most of his bands and projects have involved other members of the larger "Canterbury Scene" family.

Apparently invited by John Marshall was fellow ex-Nucleus multiinstrumentalist Karl Jenkins. Playing oboe, baritone and soprano saxophones, electric piano, grand piano, and celeste, he was much more than a replacement for Dean, and he had a completely different style that started to draw his aspect of early Nucleus into the Soft Machine sound. Hopper and Marshall were now becoming almost symbiotic, and a wealth of new ideas were brewing, so much so that it became time for another double. SIX ALBUM could be seen as their equivalent to Pink Floyd's UMMAGUMMA, coupling a live LP with an experimental studio LP. Live, Soft Machine had become so technically precise and flawless that they could perform a whole album length suite of segued compositions so that it felt like one big symphonic opus. Lots more keyboards, lots more electronic gadgetry, innovation was the key. The studio LP had 4 very different works: *The Soft Weed Factor* penned by Jenkins, prophesying where Soft Machine were to go next, *Stanley Stamps Gibbon Album (for B.O.)* and *Chloe And The Pirates* by Ratledge revisiting the atmospheric and Riley-esque elements of THIRD, and finally Hopper's weird and fuzz bass dominated 1983.

But, let's step back a moment, Hugh Hopper had just released his debut "solo" album 1984 before this. It was as though the Soft Machine number 1983 was a kind of advert for this. George Orwell's poignant novel couldn't really have inspired a weirder album, with Hugh's fuzz bass to the fore and clanking percussives dominating much of the album, punctuated by a few Soft Machine like diversions. It still challenges many. Seemingly Hugh wanted to do more music like this, and explore other avenues, and he left the band in May 1973. Roy Babbington, who had worked with Soft Machine before (known as a double-bass player with the likes of Michael Gibbs and Keith Tippett) also from Nucleus, was a good choice as replacement.

Roy, in keeping with the increasingly electric focus of Soft Machine, took up 6-string bass guitar, adding a smoother bass underpinning. This meant that although SEVEN was like a development on the live LP from SIX it was a much smoother flowing excursion, again with even more keyboards to the fore, and the inevitable introduction of synthesizer! It was another step away from the jazzy sound of a few years earlier.

Return of the guitar hero!

We may never know quite why, but after all those years without a guitarist (since Daevid Allen's exile) it was now decided that Soft Machine needed a guitar lead. Well, nearly all other fusion bands at the time had a guitar whiz in the band, and SEVEN had been criticised for lacking any real lead focus. So, enter Allan Holdsworth (originally from the eclectic Igginbottom's Wrench) who'd also played with Nucleus and featured on Ian Carr's BELLADONNA album. He joined in December 1973 at a time when the band were also

between labels, which meant a whole new repertoire had time to gel and develop before they got to record an album. BUNDLES recorded summer 1974 was even more so Karl Jenkins' show, taking those patent early Nucleus style riffs of his, pitting them against Ratledge's fuzzed keyboards and Holdsworth's guitar. It's a sizzler, and still a favourite, all a complex segue of tracks sewn together as a huge complex suite. It took some time to appear on the market though, not until spring 1975. But, Allan Holdsworth was never one to stay anywhere long, and he absconded to Tony Williams Lifetime just as the band were about to go on tour to promote BUNDLES! Allan suggested John Etheridge as a replacement. John was the first Soft Machine member to not have a Nucleus connection for some time. He was from Darryl Way's Wolf, where he'd proven his talent as one of the hottest guitarists around. Based on live material from this time he fitted into Holdsworth's role almost seamlessly.

In March 1976 the "all-change" was completed as the sole original member Mike Ratledge departed. Karl Jenkins pretty much took over Ratledge's role, with Alan Wakeman stepping-in on saxophones. The final classic Soft Machine SOFTS was recorded in Spring 1976 (it still had Ratledge featured, playing synthesizer on two track) and was amongst the most powerful sizzlers of Soft Machine. Some dismiss as not real Soft Machine. They could have called themselves ex-Nucleus really. It would have been one hell of a way to end the story!



Alive and well? Not really!

After embarking on an extensive European tour there were yet more changes to the line-up: first Alan Wakeman departed with violinist Ric Sanders filling his role, then Babbington also left replaced briefly by Percy Jones (from Brand X) and then Steve Cook (of Gilgamesh and Mirage). The live album documenting this line-up ALIVE AND WELL, RECORDED IN PARIS recorded in July 1977 is an odd one in that it starts as classic SOFTS styled fusion, with some welcome new twists, but somehow gets lost in the middle, ending up as a type of synthispace-disco music at the end.

Quite where this "electro" element came from wasn't apparent at the time, as a version of Soft Machine under the guises of Rubber Riff and Rubba had been making music for the DeWolfe library label incognito for a couple of years. The album RUBBER RIFF had the line-up of: Karl Jenkins (keyboards, flute, saxophone), John Etheridge (guitars), Roy Babbington (bass), John Marshall (drums) and Karl's wife: Carol Barratt (keyboards). It amounted to what sounded like safe sanitised Soft Machine, in small chunks, with the accent on tunes and dramatic themes instead of solos. The two albums by Rubba PUSH BUTTON and MOVEMENT are occasionally nice, but are chiefly quirky/cheesy commercial music with dodgy synths to the fore! The compositions are credited to Jenkins and Ratledge, but there's no documentation as to who the band actually were.

Anyway, I digress, as Soft Machine eventually ran out of steam after this. Whether they split up or just became an occasional "back burner" project I'm not sure. Their last gig of the 1970s is said to be December 1978, in Bremen, Germany. The 1981 album LAND OF COCKAYNE saw Jenkins, Marshall and Holdsworth together again, with former Cream bassist Jack Bruce. It's not an album I can honestly comment on though, as I've never been able to play it all! Over-produced, schmaltzy and just plain bad, it's a shame that it was ever released if you ask me. A much more interesting album is Second Vision's FIRST STEPS, with Etheridge and Sanders from 1980, which sounds much more like a logical sequel to SOFTS, albeit a more mellow affair.

Apparently a version of Soft Machine got together for a series of gigs at the Soho Ronnie Scotts club in the summer of 1984, with a line-up of Jenkins, Marshall, Etheridge, with Dave MacRae (keyboards) and Paul Carmichael (bass). The Karl Jenkins' Soft Machine saga ends there, sadly as a rather wet whimper.

The legacy

As told above, there have been a number of attempts at Soft Machine "reformations" with various line-ups. There are also related projects of note that I should mention here.

1n the 1970s there were the "illegitimate" Soft Machine modelled outfits: Soft Head and Soft Heap involving Hugh Hopper and Elton Dean, which were semi-successful, except that Elton was given too much room to squawk on the sax at will, which ruined them for me. Many other such incarnations existed, although they were largely in the avant-garde jazz field.

The most Soft Machine like albums of the 1970s that are not Soft Machine all have Hugh Hopper as a key player. There are two Hopper solo albums: HOPPER TUNITY BOX which features a luminary cast of Canterbury talent, patent Soft Machine riffs, diversions, and some new inventions, and the even more explorative MONSTER BAND which had one side with his band live in France (very much in the Soft Machine FIVE vein) and a side of Hugh in multi-tracking mode developing a unique twist on his "1983"/"1984" works. They both feature Dean, but in a more controlled mode, in fact on these he's excellent! There's also the second Isotope album ILLUSION. Gary Boyle's fusion outfit Isotope were often a mite too fiddly for my taste, but on ILLUSION Hugh seemed to weld it all together, his fuzz bass playing a key role. It's a classic! Hugh has tried out many other styles since, and still occasionally surprises. His discography is vast!

As I said earlier in this article, Kevin Ayers went on to be quite prolific as a soloist. Generally his albums become more diverse and patchy, and more lyrical, which is a big minus if too much of Ayers singing grates on the senses, especially with pop pastiche playing an all the more important role in his work. Okay in small doses, but... Anyway, because of this I cut-off his work in the "Related of interest" listing (below) after CONFESSIONS OF DR. DREAM, arguably his last good one, which in some ways is his most experimental. Kevin's career proves to me that his leaving Soft Machine was indeed a good thing, else they'd never have been able to explore and go where they did! I'd have to say that my favourite album involving Kevin Ayers is the wonderfully eccentric album by poetess Lady June. Not at all like Soft Machine in any way, but a real fun one!

Robert Wyatt, as you may know, had a big career change after an accident which left him wheelchair bound. That hiatus gave him plenty of time to come up with the exceptionally creative and unique ROCK BOTTOM, an album with a superb cast and a very clever twisting and reinventing of his early Soft Machine work. After that Robert tried his hand as a pop singer, before he found a new vocation as a left-field experimental protest singer (?), having success on the fringe of the newwave, and has sporadically remained active through to today.

Mike Ratledge also did some session work with other bands in the 1970s, but since leaving Soft Machine he's largely worked in the studio together with Karl Jenkins. Besides the Rubba albums he and Karl Jenkins had been doing TV and soundtrack work. They also both featured with the band Planet Earth (who later turned into Sky), did much in the way of session work and other such things that led to the commercially successful Adiemus.

Eventually though a serious attempt at Soft Machine reformation bore fruit in 2002 under the guise of "Soft Works" with the line-up of: Elton Dean (alto saxophone, saxello, electric piano), Allan Holdsworth (guitar, synthaxe), Hugh Hopper (bass), John Marshall (drums), releasing the album ABRACADABRA (Universal, Japan 2003) a lineup that I don't ever recall playing together before, and it didn't really work for me either. Too polished, I guess Allan had been working in the USA too long! Apparently the project soon folded after Allan Holdsworth pulled-out, and again in his place came John Etheridge (sometimes history uncannily repeats itself) for the much more successful "Soft Machine Legacy" project. They've issued at least four albums to date: LIVE IN ZAANDAM (2005), SOFT MACHINE LEGACY (2006), NEW MORNING (2006), and STEAM (2007) with the latter featuring Gong's Theo Travis as replacement for the late Elton Dean. Soft Machine Legacy tend to do a mixture of old and new material, including a good few old classics as well as many new ideas. At least now the Soft Machine story doesn't end with a whimper but with a rebirth that's well-worth experiencing live so I'm told. The story goes on!

Discography...

This discography lists only the original LPs, other British and notable European pressings and European CD reissues

Soft Machine

Love Makes Sweet Music / Feelin' Reelin' Squeelin'
7" Polydor BM56151 (1967)

THE SOFT MACHINE
LP Probe CPLPS 4500 (USA, 1968), Probe PLP 4500 (1968),
ABC 602 (1973), Big Beat WIKA57 (198?)

Joy Of A Toy / Why Are We Sleeping?
7" Probe 452 (USA, 1968)

VOLUME TWO
LP Probe CPLPS4505 (USA, 1969), Probe SPB 1002 (1969),
Big Beat WIKA58 (198?)

THIRD
2LP CBS 66246 (1970), CBS Embassy 30339 (197?)
CD Beat Goes On BGOCD180 (1993) *slightly edited*
CD Columbia Rewind 471407 2 (199?)

FOURTH
LP CBS 64280 (1971), CBS Embassy 30754 (197?)
CD Columbia Rewind 473003 2 (1993)

FIFTH
LP CBS 64806 (1972), CBS Embassy 31748 (1979)
CD Columbia Rewind 473002 2 (1993)

SIX ALBUM
2LP CBS 68214 (1973),
CD Columbia Rewind 473001 2 (1993)

SEVEN
LP CBS 65799 (1974)
CD Columbia Rewind 473004 2 (1993)

BUNDLES
LP Harvest SHSP 4044 (1975), Harvest 064 96356 (Germany, 1975)
CD See For Miles SEE CD 283 (1990)

SOFTS
LP Harvest SHSP 4056 (1976)
CD See For Miles SEE CD 285 (1990)

ALIVE AND WELL - RECORDED IN PARIS
LP Harvest SHSP 4083 (1978)
CD See For Miles SEE CD 290 (1990)

Soft Space
7" Harvest SPSR 419 (1978), Harvest HAR5155 (?)

LAND OF COCKAYNE
LP EMI EMC3348 (1981)
CD One Way Records S21-18936 (USA, 199?)

Compilations

SOFT MACHINE / GONG: COMPLETE FAMILY
2LP Byg Records 529.201 (1971) *inc. 1 side of 1967 Soft Machine*

VOLUMES ONE & TWO
2LP ABC ABCL5004 (1974)

CD Big Beat CDWIKD 920 (1989) *2LPs on 1CD*

TRIPLE ECHO
3LP Harvest SHTW 800 (1977) *inc. debut single & Peel sessions 1969/70*

UNTOUCHABLE
CD Castle CCSCD 281 (1990) *Harvest selection*

AS IF
CD Elite 006CD (1991) *CBS selection from 3/4/5/6*

FOURTH / FIFTH
CD Columbia Rewind 493341 2 (1999) *2LPs on 1CD*

MAN IN A DEAF CORNER
2CD Sanctuary CMDDD897 (2004)

KINGS OF CANTERBURY
2CD Snapper/Recall SMCD 740 (2003)

SIX / SEVEN
CD Edsel MEDCD740 (2004) *3LPs on 2CD*

OUT-BLOODY RAGEOUS (ANTHOLOGY 1967-1973)
CD Sony/Columbia 520039 2 (2005)

Archives...

CANTERBURIED SOUNDS (1962-64)
series featuring: The Wilde Flowers, Robert Wyatt,proto-Soft Machine, etc...
VOLUME 1 - CD Voiceprint VP201CD (1998)
VOLUME 2 - CD Voiceprint VP202CD (1998)
VOLUME 3 - CD Voiceprint VP203CD (1998)
VOLUME 4 - CD Voiceprint VP204CD (1998)

THE DAEVID ALLEN TRIO - LIVE 1963 (1963)
CD Voiceprint VP122CD (1993)

THE WILDE FLOWERS - TALES OF (1964/65)
CD Voiceprint VP123CD (1993)

AT THE BEGINNING (1967)
the Ayers, Allen, Ratledge & Wyatt, DeLane Lea Studios sessions
on **ROCK GENERATION 7** - LP Byg Records 529 707 (France, 1971) 1 side
on **ROCK GENERATION 8** - LP Byg Records 529 708 (France, 1971) 1 side
FACE AND PLACE VOL. 7 - LP Byg Records 529 507 (France, 1972)
SOFT MACHINE - LP 2001 Metronome 200.137 (Germany, 1973)
AT THE BEGINNING - LP Charly CR300014 (1977)
JET PROPELLED PHOTOGRAPHS - LP Decal LIK36 (1988), CD Spalax 14816 (France, 1995), CD Charly SNAP133CD (1997)

MIDDLE EARTH MASTERS (16/9/1967)
CD Cuneiform RUNE235 (2006)

SOFT MACHINE TURNS ON VOLUME 1 (1967/1968)
from Middle Earth & Speakeasy clubs, & early demos
CD Voiceprint VP231CD (2001)

SOFT MACHINE TURNS ON VOLUME 2 (1967/1968)
Amsterdam 10/12/67, Middle Earth 10/11/67, Iowa USA 11/8/68
CD Voiceprint VP234CD (2001)

LIVE AT THE PARADISO 1969 (29/3/1969)

CD bootleg (198?), Voiceprint VP193CD (1994)

SPACED (5/1969)
CD Cuneiform Records RUNE 90 (1996)

BACKWARDS (11/1969+5/1970)
CD Cuneiform Records RUNE 170 (1998)

NOISETTE (4/1/1970)
CD Cuneiform Records RUNE 130 (2000)

BREDA REACTOR 1971 (31/1/1970)
CD Voiceprint VP345CD (2005)

SOMEWHERE IN SOHO (20-25/4/1970)
2CD Voiceprint VP262CD (2004)

FACELIFT (26/4/1970)
CD Voiceprint VP233CD (2003)

LIVE AT THE PROMS 1970 (13/8/1970)
LP Reckless Records RECK 5 (1988)

aka **LIVE 1970** - *inferior version, but also includes 2 extra tracks (2/1970)*
CD Blueprint BP290CD (1998)

GRIDES (25/10/1970+23/3/1971)
CD+DVD Cuneiform Records RUNE 230/231 (2006)

BBC RADIO 1 LIVE IN CONCERT (11/3/1971)

aka **SOFT MACHINE AND HEAVY FRIENDS**
CD Hux Records HUX067 (2005)

VIRTUALLY (23/3/1971)
CD Cuneiform Records RUNE 100 (1998)

LIVE IN FRANCE (2/5/72)

aka **LIVE IN PARIS**
2CD Cuneiform Records RUNE 195/196 (2004)

BBC RADIO 1 LIVE IN CONCERT (20/7/1972)

aka **SOFTSTAGE**
CD Hux Records HUX 070 (200?)

FLOATING WORLD (29/1/1975)
CD Moonjune Records MJR 007 (2006)

BRITISH TOUR 75 (10/1975)
CD MLP10CD (2005)

The original note here about Voiceprint and Blueprint reissues is no longer relevant as all such titles are now deleted

Radio sessions...

T**HE PEEL SESSIONS [SOFT MACHINE TURNS ON]**
2LP Strange Fruit SFRLP 201 (1990)
2CD Strange Fruit SFRCD 201 (1990)

BBC RADIO 1967-1971
2CD Hux Records HUX 037 (2003)

BBC RADIO 1971-1974
2CD Hux Records HUX 047 (2003)

Incognito...

RUBBER RIFF

LP DeWolfe 3331 (197?)
CD Blueprint BP190CD (1994)

RUBBA - PUSH BUTTON
LP DeWolfe (19??)

RUBBA - MOVEMENT
LP Rouge (19??)

DE WOLFE SESSIONS
2LP Turning Point Music (Italy, 2002) *compilation*

Related of interest...

Musician key...

Kevin Ayers **KA**, Roy Babbington **RB**, Elton Dean **ED**, Hugh Hopper **HH**, Karl Jenkins **KJ**, John Marshall **JM**, Mike Ratledge **MR**, Robert Wyatt **RW**

Kevin Ayers - JOY OF A TOY - LP Harvest SHVL 763 (1969), CD BGO BGOCD78 (1990) **KA HH MR RW**

J**ulie Driscoll - 1969** - LP Polydor 2480 074 (1969) **ED KJ**

Kevin Ayers - Singing A Song In The Morning / Eleanors Cake - 7" Harvest HAR 5011 (1970) **KA**

Kevin Ayers - Butterfly Dance / Puis Je? - 7" Harvest HAR 5027 (1970) **KA**

Kevin Ayers - SHOOTING AT THE MOON- LP Harvest SHSP 4005 (1970), CD BGOCD13 (1990) **KA MR RW**

Syd Barrett - THE MADCAP LAUGHS - LP Harvest SHVL 765 (1970) **HH MR RW**

Carol Grimes with Delivery - FOOLS MEETING - LP B&C CAS 1023 (1970) **RB**

Nucleus - ELASTIC ROCK - LP Vertigo 6360 008 (1970) **KJ JM**

Nucleus - WE'LL TALK ABOUT IT LATER - LP Vertigo 6360 027 (1970) **KJ JM**

Keith Tippett - BLUE PRINT - LP RCA SF 8290 (1970) **RB**

Keith Tippett - YOU ARE HERE... I AM THERE - LP Polydor 2384 004 (1970) **ED**

Daevid Allen - BANANA MOON - LP Byg Records 529.345 (France, 1971) **RW**

Kevin Ayers - Stranger In Blue Suede Shoes / Stars - 7" Harvest HAR 5042 (1971) **KA**

Centipede - SEPTOBER ENERGY - 2LP Neon NE9 (1971), RCA DPS5042 (1974), CD BGO CD485 (2000) **RB ED KJ JM RW**

Lol Coxhill - EAR OF THE BEHOLDER - LP Dandelion 69 001 (1971) **KA RW**

Elton Dean - ELTON DEAN - LP CBS 64539 (1971) **ED RB MR**

Don 'Sugar Cane' Harris - SUGAR CANE GOT THE BLUES - LP MPS/BASF 21 21283-1 (Germany, 1971) **RW**

Heads Hands & Feet - SAME - Island ILPS 9149 (1971) **ED**

New Violin Summit - LIVE AT BERLIN JAZZFESTIVAL - LP MPS 33 21285-8 (Germany, 1971) **RW**

Nucleus - SOLAR PLEXUS - LP Vertigo 6360 039 (1971) **KJ JM**

Keith Tippett Group - DEDICATED TO YOU, BUT YOU WEREN'T LISTENING - LP Vertigo 6360 024 (1971) **RB ED RW**

Robert Wyatt - THE END OF AN EAR - LP CBS 64189 (1971), CBS Embassy 31846 (1978), CD Columbia Rewind 473005 2 (1993) **ED RW**

Neil Ardley - SYMPHONY OF AMARANTHS - LP Regal Zonophone SLRZ 1028 (1972) **KJ**

Kevin Ayers - Oh! What A Wet Dream / Connie On A Rubber Band - 7" Harvest HAR 5064 (1972) **KA**

Kevin Ayers - WHATEVERSHEBRINGSWESING - LP Harvest SHVL 800 (1972), CD BGO BGOCD11 (1989) **KA RW**

David Bedford - NURSES SONG WITH ELEPHANTS - LP Dandelion 2310 165 (1972) **KA**

Volker Kriegel - INSIDE: MISSING LINK - 2LP MPS 33 21431-1 (Germany, 1972) **JM**

Matching Mole - MATCHING MOLE - LP CBS 64850 (1972), CBS Embassy 32105 (1982), CD BGOCD175 (1993), Columbia Rewind 471489 2 (199?) **RW**

Kevin Ayers - BANANAMOUR - LP Harvest SHVL 807 (1973), CD BGO BGOCD142 (1992) **KA MR RW**

Michael Gibbs - JUST AHEAD - LP Polydor 2683 011 (1973) **RB JM**

Hugh Hopper - 1984 - LP CBS 65466 (1973), Atmosphere IRI 5010 (France, 1980), CD Mantra 051 (France, 1996), Cuneiform RUNE 104 (1998) **HH JM**

Volker Kriegel - LIFT! - LP MPS 21 21753-1 (Germany, 1973) **JM**

Matching Mole - LITTLE RED RECORD - LP CBS 65260 (1973), CBS Embassy 32148 (1982), CD BGOCD174 (1993), Columbia Rewind 471488 2 (199?) **RW**

Nucleus - LABYRINTH - LP Vertigo 6360 091 (1973) **RB**

Ovary Lodge - OVARY LODGE - LP CBS SF 8372 (1973) **RB**

John Surman - MORNING GLORY - LP Island ILPS 9237 (1973) **JM**

Stomu Yamash'ta & East Wind - **FREEDOM IS FRIGHTENING** - LP Island ILPS 9242 (1973) **HH**

Kevin Ayers - CONFESSIONS OF DR. DREAM - LP Island ILPS 9263 (1974), CD BGO BGOCD86 (1991) **KA MR**

Ayers/Cale/Eno/Nico - JUNE 1, 1974 - LP Island ILPS 9291 (1974) **KA RW**

Coxhill/Miller - THE STORY SO FAR / OH... REALLY - LP Caroline C1507 (1974) **KA RW**

Hatfield & The North - HATFIELD & THE NORTH - LP Virgin V2008 (1974) **RW**

Lady June - LINGUISTIC LEPROSY - LP Caroline C1509 (1974) **KA RW**

Robert Wyatt - ROCK BOTTOM - LP Virgin V2017 (1974), CD Virgin CDV 2017 (1989) **HH RW**

Stomu Yamash'ta & East Wind - ONE BY ONE - LP Island ILPS 9269 (1974) **HH**

Robert Wyatt - I'm A Believer / Memories - 7" Virgin VS114 (1974) **RW**

Brian Eno - TAKING TIGER MOUNTAIN (BY STRATEGY) - LP Island ILPS 9309 (1975) **RW**

Isotope - ILLUSION - LP Gull GULP 1006 (1975) **HH**

Phil Manzanera - DIAMOND HEAD - LP Island ILPS 9315 (1975) **RW**

Julie Tippetts - SUNSET GLOW - LP Utopia UTS601 (1975) **ED**

Robert Wyatt - RUTH IS STRANGER THAN RICHARD - LP Virgin V2034 (1975), CD Virgin CDV 2034 (1989) **RW**

Henry Cow - CONCERTS - 2LP Caroline CAD3002 (1976) **RW**

Hopper/Dean/Tippett/Gallivan - OH FOR THE EDGE - LP Ogun OG 900 (1976) **ED HH**

Isotope - DEEP END - LP Gull GULP 1017 (1976) **HH**

Michael Mantler - THE HAPLESS CHILD - LP Watt WATT4 (1976) **RW**

Jan Steele/John Cage - VOICES AND INSTRUMENTS - LP Obscure 5 (1976) **RW**

Elton Dean Quartet - THEY ALL BE ON THIS OLD ROAD - LP Ogun OG410 (1977) **ED**

Elton Dean & Alan Skidmore - EL SKID - LP Vinyl VS103 (1977) **ED**

Dean/Wheeler/Gallivan - THE CHEQUE IS IN THE MAIL - LP Ogun OG610 (1977) **ED**

Hugh Hopper - HOPPER TUNITY BOX - LP Compendium FIDARDO7 (Norway, 1977), CD Cuneiform RUNE 240 (2007) **ED HH**

Hopper/Dean/Tippett/Gallivan - CRUEL BUT FAIR - LP Compendium FIDARDO4 (Norway, 1977) **ED HH**

Intercontinental Express - LONDON - LP Compendium FIDARDO 8 (Norway, 1977) **ED**

Michael Mantler - SILENCE - LP Watt WATT5 (1977) **RW**

Dudu Pukwana - DIAMOND EXPRESS - LP Freedom FLP 41044 (1977) **ED**

Robert Wyatt - Yesterday Man / Sonia - 7" Virgin VS115 (1977) **RW**

Carla Bley - EUROPEAN TOUR 1977 - LP Watt WATT8 (1978) **ED HH**

Elton Dean's Ninesense - HAPPY DAZE - LP Ogun OG910 (1978) **ED**

Brian Eno - AMBIENT #1 MUSIC FOR AIRPORTS - LP Ambient AMBC001 (1978) **RW**

Planet Earth - PLANET EARTH - LP Pye NSPL 18556 (1978) **KJ RW**

Soft Head - ROGUE ELEMENT - LP Ogun OG527 (1978) **ED HH**

S**oft Heap - SOFT HEAP** - LP Charly WATT8 (1978) **ED HH**

Keith Tippett's Ark - FRAMES - 2LP Ogun OGD0034 (1978) **ED**

Gilgamesh - ANOTHER FINE TUNE YOU'VE GOT ME INTO - LP Charly CRL 5009 (1979) **HH**

Hugh Hopper - MONSTER BAND - LP Atmosphere IRI 5003 (France, 1979), CD Culture Press 3012782 (1996) **ED HH**

Elton Dean Quintet - BOUNDARIES - LP Japo 60033 (1980) **ED**

Hopper/Gowen - TWO RAINBOWS DAILY - LP Europa/Red ROUGE1 (1980), CD Cuneiform RUNE 77 (USA, 1995) **HH**

Matching Mole - BBC RADIO 1 LIVE IN CONCERT (27/7/72) - CD Windsong WINCD 063 (1994) **RW**

Matching Mole - SMOKE SIGNALS (1972) - CD Cuneiform RUNE 150 (USA, 2001) **RW**

Matching Mole - MARCH (3/1972) - CD Cuneiform RUNE 172 (USA, 2001) **RW**

*The above listing is **not** a complete discography!*



AD Music Ltd., 5 Albion Road, Bungay, Suffolk, NR35 1LQ, England. [www.admusiconline.com] [email: admin@admusiconline.com]
Altres [www.altres.co.uk] [info@altres.co.uk]
Auricle Music -> **Ultima Thule** (UK)
Gregorio Bardini, Via Delle Querce 15, 39011 Lana (BZ), Italy
Barking Green / Buzzle, Tim Story, P.O. Box 415, Maumee, Oh 43537, USA [storypod@aol.com]
Enrico Bassi, c/o Via Ungheria 109, 36025 Movent Vil, VI - Italy
Neil Campbell [www.neilcampbellcollective.com]
Celeno / N.R. Hills [http://homepage.ntlworld.com/nrhills]
Cuneiform Records, P.O. Box 8427, Silver Spring, MD 20907-8427, USA. [www.cuneiformrecords.com]
Cyclops Records, P.O. Box 834a, K-O-T & Surbiton, Surrey, KT1 9BZ. [Fax. 020 8397 2998] [www.gft-cyclops.co.uk] ☐ Pinnacle Records (UK)
DiN, 38 Church Lane, Ormesby, Middlesbrough. TS7 9AP, England. [01642 327 482] [www.din.org.uk] [email: info@din.org.uk]
ECM [www.ecmrecords.com] -> **New Note** (UK)
Eternity's Jest / Quarkspace, PMB 212, 1487 West Fifth Avenue, Columbus, OH 43212, USA. [www.quarkspace.com] [pwdood@quarkspace.com]
4Zero [www.4zerorecords.co.uk] -> **Shellshock/Pinnacle**
Garden of Delights [email: garden-of-delights@t-online.de]
Geometrik Records [www.geometrikrecords.com]
ICR [www.icrdistribution.com] -> **Cargo** (UK)
Important Records [www.ImportantRecords.com] -> **F Minor/Cargo** (UK)
Lunar Dunes -> **Cadiz/Pinnacle** (UK)
Moon City Music / Black Carrot [www.blackcarrot.net]
Musea Productions & Distribution, 138, rue de Vallières, 57070 Metz, France. [Fax: +33 387 366473] [www.musearecords.com] [data@musearecords.com]
Points Of Friction, c/o Spagyric, 19241 Kenya St., Northridge, CA 91326, USA [www.pointsoffriction.com]
Brendan Pollard [brendon.pollard@ntlworld.com]
Poseidon/Vital etc. -> **Musea Distribution**
Prudence, BSC Music, P.O. Box 46, 82055 Icking, Germany. [+49 8178 1533, Fax. +49 8178 1212] [www.bscmusic.com]
Ricochet Dream, PO Box 153, Red Bank, NJ 07701, USA [www.ricochetdream.com]
Nachtricht/Rixongs [rick@rcrane7.fsnet.co.uk]
September Gurls, Sigmundstrasse 92, 90431 Nürnberg, Germany.

[Fax. +49 911 318233] [www.septembergurlsrecords.com]
Spotted Peccary [www.spottedpeccary.com]
Synkronos P.O. Box 22, Upper Darby, PA 19082-0022, USA.
[www.synkronosmusic.com] [info@synkronosmusic.com]
Synthetic Symphony -> **SPV (Germany** -> **Cadiz/Pinnacle (UK)**
Transubstans, c/o Record Heaven, Box 24, 274 02 Skivarp, Sweden
[+40 466644] [www.recordheaven.net] [record.heaven@telia.com]
Trigon, Rainer Lange, Gebhardstr. 29, 76135 Karlsruhe, Germany
[www.heavyzenjazz.de] [www.trigon.in] [rainer@trigon.in]
Virta [Andekdoten] -> **Shellshock/Pinnacle [UK]**

Note: many of the addresses above may no longer be valid, and are of historical reference only. Use a web search engine like Google or a resource like Discogs to find current addresses.

Ultima Thule [the retail arm and publisher of Audion] can supply many titles reviewed in Audion, or at least may be able to help you locate them. Phone and ask for Alan if you have an enquiry, and I'll see what I can do. Ultima Thule offer a specialist mail-order service dealing with the types of music you'll find in Audion, but are not able to stock everything.

Ultima Thule, 21 Heather Road, Leicester, LE2 6DF, England.

Phone 0116 2702354
www.ultimathulerecords.com
PayPal: utle2uk@btconnect.com
https://www.facebook.com/groups/ultimathulemusic/

Distributors (i.e. Pinnacle, EMI, Universal, BMG) generally only work through retailers, and will not deal directly with the public, you will need to order their products through a record retailer! These days, most businesses have easy to find web-sites, and can be contacted by e-mail.

-> denotes who distributes the label (enquire with a retailer, i.e. Ultima Thule, Wayside Music, Musea, HMV, Fnac).

When no contact address is given it usually means one of two things...
1) there is no address given on the album.
2) the reviewer didn't supply any such information to Audion.

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

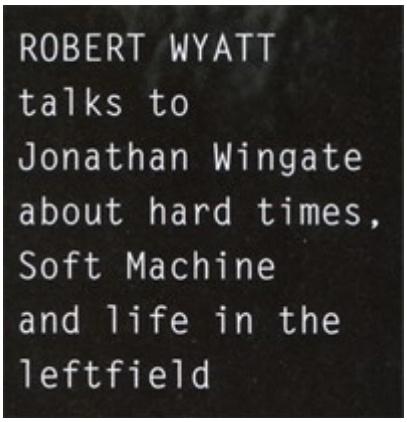
Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

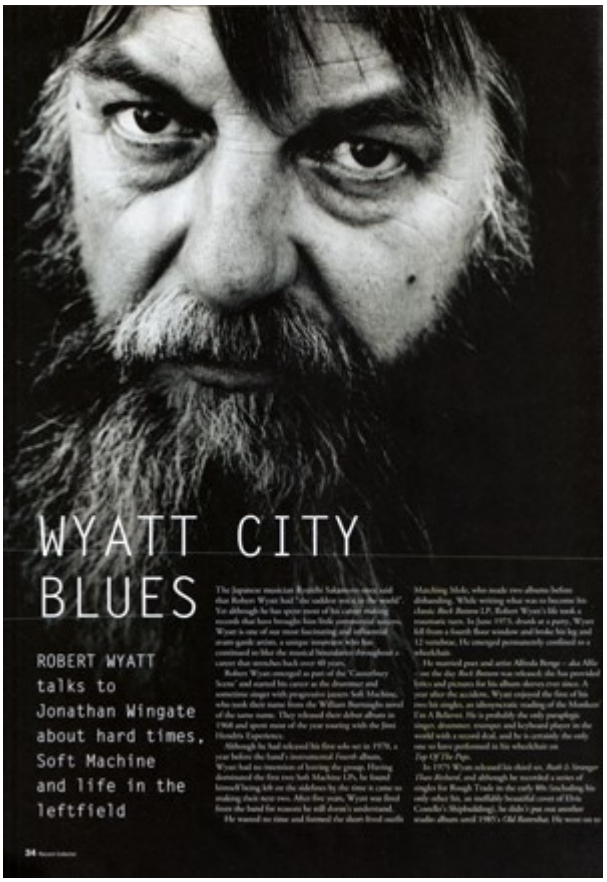
HOME

Wyatt City Blues - Record Collector N° 345 - January 2008

WYATT CITY BLUES







The Japanese musician Ryuichi Sakamoto once said that Robert Wyatt had "the saddest voice in the world". Yet although he has spent most of his career making records that have brought him little commercial success, Wyatt is one of our most fascinating and influential avant-garde artists, a unique innovator who has continued to blur the musical boundaries throughout a

Robert Wyatt emerged as part of the 'Canterbury Scene' and started his career as the drummer and sometime singer with progressive jazzers Soft Machine, who took their name from the William Burroughs novel of the same name. They released their debut album in 1968 and spent most of the year touring with the Jimi Hendrix Experience.
Although he had released his first solo set in 1970, a year before the band's instrumental *Fourth* album, Wyatt had no intention of leaving the group. Having dominated the first two Soft Machine LPs, he found himself being left on the sidelines by the time it came to making their next two. After five years, Wyatt was fired from the band for reasons he still doesn't understand.
He wasted no time and formed the short-lived outfit Matching Mole, who made two albums before

career that stretches back over 40 years.

disbanding. While writing what was to become classic *Rock Bottom* LP, Robert Wyatt's life took a traumatic turn. In June 1973, drunk at a party, Wyatt fell from a fourth floor window and broke his leg and 12 vertebrae. He emerged permanently confined to a wheelchair.

He married poet and artist Alfreda Benge - aka Alfie - on the day *Rock Bottom* was released; she has provided lyrics and pictures for his album sleeves ever since. A year after the accident, Wyatt enjoyed the first of his two hit singles, an idiosyncratic reading of the Monkees' I'm A Believer. He is probably the only paraplegic singer, drummer, trumpet and keyboard player in the world with a record deal, and he is certainly the only one to have performed in his wheelchair on *Top Of The Pops*.

In 1975 Wyatt released his third set, *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard*, and although he recorded a series of singles for Rough Trade in the early 80s (including his only other hit, an ineffably beautiful cover of Elvis Costello's Shipbuilding), he didn't put out another studio album until 1985's *Old Rottenhat*. He went on to records a series of groundbreaking records including *Dondestan*, *Shleep* and his last L.P, *Cukooland*, which earned Wyatt more mainstream attention than any of his previous albums and featured illustrious guests such as Paul Weller, Phil Manzanera, David Gilmour and Brian Eno.

Wyatt's new set, *Comicopera*, is an astonishing 16-song concept album in three acts. Much like most of his work, it is not what you would call a jazz alb that could only have been created by a jazz man. Recorded at Wyatt's house in Louth and at Manzanera's Gallery Studio, *Comicopera* again features Weller, Manzanera and Eno alongside a crack horn session that includes Annie Whitehead and Gilad Atzmon.

Although Wyatt has suffered from periodic bouts of depression throughout his life, he is in fine form when we meet in the member's bar on the top floor of the recently refurbished Festival Hall on a muggy autumn morning. Having declined his publicist's offer of a pre-interview breakfast ("Alfie nicked a couple of croissants from the hotel for me to have on the journey here"), Wyatt is fizzing with so much enthusiasm that he doesn't stop talking for over two hours.

C*omicopera* sounds very different to your last few albums.

Well, I try not to repeat myself, but although the voice is the same old thing, it gets lower and lower, and as I sink into the abyss, I grab out for other musicians and singers to help me do the high notes. Over the last 30 years, I've probably lost about an octave at the top and added one at the bottom. It's old age...that and the fags.

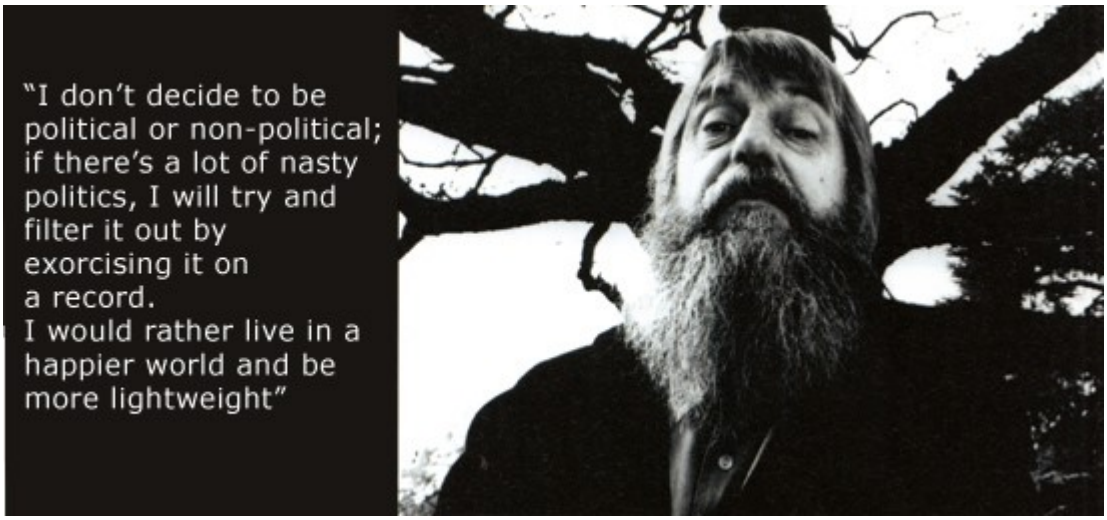
Can you take us through *Comicopera's* three sections?

The first third seems to fall into relationship stuff, man and woman losing each other, foggy things that happen between people and attempts at love between people where it's quite hard for one reason or another. The second bit leaves that kind of enclosed space, and it's just me pottering about England, which I see as a kind of rather scrappy, unkempt Methodist chapel. It's not that I sit there deliberating, choosing metaphors; it just seems to come out like that. But there's merriment in there in the second bit. I like comedy myself.

When I was in the studio with Monica Vasconcelos - who sings on Just As You Are — she said "You're so playful in the studio." And that's the nicest thing anybody has ever said about me. I just really like having fun. I hate to say this joke, but deep down, I'm shallow. It sort of sums it up, really. It's a bit like Ivor [Cutler]; deep down he was utterly trivial, just a sort of childish joke thing, but the legacy of being Jewish and the tragedy of his people sat with him very uneasily, and it was almost like carrying a great weight. My great weight is English-speaking people, the Empire.

Does that weigh heavily on you? It really does, and as an artist, I feel un-entertained by it. There are people who are poor and old fashioned, but they always seem to wear fantastic clothes and cook fantastic food. The further Western civilisation has gone, they get Anglicised and they go around wearing horrible sports clothes, eating hamburgers and getting fat watching fucking Britney Spears on telly.

For hundreds of years, I think we have absolutely lowered the tone of every neighbourhood we've gone into, and we think we're elevating. I just feel ashamed and offended at what my tax money is being spent on. For example, we're being told to watch our carbon footprint. How much carbon footprint does the average bombing raid on Basra use up compared with me and my refuse? Fuck off.



There are two particularly moving songs that address the situation, told from the perspective of the person doing the bombing and the person being bombed.
The narrator actually shifts. At the end of the second section I'm both the euphoric bomber (A Beautiful War), and the apoplectic bombed person (Out Of The Blue). It shifts about in a way that I haven't consciously done in the past.

The third section sees a shift from songs in English to Italian and Spanish. Did you decide not to sing in English as a protest against the war in Iraq?
Sort of. After the bombing it's to do with feeling completely alienated from Anglo-American culture, just sort of being silent as an English-speaking person because of this fucking war. Now I'm in my 60s, I know I'm never gonna see a world in which the English-speaking people are not thumping round the world telling Johnny Foreigner what to do, and that did hit me with a sort of thud. The last thing I sing in English is: "You've planted all your everlasting hatred in my heart."

Do you find it difficult articulating these quite complex political issues in your music without feeling a little clumsy?
I do find it difficult, because clumsy and diatribal aren't things I want to be. In fact, I really don't think what I sing makes any difference anyway, because I know enough about politics to know that politics is just about power, guns and money. I just don't think politics is about artists. I wouldn't trust most of us as far as you could throw us anyway. Artists are like cheerleaders at a football match; you can scream "Arsenal" until your head falls off, but it won't get them another goal. I'm mostly concerned with making a really nice sounding record and how to have a little fun in the studio. I'd be happy not to write about this stuff, it's just these are the things that come to the surface. I'd much rather live in a kinder world or one where I was ignorant to it. Matisse never addressed the issues in the world around him, but Picasso did. They're both great painters, it's just how it worked for them.

Are you still a card-carrying communist?
No, because there is no such thing as a communist. It's like saying are you still Yugoslavian? The thing I probably feel most affectionate about is the old left-wing revolutionary romantic sort of moments which caught my imagination in the 70s and 80s. As anachronistic as that is, it's probably even more deeply imbedded in me than all the art and music stuff. It's stayed with me, and it means a lot to me.

Were you conscious of trying to capture the sound of a band playing together in a room for this album?
Yes, it's like a fantasy band, and even though that band could not exist, it does exist for a couple of weeks when we're making the record. Everything the musicians play is fairly spontaneous. We're not playing together in the studio, because I actually work with musicians individually and then put it all together layer by layer afterwards.

Did you miss being in a band after Soft Machine?
Well, I never missed being in a group after them, I missed being in a group after Matching Mole. That was a very merry little band, although we only made a couple of LPs and then I fell out of a window before the third. It never settled, really, but then to be fair to the others, I don't think any band I was with ever could have settled.
I just can't imagine a group which could do all the different things that there are to do,

which is why I prefer the way I work now, which is to get appropriate people for each particular project. On the second track on this record, it's me with Yaron Stavi doing most of it along with Paul Weller on guitar and Monica and me doing the vocals. Well, that particular group isn't appropriate to do any other song on the record.

Would you say you are still learning at this stage in your career?
I think age is nothing but a good thing, because I just keep on learning stuff and working out how to do things. It's just a continuous, bigger, better, brighter world for me in terms of working musically. I can't believe I get to do this stuff, and I've now got the courage to ask these musicians to do things and then they do other stuff beyond it. What I like from the best jazz is the fact that the colours aren't just an instrument, they're the person who plays it. So it's not just a tenor sax or trombone, it's Gilad Atzmon and Annie Whitehead.

Can you take us through your writing process?
It varies. On the whole, I just fiddle around with chords on the keyboard and then if I've got a chord shift that can be quite arresting, I'll just record it and then keep working on it or put it away. I don't even sit down and try to do it, I just have to get things out and write things down. My room is a mess of bits of paper and notebooks with comments and drawings and observations, some of which turn into words for songs. The reason I don't write many songs is because the words don't often match the music, unless you sort of lever it in; I don't like doing that. I like to find a phrase that just sits on to the tune like it was made for it.



In the past, you have compared the way you write to an animal hunting.
That's right, just snuffling about, and if it smells good, I'll go towards it. I do that with chords and with words. I honestly have no idea what it means, I'm just drawn along by my nose. The only trouble with interviews is that it sounds like everything is the result of some kind of intellectual deliberation, whereas the deliberation and analysis comes afterwards and before, but not while I'm doing it. I work entirely by instinct.

Do you spend most of your time thinking about music?
I don't know about that. I don't think about music in terms of me making it, but I am very interested in it, and I listen to acres of music every day. My record collection goes from around the time I was born right through to about Coltrane dying, which is also, funnily enough, about the time I started making money when playing in London in '67, when all us boy-next-door types started to get into pop groups and rock groups. It's all very merry, but it ain't Coltrane.

How do you look back on those times now?
I think of those times as just murky and uncomfortable and lonely, always being the wrong person in the wrong place with the wrong people. It's just a very uncomfortable period for me, the late 60s. I tend not to think about that period very much. I go into the tunnel sort of around then, and I come out around '73 with Alfie, working towards *Rock Bottom*. Then I can sort of pick up the pieces from there.

Coming out of that live-fast-die-young era of the 60s, did you expect to die before you reached middle age? Oh yeah, absolutely. I actually attempted suicide when I was 16, not out of sadness, but because I'd sort of had enough already. I just watched what grown-ups did and I thought - I'm not sure I could ever be bothered to do any of that. Indeed, I haven't bothered to do much of it. At that very moment, the

"How much carbon

eternal infantilism of rock music suddenly presented itself to me, and I could be a kid for the rest of my bloody life, and here I still am. It does surprise me that I've lived this long, because I'm very careless really. I'm not interested in health or anything.

footprint does the average bombing raid use up compared with me and my refuse? F * * * o f f . "

Would you say you have suffered from long bouts of depression throughout your life? Yes, I have done and still do. I don't know what the word means, but if "I really wish I was dead and had never been born" is depressed, then yes. I like life, but I cannot imagine thinking - Oh, it's great to be alive. I just think life is something you've got to get through. I envy the dead, quite honestly. It's not that I'm tragic, I just find it very hard.
Meanwhile, the best substitute for death is sleep, which I love greatly. Nod off and you don't have to respond to anything. I never want to do anything apart from dream, and Alfie makes it pretty easy for me to live like that, so I'm quite happy. In fact, I've never been better than I am now.

Do you see your music as a sort of collage?
Yes, that's exactly how it works. I just keep doing it, add bits and tear bits off. That's one thing that's easier than painting, 'cos if you've painted all the layers of paint on, it's hard to peel them off again; in the studio you can put down layers and layers of instruments and just start stripping them off in different orders to see what's left.

Do you generally prefer the music you're making now to your earlier work?
On the whole, yes, but on the other hand, sometimes I'm taken by surprise if somebody plays me something I did years ago that I'd forgotten. Sometimes I've just been a guest on some little project I've forgotten, and I've had to come up with something that I wouldn't have come up with on my own, and that's really nice.

Would you say *Comicopera* harks back to your political albums of the 70s and 80s?
It seems to, but that's simply a response to the times we live in. I don't decide to be political or non-political; if there's a lot of nasty politics, I will try and filter it out by exorcising it on a record. I would rather live in a happier world and be more lightweight in response, but there's still a war on right now, we are part of it, and the tug of that affects everything I do. I live in this world, so that's how it comes out on the record. But it's the old cliché - us blondes just wanna have fun. I'm no different you know. I've always aspired that way, but I've just got to face reality, 'cause it's never gonna happen, is it?

Do you find it harder to write as you get older? It's the same really. It's sporadic. I do write all the time anyway, so it's just a question of whether anything I come up with is appropriate for what I do. There's a lot of stuff that goes on in my life outside music. I've got a son and a daughter, they've got children, I've got Alfie, and we've got her mother living at our house. We're having a life, if shopping and washing potatoes is having a life. I don't just sit there being an artist. I love peeling potatoes and going to the shops. I don't often have long periods where I'm not working on any music at all, but I don't want to give the impression that I'm a particularly useful domestic animal... I'm not that either.

How do you look back on the time you spent with Jimi Hendrix?
I think of him with nothing but love, affection and admiration. I was just very lucky to have been there. Rock musicians can be a terribly arrogant, bolshy lot, but Hendrix was always a grown-up and a real gent who never threw his weight around. He was always riveting on stage, but he wasn't always on top of it and he'd sometimes get a bit lost. We saw him nearly every night for a year throughout 1968, but I was there as another musician playing a concert that evening, so I can't say I was concentrating on Hendrix every night. I don't particularly like rock music, and I always felt most rock bands were a bit bombastic for me, but there was a fluidity about what Hendrix did which I really liked.

What do you think makes *Rock Bottom* and *Ruth is Stranger Than Richard* so timeless?
I don't know, maybe it was the fact that I had to invent a whole new way of doing music. Necessity is the mother of invention... I'd worked in a group before, and I had to work out a new way of making music, the way I made it on those records. I couldn't really use much of what I'd learned before, so I had to come up with something new, so maybe those albums have got some of that fresh angle and that feel. Most of the music that I like certainly doesn't come and go with the traffic of the day. I mean, the whole point about art really is that it's something that lives beyond the moment that it was created. A caveman

makes a mark on a cave wall, something that will be there the next morning. Art is about making a mark.



Would you say that music is a less important force than it was?
I really couldn't care less. I've got a job doing it, but in terms of how the business suffers or doesn't suffer in the current climate, it just doesn't matter to me.

But the music business is so fast moving; don't you think you have to ask yourself where the next Charlie Parker is going to come from?
Well, I'm still quite happy with the fîrst one, thank you. I'm more concerned not to lose his memory in an age of novelty, so I don't want the Charlie Parkers of this world to get buried under great heaps and racks full of the latest thing.

Which artists have had the biggest influence on you?
Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, Ray Charles and Dionne Warwick. Individually, there's nothing I can do that gets anywhere near Charlie Parker in terms of a sequence of notes, but I mention Ellington and Mingus because they're about the organisation of more than one person into a sound picture — how to make a bunch of notes and different colours like an organic whole swirling along together. It's such a valuable thing to me, and I don't think any other form of music has ever quite been able to do that.

How do you look back on the music you made with Soft Machine?
It's difficult to say because when I was thrown out of the band, I threw every single Soft Machine record into the dustbin, and I never listened to them again. If I am forced to think about it, I try and tell myself it wasn't a complete waste of time, and that interesting things happened and that young men can survive anything. There is some good music there, and I suppose it's all part of an apprenticeship, my equivalent of doing National Service or something like that... it builds your muscles up and teaches you stuff about how to live in the grown-up world if you eventually get there.

Do you still feel bitter about the whole thing?
Well, I do think it's a bit cheeky that I didn't get any money, so we had to struggle with nothing to try and make ends meet. It still makes me very angry how I got treated by the record company, the manager and the group. People say that all musicians get exploited by

managers, but musicians can be just as bad. It was interesting music, but I also learned that for a human life, interesting isn't enough in art. When art works best, it's about a moment of human contact on a lonely planet, and it's not just a question of being impressed by cleverness and brilliant ideas.
Everybody feels this stuff. I don't feel any more than anyone else and I'm no deeper than anyone else, so my job is simply to get a craft which channels it and lets it out in a sort of clear way that other people can latch on to. So in that sense, my job is only technical, because people do the emotional stuff themselves when they listen. Everybody's got heart, otherwise it wouldn't work.

Is the idea of your musical legacy important to you?
It's a nice idea, but it's a bit grand. I see it more as constant attempts to get it right from a different angle, just to get an hour of music that I can put on without getting bored and without wincing. It's not a question of trying to make a masterpiece, it's much less than that; it's just a question of damage limitation, endlessly trying to make a record without the mistakes on it.

Having barely paused for breath during our time together, Wyatt is shattered and in desperate need of a cigarette. As he weaves his wheelchair past the hordes of people in the foyer at breakneck speed, nearly knocking over a table or two along the way, he suddenly comes to a halt and points up excitedly at the sign above the Festival Hall doors. "Way Out," exclaims Robert Wyatt with a boyish grin. "Two of my favourite words."

Comicopera *is out now on Domino*

Previous article

Next article

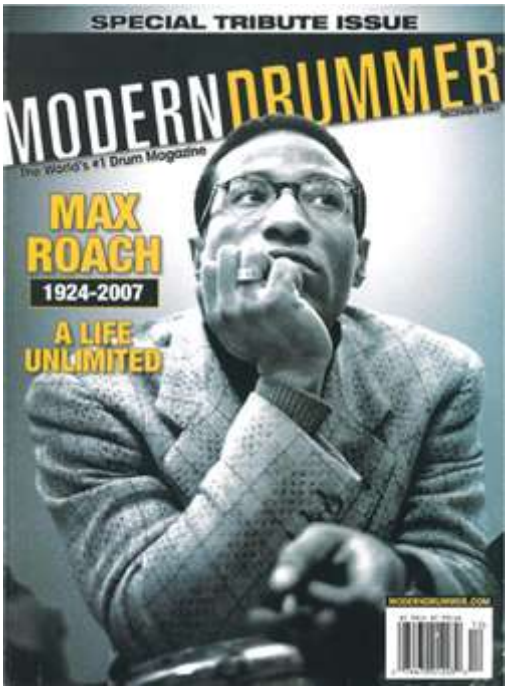
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Max Remembered - Modern Drummer Magazine - December, 2007



MAX REMEMBERED

by Robert Wyatt

MAX REMEMBERED



Robert Wyatt
Soft Machine, Syd Barrett, Brian Eno

Max really was important. And not just the records, but the whole dimension of his political fire. My god. The " Freedom Now Suite" —wonderful stuff.

Long before I had a drumkit, and I was just sitting at a table with rolled up pieces of paper, trying to simulate the sound of brushes, I sort of bit off more than I could chew, because the first record I played to was Jazz At Massey Hall, with Max, Mingus, Bud Powell, and Charlie Parker. That' s the one that got me, one of the greatest records I' ve heard in my lifetime. It' s kind of the summation of bebop—gob-smacking creativity, from beginning to end.

I met Max in 2001, when he came to England to play a concert with a trio with a Chinese pianist. I had the opportunity to say hello in the dressing room. You could tell he was ill, but once he started playing, he was still Max Roach. But I had to say to him, " You got me into a lot of trouble." Because when I was at school and I was trying to do my schoolwork, after a half hour of trying to do math, I would just think, " I can' t do this," and I' d just go and play Jazz At Massey Hall or my favorite, Thelonious Monk' s Brilliant Corners. And I told him, " The reason it was better to listen to you was because when Sonny Rollins or someone would leave off, you' d carry on and I could still follow the tune all the way through the solo, until the others came back in." That was such a clear and helpful and conscientious way to play a drum solo. So I was very glad to get that in.

We have a fairly left-wing mayor in London, and during his early days, they did all sorts of scandalous things. One of those things was, there was this tiny little patch of green in a part of London—just big enough to call a park. And somebody on the council said, " Let' s call it Max Roach Park," and they did. So they invited Max over for the dedication, and he came. And the only time they ever used the local council offices for an expensive banquet—because the socialists are all, " We don' t do that sort of thing" —was for a reception for Max Roach. And it' s still there: Max Roach Park.

> Zoom

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Rhythm Interview Robert Wyatt - Rhythm - December 2007



THE RHYTHM INTERVIEW

Robert Wyatt

Hailed as a pioneer for his solos with '60s legends The Soft Machine, written off when he broke his back and reborn as a solo percussion visionary, Robert Wyatt knows all about highs and lows. He tells Henry Yates his story

There's a clear line in the sand when it comes to the career of Robert Wyatt. Specifically, it was drawn in the small hours of June 1,1973, as a West London party thrown by the luminaries of the psychedelic scene brought the first phase of the drummer's life to a disastrous close. A heavy drinker since the '60s due to his pathological fear of crowds, the 28-year-old Wyatt had spent the night consuming punch and whisky in sufficient quantifies that when he fell out of a third-floor window onto the pavement below, he didn't immediately feel any sensation other than "a slight awkwardness at being unable to stand up".

Six weeks later, Wyatt regained consciousness in hospital to learn that he had broken his back, would be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life and, by implication, would never drum again. This last bombshell hit hardest. As sticksman and singer in '60s psychedelic trailblazers The Soft Machine, Wyatt's inspired fills and improvised free-form solos had marked him out as a unique talent amongst the beat generation. After an acrimonious sacking in 1971, he had rebounded with new band Matching Mole, and at the time of his accident was writing material for their third album. Now, after one moment of madness, it seemed he was doomed to dine out on past glories.

The medical report rang true: now 62, Wyatt remains in a wheelchair and has not performed behind a full drum kit for three decades. And yet, rather than bow to his physical limitations, the veteran musician has spent his prolific solo career adapting to them, developing percussion techniques that are arguably as adventurous as his early beats, and draping his compositions with his haunting multi-octave vocal delivery. And now, he is basking in the recent release of his new album *Comicopera*.

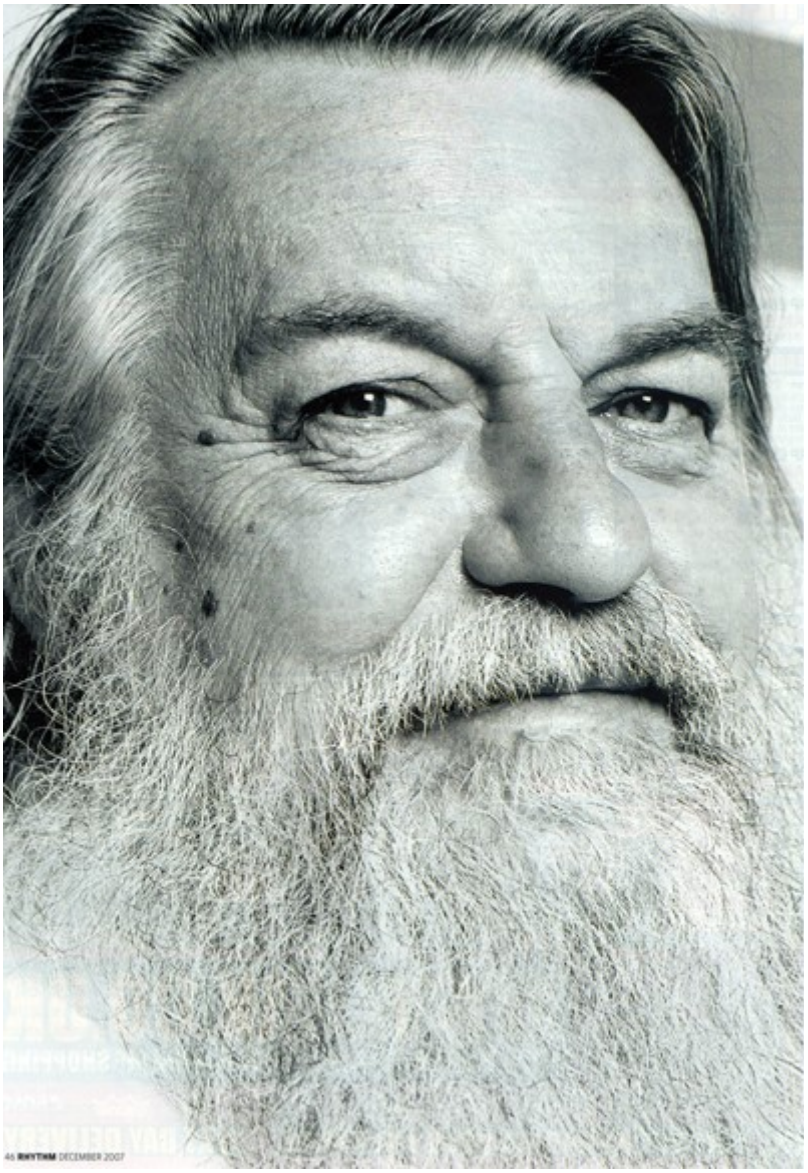
Starting at the beginning, the story goes you were taught by an American jazz drummer...

"His name was George Neidorf and he was staying at my parents' house near Dover in the '50s. He had a real drum kit, which was a novelty. Before that, my kit consisted of an ammunition box, which was my snare, my mother's typewriter as my hi-hat - you'd stamp on it and the keys would clatter back - and an old metal clothes hanger that functioned as a rhythm cymbal. I seem to remember hitting it with cutlery.

"Anyway, George had been taught by Joe Morello, but what he tried to impress upon me was how wonderful Philly Joe Jones was. Then I had another teacher called Ramon Farran when I moved to Majorca in the '60s. He was an old-school jazzer; strict about holding the sticks correctly and elbows being the right distance from the ribcage. It's good to know the rules, even if you ignore them later on."

Who did you take inspiration from?

"People think the white drummers of the '60s were listening to each other, but we were actually listening to black music. The other beat drummers were just boys nextdoor to us; the thing was to get the sound you heard on Stax records. The New Orleans drummers were the bedrock for all of us. Even drummers in bands that don't sound like they play black music learnt how to handle the kit from those bands."



> Zoom

You formed The Soft Machine in 1966 - what were you trying to do with the drums?

"I wasn't trying to be revolutionary - I was trying to get people to dance. Before then, I'd been in a band called The Wilde Flowers, and when we played the local dances in Canterbury, you'd drum in a way that made people dance. When the floor started heaving, you knew you were doing your job.

"I can't think of anyone who was doing what I was, but that's partly because of the nature of the band. The Soft Machine wasn't a proper rock band, apart from the fact we played very loud and had long hair. You needed to be able to deal with any time signature, and you also needed endurance, because once we started pushing the solos, each piece could last over 20 minutes."

Were those improvised solos ever performed sober?

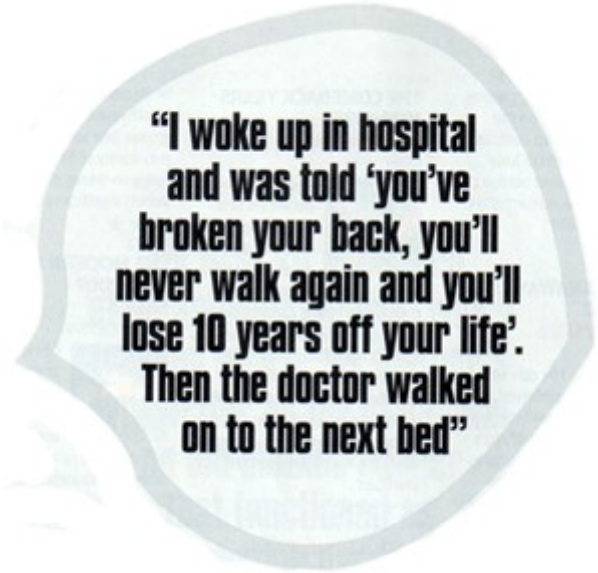
"I can't remember ever being sober once we got going, but that was because I've always had incredible stage fright. I developed my love of music in a solitary state and, to tough it out live, I'd drink recklessly."

What was your approach in the studio?

"Each piece we played in The Soft Machine had its own distinct character - I mean, Kevin Ayers wrote songs that were like Donovan or Ray Davies - so I tried to do appropriate drumming for each. The only thing I couldn't bear was to do the same beat over and over again, so I was a rubbish metronome. I was always having fun on the kit. I'd trick people; go silent when you expected it to go bang and vice-versa."

Is it fair to say you invented the notion of the singing drummer?

"I honestly don't know. As to how it interacted with the drums, it depended on the music. In The Wilde Flowers, we'd work out songs where I could do them together, or you'd just lay down very regular chops and go onto automatic on the kit and concentrate mainly on the vocals - and sometimes completely fuck it up."



You've said you didn't consider yourself part of the 'Canterbury scene' of the '60s...

"That term was invented by someone who liked drawing up imaginary family trees. I make the analogy with astronomers who look at a random set of stars and say it's a horse or a plough. It's inevitable that you start playing with people around you, but I didn't feel any particular musical connection with them. I felt much closer to the people I ended up working with later on."

Such as?

"A wonderful drummer, who I watched every night on tour in 1968 and still think is woefully under-praised, is Mitch Mitchell. Bloody wonderful. Because Jimi Hendrix was so riveting, people didn't realise just how important Mitch was. He knew his jazz and, like me, he was trying to apply it to the new circumstances.

"At the end of our tour together, I still had a little Premier kit and Mitch knew I couldn't afford a better one, so he gave me his own custom-built maple kit. So from the second Soft Machine album onwards, I was using the same kit as on Hendrix's late recordings. I've still got the cardboard boxes with 'JH Experience' printed on them, which I could probably sell on eBay, but I need them to keep the drums in."

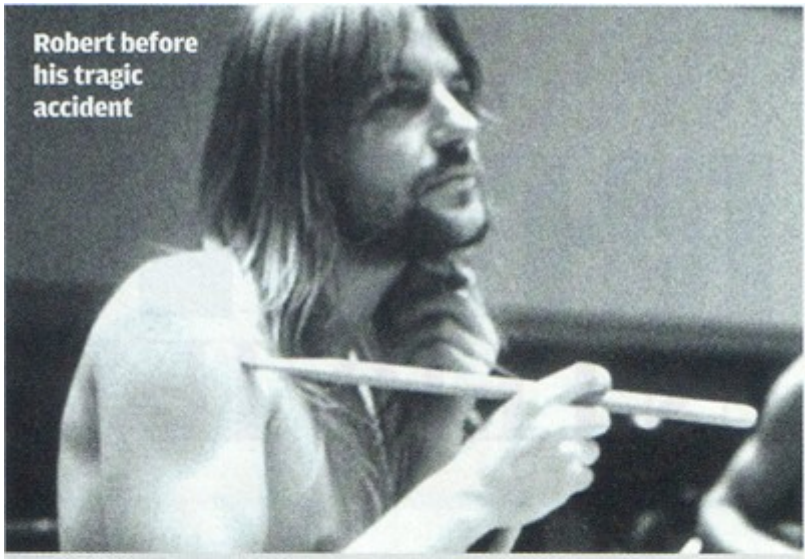
When you were fired from The Soft Machine in 1971, at the time you said it was "humiliating"...

"An experimental band like that is bound to have a lifespan, but yeah, the end was

humiliating, because I'd got them together and they democratically got rid of me. But I was asking for it. There's live footage of those last nights, and there's a real tension, I'm just playing faster and faster, and people are looking at me out of the corner of their eyes. It was untenable."

How did your drumming evolve in Matching Mole?

"That was nice, because it took me back to the happier days of The Soft Machine, so when one of us went dancing off in the opposite direction the others would just laugh and join in. It was more of a fun band, not so solemn. We'd trip each other up, but because we were friends we didn't get the stern glances."



Robert before his tragic accident

MY PROUDEST MOMENT

"It was definitely in 1970, when The Soft Machine was playing as an expanded band including Ronnie Scott on tenor saxophone. For a couple of minutes at one show, I'm actually playing drums under Ronnie Scott's solo. That's a dream for me. If you can find the tape, you can tell by my drumming – I'm in a state of euphoria, a trance-like state of pleasure. I can't judge if I did okay, but I was thrilled to be doing it. It was a tough piece with a difficult time signature, and the bit I'm playing under Ronnie is a fast 6/8. I think it's steaming, myself, but then I'm not a critic – what would I know?"

Can you talk us through your accident in 1973?

"That night I'd been drinking punch, then someone got out a bottle of whisky and I was just gone. I was flying - quite literally, in the end, out of the window. I didn't lose consciousness when I hit the ground, but I don't remember anything about the six weeks after that, because they pump you so full of drugs. Then you wake up in hospital and they tell you what's happening, which in my case was 'you've broken your back, you'll never walk again and you'll lose 10 years off your life'. Then the doctor walked on to the next bed."

Was losing your ability to drum the least of your worries?

"Actually, I did think about that pretty early on. I'd been working on a third Matching Mole album, and I thought 'fucking hell - I won't be able to play drums'. Later, I realised I could still sing, then I decided I could still work the top of the kit, and if I needed a bass drum I could prop it up and play it by hand, and I could just replicate the hi-hat by singing it into the microphone. So that made me realise I could record, even if I couldn't play live."

What's your approach to percussion on *Comicopera*?

"I can still play each bit of the kit separately, so I'll do the cymbal part, the ride part and so on, and then percussion separately. I often revert to how I played when I didn't have a proper kit, and I often don't use a kit at all. On 'A Beautiful War', the off-beat is provided by a Lebanese biscuit tin. Then there's an instrumental called 'On The Town Square', where I used a bodhran [an Irish drum], but with brushes, because I hadn't heard that before. Again, on 'A Beautiful War' the bass drum is me whacking the side of the mattress I was sleeping on in the studio. So I played mattress and biscuit tin on that track - just with a couple of cymbals over the top."

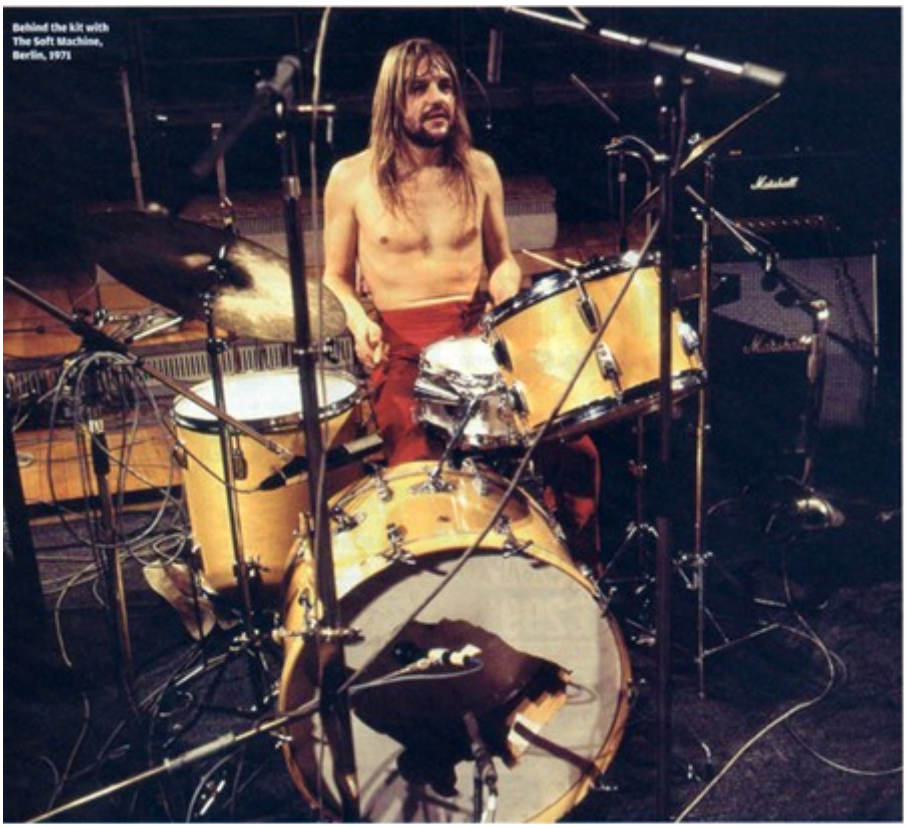


Don't you ever miss flailing at the kit, as you were renowned for doing with The Soft Machine?

"Having seen clips of my old drumming days, going back 40 years in some cases, I do remember the buzz. But I'm now in my 60s, and I think anyone of that age has twinges remembering their youth. I expect old cricketers remember their bowling when they were in their 20s and think 'fuck, I wish I could still do that'. But you have different stages in your life, and I really enjoy working the way I do now with percussion, instead of being an upfront drummer. Where there's a will there's a way."

www.strongcomet.com/wyatt
www.myspace.com/robertwyatt

Comicopera is out now on Domino Records


Behind the kit with The Soft Machine, Berlin, 1971



Wyatt on Record

THE EARLY YEARS 1968-1970

The Soft Machine

(ABC/Probe) 1968

Recorded in a few snatched days on their virgin tour of America, The Soft Machine's eponymous debut bottled the musical anarchy of the band's concerts and patented the concept of psychedelic rock at a stroke. Wyatt would grow more eloquent as a songwriter, but his fills and solos since have rarely fizzed with such a fresh-out-of-the-traps enthusiasm as here.

★★★★

Third

(Columbia) 1970

Unimaginative of title but grandiose of musical scope, The Soft Machine's *Third* double-album probed the themes of the emerging jazz-fusion movement over four sprawling tracks (one per side on the original vinyl). Wyatt contributes the haunting 'Moon in June', but his best moment behind the kit arrives in the masterful 7/4 section of 'Facelift'.

★★★★

THE BREAKAWAY YEARS 1971-1972

Matching Mole

(CBS) 1972

The title was conceived as a round-the-houses dig at Wyatt's ex-bandmates (Matching Mole sounds like 'machine molle' – the French for 'soft machine') and the content of the drummer's breakaway record was similarly whimsical. 'O Caroline' aside, you'll find more solid collections of tunes with Wyatt's hand on the tiller, but as a snapshot of the charm and wit of the Canterbury scene, this takes some beating.

★★★

THE COMEBACK YEARS 1974-1975

Rock Bottom

(Virgin) 1974

Wyatt has always denied his first post-plunge album was directly inspired by the accident, but it's hard to ignore the musical calling cards of a man clinging to sanity by his fingernails. Still, it's not all doom and gloom as, assisted by a cast of friends including Nick Mason of Pink Floyd, the drummer starts to find his flair for percussive invention on tracks like 'Little Red Riding Hood Hit The Road'.

★★★★

Ruth is Stranger than Richard

(Virgin) 1975

The lukewarm response to *Ruth*... was doubtless a factor in Wyatt's decade-long withdrawal from his solo career. While patchy in parts, revisiting the album reveals a quirky and eclectic grower that swings from the pub shanty of 'Soup Song' to the heart-on-sleeve 'Solar Flares'. Only Robert Wyatt can do this.

★★★

THE MODERN AGE 1997-2007

Shleep

(Thirsty Ear) 1997

Gloriously out of step with the prevailing music scene, *Shleep*'s soporific title was a perfect reflection of the dreamlike soundscapes within. Certainly, Wyatt sounded sharper, while the assistance of luminaries including Brian Eno and Paul Weller underlined his continued relevance on the rock scene.

★★★★

Comicopera

(Domino) 2007

With recording split between Phil Manzanera's Gallery Studio and

his own bedroom in Louth, Wyatt's new collection finds his melodic and percussive instincts firing on all cylinders, from the shadowy 'Stay Tuned' to the biscuit tin-led ballad 'A Beautiful War'. The most adventurous record you'll hear all year.

★★★★

> Zoom

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt : Web Exclusive Interview - Modern Drummer Magazine - November, 1 2007

ROBERT WYATT : Web Exclusive Interview

Since leaving the groundbreaking British psychedelic band Soft Machine in 1971, Robert Wyatt has released a succession of remarkable solo albums filled with artfulness and surprise. His latest, Comicopera, is a worldly, three-part meditation on modern profundities. MD chatted with the always-gracious musician to learn what's fueling his art these days.

MD: Congratulations on your new album, Robert. I'm always happy to recommend your latest album to newcomers, though that isn't always the case with other artists.

Robert: People think growing older is a bad thing, but what I like about it is, you get time to learn more about what works and what doesn't, and fine-tune it.

MD: I suppose we get used to people having their "formulas."

Robert: Yeah, I wish I had one of those. *[laughs]* God, life would be so much easier. Every time I go into the studio, I think, How on earth do you do this? I start to write a tune and think, What do I know about writing a tune?

MD: Do you eventually find something that you latch onto?



Robert: Well, I've got triggering devices, that's another thing you learn as you get older. My current device is sort of "karaoke cornet playing" with old jazz records. Of course I can't really play it like a craftsman, but I can pick up notes that I might sing. I can't play bebop speeds, but I find classics like Gershwin tunes, Nat King Cole, Sarah Vaughan—things that I didn't even listen to when I was younger—and just find other appropriate notes. This works well for lubricating the inside of my head, gives me lift-off. It's a way of finding lots of different melodic threads off of one chord sequence. I still get astonished at how much Sonny Rollins can get out of one chord sequence. Now, I'm not a jazz soloist, but it seems to me a good way to start out finding tunes. I know some people start by setting up a beat on a drum machine or something, but I find that gets me absolutely nowhere—partly because I don't hear things in beats. I still hear things in an anachronistic ride cymbal swing thing.

MD: As you're improvising melodies, I imagine some kind of rhythmic element is already there from the beginning.

Robert: I suppose that's right. That element of jazz 4/4, which is in fact a 12/8 with a triplet feel, is a basic rhythm for me. Even if I'm working on something with more of a New Orleans, Bo Diddley thing, I won't do it like Eddie Cochran or whoever—though I love the way he'd do it—but I like it when it's more overlaid with a swing thing, that sort of feel.

MD: That's the beauty of music from New Orleans, there are so many possible directions….

Robert: Yeah, you can take it anywhere. It's such a wonderful way to start out. When I'm looking for melodic lines, though, I need some sense of a harmonic landscape.

MD: There was an interesting thing that happened when I first saw your new album's title. Maybe I had in the back of my mind your past references to Latin music, but I read it as "Comicopera," like some Spanish word I was unfamiliar with, rather than Comic-opera. Has anyone else made that mistake?

Robert: No, it's not a mistake. One of the things I like about putting that word together is you can sort of make various other words out of it. I'm very happy when that happens. The album isn't an academic exercise in modern comic opera, though it has allusions to the genre. And the word "pera" means "pear," the fruit, so to be "a funny pear" sets up a whole other, rather nice kind of meaning.

MD: You were talking about musical trigger points. How about lyrically?

Robert: I tend to have more musical ideas than lyrical ones in terms of what I'd put on a record. So sometimes I'll have pieces lying around dormant because I'll only have one element or the other, and there's no way I can artificially put some words to music or some piece of music to words. Sometimes I'll even use other people's tunes. I begin this record with a tune by Anja Garbarek and end it with a song by Carlos Puebla, and bits and pieces in between are based on a tune by Brian Eno, beautiful stuff that he had knocking around but didn't know what to do with. For the words, I just have to strike lucky, and I don't often, which is why having my wife, Alfie, around is good. There's a lot of imagery in what she does, sometimes quite direct, sometimes indirect. But she sort of comes to my rescue with the words. We've known each other long enough where she knows what would be convincing for me to sing.

MD: In my mind your songs often seam to have been prompted by some conversation you've had with her.

Robert: That's exactly right, indeed they are, to the extent that with some songs, I don't know which one of us came up with which line. But on the whole it sort of pans out…with this record, for instance, in the first third of it, apart from the opening Anja Garbarek song, the lyrics are Alfie's, then they're mostly mine, and then it ends with this song "Out Of The Blue," which is Alfie's again. Then I go abroad and do songs from all over the place—by a group of Italian musicians, by Garcia Lorca, by Carlos Puebla…. But that was just because it's great fun singing in other languages, and I like pretending I'm not from England. It makes me feel less, um, embarrassed. *[laughs]* English-speaking people have these hubristic moments of ruling the world, and I get so embarrassed by that stuff.

MD: Do you see yourself as the "leader" of your projects?

Robert: I don't know if leader is the right word. It's more like, "The buck stops here." I have to take responsibility in the end for how it's all put together. And the other musicians are there, God bless them, to help me get my songs out right. It's only for a few days in a year. It doesn't necessarily mean we'll be in a group on the road together—in fact, it's very unlikely. I can't imagine Brian Eno in a jazz band, or Paul Weller playing guitar with Brian Eno. So it's kind of an imaginary get-together, people with different elements that are important to me.

But I have thought a lot about the issue of musical leadership, because I've been both a band member and a sort of conductor of the band. I had this group called Matching Mole *[Robert's short-lived post–Soft Machine band, which put out two albums in 1972]*. A little record company called Hux has recently found some BBC stuff we'd done that I forgot about. The CD is called Matching Mole On The Radio. Anyway, I remember that business of having that role as a drummer and a leader, and there's one obvious problem, and that's

too many drum solos. *[laughs]* It's one way to be, but I was always concerned as a drummer with the fact that we're in the engine room, and that whatever I was playing was relying on the melodic gifts and inventiveness of the other musicians. It was simply my job to keep it on the boil. I found this an interesting thing to do. I think of the role as that of an audible conductor—organizing the pace and the dynamics in such a way as to keep it alive and flowing.

The drummer/leader I've been listening to recently that's most effective is Kenny Clarke. I got a box set of his—it's sort of classic '50s hard bop—and he's such a discreet sounding drummer that most people would think he was kind of a nightclub drummer: keeps time, uses brushes…. He might be better known in Europe, because he left the States in the mid-'50s and came to work in France where he became a central figure in the French jazz scene, of course along with Bud Powell. With Kenny, you have to go through hours of stuff to guess that the drummer is the leader. But there is something in common, which is that everything just moves with such a sweet groove. You can hear that everyone can relax, that he'll take care of them. And it's a lovely feeling. I get that, funny enough, with Blakey. There's a lovely Hank Mobley record I've got from I suppose the late '50s, and he's such a wonderful accompanist. He's not very complex for a modern jazz drummer, he just sort of swings. But the way he changes the pace throughout the solo, and gathers it together, and helps the next soloist get off the ground—it's just so beautiful, such a high level of generous craftsmanship.

MD: There are Elvin records where he's not "being Elvin" so much, too.

Robert: Yes. We're talking about helping the other musicians get off the ground. That was the job: Get off the ground, and stay off the ground. Of course, it's not the only role. Tony Williams played alongside people, and that's pretty good too.

A very underestimated drummer of my era who I shared a lot with and learned a lot from, was Mitch Mitchell with Jimi Hendrix. I watched them night after night for most of 1968. [Soft Machine opened for The Jimi Hendrix Experience on their American tours.] I knew Mitch before he was with The Experience. He was the drummer with a really good R&B band in England called Georgie Fame & The Blue Flames. That was basically jazz musicians playing a kind of big band blues, closer to the Jimmy Smith era of danceable jazz. And Mitch negotiated going through that to working with Hendrix with great aplomb and great inventiveness. A lot of people thought Jimi should have had a heavier drummer, and eventually he did with Buddy Miles. But I thought Mitch was the most appropriate because he was so fluid. From jazz he got this fluidity and speed of thought.

MD: The changes in popular music at that time—and you were right in the middle of that—seem so extreme from a vantage point in 2007. I wonder, if Hendrix had stayed alive, where he would have been musically even four or five years after Band Of Gypsys. What would the drummer in that band…

Robert: …What would he have to be able to do, yeah. But there was the sense that people made mistakes and knew it. I know Noel Redding, the bass player in The Experience, said that sometimes when Mitch and Jimi were really flying, he actually didn't know where the beat was and had to stop playing. This reminds me of Coltrane. He'd go off with Elvin where the piano and bass couldn't follow, and nobody is more secure with the beat than McCoy Tyner and Jimmy Garrison. But in the end they'd just leave Coltrane and Elvin to go to it. So there's a perfectly respectable antecedent to what Jimi and Mitch were doing.

MD: You can almost hear John Cage saying, "That's fine; it's good that you were confused and had to stop."

Robert: *[laughs]* Yes, right! I mean, these are the moments where you have to think fast and where a lot of creativity can come through. "You didn't expect this to happen…so what are you gonna do now? Come up with something quick."

MD: Or if not, just chill out.

Robert: That's right, sit this one out. I used to do that a lot. I'd be playing and think, You know, this would sound really good without the drums, and I'd stop playing. Eventually the musicians around me would get used to the fact that I might well do this *[laughs]*, but in a sense it was a compliment to them.

MD: I've got twenty CDs by drummer/leaders here at my desk, and I would bet there aren't four songs total without drums on them.

Robert: Yeah, I won't use them unless I think they're an integral part of the song. I mean, when I'm recording I get a whole pile of stuff on, but then I strip it away to what I need to keep the thing going. Like on the second track, "Just As You Are," I have a really upfront ride cymbal thing going. But then there's other songs, like "You You." I tried to add an appropriate drum thing to that, and to me it just made it a bit more pedestrian, a bit more obvious…a bit more normal. I thought, No, I'll just leave it with the bass guitar strumming along, that'll do it.

MD: One of the nice things about coming to a new album of yours is not having a preconception of what the arrangements are going to be like on each song. I love that you might be thinking, "Well, we don't need red in this picture."

Robert: Absolutely. I took this to an extreme at one point. There's a song on there called "Be Serious," which is about being envious of people who have a religion. Paul Weller did several tracks of guitar, and I liked what he did so much that I took nearly everything else away except the voice, Paul's guitar patterns, and a cymbal. That's all the song needed, all of the information was there. Some of my favorite moments in recording are in the editing. For instance, the vibes duet toward the end—Orphy Robinson double tracked himself, and we treated one of the tracks and left the other alone—but this originally had a rhythm section accompaniment to it, a 7/4 figure. We took everything away to hear what Orphy was doing, and I really liked the fact that the time seems uncertain, and it gathers momentum and then sort of spreads and comes back again…. It seemed much more interesting rhythmically than when it had the rhythm section in the mix. It was a difficult moment because I'd really liked what I'd played on drums. But I thought, Robert, that's not the point. *[laughs]* The point is, What works here? I'd done my job as a drummer, which was to set the pace for him to play to. He'd done that, and now he didn't need me anymore.

MD: The process of elimination doesn't seem to be thought of enough. We're always thinking, What can I add here, what kind of harmonies can go here…?

Robert: I do have dense moments sometimes, when I really layer it on. But I really mean to do that then. It just depends on the song. The only difficulty I used to have with jazz musicians is that they would wait for their moment where they could do their thing, and what I really want is musicians who can play as well as jazz musicians, but think in terms of, What does this song really need? And that's why I'm so grateful to the musicians; that's why I used the same ones as I did on the last record—Gilad Atzmon on reeds, Yaron Stavi on bass, Any Whitehead on trombone, for instance. Technically they're really shit-hot, but they only play what's appropriate. I'm so grateful for that. It's taken years to find these people.

Photo by Alfreda Benge.

>> L'interview sur le site de Modern Drummer Magazine

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

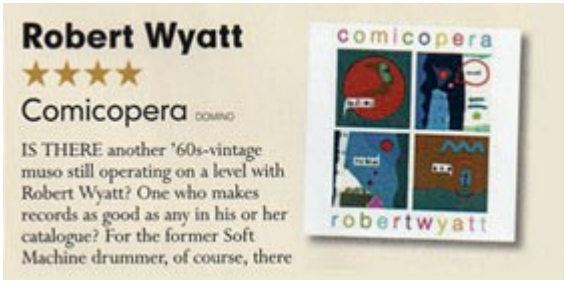
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Trebles All Round - Mojo - November 2007



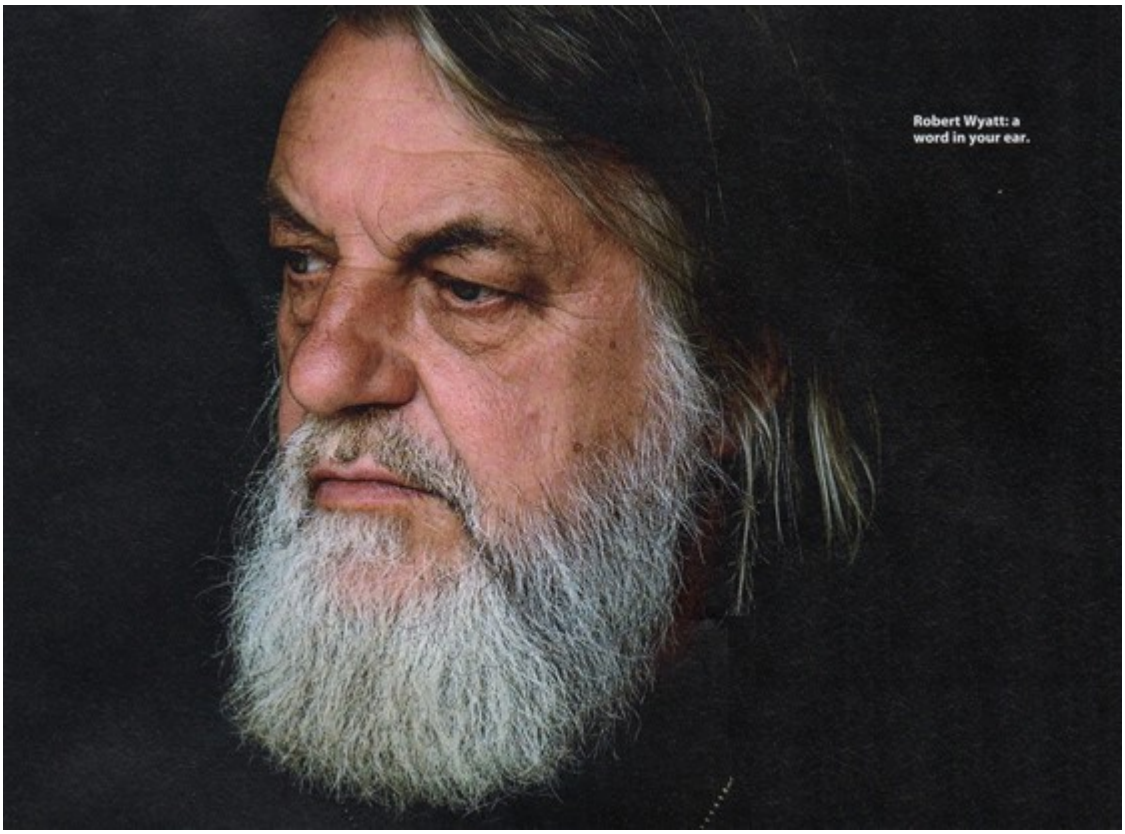


TREBLES ALL ROUND

Moving, sparkling triptych from the 62-year-old who just keeps getting better. By Danny Eccleston.

IS THERE another '60s-vintage muso still operating on a level with Robert Wyatt? One who makes records as good as any in his or her catalogue? For the former Soft Machine drummer, of course, there was no moment of transfiguring pop stardom, no place in some illusory pantheon to preserve — and you sense it is, in part, his humility that keeps his music on the straight and narrow.

Comicopera is typical Wyatt in the way it sits next to you and whispers in your ear, sharing often uncomfortable ideas in that friendly, melancholy voice. In other ways, it's all-new Wyatt, sharing personnel with 2003's *Cuckooland* (notably, Gilad Atzmon on tenor sax and Paul Weller on guitar) but lacking its predecessor's nuages of keyboards and sounding more immediate, live and quirkily melodic.



And while *Cuckooland* split into two parts (with 30 seconds of silent intermission) *Comicopera* divides into three.

Act 1 — subtitled Lost In Noise — is domestically inclined, incorporating a ravishing, mordant account of a long-term love affair (Just As You Are), with vocals shared by Wyatt and Brazilian chanteuse Mônica Vasconcelos, and lyrics ("It's that look in vour eyes/I know your despise/Me for not being stronger") that bear poet wife Alfreda Benge's trademark lack of sentimentality.

It may yet prove Wyatt and Benge's best claim to have written a "standard".

Part 2 - The Here And Now -gruffly engages with the world. There are deadpan jokes ("It's a beautiful day... but not here") amid simply serendipitous moments of music, especially where Atzmon's tenor, Orphy Robinson's steel pans and Wyatt's plashy percussion interact. In a brilliant gambit, the segment ends with a song from the perspective of a bomber pilot, happily blitzing the crap out of an unspecified Arab homeland, and another from the p.o.v. of the victim, whose hellish disorientation is uncannily summoned in the desperate, repeated refrain: "Something unbelievable is happening to the floor!"

Wyatt says this apocalyptic punctuation mark made an immediate return to Anglophone pop seem a betrayal.

So Act 3 — Away With The Fairies — goes Latin. It's pretty enough, with a moving Hasta Siempre Commandante saluting Che Guevara with help via a swinging Italian combo, and a dense Orphy Robinson vibe instrumental providing variety. But after the in-your-face engagement and subversive pop of Acts 1 and 2, it feels superfluous and defocusing.

Concluding circumlocution aside, *Comicopera* gets to you quicker and stays with you longer than any previous Wyatt album. Moreover, it's hard to imagine a record more original or full of life, from any artist of any age, emerging this year. It's that damn good.



"I can be a girl, a boy, anything."

Robert Wyatt talks to Danny Eccleston.

Trebles all round

Moving, sparkling triptych from the 62-year-old who just keeps getting better. By Danny Eccleston.

Robert Wyatt

★★★★

Comicopera

"I can be a girl, a boy, anything."

Robert Wyatt talks to Danny Eccleston.

I love the gloomy English high street scene of A Beautiful Peace.

"Yes, well you have those moments, don't you, when the grimness of England seems overwhelming. At the same time, England to me is the feeling of Gilad and Orphy merrily duetting in the middle of an imaginary street somewhere. That's my happy England, what draws me back to London, that burst of sunshine."

What does Paul Weller bring to your records?

"He always comes up with something appropriate. I like his texture and percussion, the grunts and growls. We're both rooted in black music – it's just that he starts at Marvin Gaye and I start with Roland Kirk – and both of us are just so… English. Everything gets filtered through that."

The three-act structure gives you a lot of options…

"This is a record. I can be what I like. I can be a girl, a boy, anything. So I decided I wouldn't be English at all for the last third and go away with the fairies. So that's why it's called that."

You do Carlos Puebla's Hasta Siempre Commandante. It's a subject that's obviously still close to your heart…

"I did one of his songs in the early '80s, with Harry Beckett on trumpet. I like his style, it's earthy – almost like one of those Cape Verdean singers, and the song, like Che Guevara T-shirts, has gone through kitsch and come through the other side unscathed. It still makes my skin prickle a bit, just the hope against hope."

Subject matter aside, I think the melodies on this record are your strongest ever…

"Jazz is my daily gruel and it's a great place to find melodies – you'll get eight in a good Sonny Rollins solo for a start! Recently I've started listening to the jazz singers – I was never into them so much before I turned 60, they weren't rough enough for me. But now I'm really listening to Nat 'King' Cole and Sarah Vaughan, amazed at how they hold a tune. I just think I want to be in that place where they go, but I'm afraid I've smoked too many fags!"

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Kevin Ayers and Robert Wyatt - The Guardian - 24 October 2007

KEVIN AYERS AND ROBERT WYATT

Simon Reynolds

The Guardian

"I COULD HARDLY recognise him at first," says Kevin Ayers. "But there, under that great beard, was Robert and he hadn't changed a bit." The singer is recalling his reunion after over thirty years' separation, with Robert Wyatt, his former band mate in The Soft Machine. "As wonderful as it was odd", the meeting took place in the summer of 2006 while Ayers was recording his comeback album, *The Unfairground*, his first record since 1992. In odd, wonderful synchrony. it came out last month only weeks before Wyatt's own *Comicopera*.

Intense friendships always seem like they'll last forever, but time and the way of the world wears them away. Suddenly, decades have passed since you last saw that inseparable soul-mate. Wyatt and Ayers were co-founders of The Soft Machine, in their heyday second only to Pink Floyd as a psychedelic trip band at the swirling kaleidoscopic heart of Swinging' London. But after their debut album and a gruelling tour of America supporting the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Ayers went off to start a solo career. Many thought he was set to be a big star, his tousled blonde mane and debonair charm making him the missing link between Syd Barrett and Bryan Ferry. "I think Kevin got waylaid by us nutters," says Wyatt, meaning The Soft Machine and its anarcho-surrealist mish-mash of jazz and acid rock. "There was a window there, a moment when Kevin, with his songs, could have been up there in the charts, as a Donovan type figure." Ayers is bemused by this notion that he was diverted from his true destiny. "Donovan? Good heavens. I am glad that I ended up as Kevin Ayers! And the people from Soft Machine were a big part of that."

Wyatt and Ayers originally met in 1961. "Someone had told Kevin, `oh there's one other bloke in East Kent with long hair," says Wyatt. "You'd get on." They did. "Robert is an incredibly important figure in my life," says Ayers. "He got me started. I liked him and he was doing music so I wanted to do music too. Robert was extraordinary, full of ideas and able to talk about art and books. I had never been in that sort of atmosphere." Daevid Allen, a wandering Australian beatnik, was lodging with Robert's mother – the infinitely tolerant and artistically supportive Honor Wyatt, a journalist. He befriended the teenagers, precociously turning them on the hippie values of drugs, sex and free spirited nomadism. He whisked Ayers off to Balearic bohemian paradise of Ibiza, where "one could get by with absolutely no money." Recalls Ayers, "we hitchhiked down there and lived off fruit from the trees and fish we would catch."

Allen, Ayers, and Wyatt formed the Soft Machine with Mike Ratledge, a keyboard-playing prefect Wyatt had known at school in Canterbury. One of the great myths of The Soft Machine is that they were the product of a progressive school favored by Canterbury's artists and intellectuals. "Actually, the Simon Langton School is a totally respectable, conservative grammar school," says Wyatt, who remembers struggling academically and getting regular canings. He left at sixteen with no qualifications, having swallowed a whole bottle of his father's multiple sclerosis pills because he was "terrified of having to go back to school". Still it is true that the Soft Machine came from highbrow, arty backgrounds.

"Robert was very lucky to have had parents who were interested in ideas and very open, you could talk with them about anything and they would listen," recalls Ayers, describing the Wyatt household in Lydden as "an absolute refuge." Later, after Wyatt's father died, his mother bought a small semi-detached house in West Dulwich and the entire band – plus girlfriends – lived there. "It was when the group were starting out," recalls Wyatt. "I don't how we all fitted in there. But we did and we made our racket and my mum was fine about it." Says Ayers, "There were plenty of dishes piling up in the sinks and unmade beds. But everyone was being creative in one way or another, or being intellectual or questioning and this came out in various forms such as poetry or art, but most of all music. Soft Machine was the only family I felt I ever had. We were a group of middle class boys from literate backgrounds, into jazz and beat writers, and we went off together on this incredible ride."

The Soft Machine weren't the first scions of the haute bourgeoisie to enter the rock world. But crucially, they were the first not to conceal their education or their accents. Indeed, alongside the equally well brought up Syd Barrett, Ayers was the first English rock vocalist not to sing in an American accent. Wyatt, who sang as well as drummed, followed suit on the group's second album. "At first I was all, "waaugh, bab-eee," he says, mimicking a standard American rock voice. But then Wyatt developed his own idiosyncratic style of falsetto singing, a wondrous blend of frailty and agility, melancholy and whimsy. "It sounded like me talking, only with notes."

The Soft Machine immediately became central figures on the London psychedelic scene. Yet in many ways their orientation was always jazz rather than rock. Wyatt even describes himself as a Fifties person who felt "bemused because the `rich flowering of culture' in the '60s was really just the mainstreaming of all these things that had been underground in the Fifties, like drugs." Beyond specific ideas to do with harmony, rhythm and improvisation, what they derived from jazz was "a kind of recklessness", a spirit of discovery captured in Miles Davis's instruction to his musicians: "play beyond what you know". This freeform approach, combined with rock-derived but unheard-of-in-proper-jazz techniques like distortion and effects, made The Soft Machine ideal for the sensory overload aesthetic of clubs like UFO, where they played seemingly every other week in 1966-67.

But Ayers's pop sensibility was increasingly at odds with where the Soft Machine's music was going, which was long, abstract pieces. ""Kevin had bravely soldiered on as bass guitarist in what had become really an instrumental band," says Wyatt. "He'd accumulated this stash of songs, but there really wasn't room for them in the band anymore." The tour of America with Hendrix divided the band further: Wyatt enjoyed going on the piss and the pull with Mitch and Noel of the Experience, Ayers found the whole rampage of buses, booze and birds a gruelling affront to his sensibilities. The group split up on its return. When they reformed, they invited Hugh Hopper, another alumnus of Simon Langton, to be the bass player. Wyatt enjoyed drumming in a wild, freeform style unsuitable for backing pop songs and happily went along with the jazz-rock direction. But after three more albums, he too was squeezed out as the Soft Machine became an increasingly uptight fusion outfit with little room for playfulness.

As important as the Soft Machine was to their development, few would disagree that Wyatt and Ayers came into their own as solo artists. Initially, Wyatt formed his own Softs in the form of Matching Mole, but after a drunken tumble from a high window left him paralysed below the waist, he had to give up drumming and the gang mindset of the performing band, and reinvent himself as a studio-bound artist. Started before the accident but finished and informed by that shattering trauma, 1973's *Rock Bottom* is Wyatt's masterpiece. From "Sea Song" (an oblique portrait of his new love and lifelong partner-to-be Alfreda Benge, a.k.a Alfie) to 'Little Red Riding Hood Hit the Road' (which exorcised his post-paralysis anguish via bathos-laden turns of phrase like "oh dearie me"), the album combines experimentation, emotion and melody with an exquisite delicacy.

Meanwhile, starting with 1969's *Joy of A Toy*, Ayers launched an equally enthralling career, his output ranging from light-hearted ditties like 'Clarence In Wonderland' to nihilistic noise-scapes like 'Song from the Bottom of A Well'. Another highpoint was 'Decadence', a rippling, rhapsodic paean to his friend and fellow-traveler in hedonism, Nico, an ice queen "suffering from wear and tear" who perpetually slips back into "liquid night" despite the out-stretched arms of her lovers. "I never kiss and tell," he says tartly when asked if he and Nico were ever involved.

Ayers and Wyatt belonged to a milieu of English mavericks who recorded for "progressive" labels like Harvest, Island, Charisma, and Virgin. Sharing a similar sensibility of gentle

humour and genteel experimentalism, this was an incestuous scene, the musicians frequently collaborating or guesting on each other's albums. The labels, similarly, exuded a longhaired, we're-only-playing-at-being-a-record-company vibe. Virgin seemed more like an arts council for weirdos than the Industry. "It wasn't really that idealistic," says Wyatt. It's just that "the Railway Enthusiast" – his nickname for Branson – "had noticed there was a market for bands who could sell albums without hit singles, based around the college gig circuit." Ironically, Virgin would later maneuver Wyatt into recording a single – a cover of the Monkees' 'I'm A Believer' – which actually did become a hit and got the wheelchair-bound singer onto Top of the Pops.

Ayers, who'd left the laidback Harvest, was facing similar pressures. His new label Island were convinced they could turn him into a big star. "It really messed me up and I lost complete confidence in what I was doing." It was the start of an unhappy period of desultory recordings and feeling disconnected from the music scene, with Ayers alternating between his houseboat in Maida Vale and long sojourns abroad.

When punk arrived, the progressive scene was deemed the domain of "boring old farts". The new dogma declared that rock had been enfeebled by its attempts at maturity and sophistication. It was time for a rejuvenating jolt of teenage proletarian energy. The Fall's Mark E. Smith singled out the Canterbury Scene – the Soft Machine and all the welter of bands and solo artists it spawned – when he declared "rock was ruined when the students took it over". Wyatt sympathizes with this attitude, which with typical kindliness he interprets as "a sincere attempt to reassert that rock music was a music whose vitality came from the bottom up in terms of social power structures". Still, there was a moment there in 1976-77 when the mellow meandering of a whole generation of artists – everyone from Brian Eno to John Martyn – was deemed irrelevant.

A few years later, the middle class cadres within punk stopped worrying so much about maintaining their fake-prole accents and hiding their Hatfield and the North albums. Punk turned into postpunk and the students took over again (had they ever really been dislodged?). Many of the new bands looked back to the music they'd been listening to before The Ramones and "Anarchy in the UK". These groups, such as Scritti Politti (whose vocalist Green was hugely indebted to Wyatt's "English soul"), wanted to move beyond straightahead punk, beyond rock itself, and the Canterbury Sound was a suggestive example of a concerted attempt to un-rock rock. Wyatt was coaxed back into recording by Geoff Travis, the boss of Rough Trade (home to Scritti). "Virgin were cross and said I couldn't do albums for another label, so we decided to do a series of singles, cover versions."

During his period of disengagement from music, Wyatt had become politically engaged: he started tuning into foreign radio stations, including Radio Moscow, and reading the *Morning Star*. Eventually he joined the Communist Party because its internationalism fit his own "xenophilia". He explains, "if anybody starts to build up a heat against Johnny Foreigner, sort that chap out, my instincts are to take sides with Johnny Foreigner. They used to call it being a traitor but actually I'm just a xenophile." The Rough Trade singles included versions of Latin American revolutionary songs, a pro-Stalin ditty from 1940s America, a tune called "Trade Union" by a Bengali group based in Brick Lane, and most famously, Elvis Costello and Clive Langer's anti-Falklands War ballad "Shipbuilding".

Ayers is a xenophile if anybody is. He spent his early childhood in Malaysia, "running around a beach and completely lost in my own world ". When his family returned to Herne Bay, the twin culture shock of England's grey-skied, grey-faced repression and being plunged into boarding school aged 12 was a massive trauma. Ironically, for an artist who is regarded as quintessentially English, Ayers has spent most of his life since that "homecoming" trying to escape England, traveling all over the world and eventually settling in France. "Sunnier climes have always been more compatible to me – people there are so much more relaxed and have time for the good things in life like good food and wine."

IN 1992 AYERS declared, "Between the ages of 17 and 40 I had a great time, no grounds for complaint whatsoever. My problem is just that I don't know what to do with the rest of my life." For both of the ex-Softs, the Eighties and Nineties were…. variable. Wyatt alternated between sporadic recording and periods of depression, partly induced by "the political weather… you can get a very cold draught sometimes." Both artists have had struggles with alcohol, culminating this year with Wyatt going sober and quitting the potions he'd always seen as essential to loosening his creativity. *Comicopera*'s first "act" partly concerns the deleterious effects of his drinking on his relationship with Alfie (who

wrote a lot of lyrics on the album), a syndrome she has described as "bereavement within a marriage."

Both *Comicopera* and *The Unfairground* deal with aging, that sense of twilight memorably captured by Dylan a few years ago with the lines "it's not dark yet/but it's getting there." Serenity and wisdom have eluded both artists. In one song, Wyatt sings, at once wry and deadly earnest, of envying Christians and Moslems for their certainty, their confidence that God has got their back. After the first act dealing with personal relationships, and a second moving out into the real world of politics and war, the final section sees Wyatt casting around for "solutions" via a series of cover versions that touch on spirituality, revolution, surrealism, and free improvisation. *The Unfairground*, meanwhile, exudes a worldweary confusion distilled in the line "I don't understand anything as I grow older/Nothing seems to be any clearer".

"When you get to a certain age the inevitable crumbling becomes very real," Ayers admits. "It's how you deal with that is the challenge. Robert said to me a very long time ago that I was the sort of person who would end up an old man on a park bench feeding ducks and wondering why people weren't nicer to each other!" Yet for all its bleakness, *The Unfairground* sounds sprightly and spring-heeled: falling in love was a major catalyst for Ayers even making a record again. And *Comicopera*'s sheer delight in strange and marvellous combinations of sounds is a tonic. In the end, there aren't answers but there are consolations, the highest (and healthiest) being music and friendship. Both *The Unfairground* and *Comicopera* involved a company of musician pals: Ayers called on 26talents, among them folk singer Bridget St. John and Hugh Hopper, while Wyatt's "imaginary gang" contained such seeming incompatibles as Brian Eno and Paul Weller. "I say imaginary cos they were never in the same room at the same time," he chuckles. "I do believe in doing that, but I've found that often grumpiness ensues."

Parts of *The Unfairground* were recorded at the same studio, owned by Roxy Music guitarist Phil Manzanera, where Wyatt recorded *Comicopera*. Hence the reunion last summer. "It was really great to see him again," says Wyatt. "He's gone through a lot of problems, battling the demons. And he's looking battered, but he's survived. And it was nice because I had the opportunity to say `Look, Kevin thanks very much for your tunes at the beginning'. Without his natural ability to write proper songs, The Soft Machine would have been hard pressed to cobble together much convincing original material of our own."

Wyatt actually appears briefly on his old friend's record, albeit as a disembodied vocal texture, sampled and listed in the credits as The Wyattron. "It's not Robert, but it is a memory of Robert," says Ayers. "And that makes a lot of sense to me, as that is what I have."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

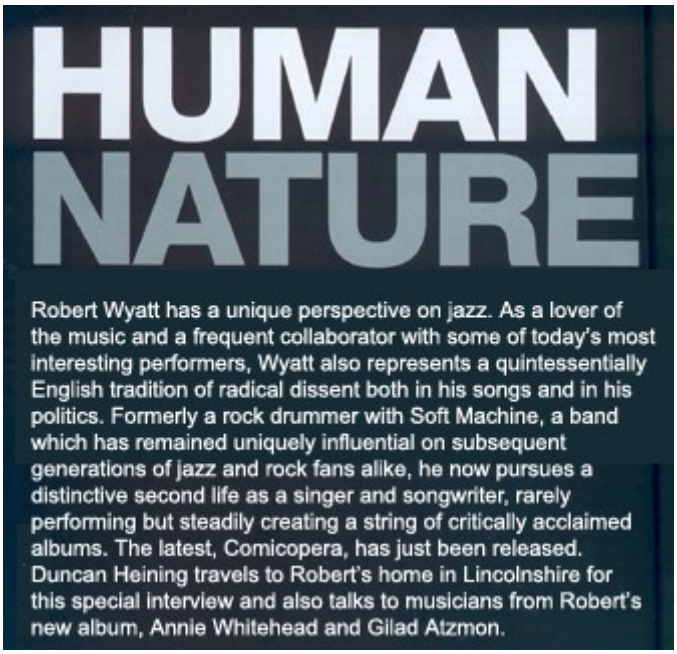
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Human Nature - Jazzwise - Issue 113 - October 2007





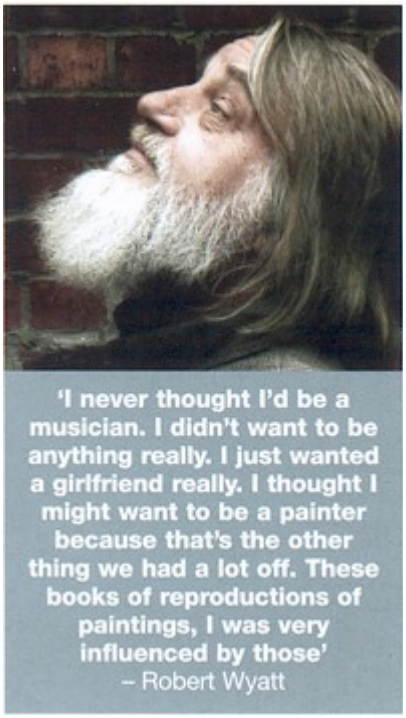
How do you describe Robert Wyatt? Musician? Clearly. Song-writer?

That goes without saying. Activist? Fair enough. But beyond stating the obvious, it gets increasingly difficult to define what he does. As if bemused by their own appeal, his songs defy easy categorisation and yet their charms communicate across generations and genres. Robert has just signed with Domino, the hippest of young independent labels and home of the Arctic Monkeys, Franz Ferdinand and more oddball talents like Stephen Malkmus and Jim O'Rourke. Oh, and he's about to release his latest album, *Comicopera*.

Louth in Lincolnshire, where Robert and partner Alfie Benge live, is about 200 miles and three decades from London. Piles of books, records and musical instruments clutter their rambling Georgian house close to the town's centre. Photos, political posters and Alfie's art on the walls. In the hall two carrier bags full of paperbacks, unclear whether they are coming in or going out. Two lives lived to the full. Outside in Louth itself, Robert and Alfie seem well-known to the town's other residents.

In the local hippy shop, all patchouli oil, josticks and Indian prints, Robert chats with the owner, pointing me out to her, "This is Duncan, he's up from London to do an interview. I just thought I'd show him your lovely shop." And in the record shop, Off The Beaten Tracks, they quickly work out what I'm doing here, "Yeah, Robert comes in quite a lot, mostly to order CD's he's seen reviewed in *Jazzwise*."

The sun is warm over Louth today and we chat over a sausage bun outside Stan's on the market. Robert had been at Ryko for years but a recent take-over led to sackings of trusted friends, people like Andy Childs whom they'd known since Robert had been on Rough Trade records.



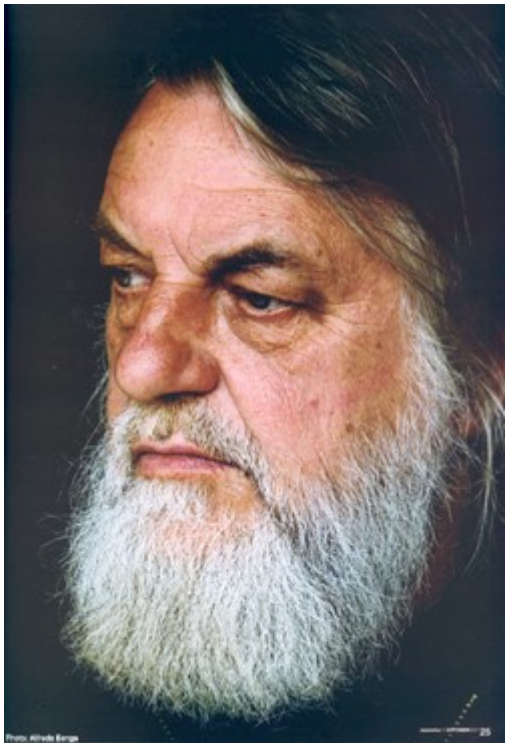
If they really cared about the music they'd be pleased they'd got somebody like Andy. It just didn't feel right. So, we left and they were a bit surprised and a bit cross. But Alfie cleverly got it built into our contract that we weren't collateral for deals like that." Alfie took on the task of sorting out Robert's business affairs some years ago. "This wasn't by choice," she tells me. "This is by seeing how chaotic some things are and how Robert signs things that are not in his best interests. Like signing songs to a publisher, who's totally hopeless, for eternity instead of checking him out first."

I turn to Robert, who has a Stan Laurel-like look on his face: "You should have been a jazz musician, Robert". He laughs, "I've got the makings, haven't I? 'Jazzwise' being a contradiction in terms." "Yeah, technically and brain-wise," Alfie chips in. "I come from a long line of jazz musicians. Also, there's been quite a lot of crooks involved in Robert's life. It seemed sensible to keep it in the family but it's not my chosen metier. I find it really irritating."

Back at the house, I ask Robert if he minds if I take a couple of photos. "No, not at all," he says, "though I am having a bit of a bad hair life." I explain that I'm using two tape machines for the interview, as in the past machines have stopped working without my realising. It turns out such things have happened with Wyatt interviews before.

"The thing that's confusing for people, if they've had to do it again, is that for every question I have a completely different answer. So, it's very hard for them to sync up an interview. Like, 'How are the 60s?' 'Great!' 'How are the 60s?' 'Crap!' 'Are you happy?' 'Yeah!' 'Are you happy?' 'Am I fuck!' So, that was just a warning."

Robert's politics, however, remain more consistent. Like his albums they're intensely personal and derive from a strong moral sense. Anti-racist, due to his love of jazz and black music. Anti-imperialist and socialist, due both to his parents' example and to his own anti-racism. These values are steadfast and infuse Robert's songs, not in any crude agit-prop way, but because they arise naturally from the processes of contemplation and reflection. Is he glad to see the back of Blair? Obviously. But does he have any sense that Brown may be any better?



> Zoom

"Actually, I'm grateful that, by association, two of the most unpleasant Western prime ministers had to go. Tony Blair dragged them down with him. The whole of Europe breathed a sigh of relief at getting rid of fucking Berlusconi and the equally odious Aznar. So, thank you Tony for that. I don't like doing reverse personality cults. I agree with Tony Benn about that. But on an emotional level I feel slightly less ashamed having a grown-up going around talking on behalf of the British people as opposed to a prep school tosser.

But that's a personal opinion rather than a deeply political analysis."

Sometimes, it's only the laughing that keeps you from crying, isn't it? But somehow Robert, and Alfie, stay optimistic. Of course, the joy, energy and camaraderie that goes into the creation of a work like *Comicopera* must surely help. And the making of a Robert Wyatt album is a painstaking process. Much of it takes place at home. Though he's used other people to produce his records in the past, notably
Nick Mason on *Rock Bottom* and Clive Langer on *Shipbuilding*, Robert is essentially his own producer these days. Advice, however, from Alfie, engineer Jamie Johnson and friends like Brian Eno and Phil Manzanera also feed in.

"Jamie Johnson is such an intelligent engineer that we can work as a team when I'm putting stuff together. Then I get a lot of vocal advice, and 'vocal' advice, from Alfie. Basically, consisting of, 'You could do that again, only better.' [chuckles] Actually, Alfie has ideas, like, 'why don't you try this?' or 'why don't you come in on that set of notes?' Nick Mason was great because he wasn't a professional producer. I asked him, partly in gratitude to the Floyd because they were so nice to us and because I thought that if anyone knows about sitting in a studio and getting a good sound out, it's got to be one of this lot and that turned out to be the case."

Actually, when Robert injured his back in 1973, the Floyd jumped in and did a couple of benefits at the Rainbow for him raising over ten grand to help out. They're still friends and it was in part a suggestion from David Gilmour, that encouraged greater emphasis on Robert's voice in the mix on *Comicopera*.

"Alfie used to get worried that my voice was getting lost in my own production of it. Also Gilmour said that. He said, 'People want to hear the voice.' Meaning he wanted to hear the voice. I thought, 'OK. You can hear it now'. But I also like it as just something else in there."

I suspect that the attraction of Robert's music, for artists as different as David Gilmour, Brian Eno, Elvis Costello, Paul Weller and Björk, comes from the fact that there is no separation between the art and the man. It is that which gives it integrity, in both senses. As ever, songs off the new album, like the beautiful 'Out Of The Blue', don't grab the attention even where their Iyrics are at their most pointed. They sail into view and touch you even before you're fully aware and they still have that emergent, improvised quality of his best work. That, I'm sure, derives from his love of jazz and is why he chooses such strong players to interact with on his records. Trombonist, Annie Whitehead is there again, as are Gilad Atzmon and bassist Yaron Stavi as well as Orphy Robinson. All three have become crucial to Robert in his music.

He's known Annie since the 70s, having met through shared friendships with musicians like Mongezi Feza, Dudu Pukwana and Keith Tippett. "We actually recorded together the first time on a record Jerry Dammers put together - *Wind of Change*, on behalf of the Namibia liberation movement, SWAPO. I particularly liked the way she was listening to what everybody else was doing. She's just utterly lovable, very, very quick and got an awful Lot of soul."
Annie has also put together a group to play Robert's music, Soupsongs, which has played gigs in the UK and continues to perform in Europe. As for Gilad, Robert describes himself as a "sort of Gilad groupie" and he asked the saxophonist very hesitantly if he'd play on *Cuckooland*, his last album for Ryko. "He had no idea who I was or what I had done or anything like that. I realised he just loves to play. Whatever I'd asked him to do, if it involved playing, he'd have said, 'yes'. He was such a joy to work with. He was just such an enthusiastic collaborator and so fast at hearing what was required. Yaron Stavi and Gilad, I regard as like Sancho Panza and Don Quixote and I love them both. It's very hard to talk about people when it goes beyond professional admiration to that sort of kind of love and I have it for various people, Phil Manzanera and Paul Weller being another two but that's really that."

Singer, Mônica Vasconcelos, is another artist who appears on *Comicopera* and is heard to stunning effect on 'Out Of The Blue'. Robert has recently been working on the singer's new album.

"She got Alfie involved because she wanted to do more stuff in English and Alfie had a go at some words for tunes Steve Lodder and Dudley Phillips had written for her. I did a bit of singing on it and chipped in a few ideas. I think I was invited. [Long pause) Oh, god, I hope so. I think Dudley or Steve would...



‘A musician, inside and out’

Saxophonist **Gilad Atzmon** appears on Robert Wyatt’s new album. He tells **Duncan Heining** how they first met

“You probably wouldn’t believe this but I’m a pretty shy person. It won’t come up when I’m on stage but sometime I would even start to play and it would take me four tunes to warm up and it was really when I come up with a joke and people laugh and then I can move on. Robert is apparently at times more shy than myself. I was playing one time in Grimsby and his wife Alfie came to me and told me there is a singer here that really wants to talk to you and I said, ‘For sure. Of course.’ Then this person came in a wheelchair and approach me. He said to me, very shy, very nervous, ‘I’m kind of a musician and really like your playing.’ But did not introduce himself or anything. Then he said, ‘And I really love your clarinet playing and I’m dying to have you play on one of my albums. Will you record with me?’ I said, ‘What a question. Sure give me a call.’ Then Annie Whitehead rang me, she said, ‘I hear you met Robert Wyatt yesterday, Wow. Great. Blah, Blah. Blah.’ I said, ‘Oh shit! Yeah?’ This is the way I was introduced to Robert Wyatt. I didn’t even know it was him. So, then I called him and said, ‘Oh, my god man, I heard your music when I was a kid.’

Anyway that's the forthcoming Mônica Vasconcelos album and I really like her voice. It's so true. And I use her on a monicatron towards the end."

That's where Robert records somebody - Brian Eno, Karen Mantler or, here, Monica - singing all the notes of the scale. Then Jamie Johnson transfers it to computer and from there to keyboard, "So I have a keyboard of that person's voice and I can play chords of it. I love doing that. I tried it on my own voice but it was rubbish. It was all out of tune."

As far as singers go, Robert's own tastes are diverse. "I've been listening to stuff that was very dependant on the idiosyncrasies of the voice like Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan together. Like this ultrasmart, ultra-educated Jewish intellectual from the North and this pure moral, country boy musician and I find their friendship really moving for some reason. It's all in there with their record. I thought this is serious here."

Joni Mitchell is also important to Robert, as is Peter Pears (Benjamin Britten's partner), mainly because of specific qualities in their voices. "There's also people in jazz I like but I can't say they've influenced me. I find Betty Carter gob-smacking and I like musicians who sing sometimes in jazz. I like Dizzy Gillespie's 'Oo Bop Sh' Bam' stuff or Jimmie Smith doing 'Got My Mojo Workin", which is really kind of rough stuff."

I ask about Chet Baker. There's something in that wispy, waif-like sound that has parallels with Robert's voice.

As a saxophonist, as a woodwind player, I played with so many people on many, many albums of so many famous people. And I would turn up and play for 20 minutes or an hour, three hours at most, but with Robert it was very special because working with him he is one of the last organic musicians, sitting there with headphones listening to you closing his eyes and he fills you with his own spirit just being with you in the room.
For me, you know I worked with the late Ian Dury, Ian was very different but somehow these wordsmiths, the English ones, are very special. Their output is turned into a very effective input when you are playing with them.
I love the man like crazy him, and his wife. He played on my album as well, *Musik*. It was so great. I sent him the music and he prepared so much stuff, you know. He is just consummately a musician inside and out."



"Well, I suppose that's so built in. I mean Chet Baker's biggest influence on me is the fact that I really like this thing of a bit of vocal, a bit of trumpet and I think one of the reasons I took up the trumpet again was because I was so haunted by that thing of moving backwards and forwards between those two.
Although I can't play trumpet like a musician, I'm able to play it like a singer or at least like I sing."

And what about Billie Holiday?

"What I like most about her, it's a bit of a cliché, but what not to sing. What actually goes naturally with a voice and in her case if you've got good enough music around you just let it come through and just ride it like a yacht. And I really like her later stuff too. Jazz people say her voice had gone to pieces by then but as far as I'm concerned that's rock 'n' roll. What did they know? It's like late period Johnny Cash, it's got 50 much soul."

Robert never set out to be a singer, a fact that still guides his approach, as he tells me chuckling to himself. "I've got this completely negative approach to singing - try not to make too many mistakes, try to hit the right note, be grateful for that and move discreetly on to the next one." Early Soft Machine bootlegs, in fact, suggest that Robert had a pretty

fine white soul voice.

"I really got into that classic English beat group thing which was taking black American records from Sue and Motown and replacing the backing they had with a more skiffle-based thing. That's what the English Beat Group scene really was, Black Music played by skiffle groups. And I was absolutely part of that and with the Wilde Flowers live gigs, that's what it was."

At the same time, however, Robert's father and mother were both great music lovers. The majorily of records they had were classical, though quite a few of those featured 20th century composers like Stravinsky, Ravel and Debussy who were inspired by jazz. It was a remark made by his father, that prompted Robert to start listening to jazz.

"My dad mentioned he really liked Duke Ellington and Fats Waller because he'd seen this seminally important film Stormy Weather, that celebrated black culture albeit in that sort of ersatz way. So, I got Duke's *Such Sweet Thunder* when I was 11 or 12, which he sort of approved of because it was a Shakespearean Suite, and I was off. I was just completely, as they say, blown away."

The other thing that Robert mentions as being important was his parents collections of art books. "I never thought I'd be a musician. I didn't want to be anything really. I just wanted a girlfriend really. I thought I might want to be a painter because that's the other thing we had a lot off. These books of reproductions of paintings, I was very influenced by those." It's there perhaps in the painterly attention Robert brings to his work but also in the collage-like impression his songs leave. It's entirely fitting that Alfie, herself an ex-student of art and film, brings those same skills to the covers and typography of a Wyatt record. "We are absolutely a team, me and Alfie. She has all these skills she acquired from art school and because she gets involved sometimes with the music and the lyrics and we do so much together, she's naturally part of everything I do. She's the one who really took control of how things are done, like cover art and presentation and typography.
Ever since Rock Bottom, she's been in charge of that. She's particularly conscious that now people can download, the whole thing should be worth having as an object.

The drums were obviously an early



Interpreting Wyatt



Annie Whitehead explains to **Duncan Heining** the genesis of her Robert Wyatt-based song project

"Soupsongs began when Robert was approached by this promoter in Lincolnshire called Dave Broom who wanted to do a project of his songs. Robert doesn't do gigs and he suggested me. Robert's very shy when it comes to asking musicians to do what he wants. He has so much respect for them, he finds it hard to say what he wants them to do. I thought Robert was going to be involved in the project as well and I was just going to be a kind of translator or bossy person (laughs) to save him having to do it. But then it became clear we were going to get singers and instrumentalists to do his music. So, we decided what we were going to do and how we were going to do it and Robert was very much a part of it, as I was. It's been wonderful doing his music, first of all because everybody loves it, the musicians love it. You can really ask anybody to be a part of this project and they'll say, 'Yes, please!'
Robert was like, 'This is your project really.' He thought my band should be the core. So, I decided I'd ask people who either had a connection with Robert or had worked with me. Originally, Julie Tippetts did it but she had to drop out. Robert had sung on one of Italian singer Cristina Donà's records, so she's come in. And Sarah Jane Morris was with my band for a while but was also with Happy End, which is politically around Robert's area as well. The other thing was I thought Sarah Jane has such a low voice for a woman and Robert has such a high voice for a man, that it kind of appealed to me. It's great to

enthusiasm and Robert's first drum kit consisted of the usual mix of household objects, which he'd use to play along with Max Roach "Bit ambitious that'. His first proper kit, the cheapest Premier set he could buy, lasted him through his early professional career. He had lessons with a visiting American drummer and summers were spent on Mallorca living near Robert Graves, a friend of both Robert's parents. Graves' son-in-law owned the Indigo Jazz Club and Robert got to practise and even jam at the club. His first group with Kevin Ayers, Hugh and Brian Hopper and Richard Sinclair was The Wilde Flowers and when that disintegrated, Robert formed Soft Machine with Ayers and Mike Ratledge. Sharing the same management as the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the group toured the States with Hendrix. The downside of that was that Robert began to develop a big liking for alcohol and it was whilst under the influence that Robert fell from a window in June 1973 and ended up paralysed from the waist down. The upside, however, was that he learned a great deal personally and musically from playing America, not least from Hendrix's drummer, the sadly underrated Mitch Mitchell.

"Going from Beat group gigs to bigger gigs, Mitch really taught me a lot about how to handle that musically. In fact, he gave me his kit when the tour ended because he said, 'Robert, I can't bear the thought of you playing on that crap kit you've been playing'." Robert laughs his body quivering at the memory. He still has the kit. Both he and Mitchell shared an enthusiasm for jazz drummers, Elvin Jones and Tony Williams. "Me and Mitch used to listen to a particular track by Miles Davis with Tony on it, 'Stuff', but I've liked Tony Williams ever since he was with Jackie McLean. Elvin, we loved because the momentum and the weight of what he did was very useful information because of the volume at which rock groups played. He actually matched that sort of depth and volume of rock."

Inevitably, the shock of hearing Hendrix for the first time has stayed with Robert. "I still remember first hearing Hendrix get into gear in rehearsal. You just thought, 'What the fuck is that?' This sensaround thing of controlled feedback. There were people like Jeff Beck and to a certain extent Pete Townshend who were controlling feedback but this sustained landscape at a certain volume and absolutely controlling. It was blinding. It was like a great living, breathing river of sound."

There was opposition in some quarters

hear Robert's things that were done so high and delicately being growled out by Sarah Jane. And Jennifer of course. Jennifer [Maidman] was always in the band because she has that kind of deadpan kind of delivery almost kind of speaking the words at times.

We have a great promoter in Italy and they really love the music over there. There doesn't seem to be anybody here who wants to do it, unfortunately. We did do a tour for Serious a few years ago and Robert came to quite a few of the gigs. As a musician when you play live you experience the audience enjoying what you do and it plays a really big part in you continuing doing what you do. Robert never gets that because he doesn't play live. So, it was really nice for me when he was in the audience knowing that he was experiencing all these people enjoying his music and seeing it have an emotional effect on them. It's very special when Robert's there."

Photos: above, Duncan Heining

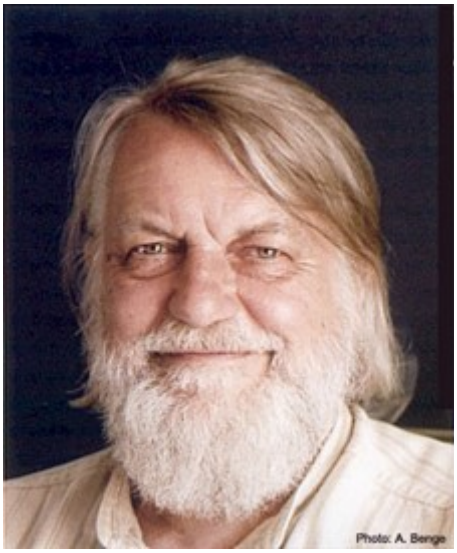


Photo: A. Benge

LISTEN UP!//

Essential Wyatt



Soft Machine
Third Sony BMG
The easy one. A brilliant album. Great drumming and 'Moon In June' (though I prefer the John Peel *Top Gear* version). Recently reissued with *Live At The Proms 1970* tracks. A must-have.

Matching Mole
On The Radio Hux



Just preferred over the two CBS records for its breadth of material. Essential to hear what happened next.

to the Softs doing the tour but Hendrix supported them. "Some people thought, 'Soft Machine? They're not very poppy. He's playing stadiums. He's got hit records.' But I'm very grateful to Hendrix because he stuck up for us, and the band did, and Hendrix didn't like pop groups that much. He wanted people who were trying something different and didn't want people copying him. And, of course, we weren't. We were trying to do something else. He was very respectful about what we were trying to do and (laughing) very polite about our ability to do it. Real gent."

Though he's put in the occasional guest stage appearance with friends from Annie Whitehead to David Gilmour, Robert stopped doing gigs not long alter his accident. People would love to see him live, as he knows. "I feel a bit sheepish about it because normally the gigs are the promotion for the LP. The difficulty with gigs is that I don't really think like that. So much of what I do now depends on a kind of Beach Boys-isation of the voice, of double octaves and so on. It's all in the editing. I tried to do a sort of imitation of a live gig with Annie's band. A couple of songs came out all right. But I wasn't really comfortable and some of them were so not right and there was nothing I could do about it. I just don't have that kind of confidence to do it live in front of a band. I did drumming and drunk but voice and sober, it's just not going to happen. I don't have that chutzpah."

Maybe Domino and Robert's many friends might someday persuade him. It would be wonderful to see him do a short residency at somewhere like Ronnie's. Somewhere he'd be appreciated but also somewhere intimate, where the warmth of the man could come across. Till then, there's *Comicopera* and Robert's back catalogue to keep us happy.



An Evening Chat with Robert Wyatt takes place at the Purcell Room. London on 15 October.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

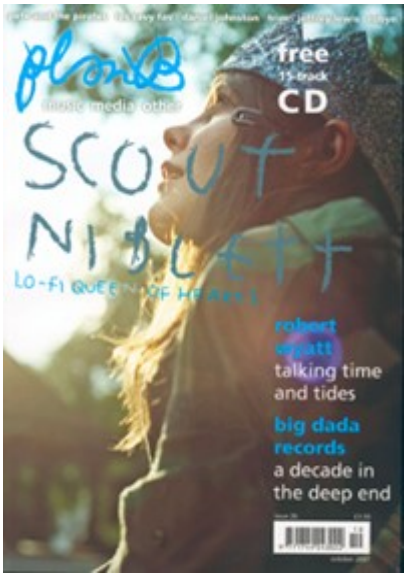
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Lost and Found - Plan B N°26 - October 2007

LOST AND FOUND



Words **Frances Morgan**
Photography **Simon Fernandez**

" For better or for worse, when you put on one of my records, you're getting me, " says **Robert Wyatt**. *Plan B* was only too happy to spend an afternoon in the company of the reluctantly iconic songwriter - and his bewilderingly beautiful new album, *Comicopera*

"About 10 minutes ago I said, you've probably got some questions," says Robert Wyatt. "And then I kept talking. Look, go through your questions.
Eat. Eat and drink and smoke, "he urges, proffering a light and some cake. "Otherwise, life, you know, just dries up..."

I'm fine with the latter three. Cup of tea, Drum Mild, a Danish pastry with custard in it. I'm fine sitting in a light front room full of *stuff* - instruments, records, pictures - and talking about Cecil Taylor and William Parker. Maybe we could just do that. I could do that all day, probably. It's what I do a lot anyway. Talk, smoke, listen, talk some more; the outside world driving around doing whatever it is it does on the other side of the curtains.



But the room I'm in belongs to Robert Wyatt, and I'm here to talk to him about his new album, *Comicopera*. I've travelled to Louth, in Lincolnshire, by train and replacement bus and a drive through big-skied cloud-blown countryside with Wyatt's wife, artist and writer Alfreda Benge, who says right away she's glad that photographer Simon

Fernandez and I are smokers. This is a relief to me too because, throughout the journey, > Zoom
I've veered between making conscientious, illegible notes, gazing camera-eyed at an unfamiliar part of England, and getting nervous to the point of missing I'd wished the train this morning, and I could do with a fag. I don't think the weight of expectation has ever sat upon my head with quite such ominous heft as it has today.

Of course, the expectation budges as soon as I'm welcomed into Wyatt's room, greeted with an enormous smile and the offer of a cuppa from an instantly recognisable voice - a voice that, when singing, seems full of quiet concern for or knowledge of its listeners.

To be honest, that weight of expectation dissipates whenever I actually hear Wyatt's music, which is why I'm here in the first place. From the playful art rock of his early bands Soft Machine and Matching Mole, through 1974's revelatory, harrowing solo album *Rock Bottom* and the early Eighties singles that further defined his sweet, weird, drifting, impressionistic, committed and heartfelt free-pop, to the meditative and eclectic *Shleep* of 1997, and beyond, Robert's Wyatt's music asks a lot of the listener, but does not *demand*. Rather, it suggests, via dreamlike timbres, open chords, gentle percussion and an almost unbearable emotional honesty, nothing less than the map of a human spirit, sketched out in sound. But what that means is, it's music that means so much to so many people, in a quiet private way that they hold close to themselves. I'm one of those people, too, so I don't want to let us down.

So I gesture at my notes.

Yeah, I wrote some questions. I find asking them quite difficult.

"Just give it a go. I'm on your side, do you know what I mean ? It's your gig now. I've done my gig, I've made my fucking record."

All right, we'll talk about the record to start with. Tell me some stuff.
"Playing it back I realised that I do play very loud cymbals all the time..." Wyatt reflects, referring to the ripply, brittle scatters of cymbal that have punctuated his percussion since his early days as a jazz drummer "I won't abandon what I do just to be fashionable, so I keep going 'Tssh! Tssh ! Tssh !'. I feel a bit embarrassed sometimes that I'm drowning out all these wonderful musicians with my splashy cymbal noises."

That wasn't the first thing I would have noticed about the album.
"Thank you. But I just listen to it and get so embarrassed. It's like old people who get hairs growing out of their faces in weird places and you're having a conversation with them and thinking, 'Fucking hell, he's got a black hair growing out of his nose'... But no, it's just weird stuff," he laughs, describing the record's mood, or possibly his own on listening to it: "'I'm lost, I'm somewhere. But wherever that is, that's here'. The first track does it on this record. Thank you, Anja Garbarek, for writing it."

'I always work backwards from chaos into order'

Comicopera's opener, 'Stay Tuned', is a slowburning, beautifully simple tilt between uncertainty and surety. The questioning verses - "*In between, lost in noise, somewhere, somewhere, somewhere*" - settle into encouragement and resolution, steady bass bolstered by trombone and trumpet: "*Don't start searching, I'll get back to you*."

You mean that state of not really being sure where you are, but being OK with that?
"Yeah, thank you for saying that. You've pinned it down exactly."

That sense of drift in your music is one of the things I like most about it.
"My physical response to what I'm doing is... Once I start making noise it's a bit like jumping into water and sometimes I'm in a pond, which I would call a pop song, and sometimes I think, 'Oh fucking hell, this isn't a pond, this is the ocean'. I'm somewhere bigger than a pond, and it gets a bit more scary."

Is that something that you can't really plan?
"You cannot plan it. If you do, you're being a cynical media bastard and it will always show up."

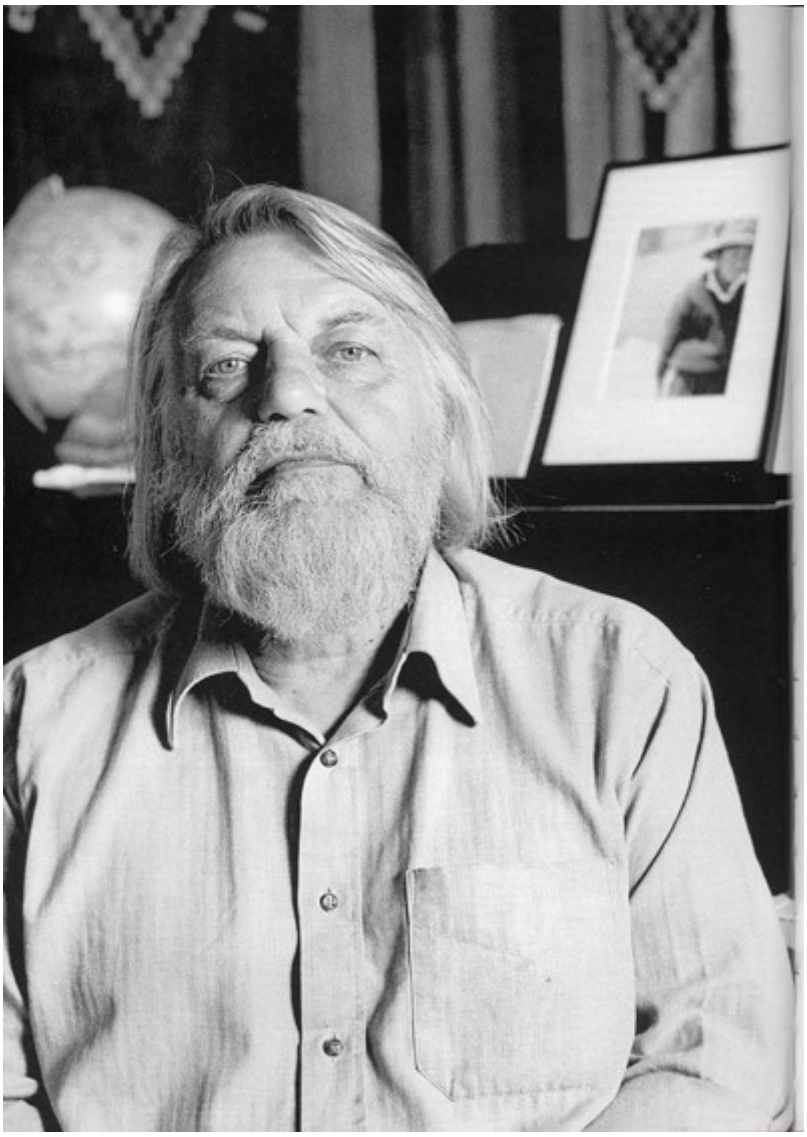
SIGNPOSTS TO SOMEWHERE

In a roundabout way, this is how we talk about *Comicopera*, an album that's both immediate and a bit unfathomable, like all Wyatt's records. It is an album in three discrete parts, 'acts', but I'd argue you could listen to it without knowing that. You would, however, notice how it deepens and changes: locationally, from domestic/internal to a confusing but familiar outside, to - suddenly and devastatingly - a world beset by conflict and chaos and thence back inside again into a rich, almost desperate imagination. Sonically, you'll hear the familiar washes of plangent chord and lilting, patchworked songwriting pick up speed into quirky, rhythmic energy, into an electronically charged, almost apocalyptic peak with the devastating, Enoenhanced 'Out Of The Blue'. The album's final section knits together songs in Italian and Spanish with loose, multicoloured arrangements of free jazz vibraphone, minimalist synth, distant trumpet, and all around a spaciousness that recalls, if anything, bands of the Brazilian Tropicalia movement, whose psychedelic bossa nova whimsy masked deeper metaphysical concerns and a wry, committed criticism of the status quo.

But at every signpost, there's a derailment or a surprise: with Wyatt, consistent as his vocal presence remains, the unexpected is, you feel, central to every song'Just As You Are', at first listen a soft love song, taps into the compromises, co-dependency and insecurity present in every relationship. The loping, lush 'Beautiful War', turns around and strangles you when the subject matter comes clear: its airiness is the methodical efficiency of a bomber destroying an anonymous settlement far below, safe in his cloudless sky. The stately, waltz-like 'Cancon de Julieta' fragments into the call-and-answer swoops of Chucho Merchan's bass violin and a weird noise undertow that befits its setting of Garcia Lorca's words.

Wyatts previous album, 2003's *Cuckooland*, navigated a similar journey between familiar and alien; internal and political-like *Comicopera*, songs gently whisked you from wry ontological questioning to cinematic evocations of 'Old Europe', from drifting, legato laments to jazzy scuttle. *Comicopera* is wider in frame, somehow; delirious with ideas, but with a settled assuredness of vision. How did it all come together? Did the structure come before or after the songs?

"It came out of the process. Things separate into chunks of preoccupation. I'm sort of floating about all the time, and it's quite disparate and quite chaotic. And then when I've got an hour and a half's worth I gather it together, then I sort it out in terms of what state of mind I was in when I wrote this song or that song, or nicked somebody else's song, or stopped singing altogether and let someone else play their instrument. Because I get bored, you know, of my voice sometimes. Anyway, then you sort it all out, and in this case it fell into three sort of categories, really.



> Zoom

"I'm on an animal level, using instinct most of the time, which is what I like most. But let's sort it out, help the listener here a bit. Cut it up a bit. This is one train of thought, that's another. It turned out it took three trains of thought".

It's a weird listen. You start off feeling quite safe but then as it goes on it starts to become a much darker record. It's quite disorientating.
"It's just that, having got past 60, I've done all the business of trying to tailor things to what people can digest. You get quite selfish at this age. You just think, 'I've got one last go, possibly, so I'm just going to throw it out the way it happens'.

"What I do remember is that youth always anticipates death as quite a dramatic, black and white thing. They romanticise it, and simplify it and cut it down. But it's a weirder and stranger journey. You start off, and you know roughly what's going on. Even if it's strange for you it's marked out. You become a teenager and think, 'OK, there's sex'. Then you get a job, and you think, that's adulthood and you've got there, to a sort of plateau. But *then* you could have another 20, 30, 40, 50 years of 'what then ?' Then you're in danger and in the wilderness, much more than teenagers ever understand about wilderness - they fantasise about 'weird', but they have no idea what weird really is. Weird is *really fucking weird*.

"When you're 50, life is just as unknown to you and unliveable, difficult and strange, as it is for a 12 year old. But then, I say all that stuff which sounds really pretentious, but all I've tried to do is make a really nice record. I've tried to string nice notes together. And if somebody's got any patience they will hear them. I don't put the beats in to help, I just say 'Look, the notes are there, believe me. Trust me, I've got a beard. How can you not trust me?'"

I don't know if I trust beards...

"No, well, I would never play a record with a person with a beard on the front, other than myself. This is why Alfie never, ever does album covers with me on the front, because it would put everybody right off."

Ever since I first heard it, I've found your music very comforting, even when it sounds unsure or sad or critical. But with this new album I feel more than ever this sense of you looking at the awfulness of things.

"If it's a bit distressing where I go, hang on in there because it's quite friendly in the end. I've just tried not to avoid the nastiness, but say that although the nastiness is unbelievable, it's not unbearable. That's what I hope. I would hope that in the end it would be some kind of comfort because god, there's just so much pain. But you've got to dig a bit deeper, not to come on all serious, but just to provide any comfort at all. Beyond the immediate comforts of orgasm and getting pissed and loud music and stuff. Life lasts longer than all those three events, which are crucial, but there's got to be a deep fun going on as well that survives all the tragedy."

In some ways I'm looking forward to getting older, getting past a lot of that stuff.
"I'll tell you, it's a lot to look forward to. It's really nice. It's kind of like climbing up the slippery bits out of an ocean and getting up to dry bits, and looking down into the valley you just crawled from of teeming activity and agony and sleepless nights and all the awful, well, wonderful things. Both. It's really nice. You think, wow, I've been allowed to live long enough to have a look at what's been going on in my lifetime. It's a great privilege."

I didn't mean to bring up the comfort thing so soon in the interview. It felt a little creepy somehow;
a little too familial. But what the hell: many of my generation are at odds with the idea of family, at odds with the media and government's current idealised view of love and domestic life, but also unsure about the countercultural values our own parents might or might not have tried to live up to, all at sea as to how and when and where we'll find our real homes and real connections. It is easier to look for the idea of 'family', of closeness, outside our own, and some of us find it in music, of course.

If we feel rootless, songs like Robert Wyatts (all at once steadfast and sharp, yet fragile and ambiguous) give us some tentative roots. While I am sure he'd laugh, embarrassed, at such a notion, there are people my age to whom his tremulous, conversational croon has an oddly mentor-like quality, a cipher for their own feelings about vulnerability, independence, where to put themselves in this world.

But let's not get too sentimental here.

This is music we're talking about, and much of the reassuring quality of Wyatts music derives, paradoxically, from his removal of himself from the songwriting process and his ability to set the listener afloat in sound. Even when his lyrics are heavy on the polemic, there's something sonically *selfless* about the way he approaches the idea of the song, which often emerges from shifting sands of resolved and unresolved melody as if you've unearthed it yourself. And this fluidity, this oceanic quality that's reflected in the timbres he works with, reassures by its assurance that some things are bigger than you and all you can do is cast yourself adrift in them.



> Zoom

DOTS AND LOOPS

Really, there's only one thing I came here to ask, and that's how Robert Wyatt makes such music.

So I do. And he scoots around the room, energised, demonstrating, sounding out notes on piano, trumpet and voice. "It's very, very simple how I work. I've got a room here; four walls like anybody else's and a door going through to where I make tea. Facing me is a CD player and a cassette recorder. On the left of the mixer is an eight-track recording machine. Right in front of me I can look out onto the car park and watch people driving into town and people driving out. On my right, I've got a baby grand piano. On the right of that there's a disused fireplace, and then I'll take you back to where we started; about a thousand vinyl LPs and some photos of my wife, including one of her smacking her previous husband in the face, just as a kind of warning to me. Look at that! That's actually from a film, two stills. Tha'ts Alfie when she was a little girl. And that's her now.

"This is where I work I just had to cut music down to very simple things. There are beats in my stuff, it's just that they're buried. There's a grid, in other words. I'm very old-fashioned. I want a beat and a tune. There are two kinds of music really, there's music to dance to and music to sing. You can have singing music, which has no beat. You can have dance music which has no tune. The intriguing exercise which I've embarked on for the last 50 years is to try and combine the two. I think, if I've made mistakes, I've erred on the side of tune, and let the beat be buried a bit; like the skeleton of a fish. It's there, but it doesn't look like a great bony animal.

"Then I work out the piano. About *there* I can hit it with my voice" He strikes a key. "Now, 20 years ago I could get up to there, but I can't anymore, so I have to do all that stuff on something else; trumpet, or something like that. So, that's notes. Then, I've got this metronome, which is fantastic;
it's Victorian, I think. Now then, that metronome is
a wonderful thing. It doesn't even rock steady, and there's a track on the new album where this is the only rhythm section, the one about 'Hattie in the at tic' [AWOL]. That's all I used. That's the drumkit.
So, I've got a beat, and the notes, and the trumpet, and then I've got heaps and heaps of bits of paper with words on... and I just try and stick them all together, my dear; that's all I do."

Do you do it every day?
"I play trumpet every day."

Do you write words every day?
"There I hit the buffers, because words and music don't always fit. The bit where you think about words is a whole different bit of your brain. It's that lovely transition zone between words and music that's got some sort of biological roots in humans. I don't know enough about human biology to know what the link is".

Is it about finding a balance between what you want to say and the musical words that will say it?
"Well, I actually think that way round, and I write more than I sing, because mostly what I write, I write. That's the form it takes. With music, I don't start with words; I start with noise, with sound. If it turns into words then I've struck lucky. You can't force it, though.

"I only make one LP about every five years because of that. It's not that I only have that many ideas. You've got to be so lucky. It's like panning for gold: every day you stick your thing in the water and drag up a bit of mud and leaf through it. Occasionally you pick something out and you think, 'Oh, that's really nice. There's a bit of mineral
there'. You put it in your bag to take home, and music's like that. Fishing about among all the notes and occasionally one will turn into a word or a phrase, and then you'll take it home.

"Singing and talking aren't the same thing. They absolutely are not. I remember a dreadful moment at a friend's house about five years ago. A bloke pulled out his guitar and Alfie rushed into the kitchen saying, 'Oh no, he's going to sing a song, it's going to kill the conversation dead! We're going to have to sit and listen to him now.'
He started singing some ballad and you could see everyone's metabolism slowing down. It's an awfully cruel thing to say, but people when they're singing gentle ballads think they're being gentle, but they're being quite interventionist, actually."

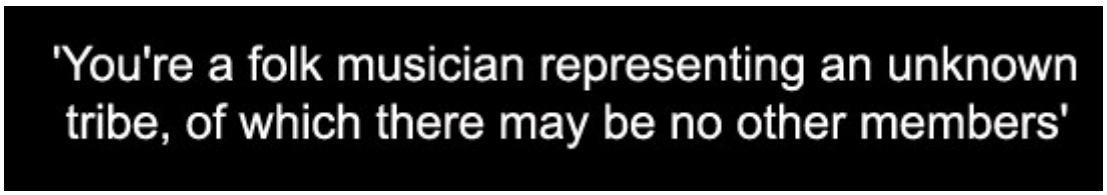
They're forcing you to enter their world.
"It's that kind of ersatz church mode. I much prefer making records to live gigs now, for that reason, because I don't want anyone to listen to me when they don't have to, or don't want to."

So you don't like the idea of reverence...
"I think it's appalling."

Do you still improvise with people?
"Yeah, I do a lot. In fact, even on my records I do. Most people start with the notes, and the beats, and fix which ones are going to work and expand on it. I tend to work backwards in a way. My brain is sort of a cross between Oxford Circus and a Cecil Taylor concert. Then I just keep cutting stuff out until I'm left with a followable thread - reduce it right down to a few words or a few notes. To me, songwriting is incidental to making music. What I'm trying to do is make *records* and I want them to be complete meals; vitamins, proteins, trace elements, the lot. "But I always work backwards from chaos into order. That's really the only thing I do that's totally not jazz and it's totally... well, I haven't learnt that from anybody. That's just the way I work."

It's probably an accumulation of all the music you've listened to.
"Yes, there's just an overwhelming amount of stuff that you can't deny or chuck in the bin, and it's irreconcilable so you just have to let it ferment in your brain, and then your brain will inevitably because you're only one little pathetic person - will reduce it down to the things that work for you and keep pushing everything else away and you're left with the utter simplicity of a Buddy Holly song - or you're left back with actually being a kind of folk musician representing an unknown tribe, of which there may be no other members! Just your own little one-person tribe."

You know, you've probably summed up there one of the best reasons I can think of to make music.



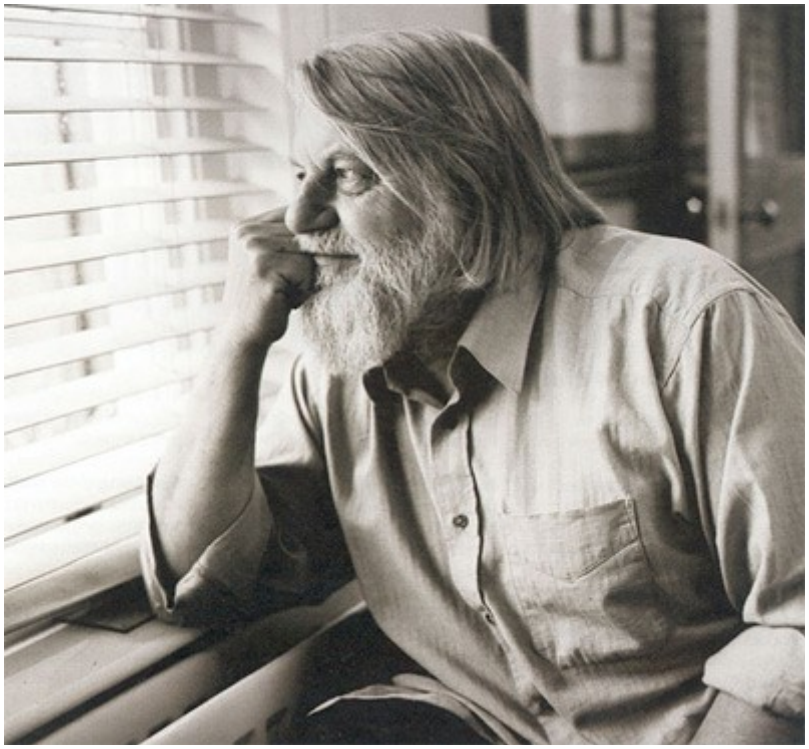
SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

The most obvious, and pleasurable, evidence of Wyatt's eschewal of singer-songwriter egotism is the long-standing relationship he has with collaborating musicians - from rock notables like Paul Weller and Brian Eno, to jazz musicians such as trombonist Annie Whitehead, vocalist Karen Mantler, percussionist Orphy Robinson and loads more. It's not unusual that an admired musician should be able to cherry-pick others to work with them, but Wyatt's collaborative recordings stand out through giving the impression, always, of real musical dialogues, necessary and organic. *Comicopera* marshals a large cast that feels particularly able to draw Wyatt's compositions in odd, exuberant and atmospheric directions.

"I've given up working with people I don't like," he says. "I used to, because I thought they were really brilliant or clever, but I can't be bothered with that anymore. Because in the end, musically it's better - people open out. There's this illusion that confrontation brings out stuff that's exciting, like on *Big Brother*-no it doesn't. It's sort of all right, but you get further and deeper with empathy."

When Wyatt asked singer Seaming To, who provides the soprano vocal on *Comicopera*'s 'Stay Tuned', to add clarinet, "She said, 'I haven't played the clarinet for a while', and I said, 'Look, it's not fucking Mozart, it's just a few notes'. I thought she did lovely on it. I know I could look through the Musicians' Union phonebook and get brilliant clarinetists, but I wanted someone I could connect with as a human being."

I get the impression you're open to people having their own take on your songs.
" Absolutely. I don't tell them what to play. The buck stops with me when I'm editing. They know that. So it's not in that sense a free-for-all. I will take responsibility for the end result, which is arrogant but also I don't want them to get the blame for the wrong notes. It's got to stop somewhere, because when you listen to a record it's partly for sound, but also for company. You want some kind of coherent sense of another person in the room when you play a record. So for better or for worse when you put on one of my records you're getting me. I get all the help I can to make it sound good."



> Zoom

Do you feel like you learn a lot from your collaborators?
"I couldn't do without them. I left school at 16 and I can't really read music. I rely on people like [saxophonist] Gilad Atzom and [bassist] Yaron Stavi and Annie Whitehead, who are fantastically well-schooled musicians, to hear what I'm doing and make coherent sense of it. I'm not really an individualist."

Wyatt's most significant collaborator, though, must be his wife, Alfie. As well as writing a great many of the lyrics to his songs, her paintings and collages have been the visual representation of Wyatt's music over the past few decades, and are almost inseparable from

its sound.

Like Wyatt's songs, her designs are deceptively simple, their bright colours and irregular shapes belying a complex fluidity. What I regret most about this day spent with both of them is that I didn't record the conversation Alfie and I had on our drive back, an exchange about writing, feminism, war and families - and probably most of all, how lyrics and music work together. I remember it, though. It was great.

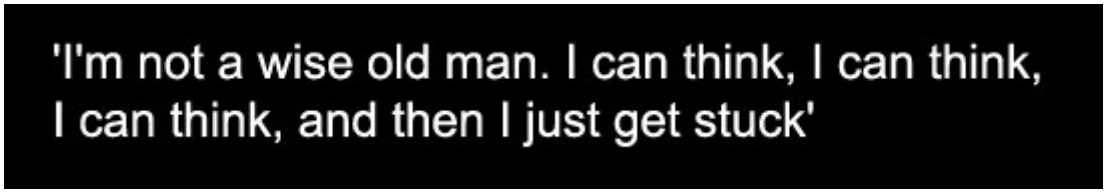
Do you tell her what you want her to do with the artwork?
"I wouldn't say a word. I let her get on with it. She knows what the songs are about because she wrote half of them. I know from doing stuff myself I don't need someone looking over my shoulder. I can get there myself, otherwise it's not a journey. I don't always know what's going in Alfie's head."

Do you ever disagree?
"I never disagree with Alfie."

Some of Benge's most moving lyrics on *Comicopera* are those of 'Out Of The Blue', which was provoked by the Israeli bombing of Lebanon last year. Focusing in on the domestic, it tries to express the sheer sudden horror of a house - a simple, safe place - destroyed by an anonymous enemy. Wyatt's turning to other languages for the remainder of the album after this is no coincidence.

"It's after the line, '*You have planted everlasting hatred in my heart*'. It follows a woman whose house has been bombed to bits by some clever dick in an aeroplane - 'You've come to my door but you've blown it apart, so you might as well come in through the roof or the ceiling. You've fucked up my house - fuck you. There's nothing I can do, I haven't got a bombing aeroplane myself.' What do you do? What Palestinian women do is they do encourage their sons to and fight back, but of course that leads to more tragedy. But at the same time you can't just wipe people out by bombing them.

"Alfie was reflecting on the cycle of violence, where you may not intrinsically feel violent, but if great violence is done to you then one of the responses is to be violent back, and it's the point at which all these philosophies about trying to be nice just collapse in the face of that excessive rape of a soul. And I'm just not clever enough to know what to do next, so I just sang in foreign languages and did a bit of free jazz..."



Did you feel like there was nothing you could say?
"I just felt completely ill-equipped to come up with an appropriate response. So then I do what artists do, which is drift off into some kind of fairyland. The whole last section of the record is about trying on different alien guises: foreign language or a revolutionary rhetoric or a bit of free jazz, Orphy Robinson on vibes going bonkers, or surrealist dream-world stuff. I just turn back to my original craft, which is to try and make a nice sequence of notes that don't ignore reality. It sounds so pathetic. I'm not a wise old man. I can think, I can think, I can think, and then I just get stuck.

"I can't compete intellectually in words with where I've got to musically. I do feel like I've got much further... when I try and catch up with words it's sort of a bit clumsy...

He picks up a weathered-looking brass instrument.

"Annie Whitehead, who plays trombone on the record, on the fourth track of the album ['AWOL] she plays this. Alfie got it in a car boot sale. It's got the wrong mouthpiece on it. It's called a baritone horn. I tried to play it, but I can't fix the notes! The reason I mention that is because I said to Annie, 'I'm having trouble with Concert B - how do you hit that?' And she said, 'Robert, there's no short cut." Annie's been practising hours a day for 40 years, and she was politely telling me there were some things you just can't get to straight away. " He laughs. There's no short cut to a low Concert B."

FREE WILL AND TESTAMENT

Do people still ask you a lot about your politics?
"It still comes up a lot. The moment I joined the Communist Party I knew it was something I'd have to deal with for the rest of my life and it would be a real obstacle for some people, a point of interest for others or a point of contempt for others."

How do you feel about it now?
"I'm always nervous about sounding like Cliff Richard talking about his Christianity, but it's just that I personally have found a way of understanding the world that makes sense to me and I get more sheer intelligence - applicable ways of looking at the world -than I do from Marxists than I do from religion as the world is commonly used. I do see the power shifts and politics in the world in terms of military and economic power. Not in terms of an answer, but just an understanding of the process as we're living through it. That's all I'd say about it."

Would you say all your music is political?
"I would go further than that. I would say I'm more consistently a political animal than I am a musical one. In other words, who I am and the privileges I have come from political reality. And the fact that I've chosen to be a musician out of the various occupations I could do is sort of secondary, actually, to me. I love music. But I did anyway, long before I was a musician. As a teenager, music saved my life. But as a teenager I thought I'd be a painter.

" Thank god for rock music for one thing: that it went back to basics. Rock music is about a return to folk music. You don't have to know anything. You just have to get an instrument in your hand that plays a note, and sing, and anyone can do it.

"I started out from there. I was really grateful, because in the Fifties when I was listening to jazz or Stravinsky or something, it didn't occur to me that I'd ever be able to play it. There's no short cut to that stuff. But with rock'n'roll there *is* a short cut - you just sort of... do it. So that's what I latched onto. First of all, it wasn't very philosophical, it was more like, how do you get to dances, and one way was being the drummer. So that sort of thing - very simple."

Is it still very simple?
"It has to be. Any information I get, I try to take it all on, but in terms of processing it, I have to reduce everything back to all those teenage things - is there a beat somewhere, is there a tune somewhere? That sort of thing."

He pauses.

"Are you hungry? You must be hungry."





songs in the key of life: ten wyatt classics

Little Red Riding Hood Hit The Road
(from *Rock Bottom*, 1974)
Spirited free jazz with reversed trumpet, giving way to spellbinding song with fabulously shifting chords.

Maryan (from *Shleep*, 1997)
More water imagery in a song whose dreamlike melody meanders along icy tributaries. Mesmerised, we drown therein.

Signed Curtain (from Matching Mole's *Matching Mole*, 1972)
A resigned sigh of a song that feels like it's being made up ad hoc, yet whose very lethargy and inherent humour belie a lively human heart.

Moon In June
(from Soft Machine's *Third*, 1970)
Hotwire into young Wyatt's brain and sample the psychotropic delights of his playful Canterbury art-rock band; become a medieval child without the pestilence for a hazy 19 minutes.

Left On Man
(from *Dondestan*, 1991)
Ten years before Bush threw down the gauntlet, to question the cost of *"What we call freedom in the north"* still met with disapproval from one's compatriots, so this song still stands.

Sea Song (from *Rock Bottom*, 1974)
All top tens of Robert Wyatt ever listed will include this song for the simple reason that it is one of the best songs in the world.

Alifib/Alife
(from *Rock Bottom*, 1974)
Nonsense love-songs are rare but this one is a treat and homage to Wyatt's creative partner and 'other half'.

Lullaby For Hamza
(from *Cuckooland*, 2003)
Hamza was born during the onset of the Gulf War in 1991 – the bombing campaigns and climate of fear have left indelible scars on many children.

Beautiful Peace
(from *Comicopera*, 2007)
Wittily illustrates the acceptance of the banal and the turning of a blind eye towards ugliness in English towns and attitudes.

Pigs... (In There) (from *EPs 1999*)
Without resorting to a preachy approach to animal rights, Wyatt's naïve yet incredulous repetition of *"Pigs...? In THERE?"* says it all.
Crayola Lectern

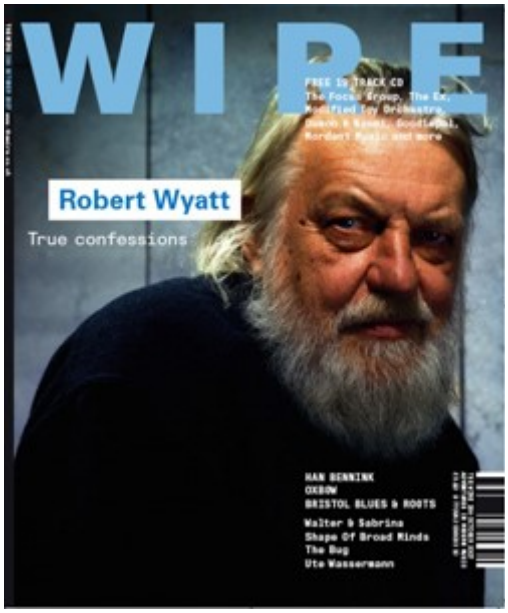
Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Saturday night and Sunday morning - Wire N° 284 - October 2007

SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING



> Zoom

Saturday night and Sunday morning

Whether drunk on the dance or in sober reflection, Robert Wyatt finds optimism even in his darkest hours via his ragged examinations of human foibles. In a frank interview, Wyatt and his longtime partner and co-creator Alfie discuss the troubled backdrop to his latest album *Comicopera*.

Words: David Toop. Photography: Jack Walters.

An abandoned caravan, black inside and empty as a dead tooth, lies wedged into trees on the edge of green Lincolnshire flat lands - main event; figure and ground - and I am on my way to see Old Rottenhat, ranger in the night.

Alfreda Benge, better known as Alfie, has been Robert Wyatt's partner in life, lyrics and artistic production since 1971. She collects me from the nearest railway station to their house in Louth, and during the car ride we talk about mothers haunted by waltzes and away with the fairies in their old age, so touching accidentally on subject matter relevant to songs composed by Alfie and Robert for the new album *Comicopera*, it's called, which is not indicative of operatic knockabout so much as the stumbling efforts of humanity to be more human. Maybe this jumps too quickly into the work; perhaps better to ask, who is this anomalous person with the convoluted history, with the unique voice, aching, plain and worldly, that can penetrate the emotions not just of greying hippies and Prog rockers but one-time punks, post-punk entryists, soul boys, folkies, improvisors, jazzers, technocrats and many other tribes of music's post-war fallout?

Thanks to bassist Hugh Hopper's Website, with its Soft Machine gig list, I can identify exactly my own first encounters with Wyatt as drummer and vocalist with one of the most enduring, still influential British groups of the late 1960s. There was Christmas On Earth at Olympia in December 1967, where I took photographs of Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, The

Graham Bond Organisation and Soft Machine (films long since lost with only one print surviving, a blurred shot of Kevin Ayers in black vest silhouetted against a whiteout of light show); their taped music for Peter Dockley's *Spaced* event at the Roundhouse; York University and London's King's Theatre, both in 1969, and then the Queen Elizabeth Hall as a quartet with Elton Dean in May 1970.



> Zoom



> Zoom

Once Robert was ousted from the group I lost interest, both in the records and the concerts, and like a lot of people, transferred my allegiance to his solo career.

The interest, after all, came from an uneasy but productive balance of contradictory elements: a sweet yearning pop sensibility informed by jazz balladry; the new electronic minimalism of Terry Riley; influences from Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock and other pioneers of extended black music; a very earthy application of the inexplicable doctrine of equivalence known as 'pataphysics. That is to say, a reading of the alphabet or a geographical placement of the BBC tea machine as meaningful as uncountable time signatures and fractured compositional structures.

But enough of that, for the moment; I'm in the front door, turning left into Robert's place of work with the piano, the keyboard, the record collection, the antique globe, the photos of Alfie and the LP of music from Syria propped up on the record player, and Robert is looking fitter and younger than he has for many years. In public his persona is customarily gentle and self-deprecating, but at the moment he's twitching with energy, buzzing about the room, beard trimmed, impatient to get on with this ritual we've agreed to enact, and presenting a strong reminder of what an inexhaustible drummer he was before the accident that put him in a wheelchair.

I tell him a story about an academic conference on 20th century music at Sussex University. In 2005 I was invited to give the second of two keynote lectures. The first was given by musicology professor Gianmario Borio of Cremona, who spoke on "Avant-garde As A Plural Concept: Music Around 1968". This is a tricky area, a *Saxondale* trap for professors of a certain age, radical left politics and progressive music from their youth suddenly assuming a significance that in other circumstances would be taken for twilight nostalgia. After speaking at length about Nono, Kagel and Evangelisti, soixante-huitards and all that, Borio concluded by playing the first few tracks from Soft Machine's *Volume Two*: "Pataphysical Introduction - Pt 1 " "A Concise British Alphabet - Pt 1 " and a snatch of "Hibou, Anemone And Bear". They begin with this trashy music, he opined, and then abruptly toss it aside in favour of something more challenging. Neat as the metaphor appeared - a suffocating complacency in repressive European society rejected for a more progressive future - I was dubious. Had he been in the audience, would Robert have challenged this dismissal of the pop sensibility in Soft Machine?

"Well, David, to be honest I'm more of a slapper than that," he says, now that I'm asking him. "If somebody likes anything we've done enough to play it in public..."

"You're pathetically grateful?"

"... I'm pathetically grateful. The struggle people had with Gershwin - is he just a posh folk composer or is he a new...? This struggle has been going on for a long time.

"Say a fantastic meal you have, it's not rejecting fried egg sandwiches. Without the basic thing, the apple off the tree or the glass of water, there's nothing to develop. I think Charles Mingus said that if music loses its roots in song and dance it loses all importance or value. I certainly feel that. If music hasn't got song and dance in it, even with a *search*, it's decorative, but it's deeply trivial. I'm a Darwinist. Song and dance, they're so biologically wired in to what humans do. People have been dancing on a Saturday night for a long time. But there is a Sunday morning, when you have to listen to church music. That's why they invented Saturday and Sunday."

There's a lot of laughing to go with these words, so don't necessarily take them at face value. Robert hasn't become a Christian. He's an unashamed admirer of Richard Dawkins, despite a growing feeling abroad that Dawkins would be Witchfinder General if only the job could be reinstated. *"I really envy Christians, and I envy Muslims too, it must be great to be so sure..."* he sings on *Comicopera's* "Be Serious", a strangely cheering gospel shuffle for atheists featuring Paul Weller on guitar. "*I've got no one to turn to when I'm sinking in the shit, feel so sad and lonely no one to tell me what to do*."

"At the tail end of a digressive response to the Italian professor, Robert turns the argument on its head. "I love pop music to death," he says. "Most great composers rely on folk music. I rely on pop music. I'm not saying I'm a great composer or that pop music is folk music. There's a whole endless thing going on out there. You make your little pond but if your pond isn't connected to the river, which isn't connected to an ocean, it's just going to dry up. It's just a little piss pool, I've lived too long to be happy in a pond."

"This was, more or less, Barbara Ehrenreich's argument in her recent book, *Dancing In The Streets: A History Of Collective Joy*. "So if we are looking for a common source of depression, on the one hand and the suppression of festivities, on the other," she wrote, "it is not hard to find. Urbanisation and the rise of a competitive, market-based economy favoured a more anxious and isolated sort of person - potentially both prone to depression and distrustful of communal pleasures."

"Wyatt music, by inclination on the slow raggedy side, vulnerability voiced, leaning towards doleful in the reeds and brass, and in its frank examination a questioning of what he calls "human foibles" has more than a touch of chapel and colliery band about it, yet the effect is uplifting, as if we were hearing the more anxious and isolated sort of person transmit a gift of great generosity, optimism and fortitude.

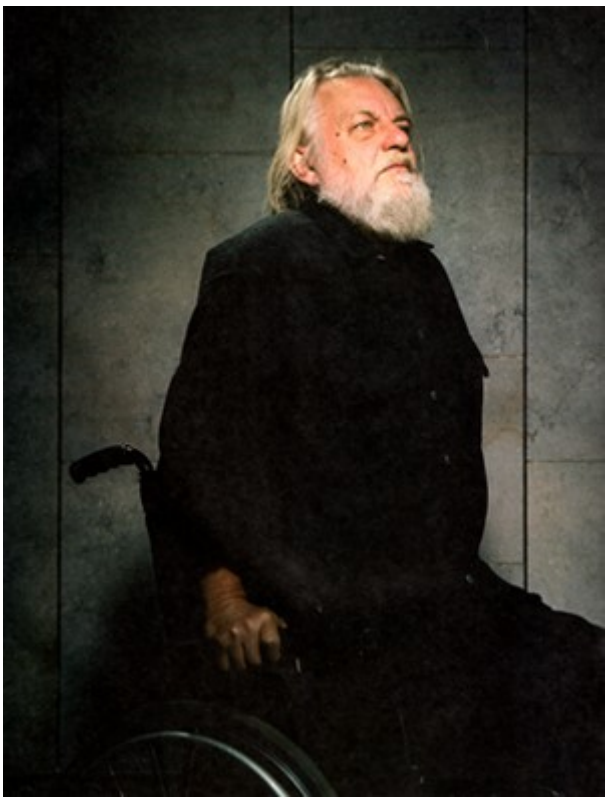
If this makes him Sound too saintly, let's talk about Mingus. When I listen to Robert's music I'm reminded of the sombre beauty of Jazz Composers Workshop records made by Charles Mingus and John LaPorta in 1954-55, or the hushed sadness of Duke Ellington "Mood Indigo". *Comicopera* shares common ground with the ambitious projects of Carla Bley, Paul Haines, Mike Mantler and Charlie Haden, themselves building on the innovations of Mingus and Ellington. Orchestral suites, song suites, jazz operas, chronotransductions and sort-of-an-operas; all of these terms have been used to describe their method of bringing together distinctive voices, contemporary composition and jazz improvisation as a vehicle for powerful ideas and political commitment.

Robert sang on Mantler's *Many Have No Speech, The School Of Understanding, The Hapless Child, Silence and Hide And Seek*, so is steeped in this oeuvre. We begin to talk about what the idea of opera might mean and he tells me a story of being taken to the opera for one of Mozart's earliest attempts at the form. "I was just completely astonished," he says.

"It was such a beautiful shock to go into a place where an attempt at archaic things are happening. So that may have interested me. My mother in law, Irena, she had a dog and she used to take this dog for walks. She used to meet other people who had dogs, the way you do. She met somebody's dog and said, 'What's his name?'

"'Amadeus'.

"She said, 'I would call a dog Sebastian; Mozart was so frivolous, Bach was serious', and she went on her way. My mother in law was a Polish refugee - like refugees must all be burning with a sense of... 'You think I'm an ignorant person to be patronised. I know stuff you haven't even thought about.' "I'm not just going round the houses. I just want to establish that when I sing of tragic things, the way it comes out, which is fairly deathly, sometimes I'm not tragedy, I don't do tragedy, I'm not ready for tragedy, I don't understand tragedy. I'm still just a long-winded pop musician. This isn't false modesty. It's just how I see it. But, my songs aren't pop songs. I go on and on for longer than pop songs do. I get bored with hearing the voice so I put in noise stuff, sound stuff. So it's like the voice keeps re-occurring and has to be the main event because I'm a singer, but the songs are not the be-all and end-all of what I'm doing. I'm just trying to string bits of music together."



> Zoom

"I don't know how to mature. I'm constantly being bombarded by images of proper grown-ups and reprimanded by the various headmasters of the world."

Later he talks about the songs as sketches or caricatures, none of which represents a whole person or any sort of completion. Getting older adds up to an accumulation of loose ends.

Salves, illusions and utopias aside, is there such an entity as a whole person, or any such state as completion or closure? This question makes him quite agitated and defensive. "I don't know how to mature," he says. "I don't know. I'm constantly being bombarded by images of proper grown-ups and constantly being reprimanded by the various headmasters of the world. I don't know enough yet to even have an opinion about anything. I don't now how to argue with that."

Opera is a word meaning work, or labour, as in "do not operate heavy machinery", and this business of musical work is one way in which an isolated and anxious sort of person with no safety net of religion can stay out of the doldrums. Unfortunately, it can also land the same person in the doldrums, decent music being an elusive bastard to pin down.

Alfie enters the room at my request. Since she as so often been at the heart of Robert's work - the subject of one of his finest tracks, "Sea Song" on *Rock Bottom,* co-author of many compositions, painter of album artworks, *a* constant presence in photographs, companion, support and shield - I'm surprised she is so rarely asked for her opinion. She laughs, people asking Robert what a song means, what does he know, he didn't even write it.

"You're half of it," he says.

"Well, not half."

So this is the moment to confess that my understanding of words in songs is poor. In general, unless the subject is ostensibly transparent, I have a tenuous grasp, verging on stupidity, of what many singers are on about. Give me the lyrics of an average white guitar band and I'm better off with the sheer surface of a Jeremy Prynne poem. There are songs on *Comicopera* that seem angry, or disillusioned, perhaps deeply personal, about love or bombs, lost, loss, lossy. Is it me who's lost?

"Words are usually about a few things," Alfie says. "I don't feel satisfied if they're about what they seem to be about. There has to be another possibility. And also people find things in them, which is great. I find things which are there later, and I suddenly realise what I meant, and strange connections. For years I didn't know that "Sea Song" was for me, and Robert thought it was really obvious. I've just written some lyrics for Monica Vasconcelos and they were all about Robert. He didn't know that at all. Then this morning he said, 'You're right, it's all about me.' How music saves you from the doldrums. How it's his lifeline, basically. I thought it was so obvious."

Alfie wrote lyrics for four songs: "Just As You Are", "You You", "AWOL" and "Out Of The Blue". Three of them are grouped together early in the album. Like a mysterious rock in the hallway, they squat in their place, emotional weight, demanding engagement.

"They're all about loss of some sort," she says, "loss of trust, loss of husband, loss of memory. It's about grieving, actually. It's not anger really. We know a lot of widows at the moment. There's a lot of people like Sheila Peel, Helen Walters, Paul Haines's wife, Jo. People who've been part of a partnership, absolutely solid, and their husbands have died. It's really horrible, tragic. So there's thinking about them in "You You "and "AWOL".

"But the other one, "Just As You Are", the one that Robert sings as a duet, it's not exactly disillusionment." She laughs, sighs, looks at Robert.

"Can I say what it's about?"

"Of course," he says. "It's about bereavement during a relationship."

"It seems as if it might be about some kind of unfaithfulness but it's not about that all. It's about one of you..."

"Let's say, for the sake of argument," he says, "the bloke..."

"... deciding it might be rather fun to become an alcoholic, and the other one, who has quite a lot in their life to deal with - a mum whose mind is drifting, lives in a place not surrounded by friends, relies very, very hard on the one thing she married her husband for, which is intelligent conversation, and finds that the only time they ever meet, early evening when they've all done their work, he's downed another little bottle of vodka and says he hasn't. She can tell out of the corner in a microsecond whether he's had a drink or not. Then he becomes totally and utterly boring all evening and then she thinks, God, life is so fucking lonely. You've tricked me. I thought for the last 30 years you would provide me with the one thing that I need in my life - an intelligent pal, and look what you're doing now, you arsehole. There's a lot of anger there. But there may come a day when he's weak and he's stupid no longer and that day seems to have almost come, because he's now for five months..."

"Sober," he says.

"All my anger and rampaging and complaining seems to have worked," she says, "and I've got my old Bertie back."

Rather unfairly, I suggest to Robert that his remark of 20 minutes past, that he is unable to mature as an artist, has just been disproved by this painful revelation of very adult themes: bereavement, alcoholism, loneliness, deception, abandonment and acceptance.

"It's not abstract art," he says, "Abstract art would just be endlessly working out ideas. I'm trying to live through what I do. You do grow older and you do learn stuff, and if you let it, it will get into your music."

One of the advantages of getting older, I venture.

"Yes," he says, "there are several and that's probably the main one. Going back to that Italian bloke you were talking about, it's a useful though and it's exactly the same as my dad's thought, that pop culture is just not enough. Without knowing why, as a youth, I was always looking for an extension, what happens next, where does this go? The explosive moment of excitement, then what? Anticipating adulthood, in that sense. I know it sounds impossibly pretentious but it's just a fact. Being taken to lots of very grown-up concerts as a child, I didn't know why they were going on and on and now I do, because life does."

In the current era of all-ages concerts, pre-18s festivals and pensioner crèches at Glastonbury, the notion of popular music as a teenage moment has become hopelessly muddled.



> Zoom

"If you want to see youth still wet from the womb in its sylph-like prancingness," he says, "you have to go to ballet or a classical music concert. It's all upside down. I feel, clumsily, just trying to take on the extra equipment I find I need when what started out as a sprint turns into a marathon. So these great weights my parents put on me, of museums and operas, after a few more decades I'm really glad they said to me, 'You must take a woolly and a handkerchief and a change of underwear.' I now know why they did that and I'm grateful. A sprint won't get you through."

That was how I remember you playing the drums, I say, 100 metres dash, stripped to the waist, voice, arms and legs, words and 13/8 or whatever time, simultaneous and full tilt.

"For about two fucking hours," he says, "soaking wet with sweat. Like a lot of jazz it was a combination of aesthetics and athletics. For ten years, more or less every night, I did it like a sprint."

Later, in a moment when Robert has left the room, Alfie joins me, sits down, makes her decision to be absolutely clear.

"I can't do unconditional love," she says. "Robert can." How to accept human frailty when the sprint is over and done? That's the question.

"Some hours later, driving me back to the spot where I pick up my transport to London, she explains in more detail about Robert's drinking, how it came to a head during the making of the album because of his fear that the spirit of the music could only emerge through the spirit of the bottle. The song, "Just As You Are", came about during a session at which the engineer, Jamie Johnson, had come down with a stomach bug. Brian Eno had dropped by, and this is his genius, pushed them both to use time otherwise lost. Write a Country song, he said; play some piano Robert, write a line Alfie. Desperate in the headwind of this oblique strategy, they wrote a song that blew the cover of their central problem. Since then, Robert has been going to Alcoholics Anonymous, and perhaps as a consequence of his new sobriety, looks about as fit and strong as I have ever seen him.

But the subject troubles me, generates feelings of disloyalty, is the gist of what I say.

To speak about such secrets in public, making hidden addictions common property, can

transform them into tangible, negotiable conditions, is the gist of what she says.

Certain relationships are described in terms of records, I notice. When Robert and Alfie met, at the beginning of the 1970s, he was impressed by her record collection: John Coltrane, Sly And The Family Stone, alto saxophonist John Handy's *Recorded Live At The Monterey Jazz Festival*. Later, he talks about his current listening habits, which have moved back into the 1940s, to Ellington, Glenn Miller even, and Eddie Haywood, the pianist who accompanied Billie Holiday.

"I seem to be going back to the 40s in tandem with Alfie," he says, "who has become terrifically interested in finding photographs of her middle European ancestors. She's got extraordinary roots in Slovenia, Roland, Trieste, Austria. She spent the first seven years being carted around Europe by her mother before being brought to England in 1947. I've been doing a strange parallel thing.

"I was born at the end of the war. My dad had Vera Lynn records - they were some of the few pop records that he allowed that had an importance that transcended what he considered their merit, as a trained musician that he aspired to having been. Professionally he was a psychologist, but as a young man in the 1930s he'd been a pianist and had in fact made a few 78s accompanying some Italian tenor, playing a few arias. He played Debussy and Ravel, though only on record by the time I knew him. I didn't meet him until I was six and within two or three years he developed multiple sclerosis and couldn't read music any more, hadn't learnt any and couldn't improvise. He was with his first family until I was about six and he didn't join my mother until I was about six. He left his first family behind and joined his second one. I have no idea what that was about, really. He was married to somebody else when I was born. By the time I knew him the only things he could play by memory were folk tunes and Christmas songs, so he'd play "Little Brown Jug Don't I Love Thee" and "Away In A Manger" and at Christmas I would sing those with him. That's what I remember."

There's an uncomfortable parallel here: two men, father and son, prevented by disability from pursuing their music, except for the fact that Robert has taken that initial loss as a form of liberation, rebuilding it into music that is deeply personal yet speaks to listeners of all generations, all proclivities, all allegiances. Just run through a partial list of collaborators: Jimi Hendrix, members of Pink Floyd, Scritti Politti, Mongezi Feza, Ivor Cutler, Elvis Costello, Paul Weller, The Raincoats, Evan Parker, Ultramarine, Mike Mantler, Björk, Anja Garbarek, Brian Eno. Just his minimal piano part on Brian Eno's *Music For Airports* has launched a thousand Ambient, post-Ambient, television and movie soundtracks.

"I never thought I'd be a musician when I was a teenager," he says. "I tried to learn a couple of instruments when I was younger - violin and trumpet - but couldn't read music and left school in disgrace when I was 16."

What did you hope to be?

"A painter, an artist," he says. "I thought it'd be great if you had a tube of toothpaste the size of a lamppost all bent on a lawn with stuff like squeezed toothpaste coming down the side. Eventually pop artists did that so I thought, there you go, I'll be a conceptual artist. René Magritte had a composer brother who never bothered to compose anything at all and I thought that was so fucking Zen. So this was my idea of being a truly conceptual artist. I think it may be why I got on so well with Brian Eno later on. We'd Just sit around thinking of things that could be done. I'm not a great believer in individualism. I think things are around to be done and if one person doesn't do it another will."

You like your songs to sound unfinished, I say, a bit rough round the edges, a bit abrasive in the mix, like everybody is in the room, air stiff with fags, the playing is in the moment, and what is left suspended after the event can take its Darwinian chances out in the world.

"I got that a lot from painting," he says. "From the late 19th century, painters stopped finishing things off. Before photographs, the ideal painter finished. I Just grew up with post-Cezanne artwork where the brushstrokes are fairly scruffy. As long as you got the structure right."

You like a thick sound, I say, a kind of wheezing, wall to wall, portative organ meets harmonium earth to sky privet hedge seething with bees.

"That's Cezanne as well," he says. "A lot of it comes from painters. In Cezanne you don't have many clear horizons or skies. It's texture to all four edges. It's like looking at a text,

or something; you're not going to get a landscape or even a person out of it. You've just got this dense, arbitrarily hacked-out oblong of texture. It's taken to its extremes on *Comicopera* - the semi-instrumental - "Anachronist" - it's floor to ceiling stuff. I like Cezanne, I like Vuillard. That's what I like.

"It's difficult if you're a singer because singers make very clear landscapes, the backing, the ground and the sky, then the voice is a person in it and maybe the other instruments are the trees in this landscape. I always feel that an awful lot of music has done that - you've got the bedrock and then you've got these people standing up in it - the voice and the soloist. I just got used to the idea of an almost underwater thing, of great swirling mixtures without a horizon, without a top or a bottom, just a great churning mix of stuff. I would do that a lot more than I actually do, but being a singer I feel obliged to identify the singer and say yeah, hands up, I'm the singer. Otherwise how could I put 'Robert Wyatt' on front of the record? Otherwise ideally I'd just disappear in with the mesh."

He moves into the hallway, by the front door, where a reproduction of Samuel Palmer's astonishing brown ink and sepia drawing, *Early Morning*, is fixed to the wall. Teeming with life, picked out with microscopic details, full to the edges with mystic intensity, it portrays a woodland as seen by a travelling knight, "When that misty vapour was agone and cleare and faire was the morning". In the foreground quivers a rabbit, fixed as the fallen log, and at a central point to which the eye is drawn, almost hidden in the shade of a mushrooming oak tree, sits a group of four people, perhaps praying.

"In a painting," Robert says, back to me and looking into the image, "if there is a person in it you scan it in a much more detailed way. There's this drawing out here, Samuel Palmer. It's extraordinary for the era, 1825, way before the impressionists. There's a little huddle in the middle. There's no question that for a human being looking at the painting that huddle becomes the main event. Next is the rabbit. There is no objective animal that can look at that. Presumably if you were a member of the tree race, the thing you would notice is that log down there and think, that's awful, like a dismembered arm.

"The equivalent of that is hearing a voice on a record. You cannot help but pick it out and to the extent you get into the record what that voice is doing and to the extent that you can recognise it as a fellow human and what it's asking of you. There's no avoiding that. On this record most of the time I've stuck the voice fairly up front. I listened to a lot of Johnny Cash, thinking, yeah, better or worse, that is how people communicate with the voice. You are not Mozart after all, old son."

This leads to a conversation about Palmer and William Blake (and I'd add writer John Cowper Powys), in which Robert talks about the romantic local sensibility of Britain. "You don't have to go to Italy for romance," he says. "It was here all along. I feel really in tune with that." The subject of folk music has emerged at various points during the day, with Robert and I both admitting our struggles and changing attitudes regarding English folk. In the 1960s, like me, he rejected most of it, James Brown's brand new bag being far more immediate. James Brown is still up there, but for the rest of it, now he's not so sure. I ask if he and Alfie had heard Rachel Unthank & The Winterset's new album, *The Bairns*, with its deeply moving version of Robert's "Sea Song"? The room explodes for a moment, yes and yes, Robert in wonderment that she has captured the core of his song so completely.

The ghost of James Brown having entered the room, I mention a concert I watched on television earlier this year, one of Brown's last performances before his death. I was puzzled by his frequent mentions of Wes Montgomery, who probably meant nothing to the audience. "I'm so glad about that" Robert says, "because Wes Montgomery is someone I'd been listening to on my own. That's when you know you really like music, when you don't expect anybody else to be interested." We listen to a track from one of Robert's recent acquisitions, Montgomery playing "Twisted Blues", live in Belgium, 1965, the drive and economy of the solo making both of us realise why this guitarist who looked like a middleweight boxer meant so much to James Brown. A little bit later we listen to a record of alto saxophonist Charles McPherson, with strings. I'd like to hear you record an album with string, I say, like Ray Charles, "Lucky Old Sun", Chet Baker, "Grey December", Charlie Parker, "Just Friends". He laughs, tells me certain people ask him why he can't just make easy music.

We've been talking for quite a few hours. Are you tired of this, bored, fed up?

"No, I'm all right," he says. "I've just run out of fags."

Comicopera is released this month on Domino. Robert Wyatt will appear in conversation at

London Purcell Rooms on 15 October: see Out There.



> Zoom

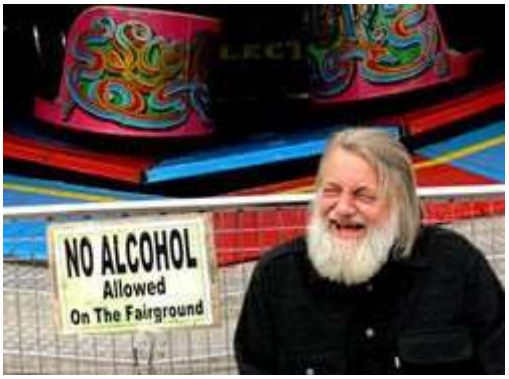
Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

'Other' Music - The Village Voice - October 23, 2007

'Other' Music
Robert Wyatt gets subversive and operatic



Inexplicably, Robert Wyatt finds this sign hilarious.

"Hullo?"

Alfreda Benge's sleepy voice answers from the other side of the Atlantic, her English accent wool-thick. It takes all of my effort not to reply by bursting into song: "Allllllifi, my larder," the refrain to "Alifib," Canterbury legend Robert Wyatt's sweet if strange ode to his muse–partner, taken from his sublime 1974 solo album, *Rock Bottom*. In my mind's eye I see that famous photo of the couple from around that time, scant months after Wyatt's wine-sodden plunge from a third-story window rendered the once octopus-like prog-rock drummer of Soft Machine and Matching Mole a paraplegic. Wheelchair-bound, Wyatt bears a shaggy, sheepish smirk in the pic, while Alfreda stands beside him, a stern look on her face, a gleaming butcher knife in her hand. I have but a nervous five-word exchange with her before strains of some lost bebop recording come onto the line and Wyatt issues his own warm "Hullo."

. He has agreed to discuss the release of *Comicopera*, his ninth studio album in 30-plus years. Just don't call it an "opera" in the literal sense. "I find the blank canvas of a CD with the potential to be 80 minutes daunting," Wyatt divulges from his home in Louth, Lincolnshire, saying that superimposing three dramatic acts helped organize the album: "The dramatic structure was simply because there were different songs on there. They're not all singer-songwriter me-me-me things in the sense that there are quite different characters on it. There's someone whose idea of happiness is going on a successful bombing run. There's a nihilist who feels alone cuz he doesn't have religion. There's a woman telling a man off. There's all kinds of emotions in there."

As on previous efforts, Wyatt still builds songs up on his keyboard (with what the Voice once deemed "some of the most god-awful synthesizer presets ever") at a pace part jazz-shuffle, part somnambulism, with horns, violins, and the sonority of friends gently accruing around his sage voice. Wyatt again draws on a remarkable group of musical conspirators for *Comicopera*, including the likes of Brian Eno, Paul Weller, Annie Whitehead, singer Monica Vasconcelos, and Alfie herself. (FYI: She portrays that woman telling a man off.) The two trade verses on Act I's painfully honest "Just As You Are," both attempting to love despite infuriating shortcomings on either side. That personal rift widens over the course of the album, expanding outward to comment on worldly conflicts as well. If lovers can't understand the person beside them, then how could a bombardier and the bombarded?

"[It's] something Susan Sontag said quite late on," Wyatt explains. "The question is not

just compassion, but to really *empathize* with the Other. . . . It's that kind of thing . . . to distance myself from that with the slogan 'Not in my name.'" So while the middle part of the album has Wyatt, in his words, "bemused by little country towns and boring council meetings" in the English countryside, the bombing of helpless civilians on "A Beautiful War" is the last indignation. Amid the eerie intonations of Eno's voice on "Out of the Blue" at the end of Act II, Wyatt's character rasps about his house being blown apart, that "you've planted your everlasting hatred in my heart." For the remainder of the album, that Other is present, eschewing English altogether and singing instead in Italian and Spanish throughout Act III.



It's not an unfamiliar stratagem for Wyatt. Even while releasing curious Top 40 fare like "Shipbuilding" and his take on the Monkees' "I'm a Believer," he also sang Spanish tunes like "Yolanda" and "Te Reuerdo Amanda" (all collected on his CD *EPs*). A lifelong admirer of figures like Federico García Lorca and Che Guevara, he now sets Lorca's surrealistic imagery to song and sings Carlos Puebla's ode to the fallen revolutionary, "Hasta Siempre Comandante," at the end of *Comicopera*. "They're all bits of me," Wyatt realizes. "When you got different characters in a sort of sequence and there's music and singing, it's kinda like an opera." He pauses. "But it's not a serious opera."

Andy Beta

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The freewheelin' Robert Wyatt - Uncut N° 125 - October 2007

The freewheelin' Robert Wyatt

"What I do," he says, "just doesn't come out normal." One of British music's great eccentrics leads us through a life of drink and cigarettes, Hendrix, Moon and Syd, strange records and terrible accidents...

INTERVIEW by **JOHN MULVEY**
PHOTOGRAPHS by **DEAN CHALKLEY**



Robert Wyatt's home is in the centre of Louth, a quiet town in the Lincolnshire, hinterlands. A swift, wheelchair ride down the road from his house, there's the Co-Op where Robert was shopping when the first of the summer's floods arrived. Nearer still, there's the market square where he goes for sausage sandwiches a few lunchtimes a week. "Tea 40p. Not bad, is it?" he notes approvingly.

It's a strange place to find a man like Robert Wyatt. He has, after all, followed an idiosyncratic and cosmopolitan musical path for over 40 years, with Soft Machine, Matching Mole and on his own rare and lovely solo records. He has consorted with musical legends - from Hendrix, Moon and Syd to Weller, Eno and Phil Manzanera. He has been steadfastly radical in his politics, and global in his outlook. By the end of his new album *Comicopera*, in fact, Wyatt is so disgusted with the behaviour of the British and American governments, he abandons his mother tongue and sings in Italian and Spanish instead.

For such a committed internationalist, you'd imagine Lincolnshire would be a little too parochial and conservative. But Wyatt and his wife, Alfie Benge, have lived in Louth for some two decades. This is where Alfie, an artist, found a house that they could afford and which was big enough to accommodate her husband - wheelchair-bound since he fell out of a window in 1973- on the ground floor.

Robert's lair is the front room, just past the step with "**R ♥ A**" drawn into the cement and the door decorated with a photograph of Picasso. Here, he plays Gil Evans albums, makes tea, smokes endlessly and records his impressionistic, entrancing songs. Here, too, he welcomes us for a leisurely amble through an extraordinary career.
"I have no agenda, as they say on *Big Brother*,"he says, arranging cigarettes, two pouches of tobacco, papers, matches and lighter on the table in front of him. "Gameplan? Me? No, I'm just here for the crack, man."

Do you watch Big Brother, then?
Alfie watches it, I see it. I can't believe how rude people are to each other. Andy Warhol

would absolutely love it.

Did you ever meet Warhol?
No, although I met Warhol's associates in 1967 when we [*Soft Machine*] were playing in the south of France, adjacent to a German beer festival, basically living on the beach... Grey, actually. People always think beaches are pinky orange, but this was grey with dirt. Or was it pine needles? I don't remember. Rubbish for sex, actually.

Anyway, yeah, we were doing music for a play: written by Picasso, I think. And among the people involved were Factory stars and starlets. They were very nice, very funny.

There were few people you didn't meet...
Well, I haven't gone out of my way to meet people. It's because I've been at it a long time now. I'm in my sixties and my first paid job as a drummer was in 1963, so it's been getting on for 35 years, hasn't it?

Forty-four.
Is it really? For the first 10 years I was going round drumming, and it's a social activity. Drumming is like being the engine of a car. Somebody else has to be the car.

Your parents seemed to be quite bohemian, being friends with the poet Robert Graves and all. What was your childhood like?
My dad was an industrial psychologist, my mum was a journalist, and it was a fairly straight upbringing. We just had a lot of nice artbooks around the house. I struggled through grammar school, which I absolutely hated. I got caned a lot when I was at school. I think that's what put me off.

Why were you caned?
We lived near Canterbury Cathedral, we used to sing there and once, in a casual moment of hubris, I wrote "Jesus Christ" in a visitor's book. I was caned for that. Then, when we got to the fifth form, the headmaster gave us boaters, because he fancied we were a public school. I steamed mine up into a sort of cowboy hat, and I was caned for letting the school image down. Blimey, my bum was sore by the end of all that.

All the way through Soft Machine you seem to have been a bit of a troublemaker, as well.
I was always getting into trouble, but I'm not sure that's the same thing. I was never a born rebel. I think there's something utterly meaningless about that, it's totally posey. I liked my parents, I tried to fit in. Half my recording is an attempt to make normal records, seriously, but what I do just doesn't come out normal. That's not deliberate troublemaking.

When I joined the Communist Party, someone said, "Don't you mind being told what to do?" and I said,"No, not at all."

I thought that the band [*Soft Machine*] was being taken in a direction to compete with American jazz rock and I couldn't or didn't want to do that. I remember the organist [*Mike Ratledge*] once said to me, "Why don't you learn to read music?" and I answered, "So that you can't tell me what to play." That was probably the nail in my coffin as far as that band was concerned.



> Zoom

What about the drinking? Weren't you on a slightly different social path to the other Softs?
Well we all know that young drunken men are a terrible pain, and the others didn't really drink. They weren't always kind, but they were well-behaved, and I wasn't.

Didn't you end up spending time in Laurel Canyon with Hendrix at the end of the second Hendrix/Soft Machine American tour?

That's true. The whole of'68, we were there with the Experience, and at the end of it, our group broke up, basically. I hung on because Noel and Mitch and Hendrix said, "We've got this place and there's a spare room if you want to stay." I'd hung out more with them than with the members of the band I was in, as they were all drinkers like me.
Listening to Hendrix play every night, he was absolutely wonderful, and I knew it then.
What he did was just eyewateringly magical. He would transform hotel rooms into magic little rooms, turn them into some curious little temple of a hitherto unknown sect. He was very shy and polite; courteous to a Victorian extreme.

Did you do drugs with him?
I didn't take drugs, no, I just drank. Since you can get completely out of your brain on legal drugs, why bring the law into it?

More proof that you're not a rebel, I guess.
I don't like breaking the law; it embarrasses me. The idea of hanging round policemen is dull.

So you never took acid?
I don't think so. I think I took some substitute - was it TCP? No, that's what you cure cuts with. Knowing me, I probably did take TCP! I didn't like it at all. I associate certain conversations with rooms full of drugs, like [*adopts whiney American voice*], "What sign are you?" and "Do you like The Doors?" And the record would be The Grateful Dead, always. Was it always the same record? Who could tell? I got claustrophobia in that atmosphere. The thing I didn't understand about white American rock was that they were loud folk bands, whereas the English scene was much blacker. Even before rock'n'roll, the tradjazz musicians had this fantasy New Orleans they took around in their heads. The modernists had an imaginary Harlem - which I still have.

You recorded with Syd Barrett...
Well he asked us. We were two bands [*Soft Machine and The Pink Floyd*] that played in the same places and who weren't playing "In The Midnight Hour" because neither of us could play it very well, probably. I liked working with people from the Floyd, because they were so different from us. We would play 100 notes, as many as possible, and they would play as few as possible. I was fascinated by that, and I was very pleased to go and do [*Barrett's first solo LP*] The Madcap Laughs. It's a lovely record.

What was he like at the time?
I didn't know he was meant to be mad or disturbed or anything. He just seemed very well brought-up and polite. Jolly good songs, that's all I knew.

Did you play the UFO Club a lot with the Floyd?
We did. I remember the dressing room at UFO was very small, with benches either side. The Pink Floyd had incredibly long legs, so their legs would come across and cross each other in the middle, like the giant scissors they did in *The Wall*. They were very kind to us. We had crap equipment that tended to blow up, they had good equipment - they were never poor - and they would let us use their gear - actually quite unusual in those days.

What about Keith Moon? You drank with him?
He took me down the blissful road to hell, several steps at once. Hendrix and I used to go down to the Scene Club in New York, and there would be Keith at the bar. His arm would go around your neck and say,"What are you drinking? Look, try this Southern Comfort." I'd go,"It's a bit sweet." He'd say,"Yes it is, so what you need now is a tequila." We'd do it with the salt and lemon. I'd say,"Oh, that's a bit salty. "He'd say, "Yes it is, so what you now need is another shot of Southern Comfort." He taught me how to get completely blasted very quickly, so within 40 minutes you were on another planet. Thanks, Keith, I enjoyed it, but it probably wasn't good for me in the long run, and it certainly wasn't good for you, old son.

Was that what you were drinking the night of your accident in l973?
What I remember is mostly punch - what on earth is that'? - but Kevin [Ayers], I think, brought out a bottle of scotch whisky, and then I felt like I was flying out of the window. Turned out I was [*laughs*]. That's all I remember.

Did that stop you drinking?
No. The first time I got out of hospital, Alfie wheeled me off to the pub. We were really broke - we had about £15, and then the Pink Floyd did a benefit for us for a few thousand. We'd just heard about it and it was fantastic for us. So we went out and got drunk, and when we got back in, Alfie was reprimanded for being drunk in charge of a wheelchair. No, it didn't stop me at all. We both used to drink a lot, me and Alfie.



> Zoom

When did you calm down?
About two months ago. I finished this record and then I stopped. I've had about six relapses, which sounds like a lot, but it's fantastic for me. I tried to write a tune the other day, and I can't remember writing a tune sober ever before. I couldn't imagine normally even sitting down at a keyboard Without the bottle of wine on the left hand side and the packet of fags on the right hand side.

Did you have a drink problem all that time?
It seems like I had, yeah. Answering the questionnaire for alcoholics, it turns out I'm one of the unlucky ones who's an alcoholic, so I can't drink moderately or anything. We'll see how it goes.

It's incredible that, looking through 40 years of photos, you're smoking in nearly all of them.
People ask how many I smoke and I say, "As many as possible." If there was a mile-long cigarette that I could have suspended in front of my mouth, it would go straight into my mouth in the morning and come out at night before I go to sleep.

It's interesting that Rock Bottom [*Wyatt's second, greatest solo LP, from'74*] was partially written before the accident, because it's so often stereotyped as your post-traumatic record.
It's a funny thing, I always feel embarrassed to say this, but I don't mind being in a wheelchair. There are aspects of it that I find quite novel and entertaining. I didn't see it as a record about a tragic trauma. It's actually quite euphoric, to me it's more like the phoenix out of the ashes. Having the nerve to play my own keyboards, having played with all those brilliant keyboards players - trying to get away with it was exciting.

I think Rock Bottom is about the possibilities of love: what someone who loves you will do, and the gratitude that comes in response.
That's much more I like it. I'd been with Alfie a couple of years, and I'd been quite rotten to her while I was in hospital. Me and Alfie had already been married before, we'd had about three decades each of bipedal life. I say it was all right for me, but a lot of people come out of hospital and it's not all right at all. I had Alfie, and Alfie with her friends really helped. I felt like life was making more sense afterwards than it had done before. I was actually very unhappy through the'60s. Being thrown out of Soft Machine, the damage it did to my confidence was far greater than the physical damage of breaking my back. It was like being washed up on a really nice desert island from a ship that had come from a port in a grubby cold northern town. It's terrible but it's not that terrible [*Laughs*]. Alfie has suggested that I'm much sadder and more traumatised than I allow myself to think. I don't know. How can I know if I'm kidding myself?

You seem to flourish as a collaborator with friends, but not as a bandmember.
That's exactly right. The trouble with a band is I can't take orders and I can't give orders. The people I choose vary enormously because it's not for the instrument they play or their style but what kind of company they are. With the final record I believe in a sort of benign dictatorship. I will edit ruthlessly'til every thing sounds good to me, simple as that, 'cos my name's on the cover.

With the last three records [*Shleep, Cuckooland and Comicopera*] I found my imaginary band. It's a lovely band because it's not any band that could exist in real life on the road or any thing like that. It's a basic team; there's Annie Whitehead [*trombone*], Yaron Stavi on bass, Gilad [*Atzmon, saxophone*], that's the core. Then people like Phil Manzanera, Eno and Paul Weller do cameo roles. It's like a little musical family.

There's something incredibly English about your music, even when you sing in Italian or Spanish...

I am totally English. I love the lyrics of Noel Coward, I even like Gilbert & Sullivan. But the point I would make, to the BNP and people who go on about their culture being threatened by alien things, is that no one has allowed and welcomed non-English cultures so wholeheartedly into their lives and into their brains and into their food more than I have. Yet I don't feel the slightest bit compromised or diluted as a human being. I'm as English as my Staffordshire great-grandparents. As my Lancashire dad would say, what the fuck are you all scared of? What kind of wimps are you that if the man standing behind you in the checkout queue is wearing a turban, how does that threaten your identity, you twats? Get over it, for fuck's sake.



> Zoom

On *Comicopera*, there's a song called "Something Unbelievable" where you voice the anger of a bombed Palestinian. The last lyric is, "*You have planted an everlasting hatred in my heart,*" and after that you refuse to sing in English for the rest of the album. Why is that?

Susan Sontag said that people can moralise in politics, but in the end morals in politics are about empathising with the other. Instinctively, that's what I've always done. It's to do with a craving - it's not so much a principled stance, it's much more primitive than that - for cultural biodiversity, and a fear of cultural incest.

During my lifetime, the English-speaking people have bombed about 25 countries. It seemed to me legitimate that anyone who had been bombed like that might be feeling that they're going to hate the bombers for the rest of their lives. The children and the families of your victims will rise up, and they won't like you. I wanted to disassociate myself from the English-speaking trajectory abroad.

The middle chunk of this record is England, and it's not all bad. There's nice tunes, a good laugh, scepticism and grumbling. But at the end I think, 'Oh fuck, I'm off', and the last chunk is all about different ways of getting away from the mainstream, whether it's the avant garde or singing in a foreign language or singing surrealist songs.

It seems very odd that you should end up in a county as conservative as

Lincolnshire.
Henry VIII called it this "brute and beastly shire", hanged a few recalcitrant Catholics and went back home. He's not entirely wrong, but he's not entirely right. There's a village up the road where they're saying,"We don't need any Kosovans here," and I'm looking at the women thinking, "Yes, you do!"

I miss London life, the cosmopolitan thing, and we do go back there several times a year. It's a local joke that life is cheap in Lincolnshire, and we can have a house here for the price of a flat in the south. I can make all the racket I like and no one's going to bother about it. I can get everything I want just around the corner, it's like the imaginary community in a child's train set.

Everyone here seems to know you.
Well, I like buzzing about town, it takes me away from the prison of the keyboard. I'm just one of the local derelicts.

Comicopera is released on October 8 on Domino

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

"Sing like you speak" - The Word - n°55 - september 2007



"SING LIKE YOU SPEAK"

Unimpeachable vocalist, jazz journeyman, storm-tossed philosopher and political sage, Robert Wyatt looks back at what life has taught him

INTERVIEW BY TOBY MANNING
PORTRAIT BY MUIR VIDLER

ROBERT WYATT is BOTH A disarmingly ordinary bloke and a figure of extraordinary charisma. Not many interviewees include Richard Dawkins, Kropotkin and Benjamin Britten in their discourse; fewer still ring you up afterwards to check you got home safely.

The son of liberal parents, Wyatt left school at 16, because "I was fed up of being caned. I'd no ideological objection - it just fucking hurt." He became the drummer and singer of progressive jazz voyagers Soft Machine, lords of misrule of London's psychedelic revels. Wyatt was the Softs' heart and soul. With his Kentish vowels, forlorn falsetto and conversational lyrics, he was a deliberate antidote to countercultural whimsy. He describes being kicked out of the band as one of the most painful experiences of his life. As painful as the drunken fall from a window in 1973 that brought his drumming career to an abrupt halt and has consigned him to a wheelchair ever since. Back broken, spirit anything but, Wyatt married artist Alfreda Benge, who became his cover artist, manager, and - since 1991's *Dondestan* - co-lyricist. His work took on new energy, from 1974's *Rock Bottom* through unlikely hits *I'm A Believer* and Elvis Costello's *Shipbuilding* right up to his forthcoming, magically eccentric *Comicopera* - a wonderful body of work. He's also pursued an astonishing array of collaborations: who else could get Brian Eno and Paul Weller into the same studio?

"Exiled" in a delightful market town in Lincolnshire, in a Bohemian house stuffed with art, percussion instruments and jazz records, Wyatt has only very recently given up alcohol, and says ruefully, "It's very hard to write sober. Sundown's the difficult thing. What are you going to do? Have another cup of tea?"

Well in this case, yes. Alongside a roll-up, a pensive tug of his Lenin beard, and the offer of his wisdom for THE WORD.

"NEVER PRESUME"

"Presumption is the biggest cause of human traffic accidents. Never assume you know what's going on in someone else's mind. Because as far as I can see no one knows why we're here at all, so we all have to invent a reason and everyone will have invented a slightly different one. Even if a relationship has a name like son, daughter, wife, that doesn't give you the right to trample over each others' private dreams and fantasies. Treat other people's minds with respect. Even your nearest and dearest have a silent solitary part of themselves that's as inviolable to you as if they were a complete stranger."

"LOVE IS THE BRAKE TO YOUTH'S RECKLESSNESS"

"As a young man I lived rather recklessly and just about half got away with it. I say only half obviously 'cos I'm in a wheelchair. One of the corollaries to thinking I'd have been quite happy not being born is that the concept of danger changes completely. The only enemy becomes boredom. And the only limits to what you do about that are an education - and I'd like to think, via Kropotkin [Russian anarcho-communist], an inner desire to not cause harm to other people. Whereas I'm quite likely to -and indeed did - jump out of a window just to see what it was like, I don't think I'd have ever *pushed* anybody else out of a window. Because it might not have suited them as an activity.

"Did I jump or fall? Well, I was so drunk... But it's not kind of normal, is it, climbing on to a window ledge. But I didn't give up drinking afterwards. The thought that I might drink myself to death seemed a good way to go. I've never been interested in my health. I'm very touched that someone else wants me to keep healthy for as long as possible and as that's as good a motive as any I could cook up for myself. Alfie tends to guide me from obvious harm. So out of respect for that I try to look after myself.



Before the "horrible crash": (clockwise from left) Wyatt, Mike Ratledge, Andy Summers and Kevin Ayers in Soft Machine.

"I've been more at ease since I've been in a wheelchair and more clear what on earth to do with myself than I was before. It coincided with marrying Alfie - maybe it was just that that was the just right team I needed all along rather than being in the testosterone-fuelled nightmare of an avant-garde boy band. So when I hit rock bottom, it was anything but rock bottom - it was like being washed up on a really nice desert island. With me and my mate. And it was a pleasant surprise that the kind of people who previously regarded long-haired jazzers with suspicion and hostility suddenly started treating me with courtesy and consideration - I made a smooth transition to a kind of Winnie the Pooh-like harmlessness, which disarmed hostility all around me.

"I'm perfectly alright in a wheelchair. I find it...interesting. It's another place to be. I had 28 years as a biped. I've had much longer now in a wheelchair. And apart from my childhood I've never really been happier than I am now."

"SING LIKE YOU SPEAK"

"Songs work best when they seem to resonate with conversational patterns. You go back to Ogden Nash and Noel Coward and find kindred spirits. My goodness what a beautiful voice Noel Coward has got - and utterly and totally English. I extended the same thing to lyric writing. I prefer to use phrases I would use anyway. One of the Englishnesses I was brought up on was Edward Lear, Hilaire Belloc and Lewis Carroll. Gobbledegook. That sort of game is also part of what I draw on - before conscious thought. Dada too, of course, follows straight on. The surrealists said do an intellect bypass and get straight to what's going on in the head without monitoring it."

"RULES ARE PRACTICAL, NOT MORAL"

"It's been a very great preoccupation of the extreme right to establish the existence of evil: they think the trouble with liberal thinking is that comparative moralities give people no guidance. So I say call it evil then, but then what? If someone's actually born evil, wouldn't that mean they'd be completely blameless? To make murder illegal is just a practical issue, like driving on a certain side of the road. That's not a moral question, it's practical."



> zoom

"BEING MARRIED TO A TOURING ROCK MUSICIAN IS LIKE BEING MARRIED TO A SAILOR"

"I was not a conscientious father. I put my music and drumming first. And it's not at all surprising that someone took over [fellow bury drummer Pip Pyle married Wyatt's first wife Pam, bringing up his son, Sam]. And as far as I know there's no ill feeling among any of us. "I've been punished, it's that Sam doesn't have anything in common with me in terms of cultural pursuits. But we love each to death.

"Shared tastes have nothing to do with empathy. As a youth I remember voluntarily ghettoising myself into various gangs, whether it was avant garde or jazz or the new rock and roll, and getting terribly het up if people didn't want to heart Stockhausen. But some

of the nicest people I know never listen to anything apart from Gilbert and Sullivan, and I know some people with terrific taste whose behaviour strikes me as really misanthropic. »

"I was wheeling through Soho Square, early on in my wheelchair. And I slipped out of the chair right forward into the road into the traffic. A lot of people ignored it, but one bloke ran across from the *other* side of the road, picked me up, helped Alfie get me back in the chair and disappeared into the night. I didn't say, "You look like a jazz musician, but if you only like country and western then I don't want your help.' Kindness can't be legislated."



"RECORDS ARE LIKE FADING TATTOOS"

"My biggest influence is records I don't like. Including my own. It's a bit like if you have tattoos saying I Love Ann. Then she dumps you a month later and you're going out with Mandy. You think, 'If I add an M and a Y...' and it all gets a bit scratchy. Records are like fading tattoos. They're eradicable more or less, and if you knew that when you were making them you'd have been much more circumspect.

"Writing lyrics is one thing, writing tunes another, singing songs another. I try to do each one as well as if it was the only thing I did. But I find it a challenge to get all three in one place for three or four minutes, and if my words won't fit the music I don't use them. I like not to be able to spot the join. I can sometimes tell with Joni Mitchell that there was a bunch of lyrics here and the music came after. It's even worse with Benjamin Britten - phenomenal musical ideas, but too much recitative! It's hard work - I don't listen to verbal narrative with the same brain muscles as I fall into music."

"THE PAST IS A REFERENCE POINT FOR WHAT NOT TO REPEAT"

"For a long time my biggest regret - apart from being born, I wouldn't have done *that* if I'd thought it through beforehand! - was going to school in East Kent and meeting the Soft Machine guys. For a long time afterwards it felt like a complete waste of time. It's like a train journey - you can't think of it without thinking of the horrible crash that ended it. But I'm glad I'm not nostalgic, because I find some people sort of trapped in nostalgia. I'm still trying to get things right. Just an *hour's* music that I wouldn't change. I don't think I'll ever manage it, but it's an exercise that's taken up most of my life. The past is a useful reference point for what not to do again."

COMICOPERA is out on October 8 on Domino

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Q&A: Robert Wyatt - The Birth Of The Cool - Stop Smiling - July, 12 2006

THE BIRTH OF THE COOL

The Stop Smiling Interview with Robert Wyatt
By Anthony Reynolds



The following piece originally appeared in The U.K. Issue. Presented here is the unabridged, 5,700-word Q&A.

I arrive around five. Being England in January it's dark and raining. The house is fronted by black railings to which bicycles are chained. There are two gates. I ring the bell and Robert Wyatt appears. We shake hands and he leads me into the warm, low-lit front room that has the feeling of a well-heeled bedsit. It's tidy but lived in, with a hotplate beside a baby grand piano. There is a basic recording setup in the corner: a microphone, small mixing desk, a keyboard and various percussion instruments. On the wall is a Basquiat and smaller framed portraits are around the room.

Robert offers tea, but I pull two bottles of Bordeaux from my bag. He tells me to take a seat in the dining room while he finishes his business in the music room. Alone, I scan the bookshelves: Picasso, Beuys, Hockney.

Wyatt's wife, Alfreda Benge, joins me. "Alfie" is also Wyatt's professional collaborator, providing occasional lyrics and record art. She has just written lyrics for four tracks of Parisian DJ Bertrand Burgalat's most recent album, Portrait Robot. It's her first writing gig for someone other than her husband. As Alfie disappears into the back of the house, I am joined by Robert, who decides to take up smoking again. (He had given up three days previously.)

Wyatt was a founding member of the Soft Machine, (named after the William S. Burroughs book, although he no longer recalls why). Along with Pink Floyd, the group transformed the late '60s psychedelic scene of the U.K. into a new and valid form of musical expression. They soon evolved into a jazz-rock fusion group, punctuated by Wyatt's passionate, disciplined drumming and unique vocals. A substantial cult following bloomed across Europe. After countless sessions, extensive touring (including a 1971 trip to the States with the Jimi Hendrix Experience), Wyatt was sacked. He immediately assembled the improv fusion combo Matching Mole. (The name was a pun on machine mole, which is

Soft Machine in French). They released two critically acclaimed LPs before splitting in 1972.

In 1973, after consuming considerable amounts of alcohol at a party in London, Wyatt fell from a third floor window, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. After recuperating in the hospital for a year, Wyatt married Alfie and embarked on a solo career. He emerged as a vocalist with a singing style that was both refined and haunting. (Ryuichi Sakamoto has called Wyatt's voice "the saddest sound in the world.")

In 1997, a new audience was introduced to Wyatt with the release of a long-awaited album, titled Shleep. Though self-produced, Wyatt benefited from the participation of friends like Brian Eno, Paul Weller, Evan Parker and Phil Manzanera. Another critically acclaimed album, Cuckooland, was released in late 2003, preceding a collaboration with Björk on Medulla in 2004. Wyatt is presently recording his next solo album.



Robert Wyatt in his home, photographed by Anthony Reynolds

Stop Smiling: Tell me about getting older.

Robert Wyatt: Getting older gives you a long time to think. If you're a slow thinker, you need that time. I was lucky with music. It's a humble aspiration to find a way to make a living. When I was a child my parents used to get me to sing along with Christmas carols and I thought, I can hear the difference between this note and that note. It was a thrilling moment. Like when you learn to ride a bicycle. To me, that's what all music is. I thank God for it, because it gave me a living. When people would say, "What motivates you? Did you want to be a rock star, a pop star, an artist?" I said, "I want to earn a fucking living."

I can't read music. I know the names of the notes. I know the wrong note from a right note, even on a fast bebop solo. I know music aurally, not orally. Listening to music is instinctive, enjoying it is instinctive. But as a writer I approach it as craftsmanship. I might have a drum part on tape for 10 years before I hear a bassline that will go with it. I don't like to force tunes into existence before they are ready to come alive. They come out right if you wait for the tune. You can't say, "I want a baby a month from now." It takes time. But even then, the only reason I'm creative publicly is because we need the money. If I didn't have to earn a living I would sit around listening to jazz records and never write a tune in my life. There are a lot of things the world is short of — for instance, enough fresh water for everyone to drink. But it's not short of songs. I'm embarrassed about that, in a way. I could spend the rest of my life listening to music that already exists.

As far as I'm concerned about music, the last thing that really mattered to me, that could save my life, ended when John Coltrane died in 1967. But when I started, I was so bloody lucky the beat scene came along. The standards were so low that even someone who had no idea what they were doing could actually earn a living.

SS: Some would say, with your voice, that you're gifted.

RW: I don't know. When I open my mouth, I do the best I can. That's all I can tell you. But compared to the people that inspire me, I know fuck all. And that's not a choice. That's why I wonder about the idea of free will.

I think it's particularly hard for people brought up in the Western individualist tradition to accept the fact that ecstasy comes from losing yourself within something else. The simplest way you can do this is through sex — when you lose yourself in someone else. That contradicts the intellectual tradition of finding yourself. Instead, you surrender yourself and become a voice in the choir, where the choir is going on and you can't even tell which voice is your voice and which voice is that of the person next to you. That to me is ecstasy. This isn't something that's available only to artists, although they may articulate it more expressly. But it's the same thing that makes advertisers realize why they should do these kitsch little dreamscapes of some kind of pinky, bluey dreamy landscape that adverts are full of. To me it's the only possible explanation as to why people yearn for the utter idiocy of religion, for example. It's so tiring to carry the physical weight of your body.

This will probably be the last interview I'll do as a 60 year old. I suppose I'm now entering the land of Old Man. It disappoints and frightens me that a lot of the things we thought we'd do never happened — I mean, you never expected to win the war. But we thought we'd win a few little battles along the way. Against racism, for instance. And we haven't really because it just gets transferred to Arabs or immigrants, Gypsies or something or other. I mean, I understand it. I don't expect a great deal from humans. The only thing I'm prepared to stand by are the actual lyrics and tunes of my songs. The only times I think, I'm going to hang this on the hook and leave it to dry, are when I actually write a song and put it on the washing line. I would defend any song I've written. If someone says, "Well, that's an anachronism," I think, "Good, because any song I've sung that is no longer necessary means there's a battle that has in some way been won." I've written songs about Nelson Mandela being in prison, which is where I assumed he'd spend his life. But I was wrong about that. I'm happy that song is an anachronism. Another song is "Born Again Cretin" [from the *Nothing Can Stop Us* album] which is about the blatantly idiotic Christian movement in North America. Which now, in fact, runs America. I was writing about the mindset that somehow means that if you're attracted to Christianity, the people who represent it are basically arseholes. You think, "Well, if Jesus was such a nice man, did he need this kind of help?" [*Laughs*]

SS: Did you have a university education?

RW: No. People are quite shocked when they find out about the number of people I haven't heard of — people who are terribly important to know about. There are a few people I've read who really helped me when I've felt I was getting intellectual claustrophobia. These people tend not to be artists at all. People like Noam Chomsky. I'm not very good at repertoire. It takes me ages to think through what anybody says, which is why I wouldn't stick by anything that is said in a conversation of this nature. I react quickly, and I'm just as stupid as everybody else. I've found this magical area where if I've written 20 or 30 songs. Those songs, from the last 30 years or so, will certainly stand up. I'll defend them. But I won't defend all the bullshit I've talked in the middle.

SS: As an American voice, I suppose Chomsky is unique.

RW: Oh yes. There was a wonderful period, from the American Civil War, or even before that, from the war with the British Empire. That's an interesting one — it's the one that

seems to be dead and buried. It's neither dead nor buried, to the extent that Americans retain an extraordinary envy not of Britain as a democracy, but as an empire. They are more intrigued by our imperialist past than by our democratic modern era. Whenever they make films about the European past they always romanticize royalty over the mob.

Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, for example. Even when they romanticize the [American] upper classes as evil, they are still considered much more interesting than the people they were oppressing. Even American intellectuals are quite unable, it seems to me, to transcend this crazy lust for imperial status, which you get from being Greek or Roman or British. People say, "Robert, everything you do is based on what happened on the American continent." I don't accept that there's such a thing as the American people.

Speaking about this is so hard. I do it much better in songs. I get embarrassed by the differences between English culture and American culture when I'm trying to communicate with American intellectuals. The problem I have with intellectuals is that they start from a level of expectation so unutterably precious that it reminds me of the old French aristocracy. So, while seeming pluralistic, American culture has so far presented toward us a fake conflict between the squirearchy and the mob. They play this delightful game among themselves and it's none of my business. They've got a democracy, they can vote for whom the hell they like and they can buy the books they like. But what I don't like is when they apply this to everybody else.

There's one great thing about me being as old as I am: I remember a wonderful thing that happened with the 20th century avant-garde. It blew the century off course, and I hope future centuries will be grateful. I sort of depend on the idea, intellectually, that they will be grateful, because something happened to European art when it transferred itself to America. It mixed with the rest of the world, particularly Africa. Constantin Brancusi was a sculptor from Eastern Europe. He was one of the late 19th century sculptors who set up the possibilities in his studios for the entire 20th century European art movement. He set up giant quasi-African sculptures and he turned the perception of the third world as a source of cheap materials, like oil and cotton, into a continent of peoples who had great imaginations. In the process of discovering and using these people, we have destroyed their imaginations. This gave me my political angle. And maybe it's a given now, but the first person to whom this change of awareness occurred, so far as I know, was Brancusi. He started looking at these little artifacts that grave robbers and gold diggers had brought back from Africa.

The history of European art in relation to the third world is basically scalp-hunting. "Look at this nice pretty curved shape we have here. Turn it upside down and you have a little bowl." What is it? Someone's head. The history of scalping is that in fact, the Europeans in America basically used it. American soldiers were rewarded and praised for their conquest against the indigenous inhabitants. That is the origin of scalping. And then the American Indian picked up on that.

The most important thing in my life is the inspiration of black music in America. I was saying that this black music, which is dismissed as a kind of black underground, it's the survival in the only way it knows how to survive, of the black culture which gave you the only valuable thing your civilization has come up with. So you can sit and snigger if you like but say thank you once in a while. I also have to like the tune. A piece of music can't just be a bit of polemic for me. I can't just make a speech and put music to it — that's bollocks. I hate that. That's why I don't really like a lot of stuff that's called folk music, just speeches set to music. Boring. I like music. Songs. Tunes.

Whenever critics put something down it's because they don't understand it. The only thing I would want to be noted for are the things I praised and loved and take no notice of things I hate — because they're just things I don't understand. And I'm burying myself here because I'm almost immediately discrediting everything I've just said. But I don't care. I don't have hubris. I stumble across occasional bits of beauty and truth. So if I describe myself as the quintessential anti-American, then I have to qualify that by saying, "Ah, but Chomsky, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk!" But then again, I don't know the half of it. Like a lot of revolutionaries, I'm conservative in a hopeless way. I think that all the things I fought for have already been killed. So, I live in a strange twilight world. A ghostland.

SS: You sound quite alive on your records.

RW: It's that Dylan Thomas thing: Go out whimpering or raging. I will go out fucking angry. All that beauty, all those different ways of living. Turning it into some kitsch shit, a cola-and-hamburger culture. How dare you? How fucking dare you!

SS: Yet you've covered many songs by American songwriters. Why?

RW: Many great Americans were anti-capitalist or involved with the left, like the lyricist of "Autumn Leaves," Joseph Kosma. Or Yip Harburg, who wrote "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" and "Over the Rainbow." Or Abel Meeropol, who wrote the lyrics to "Strange Fruit." Many of them had sympathy with the left. It's amazing how many of the young American Jewish and Italian radicals in the '30s were against capitalism. During the Depression, it looked like capitalism had failed. Communism was a legitimate alternative until it was wiped out in the '50s by Joseph McCarthy.

This is a good moment to ask, "Am I grateful that America exists at all?" I think if it weren't for jazz, I would say it would have been better if America had not existed at all. But because jazz existed, personally I'm grateful for it. Because I don't see how the rest of us would have quite broken through to that level of intense beauty without the existence of jazz. I think what the best people do is lose themselves in the greatness of everything else. It's a pluralistic thing and it's not a Western thing. The Western thing is the individual dominating the landscape. The greater thing is to lose yourself within the greater incomprehensible vastness, a collective majesty.

SS: You started as a drummer. Miles Davis said all white drummers play slightly behind the beat.

RW: I conquered my fear of what jazz fans would compare white drummers with by watching Keith Moon, who didn't give a shit. He wasn't sitting there thinking, "Am I reaching some standard set by somebody else?" Keith freed me from trying to think about standards set by someone else. Moon sustained a kind of momentum on the kit, plus a kind of human uncertainty about what was going to happen next. Which is what I wanted to do with my drumming. So, while I got my inspiration from black drummers, I got my confidence from Keith Moon. As for my own music, there's nothing I've really done since the mid-'70s that I haven't done because I needed to make a living. Saying that, I'm thrilled and amazed that there were other things yet to come out of my head after the mid-'70s. Creatively, I felt a terrific sense of relief about that because, since the mid-'70s, I've felt a weird resignation, a feeling of depression that relates to the political climate and the state of the world. And the triviality and silliness of being a musician or even an artist in that world. Politically, I'm one of the last survivors of a lost war.

SS: You recently worked with Björk on her *Medulla* album. How was that collaboration?

RW: Björk came here in the spring of 2004. It was a surprise visit for a night or two. She was working on a vocal album and she asked if she could come and stick my voice on a couple tunes. She sent me a few tunes she hadn't completed. I had a listen and thought that I'd like to do as much as I could on all of them, but in particular the first track, "Submarine." So I threw everything I could at it on a demo and played it to her over the phone. And she said, "Yeah, we'll have a go with that." So she came along with her engineer and I was so shy of her hearing me trying to stumble through doing a vocal that I sent her away. I made her go for a walk. When she came back I still hadn't finished, so I sent her out again. The poor woman had to spend several hours walking around. I sang every note I knew. We sampled them all so she could play them through a keyboard. I threw everything at the track on the assumption they would pick out two or three bleating notes to go with hers. The engineer kept everything I did on it, to my great embarrassment. I myself would have cut most of it out. She ended up sampling my voice on another track too, "Oceania," which ended up being the tune that opened the Olympics. My voice is just in there at the beginning. That was my little anonymous moment, opening the 2004 Olympics. But we spent an evening here as we have, drinking wine and playing records and talking. I thought she was charming, funny and intelligent. She came and went. It was an absolute fizzing buzz to have her around. I was honored that she wanted to come here. She's one of the greats. I'd put her up there with Nina Simone.

SS: Did you and Björk sing together while she was here? You know, a few bottles of wine and then around the piano for a singsong?

RW: That would never occur to me. A singsong? Blimey! You're kidding, son. I'm not a singer.

SS: Did you go to many gigs when you lived in London?

RW: Alfie and I used to frequent Ronnie Scott's a lot in the '60s. It was a place you'd go to after you'd done a rock gig and wanted to hear some decent music after all the rubbish you'd been playing. One night, someone was complaining because Spike Milligan [of "The Goon Show"] decided to stand on his head on a table. Some fat old Tory was moaning and Ronnie told him: "Shut up. You come for music, Spike comes to stand on his head."

That night, Bill Evans was playing the piano with his head. You know when you're having a meal with someone and they're eating a bowl of soup and their hair is actually in the soup? When they are totally out of it? Bill Evans sat at the piano like a man dead drunk. He played piano with his hands way above his head because his face was dipped in a bowl of piano. I don't know how he lived as long as he did.

Ronnie's place was like the London equivalent of the Village Vanguard. Ronnie was a great host. He was so out of it, he blew so many rules. I loved Ronnie. I cried for Ronnie's death. And I still do sometimes. I've got a photo of him propped up on my piano at the moment. He's one of my reasons to live. Even though it was rumored that his death — at 70 — was suicide, he didn't want to be a bad saxophonist. He realized that once he'd got his false teeth in, which they were about to fix for him, he wouldn't be quite a good saxophonist because his mouth wouldn't be as sensitive anymore. He didn't want to be a second rate saxophonist. So many of my heroes have done this. Roland Kirk, who was always a regular at Ronnie's, had a stroke. He could play with only one arm, which is quite hard on a saxophone. He was told, "Stop playing or you'll die." He said, "What will I do if I stop playing?" He just laughed it off. And he played and he died.

SS: I'd like to ask you about a few specific songs.

RW: Sure. Go ahead.

SS: Where did you get the nerve to sing "Strange Fruit"?

RW: Alfie asked me that same thing. But, you know, why not? I first heard it as a teenager in the '50s. The words were written by a young Jewish radical, a white guy, Lewis Alan. I did feel tentative about singing it, but at the time black music was the Three Degrees and glitzy showbiz stuff. I thought, Hang on, white kids think they've invented the protest song. Disco was part of the mainstream then. I wanted to point out that protest music wasn't just saying fuck on a record — there's a long history of this stuff, way back before World War II. There's some advanced protest poetry coming out of America long before the folk movement of the '60s kicked in. An example of this was "Strange Fruit." I was representing a piece of black and communist history to a generation that didn't associate black culture with protest music anymore. And although the lyrics were written by a white guy [Abel Meeropol] it was written specifically for Billie Holiday, who wrote the actual music. She didn't have to sing it. But she sang it a lot, especially during her old age — and a few people picked up on it, like Nina Simone. Musically, it's extraordinary. If you write music to words that aren't really written for music, you have to make strange music to fit the words, because the words are untidy rhythmically. "Strange Fruit" is an odd piece of music; there's this interlude before the piece begins and then there's this tune that doesn't really repeat itself. It's such a unique, odd shape. There's no real repetition, it's one thread that starts and carries onto the end.

SS: John Lennon's "Love" (From an Uncut magazine Lennon Tribute album, 2003)

RW: I was asked to sing a John Lennon song, and I thought the one that I could sing was that. I didn't know afterward that it was one of his own favorite songs. I just tried to sing it as faithfully as I could, according to what I felt it meant to be. I thought the Beatles were okay. I would never have bought their records. As white musicians go, I found some of them the least embarrassing. I did buy Lennon's Imagine album at the time.

SS: "Soup Song" (From Ruth is Stranger than Richard, 1975)

RW: I was singing about being some bacon in that song. What I'm complaining about is the way bacon was used as mere wobbly bits in other meals. It was also used in quiches, which I thought, What the fuck was that all about? If you're going to eat a slice of pig, then eat a slice of pig. Don't piss me about with your little wibbly, wobbly bits of bacon.

SS: "Memories of You" (B-side of Shipbuilding, 1982)

RW: This is a song by Eubie Blake, an American pianist born around the beginning of the 20th century. He died at 102. He invented a lot of the stuff before jazz, like the Charleston. He wrote this tune and I wanted to do it, but I didn't really understand the chords. So we got the sheet music and Alfie played them to me. I couldn't have got my head around it if Alfie wasn't able to read the sheet music.

SS: "At Last I Am Free" (From Nothing Can Stop Us, 1982)

RW: Around that time there was something happening, historically, that was quite wrong.

There was a pattern forming where young white singers were singing serious stuff — political stuff, punk. Black people were assigned the role of popular entertainers who just did disco music. This was not my experience when I was a youth. It was the other way around. The whole idea of music — of opposition, of music, of seriousness — that rock inherited, actually came from black music. So the idea that the historical consciousness of the history of popular music was so short that young white punks could claim seriousness as their own. Any white group who grew their hair long and wore jeans when they could actually afford corduroy is acting poor. Whereas black people at that time weren't doing that because young black people weren't hoping, like young whites, to drop out of the system. They were people from working class origins aspiring to belong. So the idea was to get away from the raggedy ass stuff of the blues and to present a more sophisticated veneer. So they would wear shiny suits, ties, nice haircut, smart stuff. Chic. It was an aspiration toward what 19th century white people aspired toward. A kind of chic European, end-of-empire poshness. This was completely against the grain of what white kids were going through, which was to ostentatiously behave in a vulgar fashion that didn't glorify their parents' postwar aspirations toward suburban respectability. So the great white thing was: Fuck our great suburban ancestors, we're going to grow our hair, not bathe, we're going to say swear words in public, we're going to try and look like the Rolling Stones and all that kind of stuff.

So this absurd Alice in Wonderland contradiction had arrived in pop music whereby black pop musicians as epitomized by say Michael Jackson were respected bourgeoisie. They were respectable people to be laughed at by the rebels, who were the white long-haired people. This is a complete reversal of the historical truth of their music. I didn't want to lose my grip on the fact that the only reason America is any more significant culturally than New Zealand and Tasmania is thanks to the black American contribution. I wanted to say even in the degrading position of having to be circus performers in Las Vegas, they come out with better tunes than you lot. Here's one. ["At Last I Am Free"] It was filler track on one of Chic's LPs. A throwaway. I thought, What a lovely phrase. I was a kind of hangover from a Martin Luther King-era consciousness transmuted into a smooth love ballad. It's something that only a black person of that time would have written that time and in that way. So you have that chorus: "At last I am free / I can hardly see in front of me." That struck me as one of the most moving couplets I'd ever heard. It's like a fantastic blues couplet, and it doesn't sound like much unless for years you've been in some kind of struggle where for ages you've longed to be free. Then suddenly you were and you think, "What the fuck do I do now?" It had been constructed from various mindsets that had been going on in the battle for the brains of young Americans at the time. I'm not saying that this is what they intended, but this is what it meant to me. Their version was so clean and neat — it wasn't presented in a rebellious way. It was presented in a kind of way that aspiring pop wannabes presented themselves in — and still do — which is, "We don't want to be drop-outs, we want to be allowed to drop in." It was a completely different mindset than punk. I wanted to take a thread out of that.

SS: "Raining In My Heart" (From Cuckooland, 2003)

RW: I did try and sing this, but it wasn't good enough. The reason I put it out as an instrumental was because — say you did a tribute to the Mona Lisa, and you couldn't paint it, you couldn't pull it off. Well then, maybe do a reproduction of the frame it was in and left it blank just to say, "I remember that painting." Plus, the piano I used was from an old ship from the '30s and it was designed to play background music. I tried to imagine the two people who wrote it. She was a lift operator and he was a jazz violinist. I was trying to imagine the early rock and roll atmosphere from when they wrote that song, when they would have met. They would have been horrified by rock and roll — all that sex and nastiness. But they were deeply conservative, weird and children of immigrants — respectable working class provincials. But they wrote nice little tunes that you'd play in a Victorian parlor. They were covered by people like Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers. So I wanted to go before that to this little couple from almost pre-rock and roll American history. The kind of people you might see in the background in a film with Katharine Hepburn. So I did it as an instrumental. But it's my little piece in the middle of my record — my little thought about my roots. I have a reputation for being knowledgeable about Bartok and Stravinsky and Charlie Parker and all that. I wanted to point out that it wasn't the roots of my music. My roots are simple, popular, pre-rock and roll rebel songs. But there's nothing perverse or ironic about it. I'm not like that.

SS: "Heaps Of Sheeps" (From Schleep, 1998)

RW: Alfie wrote the words to that one.

Alfie Benge: "I realized my fists were clenched / I stretched my fingers to relax / Still not

sleeping / I tried counting sheep." I'm not an insomniac. It was written one morning in Spain after I'd spent the night trying to get to sleep, and I tried counting sheep and the fuckers were just piling up in some terrible heap. I thought it was funny, so I wrote it down. It's one of many poems I wrote in Spain. When Robert started getting word-starved as it were, he pinched my poetry book and started doing things to them. I thought it was so banal and trivial that it was beneath him to actually do that song. I always felt it was a bit vulgar.

RW: It's my job as a songwriter to find things that will work.

AB: He's the insomniac, and he hasn't written about that.

RW: That piece took years. The actual piece of music was a piano exercise, which I had on bits and pieces of tapes for years and then I combined it with a drum exercise I'd had — a Bo Diddley thing. I took it from there. The only battle was with Alfie, who is quite posh about which of her words get used for lyrics. That's one of the two or three times when I've taken words she's written from her notebooks.

AB: My notebooks only exist when I'm somewhere else. I don't get a lot from home. When we're in Spain and Italy, I take bits from my diaries, have a few brandies and make little poems. I had about 20 or 30 from Spain. The fait accompli was that some of them got turned into songs. But he didn't ask me. That was the beginning of it. I thought you'd hear it once, laugh, and then not want to hear it again.

RW: Yes, but when Brian Eno came into the studio and read your lyrics, he laughed and laughed and laughed. I thought, It's nice to see Brian laughing. It was a happy moment for me. He came in and got really stuck in. So, that's a trio performance at the end.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

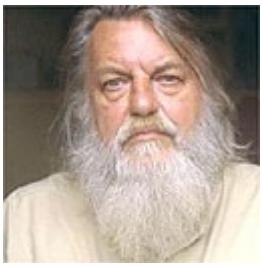
Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Wyatting (vb): when jukeboxes go mad - The Guardian - July 10, 2006

WYATTING (VB): WHEN JUKEBOXES GO MAD

Ned Beauman
Monday July 10, 2006
The Guardian



Robert Wyatt: the perfect way to clear a pub

Just as the best way to judge an adult is by his or her record collection, the best way to judge a pub is by the albums on its jukebox. Or it was, until the 21st-century caught up with the noisy machine in the corner. There are now nearly 2,000 internet-connected jukeboxes in the UK, each of which can access as many as 2m tracks - and with them has come Wyatting, which is either a fearless act of situationist cultural warfare or a nauseatingly snobbish prank, depending on who you ask.

The phenomenon was first identified in the New York Times by Wendy McClure. She was in a grimy rock bar when someone pulled up Brian Eno's Thursday Afternoon, which consists of a single distant piano phrase repeated for more than an hour, and found herself too mesmerised to leave. "Imagine replacing the brass cylinder in a music box with a Möbius strip made from nerve endings," she wrote. The rest of the bar's patrons , however, were soon in revolt.

This wasn't to be an isolated incident. After music critic Simon Reynolds linked to McClure's article on his weblog, several of his readers wrote in to confess that this is a game they regularly play. Carl Neville, a 36-year-old English teacher from London, coined the term "Wyatting" because sticking on Dondestan, the 1991 avant-garde jazz-rock LP by ex-Soft Machine singer Robert Wyatt, is the perfect way to disrupt a busy Friday night in a high street pub. Other favourites are free-jazz clarinetist Evan Parker and surrealist Japanese noise producer Merzbow. In theoretical terms, Wyatting has been explained as enacting the theories of Adorno, who believed that subverting pop music would help to bring down capitalism. Alternatively, if you listen to Neville, it's simply "childish, futile, but finally hilarious".

Inevitably a backlash has arrived with other bloggers claiming Wyatting is just a way for those who feel superior, both in terms of class and musical taste, to bait those beneath them. But Inspired Broadcast Networks, which run most of the internet jukeboxes in the UK, insists it has not unleashed a monster.

"Most people won't spend money on making the pub an irritating environment," says Anne de Kerckhove, Inspired's chief operating officer. If landlords do have problems with inappropriate selections, she says, it is usually hip-hop with lots of swearing and in that case, "they can kill a track while it's playing and reimburse the customer". Has she thought of limiting the available tracks to those appropriate for drinking and socialising? "The minute we say, 'You can't play that,' then people want to play that. We're all a bit contrarian in nature."

Perhaps Wyatting will be added to flicking peanuts and talking loudly about your sex life as

Adorno behaviour. But what about the man after whom this controversial sport was named? "I think it's really funny," says the 61-year-old Robert Wyatt, whose most recent album, Cuckooland, was nominated for the 2004 Mercury music prize. "I'm very honoured at the idea of becoming a verb." Would he ever try it himself? "Oh no. I don't really like disconcerting people. Although often when I try to be normal I disconcert anyway".

>> The original interview

Previous article

Next article

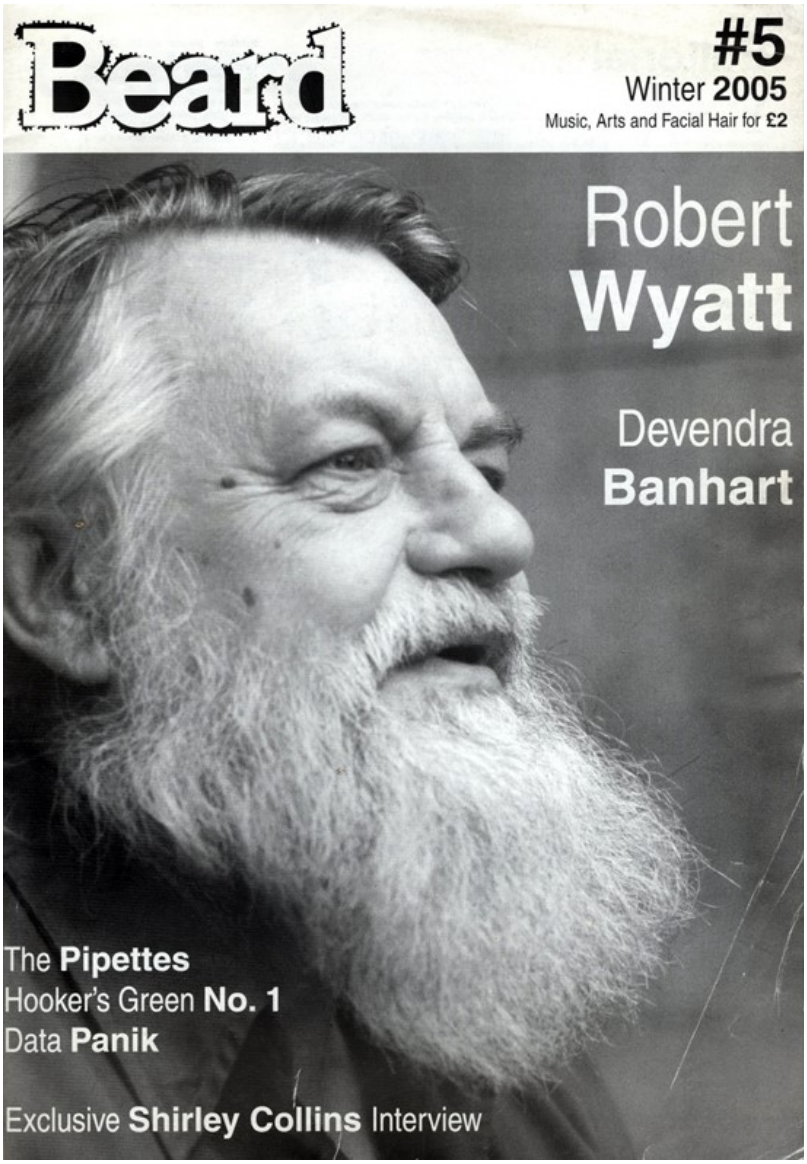
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

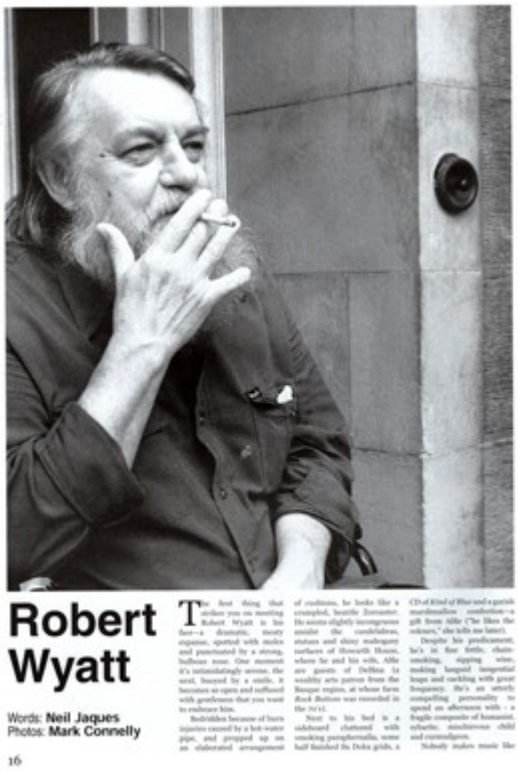
HOME

Robert Wyatt - Beard - #5 - Winter 2005



> Zoom

Robert



Robert Wyatt

Words: Neil Jaques
Photos: Mark Connelly

16

> Zoom

Wyatt

Words : **Neil Jaques**
Photos : **Mark Connelly**

The first thing that strikes you on meeting Robert Wyatt is his face - a dramatic, meaty expanse, spotted with moles and punctuated by a strong, bulbous nose. One moment it's intimidatingly serene, the next, buoyed by a smile, it becomes so open and suffused with gentleness that you want to embrace him.

Bedridden because of burn injuries caused by a hot-water pipe, and propped up on an elaborated arrangement of cushions, he looks like a crumpled, beatific Zoroaster. He seems slightly incongruous amidst the candelabras, statues and shiny mahogany surfaces of Howarth House, where he and his wife, Alfie are guests of Delfina (a wealthy arts patron from the Basque region, at whose farm Rock Bottom was recorded in the 70's).

Next to his bed is a sideboard cluttered with smoking paraphernalia, some half finished Su Doku grids, a CD of *Kind of Blue* and a garish marshmallow confection - a gift from Alfie ("he likes the colours," she tells me later).

Despite his predicament, he's in fine fettle, chain-smoking, sipping wine, making languid tangential leaps and cackling with great frequency. He's an utterly compelling personality to spend an afternoon with - a fragile composite of humanist, sybarite, mischievous child and curmudgeon.

Nobody makes music like Robert Wyatt. Since he became a paraplegic in 1973 the former drummer with the effeminate singing voice has hewn a musical vision that defies the parameters of musical logic. With a dizzying amalgam of jazz, soulful ascetic prog, the avant-garde, melody and unpretentious poetry, he always threatens to make no sense. But somehow, and with a disarming directness, always does. He's never released a bad album (some of his best have come in what most would consider the twilight years of an artist's life), and he has never sounded anything less than startlingly relevant. You would have a hard time convincing him of this though.

"I'm not particularly tuned into my times," he says, eventually, following a lengthy attempt at positioning himself in the contemporary musical landscape.

"Except you always know what the latest sylph-like black ladies are up to," interjects Alfie.

"One of the joys of music is that it is beyond pinned-down sex. I feel that in music I have the right to be any fucking sex I like!"

"Yeah, I do like black ladies," he retorts, flashing her a seraphic smile. "Sylph-like. Preferably in very short skirts - I think they're terribly good!"

"In fact, the only LP I really sang along with all the way through was a Dionne Warwick record. And Dionne Warwick had a very long skirt so I'm y'know, very broad-minded about skirt lengths!"

I'm half-way through asking him if that could account for the femininity of his own vocals, when he stops me short:

"One of the joys of music is that it is beyond pinned-down sex. I feel that in music I have the right to be any fucking sex I like!"

As an adolescent, Robert Wyatt Ellidge's mindset was, in his own words, "unreconstructed 1940's Harlem". A jazz obsessive, he was able to hum labyrinthine solos verbatim, and spent hours beating out Jimmy Cobb rhythms on a drum kit constructed from a typewriter, clothes rail and an old ammunition box. He even gave illustrated jazz lectures for anyone who would listen during school lunch breaks.

He's wary of calling his upbringing bohemian, but his home - a 14 room Georgian home (known as Wellington House), populated by a cavalcade of lodgers - was at least somewhat anomalous against the staid backdrop of 1950'$ Canterbury.

One of the Wellington House lodgers was an Australian beatnik called Daevid Allen (briefly a member of Soft Machine, and later, Gong). Allen had hung out with William Burroughs, smoked a lot of pot and owned a sizable collection of jazz records. He influenced Robert immensely, turning him on to the Beats, and, crucially, introduced him to George Niedorf, an American jazz drummer, who offered drumming lessons in lieu of rent.

Predictably, school paled by comparison.

"I just hated it, provincial English grammar school life. I really hated it. It was absolutely dismal," he says angrily.

"I should have been sent to a secondary modern and learned carpentry and would have been happy as you like. My big mistake was to pass my 11 plus. I should have just failed it and I think I would have been a happy adolescent."

"I just thought I don't want to be in this world. I just don't want to do any of the things they're teaching me."

It was an existential crisis that led to a suicide attempt at the age of 16, using Allen's stash of sleeping pills. He left school with no qualifications. Instead, he followed George Niedorf drifting around Europe, at one point staying with his mother's friend Robert Graves in Majorca. On his return to England he became involved in some brief, though inspired, tomfoolery with Canterbury band The Wilde Flowers (alongside Hugh Hopper and Kevin Avers) and by 1966, he was Soft Machine's singing drummer.

Soft Machine's lunatic blend of jazz, homegrown British whimsy and Wyatt's propensity for a good tune had them pegged as the ultimate cult band, earned them a place on tours with Hendrix ("Courteous, considerate and witty") and opening stints for Miles Davis ("I think rock n' roll made him really cross. He felt, y'know, 'who are these kids?'"). Nevertheless, it's not a time he recalls fondly.

"I found that, to me, the 6o's thing was a bit ostentatious. I mean, I got drunk and did it but I could see why people didn't like it," he says flatly.

"People are surprised about that, they always think I'm a sort of classic 60's person. I'm not: I was a so's person and then I became a 7o's person. The 60's were just the thing in the middle between childhood and adulthood. To me it's just excruciating adolescence, that's how I'd sum it up. Deeply embarrassing. "

Objectively he's got nothing to be embarrassed about—he'd become one of the most imaginative drummers around (a single listen to Why Are We Sleeping dispels any doubts), an accomplished songwriter and an integral part of two indisputably essential recordings (Soft Machine *Vols. I & II*).

Towards the end of the decade, however, Wyatt's idiosyncratic vocals and pop

sensibilities were being marginalised in favour of a purer jazz sound, and his heavy drinking habit had begun to annoy the stoic Ratledge and Hopper. He recorded his first album, the much overlooked *End of an Ear* (1971), as an outlet for his suppressed creative urges, emblazoning the sleeve with the legend "Out of Work Pop Singer Currently on Drums with Soft Machine." After four albums he walked out. Any conversation about those final days is met with uncharacteristic reticence.

"I don't like bands; I think they're too bloke-ish for me. I can't give orders, I can't take orders, so it doesn't leave you much option in a group—you've got to be able to do one or the other and I could never do either," he says, by way of summation.

It was somewhat surprising then that his next move was to form another group, Matching Mole (a cheeky French pun on Soft Machine), who produced two, equally overlooked, albums in their short lifespan. They were about to reform in 1973 when, drunk out of his mind at a party, Wyatt fell from a third storey window, paralyzing himself from the waist down. "This was how the accident went: in order, wine, whiskey, Southern Comfort then the window," he remarked in Michael King's biography, *Wrong Movements*. His doctor informed him that if he hadn't been so drunk and had fallen more rigidly, he would have been dead.

I feel apprehensive discussing the circumstances surrounding the accident, but Robert is comfortable and candid.

"I'm missing the moderate gene. I don't understand moderation," he says simply. "My dad, wicked chap, lovely man, used to come out with sayings like 'if a thing's worth doing, it's worth overdoing!' Lovely saying. And I've always thought that. I've never understood this thing about drinking in moderation. I thought, what's the fucking point of *that*?"

Was alcohol always your vice?

"I stick to the legal drugs. I found a wonderful thing—which is don't worry about breaking the law. You can get completely smashed out of your brain on legal drugs. Just don't worry about it. Believe me, the right combination of serious amounts of wine and brandy and vodka and then a bit of Tia Maria and lots of fags...believe me, you're sailing. You're out there."

He gives a raucous laugh and adds solemnly: "You have to know where to draw the line. There's this thing called a line, which we have to draw apparently. You just have to know where it is - and I'm crap at that."

Following a lengthy, painful recuperation he recorded arguably his finest work, *Rock Bottom* (1974). Through a precarious morass of hypnotic drones, Wyatt's uninhibited singing, which at times is reduced to high-pitched yelps and percussive, rhythmic breathing patterns, becomes the sound of expiation, of coping with the aftershocks of paraplegia, and a tear-inducing expression of his love for Alfie (whom he married that year).



> Zoom

There's a dense, dreamlike quality to the sound, lyrics and imagery—a common theme in much of his later work.

"Partly it's a negative thing because my dreams are much more physically active and varied than my waking life can possibly be," he explains.

"I think they're extraordinary little journeys— the stories that happen and all the things you can do....

He pauses, dragging heavily on his cigarette.

"...and find yourself doing and if it's a nightmare, that's alright 'cause you wake up and think, well that's not true! Fantastic! And if it's a nice dream, it's a nice dream. Gravity has gone. Being awake is like you're being anchored and when you're asleep it's like 'anchor's away!' Off you go, just let the wind blow you wherever," he says, making wave-like movements with his hand.

Outside of music, Robert Wyatt is probably best known for his politics. After a fallow period in the late 70's and early 80's, he began explicitly fusing his political beliefs—an ideological strain of communism—with music, releasing the musical call to arms *Nothing Can Stop Us* (a compilation of overtly politicised covers). He also had his biggest hit with the intensely moving anti-Falklands song Shipbuilding, which was penned especially for him by Elvis Costello and Clive Langer.

These days you're not likely to see Wyatt - still a communist cardholder - handing out copies of *The Morning Star* in the rain. He's aware of the flaws of socialism but still clings to it as distant, symbolic hope. Talking to him about politics, he doesn't seem as trenchant as before. For instance, he doesn't follow current affairs that closely.

"I don't get my sense of the world from journalism," he says. "I always come up with these crap analogies, but I wouldn't get my knowledge of the oceans from surfers and speedboat drivers.

"I'd get my knowledge of the ocean from deep-sea oceanographers, not from people just endlessly zooming around the waves at the top, which is what I think news journalism is. I am actually interested in the undercurrents, the stream of history. My reference points tend to be more cultural and how people treat each other."

The calmness in his voice comes to an abrupt halt when I mention Blair et al.

"I find that our government is a completely alien collection of horrible monsters," he spits building up a vituperative momentum:

"I scarcely recognise them as being members of the same species - let alone the same country! I just think that we haven't got the hang of this leadership business at all. We keep clinging on to a kind of 'Boy's Own' mentally retarded leadership, like boy scouts charging off into the wilderness to sort out Johnny Foreigner, I think 'Oh, for fuck's sake! I thought we finished all of that in the 19* century.

"My dad, wicked chap, lovely man, used to come out with sayings like 'if a thing's worth doing, it's worth overdoing!' Lovely saying."

"I'm just too vain, intellectually vain, to even take much interest really. I think fuck it, there's nothing I can do about it."

What about the responsibility of art?

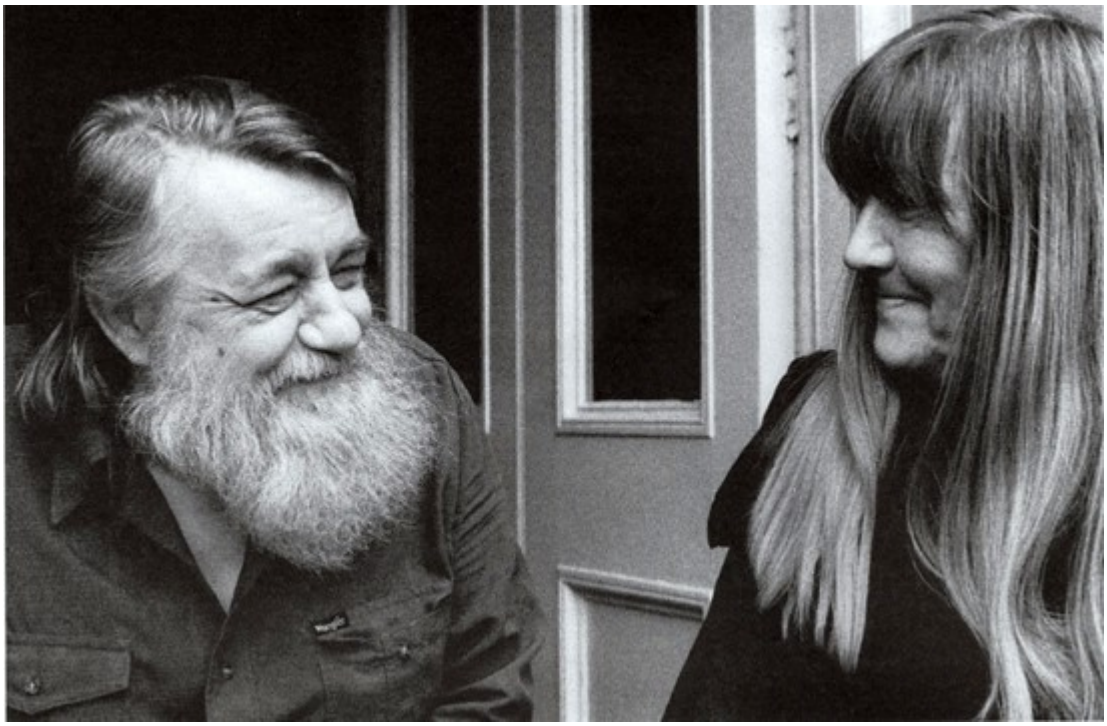
"I don't think art should have any more responsibility than anything else," he replies, sounding irritated.

"I think it's quite vain of artists to think that they are the engine of anything. There is a relationship between art and politics, but it's a response to politics. I'm not in the business of making people feel bad about being apolitical and I think it's none of my business to tell people what to do at all!"

He stops himself and sighs wearily:

"I say things and read them in interviews and it looks so sort of bleak and I think 'I was only fucking joking!'. I think if you make certain commitments like joining the communist party the automatic assumption is that I must be incapable of levity and there must be some kind of utter solemn groove but it just happens to be...I mean, I looked at all the various analyses of the world and it seemed to me about right, y'know. I read the Marxist analysis and thought yeah, that's the world I recognise. Well, that must be what I am."

What he is when he's back home in semi-rural Louth, Lincolnshire, is a fairly unassuming man. He fills his time with music, ephemeral entertainments such as TV - he's a huge comedy fan, effusively praising everyone from Chris Morris, Victoria Wood, *Spaced* and "that amazing guy off *Green Wing*" (Mark Heap) - the occasional drink, and quiet domesticity. He'll trundle around anonymously, pop into Woollies for Janet Jackson albums ("Some people feel guilty about liking Janet Jackson, not me mate. I think she's terrific"), and socialise with neighbours. Generally, within Alfie's limits, he does what he likes, when he likes.



> Zoom

Alfie's influence is inestimable. She designs his album covers, writes some of his lyrics (they've written 20 songs together) and looks after him, loves him and protects him. Without her a combination of procrastination, perfectionism and fear would prevent him from achieving anything. He'd rather listen to jazz all day.

When he first met her she came across like a "Mongolian princess", who didn't throw herself at him like the usual groupies, instead remaining coolly aloof.

"She had a very stately way of going about things. I was dead impressed. She had all these books on politics and stuff and, y'know, she was much better educated than me, reading all sorts of philosophers I hadn't heard of. We'd go a see long foreign films with subtitles. It was a great adventure for me. It's just the best company I've ever had really."

When I ask him to identify the point at which he is happiest, he begins mumbling something vague about finishing a record before he pinpoints the exact moment:

"Drunken evenings with Alfie," he says assertively.

"She doesn't really do it as a habit as I would, but occasionally she does and she remembers all these old songs and gets out her singles starts dancing around to Motown classics or whatever and old jazz records and the brandy keeps flowing and then it gets heavier and heavier and she starts getting out the flamenco and then she gets back to her people and it'll be Polish things [Alfie is of Polish descent] and Neapolitan songs and the candles are burning and I love that. That's the most fun I can think of."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt & Friends + Q&A Robert Wyatt - Record Collector - issue 318 - Christmas 2005

ROBERT WYATT & FRIENDS + Q&A ROBERT WYATT

In Concert - Theatre Royal, Drury Lane 1974

★★★★

Hannibal HNCD 1507/ADV (76:07)

Wyatt's first and last solo gig gets a proper release at last

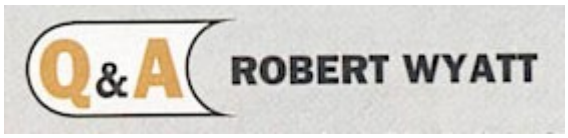


"And now, for Robert Wyatt of Twickenham... Opportunity Knocks!" So Robert's old mate John Peel rounds off his amiable, rambling intro, welcoming onstage yet more of the headliner's extended family of Canterbury Scene musos and art-rocking mukkas.

Just a year after Wyatt's fall from a fifth-floor window left him permanently wheelchair-bound, he bravely took to the stage for this debut solo gig, understandably surrounding himself with characters who would offer great support in every sense. The now-former drummer roped in his 'dream rhythm section' of Laurie 'Gong' Allen, Hugh 'Soft Machine' Hopper and Dave 'Hatfield' Stewart, plus an all-stars cast including Nick Mason, Mike Oldfield, Fred Frith, Julie Tippetts and Ivor Cutler.

Kicking off with a couple of Soft Machine oldies, Wyatt feels his way through all of his classic *Rock Bottom* LP, heading off into uncharted territory as he warbles, yodels and breaks in his brandnew heartbreaking voice of a child over his own piano and tumbling waves of psychprog jazz. The triumphally shambling party climaxes with I'm A Believer breaking down into Knees Up Mother brown.

Full minutes of encore calls are captured on the CD. But there would be no more.



What are your memories of that night 31 years ago?

All I remember was a euphoric feeling of a whole band who were just going to play my

tunes and help me get my songs right, instead of being a bit-part player in other people's musical projects.

This must be one of the most bootlegged gigs ever.
Some of the stuff that went out simply shouldn't have. It's a bit like Dylan complaining about people rummaging around in his dustbin! I didn't want mislead people into thinking that this was a new or perfectly formed recording - I always think it's unfair when it only says in small print 'oh, by the way, this was recorded in a club'.

Back in '74, people must have thought you'd be playing live with this band for years to come.
Yeah, I wish.

Did you know this was the beginning of the end, live-wise?
I can't remember. I don't think ahead like that. I don't think I even knew how to spell 'career'. I left school at 16 and did washing up jobs, I was just amazed you could get a job playing drums in a beat group. I was grateful to string it out for 10 years. After I did *Rock Bottom*, I thought 'that's all I've got, the tank is now empty - I've now got to sign on and I hope there's a good disability allowance'. But other things cropped up, and other little tunelets appeared in [my] head. I just kept trundling on and, fuck me, 30 years later, I'm still trundling on - extraordinary!

Do I sense a note of regret?
Yes, you do. I'm sure I could have done more gigs than that, and I do wish I had. What I love is that, although it's no a jazz session, they have that jazz sensibility, and they're reacting quite spontaneously to me and to each other, and you can tell every night it would have been different. I would have enjoyed to hear how they dealt with it, different nights at different places. I'm pretty hard on myself and curse the mistakes I've made in my life, but I'm really happy to hear this gig - that it happened at all. And I do think 'blimey, that could've been a whole new thing in the 70's...


ROBERT WYATT & FRIENDS
In Concert – Theatre Royal, Drury Lane 1974

Q&A ROBERT WYATT

> Zoom

Would it have been difficult in reality?
One of the things I do blank out is the difficulties I might have had getting around the world in a wheelchair. To be honest, although I don't think it's tragic, it's bloody inconvenient - going to a place and then finding that you can't get on and off stage without four people to help you, and that you can't fit into the toilet. I realised fairly early on that a regular touring life was out of the question. I'd done that in the 60s and the result was the disintegration of my first marriage - I was just on the road all the time, and that was a plant that collapsed through lack of watering, really. I was already in my late 20s by the time of that concert, and the most exciting thing happening at that time was the fact that Alfie had just married me. My private life started to become the main event in my life...

Derek Hammond

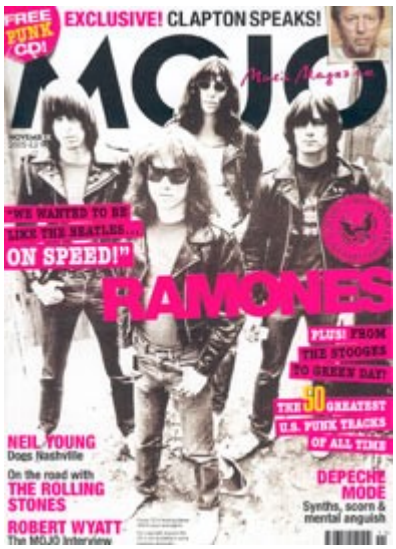
Previous article

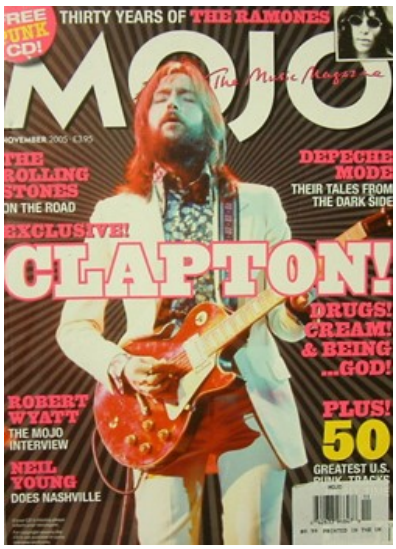
Next article

Back to the list

The MOJO Interview - Mojo N° 144 - November 2005

THE MOJO INTERVIEW





alternative cover

Soft Machine made him **miserable**. Falling from a **window** in 1973 was **"a good career move"**. Enter the topsy-turvy world of rock's **reluctant Mr Nice Guy**, **Robert Wyatt**.

Interview by **MARK PAYTRESS**
Portrait by **ROSS HALFIN**

ROBERT WYATT IS MAKING HIS WAY TO THE nearest mirror. "My wife goes mad if it looks crap," he says, teasing unruly strands of silvery hair away from his face. It doesn't seem to make much difference. As he poses affably in his small front garden, oblivious to the bustle of the Lincolnshire market town passing by his gate, this softly-spoken god of small things still sports the unkempt 19th century Russian thinker look he's maintained for over a decade. He's all facial hair and kind, youthful eyes, and no 10-second makeover can alter that.

Inside, across a wooden dining table, Wyatt discusses everything that's thrown at him with generosity and insight. Moving effortlessly from Richard Dawkins to Don Covay, from father of anarchism Peter Kropotkin to flamenco siren La Niña de la Puebla over wine, fags and omelette, Wyatt is fascinated equally by musicians and ideas. Especially those, such as Hendrix and Miles Davis as well as innumerable unnamed fighters
for economic and social justice, who push themselves a bit beyond what we know.

Wyatt, too, inhabits the realm of the

unthinkable. Less than two years after the singing sticksman had been unceremoniously dumped by The Soft Machine, on June 1,1973 he fell from a fourth-floor window ("I'd always been a bit reckless," he explains) during a party, which turned his life round for a second time. Left paralysed and wheelchair-bound, he insists he simply got on with the job. But when he leaves the room, his wife Alfie helpfully suggests that "the trick has been denial". Ostensibly, MOJO is here to discuss the release of *Theatre Royal Drury Lane*. This September 1974 set chronicles his one and only solo live show, including his masterpiece, *Rock Bottom*, in its entirety. Since then, he's become a cherished institution, thanks to a string of inimitable and idiosyncratic, keyboard-led solo records. Unafraid to speak up for the common people, Wyatt won the respect of punk audiences, who loudly applauded his integrity. But most cherished of all is his voice, the most plaintive, deeply affecting in popular music. Refreshingly unassuming, Robert Wyatt is rock's most reluctant legend.


We're not WORTHY

"He's unique," says Roxy Music's Phil Manzanera

"Robert makes entertainment matter. He's got a unique British voice. The minute you hear him you know it's him, his voice touches you. He's like Dylan in that respect. His personality is in the music he makes. It's a testament to his life. He'll hate me for saying it, but it's very real."

This latest archive release [*Theatre Royal, Drury Lane*] was your coming out a year on from the accident in 1973. Was it difficult to listen to?

No. It's the sound of freedom compared with my previous responsibilities as a drummer. What I hear are the technical things, the purely musical things. The content I have to take for granted.I don't listen like a listener.I would have loved to have taken that band on the road, though with Fred Frith, Mike Oldfield and Nick Mason involved, that was clearly never gonna happen. And John Peel's intro is one of the best solos on the record. He sets up an atmosphere that a good MC would have done opening a 19th century music hall show - very light and easy.

Privately, it must have been a different matter. How low did you go?

The truth is I wasn't low after the accident. I may have had the bends coming up too fast, so I may have been a bit deranged, but I can't call it sadness. I'd just got together with Alfie. For the first time I had people helping me do my own tunes. Being rejected by the burgeoning jazz-rock community [dismissal from The Soft Machine] was far more humiliating. That was when I was miserable, before I broke my back, before I met Alfie, before I started a new year zero in '74. It's actually quite a celebratory moment for me.

So, contrary to popular opinion, Rock Bottom wasn't a direct response to your new state?

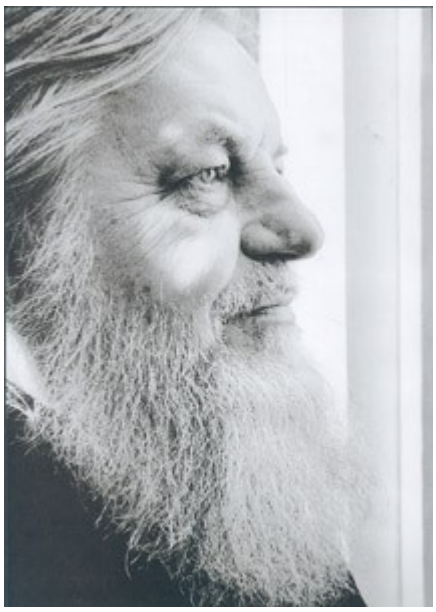
My overall view of life, not my circumstances, is that I am rather sad. I think life is wonderful, but my tendency is towards great sadness about things. I don't know why. While that may come out, it's not something I consciously put in. I operate like an animal - I just go for what feels right. People say humans have a fantastic ability for selective memory, that they erase pain because a certain amount can't be lived with. So it may be possible I was more distressed than I remember. But when you've fallen down a hole, and are scrambling out, you're not really sad.

One night, you're a well-known party animal. The next you're sobering up in a hospital bed and have just been told you've lost the use of your legs. What was your first thought?

I thought it was interesting, odd. It was a bit like being lifted up by helicopter off a street and dumped on a beach in Java. You think, Where am I? Is anybody here? I don't know the language. The world looks the same, but you're so different in a wheelchair that you have to re-learn how to live, the oddness of being in the same place but not being able to participate in the same way. I must emphasise that I was very unhappy in the late '60s, deeply uncomfortable. It's not as if I'd lost something that was very precious to me.

Did you tell yourself: I'm gonna beat this?

No, I'm too short term for that. I thought, Blimey, I think I might have enough material here for another record - that'll be good. But I only had about three or four chords I liked.



> Zoom

I wanted to expand the repertoire... to about six.

Where did you look for inspiration ?

Alfie taught me how to look at films in a more educated way, and though we had a lot of music in common - Sly Stone, Mingus - she listened to flamenco, Bulgarian folk music and so on, which had an enormous effect on me. To discover that the spirit of soul music is all over the world was a revelation.

From a young age, you'd cherished outsiders through your admiration of jazz musicians and bohemian culture. Did this help?

I hadn't thought of it like that, but the answer is yes. If you're feeling lonely with the world because it seems to be made for somebody else but not for you, then to find other people that it's not made for either, who are uncomfortable in their own ways, you get a certain fraternal sense of relief from that.

What did music, especially your early passion for jazz, first mean to you. Escape? Intoxication? Removal from the humdrum?

You've nailed it!

There's a childlike sense of wonder to your work, and hints of Christmas carols and nursery rhymes in your melodies.

The first songs I sang were with my dad round the piano at Christmas - Away In A Manger and Silent Night. It's folk music, but like a lot of folklore, it survives as children's music and stories. It's not a deliberate, 'Life is complicated, I'm going back to my childhood' thing. It's simply that when you're a child you experience things for the first time, and a lot of things are astonishing. And it's that astonishment that's the basis of the art I like. That's what I try and release when I turn my [creative] tap on. But you can be made to feel a bit of a fool. I had an LP once, and the back cover was just a blank blue piece of shiny cardboard. And I said to the person I was with at the time, "Isn't this beautiful?" She said, "Not really, it's just a bit of blue cardboard." That made me feel a bit sheepish about it. I don't know if that's right or wrong. Maybe I'm retarded.

Your parents both knew the writer Robert Graves, were well travelled and seemed to provide you with an aestheticised world view.



> Zoom

Yes. The only thing that doesn't ring true is that it's always described as if there was something luxurious about my upbringing. But my parents were fairly poor and we lived a fairly scruffy life, as most people did after the war. It wasn't as grand or precious as the word 'aesthetic'

makes it sound. As far as my dad was concerned, the world revolved around wine, women and song. If that's aesthetics, then I'm an aesthete!



> Zoom

I sense you had a smell under your nose when beat music arrived in 1963.

Beat music was a bit too boy-next-door to get romantic about. But it was encouraging to think that there was something I could do. I'd been interested in Eric Dolphy and Dada and Picasso, and I didn't want to work in an idiom that closed that off.

In fact, you have a quite jaundiced view of the entire '60s decade.

There's this surrealist map of the world where they made some places very big, like Africa. My surrealist calendar of the 20th century would go straight from 1959 to 1971. People say that life was so boring in the '50s, and thank goodness for the '60s. My life wasn't boring in the '5Os. As a young teenager, the whole business of beats and beatniks, and the music, these incomprehensible French films, the berets and the wines and the strange back alleys of Soho and Paris that went with it, was so exotic and romantic. I didn't need the breakthrough the '60s provided for others.

You were a significant part of The Soft Machine, an adventurous pop group doing something unprecedented. Thrilling, surely?

We were just trying to harness the various things that came into our heads and make something of it. That's all remember. Only recently when some labels started digging up old concerts from the late '60s and early '70s, I'd listen to them and think, Blimey, we weren't half going at it. It's a relief that it's not always as embarrassing as I thought it might be, though some of it is. There's an awful one that should be burned, destroyed, but you know how perverse people are, they'll go and buy it! It's like having a tattoo on your arm that you can't get rid of.

You were with The Soft Machine musicians in various guises for the best part of a decade. You must have believed in what you were doing.

It was important for me to be with musicians that might not normally play together, rather like putting garlic on cornflakes. The people I played with wouldn't try to play like somebody else. I liked the idea that what they played came out of themselves, and was not prompted by wanting to make, say, a jazz-rock record. I remember thinking it was better to be original and get it wrong than be derivative and get it right. It was an adventure to the point of recklessness.

You're very open in interviews yet always profess near total amnesia when discussing Soft Machine. Can the collapse of relationships in a pop group really have been of more significance to you than the accident?

I once asked Nick Mason why the Pink Floyd keep going. He said, 'We haven't finished with each other yet." But we had, obviously. Well, they'd finished with me. It's silly to talk about a group. It's not a living thing, just a word to put on a concert bill or a record cover. I'd rather work the way they do in cinema, where you get a bunch of people together for a particular project. But I'm grateful for the discipline and the training that being in a young group gave me.

"**Harmless** is as good as I dare aspire

to. Beyond that I'm totally **self-indulgent** and **hedonistic."**

Your gorgeous, side-long solo epic, Moon In June, on [Soft Machine's] *Third* must have suggested a possible way out.

The only way to play that was for me to do it virtually myself. The dominant thing in my head was to take responsibility. I was doing more and more things that were quite incompatible with the band I was with, that weren't really rock band things at all. Moon In June was the second of two things I'd done myself. The first was taking these fragments of tunes that Hugh Hopper had written which I stitched together on the second Soft Machine record. The next was my stitching my own bits and pieces into a sustained sequence which became Moon In June.

By calling your next band Matching Mole, which roughly translates as "Soft Machine" in French, was that a case of not letting go?

It was me saying I was still in that band in my head. I could have called it Soft Machine. I can now announce to the public that in fact we were never allowed to register the name. Anyone can call themselves Soft Machine if they want a quick shufti to the top of the bill!

How did you cope now you were the boss?

To my dismay, just as I wasn't very good at being told what do to, neither could I tell other people what to do. I now think that everything was leading to me making my own records. But the musicians I worked with were terrific. Phil [Miller] wrote the tune for God Song. O Caroline was basically a duet with David Sinclair. But we didn't have any money or resources. The others took all that. It was very hard.

The title and cover of Matching Mole's *Little Red Record* clearly suggests you'd become politicised by the early '70s.

The cover was actually chosen by someone at CBS who'd heard the lyrics, found this poster of the imaginary liberation of Taiwan, and put our faces on it. However, the world drifting to the right took me by surprise. I thought the era of moustached racist colonels in their mock Tudor houses in Whitstable was becoming a thing of the past, but to see whole new generations picking up on those ideologies, that imperial nostalgia, made my skin prickle. I thought my parents' generation sorted all this. It was quite clear. Are we on the side of the rich, trying to stay exclusive, engineering this endless character assassination against less lucky people? When the guns are firing, there is no middle ground. My tendency is always to err on the side of the exploited.

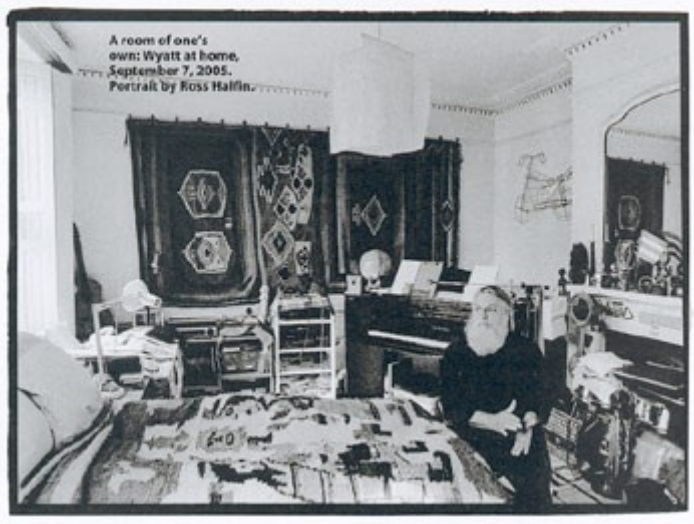
Did the accident make you more militant?

Not directly. I've disappointed some disabled people by not using my work as a platform to fight for our rights of access. But if it hasn't caught your imagination, you can't pretend it has. Yet having to yield control of the situation you're in, a dilemma most severely disabled people know well, I can recognise in a lot of the battles going on in the world.

Do you need to be a good man?

I want to be harmless. That's as good as I dare aspire to. Beyond that, I'm totally self-indulgent and hedonistic.

You're famous for your postcards, written on the back of cereal packets, sent to friends and admirers. My sister still has one from the early '80s where you complain



> Zoom

about your nice guy image and sign off as "Bolshie Bertie". Are you uncomfortable with the Mr Nice reputation?

Sometimes I have to work at a compassionate view towards what other people have done. I can get very impatient and angry as an initial reaction. But ideally the goal would be, to understand all is to forgive all. It's a magical phrase.

But when a population votes in a government hellbent on destroying their livelihoods, as in the case of Thatcher, you must despair.

Well, I'm quite happy to sing a song like Shipbuilding by Costello, who felt exactly that, a rage that had to be exorcised in some way. That kind of rage can give you energy. But it's different from the cool mantle of wisdom that judges assume, which is almost inevitably bullshit. It seems to me that a nice person wouldn't have such a battle with all this stuff.

Earlier on, you mentioned hedonism. Is intoxication important to you?

I do have an intense greediness for stimuli. I get bored quickly. But I'm really scared of breaking the law. Pathetic, isn't it? Some musicians blast themselves with stimuli in order to blast their own rockets off to go into outer space. I wouldn't be alive if I were on my own. Alfie's kept me alive. My ideal state is to do absolutely nothing in a complete stupor listening to Charlie Mingus records very loud in a candle-lit room - with Alfie.

So your fall in 1973 saved you?

Yes, that's the way it looks to me. It was a good career move.

Keith Moon apparently taught you how to drink heavily. What is it with drummers?

I learnt how to get very drunk very quickly with him in New York. Drummers are hopeless; we don't get our things together. Maybe because it is extremely physical, it's possible you get into a certain state, that some chemical thing happens.

It's obvious that Alfie is your inspiration, your sounding-board, your collaborator. And, as she says, also "your guarder". Do you ever yearn to nip out and have a few sneaky beers?

I do. The trouble is it's hurtful for Alfie. If I'm left to my own devices, I do seem to be amazingly irresponsible, so I have to be grateful for someone who points these dangers out in advance. I'm not quite sure how to function safely in the world. I would be much better for her if I looked after myself better.

You survived punk. Did you feel a genuine affinity with it?

Yeah, the working methods, the attitude and



Solar flares for YOU...

How to buy Robert Wyatt.
By Mark Paytress.

THE SINGING DRUMMER ALBUM

Out-Bloody-Rageous 1967-73
★★★★ Sony 2005

An instant guide to the 'pre-history', this recent primer documents The Soft Machine's mutation from psychedelicised soul boys (Love Makes Sweet Music) to the instrumental wastelands of the post-Wyatt era. Includes phased drumming, a recitation of the British alphabet and Wyatt's landmark epic Moon In June, the template for his future solo career.

THE MASTERPIECE

Rock Bottom ★★★★★ Virgin 1974

Serene, melancholy and very occasionally sinister, this first post-accident LP is classic Wyatt. Assisted by a cast of British jazz-rock luminaries, and produced by Nick Mason, he assembles a seamless suite of songs that allude both to his new circumstances and to Venice, where the album was partly written, hence the aquatic subtext.

THE ELDER STATESMAN ALBUM

Cuckooland ★★★★ Rykodisc, 2003

An unlikely mix of nostalgia (Old Europe), quiet indignation (Lullaby For Hamza) and ageing (Lullaloop) lends a lovely dignity to Wyatt's most recent studio set. Brian Eno, Karen Mantler and David Gilmour confirm the singer's gift for the well-chosen cameo, but it's his continued quest for simplicity with sophistication that astonishes most.

the tunings. It was a very witty movement, an autonomous one that wasn't invented by fashion stylists. I thought they were very moral young people. A lot of people were thinking hard about the rise of the National Front, and the relationship between young rastas and punks was very ahead of its time. Some cracking records too.

In the '80s you spent quite a bit of time in Spain and Italy. Then you moved from west London to Lincolnshire. Is this indicative of a make-the-world-go-away philosophy?

We had a busy life abroad, recording, doing television and attending ANC meetings. I didn't need to be part of the rock world back here. But sometimes a certain distance is required. If you create a comfortable distance between yourself and the world you have to deal with, you can keep control of your own bit of it. But if I'm asked my ethnic group, I always say "Soho". In my heart I'm still hanging round Ronnie Scott's foyer. I could spend the rest of my life there, and I do in my head, just by choosing the right records.

Over the past 20 years, you've released a record roughly once every five years. The curse of perfectionism, perhaps?

I'd love to be a perfectionist. I always think I am until I hear the results, then I realise I'm not.

***Cuckooland*, the title of your last album is such a Wyatt word, vaguely archaic, full of echoes.**

I'm really amused by words that have some sort of folk memory, and I love half making up words, because that's how they came to be in the first place. Cuckooland is ambiguous. Either the world is really as mad as it looks to me, or because that's how my brain is, it's me that's in Cuckooland.

John Peel was a long-time friend. How did his death affect you?

Terrible. A death in the family. I was asked at the time to respond in the media and I couldn't. Me and Alfie, John and Sheila, and John and Helen Walters became friends over the years quite apart from the professional connection that brought us together. Sheila is putting together a CD for the anniversary of his death. I was asked yesterday if they can have Shipbuilding for it, and as far as I'm concerned, Sheila can have anything of mine she likes. The world seems to be filling up with so many friendly ghosts. As long as you have people in your head, that's the nearest thing I understand to immortality. People live on through the people who loved or remember them.

So death is not something you worry about.

Not at all. It is difficult for the people that are left. The people who are dead are at peace.

Previous article

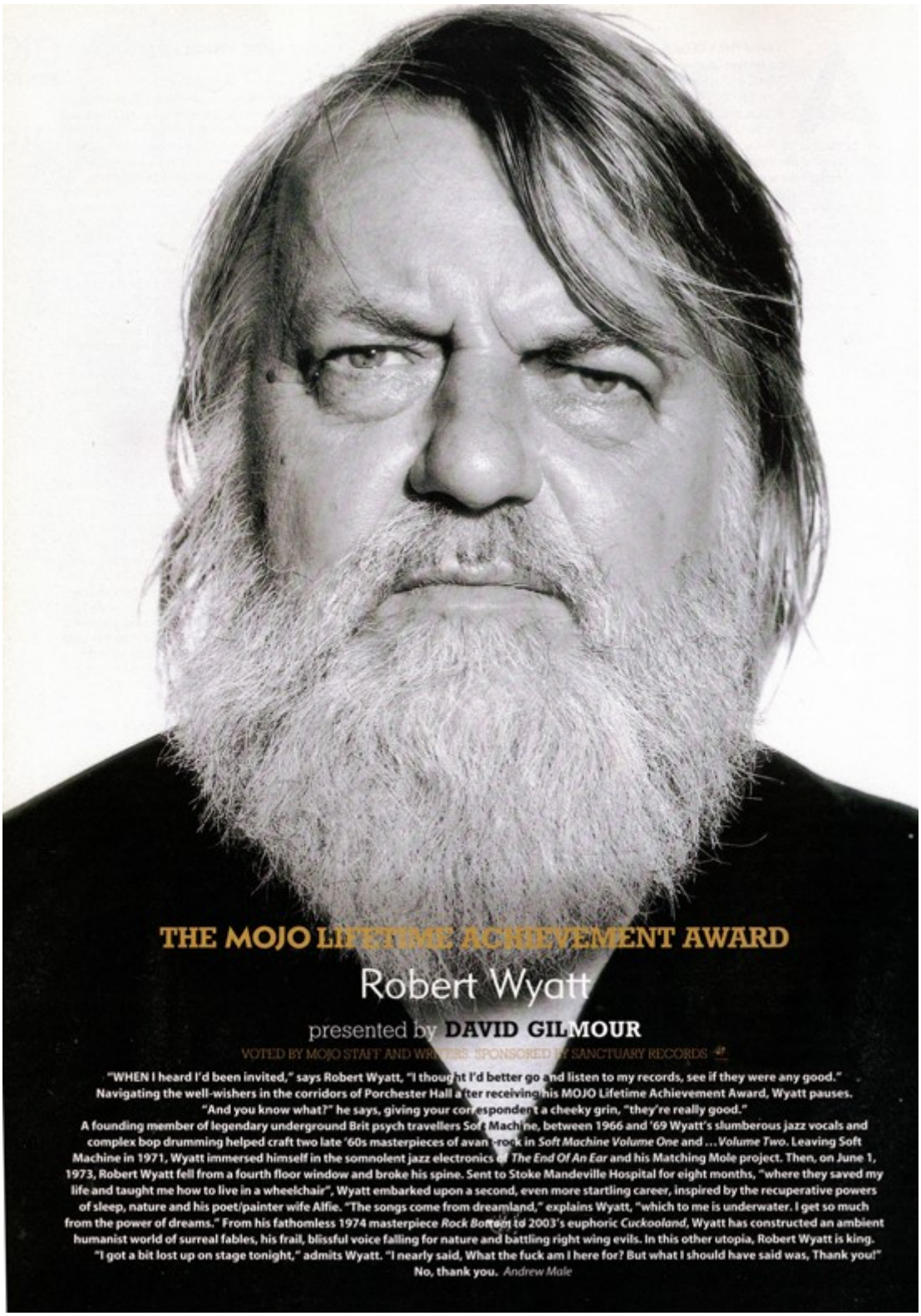
Next article

Back to the list

Robert Wyatt presented by David Gilmour - Mojo - August 2005

THE MOJO LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD





> Zoom

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Robert Wyatt & Alfreda Benge - Dream Magazine #5 - Spring 2005

ROBERT WYATT & ALFREDA BENGE



It was a rare treat to speak to Robert Wyatt by phone for this interview, I'd like to gratefully acknowledge Joyce at Cuneiform Records for kindly setting this up. When I first dreamt of doing Dream Magazine, Robert Wyatt's name was near the top of the list of folks I wanted to talk to. I've been tuned into his stuff since the first Soft Machine album, though he had recorded as early as 1962 as a member of The Wilde Flowers, and as a solo artist, continues to this day as one of the most artistically vital avant pop composer/singers of his, or any generation since. His angelic lighter than air voice is one of the most unique and lovely ever recorded, his continuing creative flow reveals some of the finest work in a forty-plus year career. His open armed embrace of jazz, folk, pop, socialist politics, intelligence, wit, minimalism, progressive rock, compassion, psychedelia, several different international musical forms, and his own distinctive vision is a singular contribution to the history of recorded music. He's worked with folks that range from Jimi Hendrix, Syd Barrett, and Brian Eno, to newer artists like Björk, and Hood. It was also great to get to talk to Alfreda Benge, who is: illustrator, instigator, inspiration, coconspirator, often lyricist, and painter wife of Robert Wyatt, (also the subject of many of his songs). Robert and Alfreda deserve a book, not just this truncated chat; though we talked for over an hour, I felt like we were only scratching the surface.

G.P.: *Hello Robert.*
R.W.: Can you hear me OK?
G.P.: *Yeah.*
R.W.: This is a different phone. Maybe it's because a blizzard is coming, or maybe it's just weather stuff going on.
G.P.: *Could be. I'm hoping we can also talk to your wife and frequent collaborator Alfreda later on, if that's possible.*
R.W.: A good idea. She's upstairs right now, but will be down later. I'll ask her if she's up for it when she comes down.
G.P.: *You've worked repeatedly with certain folks; you worked with Michael Mantler, and Carla Bley, and now their daughter Karen.*
R.W.: Right. (laughter)
G.P.: *She contributed quite a bit to Cuckooland. What is it about those folks that you found such an affinity with?*
R.W.: Well they're a great family. I think each of them is really unique; you can't really describe the genre of music they're into. It's really fascinating; the parents are very disciplined for jazz players, and it's interesting to see Karen coming out of that background.

Although I'm of the same musical generation as her parents; the fact that Karen makes her music out of recognizable notes, and songs and like that; makes her music much more like mine, than her parent's is. But, she brings that kind of careful and astute knowledge of music to it.
G.P.: *Her pieces work really well on **Cuckooland**.*
R.W.: Well I'm glad you think so. The other thing is she's so... I mean Karen went through a punk period, kind of as a teenager. But the fact is she's learned a lot of discipline compared to me; and I was sort of interested in playing the role of kind of wicked uncle; and kind of messing it all up a bit. (laughter) Getting some of that dirty noise in there.
G.P.: *It also feels like you're sort of a member of the extended Pink Floyd family.*
R.W.: Well, I don't know. It's actually rather distant, the thing about Pink Floyd is that it's actually another planet really; the planet "rich" for a start. Not the undeserving rich, they're rich because other people buy their records.
G.P.: *You have worked with most of those people though. Can you tell me a bit of what Syd Barrett was like as a person?*
R.W.: Well, he was very nice.
G.P.: *Not a loon huh?*
R.W.: In those days how could you possibly tell? (laughter) I mean what would have been unusual about that?
G.P.: *(laughter) That's true. What did you work on together?*
R.W.: I played drums on a few tracks of **A Madcap Laughs**.
G.P.: *I really enjoyed the album **Songs** by John Greaves, it featured you on three tracks. How did that collaboration come about?*
R.W.: I've known John a long time, and Peter Blegvad is one of the great wordsmiths of our time.
G.P.: *Oh yeah.*
R.W.: Anyway they just asked me if I would sing a few things. [Lengthy response that is inaudible].
G.P.: *Who or what are some of your conscious songwriting influences?*
R.W.: You know I have no idea, I can tell you what I enjoy. American writer Ogden Nash for one, the best songwriter that I can think of is Randy Newman.
G.P.: *Ah, he's incredible.*
R.W.: There are a lot of people that kind of get to me and John Lennon was one of them, but for the rest I don't really know. I can't separate influences from things that I've enjoyed. I forget to mention this but a great deal of what used to be called , the "hep talk" of the 40s and 50s, like Cab Calloway and Slim & Slam, maybe you don't remember that.
G.P.: *Sure I do.*
R.W.: Alright then, you'll know what I'm talking about. Like the mad lyrics that Dizzy Gillespie used to do like "sh'bam, a gloog a mop" which I think is a very good line.
G.P.: *(laughter)*
R.W.: (laughing) I think that's as good as anything Little Richard came up with.
G.P.: *I really enjoyed your contributions to the **Winged Migration** film; how did your participation happen on that project?*
R.W.: They pretty much just asked. Composer Bruno Coulais does music direction for that filmmaker's (Jacques Perrin) various subjects. This time they wanted to do the thing you're not meant to do; which is to anthropomorphize the subjects. So in other words it's not a straight nature film. The original title in French is "**Migrating People**".
G.P.: *Oh really?*
R.W.: And I think that's a good title really. And uh, so anyway they wanted some singing on it and they asked. And I said "I don't normally do things like this." They said: "It would really only be your voice and our lyrics". And when I heard it they had me.
G.P.: *Well, they really sound like pieces that you might have written.*
R.W.: Yeah, well that's what he was trying to do. It was part of his way of getting me to do it.
G.P.: *What did you think of the finished film?*
R.W.: Oh, it was very nice. The words were originally written in French, and had to be translated into English in a singable way; so Alfie; as is often the case; uncredited, but she's really shy about getting credit. But on the other hand she does all this stuff. She actually rewrote the whole thing to make it singable for me. I couldn't have done it.
In fact when I first got the lyrics, I said "I can't sing this." But she reworked is so that could. So she's the hidden ingredient there; the catalyst that made that work.
G.P.: *You have long been a supporter of animal rights, what would you say to someone to raise their awareness regarding animals and their treatment?*
R.W.: Well, not to proselytize; but as far as I'm concerned we're all animals. And anything that's got a beating heart, it's just trying to live like you are. So if you're going to eat it or use it, go ahead. But just sort of think about that for a moment. Try to be nice to it while it's alive at least.
G.P.: *Tell me about your album **Cuckooland** and how it came into being?*
R.W.: Well more than anything, as you may know about the last couple albums; were sort

of kick-started by taking some of Alfie's lyrics and putting them to music, or occasionally; as is the case with **Alien**, from my previous album **Shleep**, where she actually wrote words to my music. But in this case I don't think the record would have interested me without Alfie's words. I just haven't got enough coherent material, I had sort of scraps of tunes knocking about for years literally. And Alfie said we had to just get on with it, and do it. It's how we earn our living for a start; I get a pension, but this a large part of our income.

G.P.: *Well it's interesting how it feels so coherent; it doesn't seem put together it feels like a piece.*

R.W.: Well I think that's why it takes me so long to get things together. Everything has to be sort of re-tailored and remade so that it feels natural and organic. But I think in this case; the musical ideas I had, reduced the lyrics to sort of mantras and things, and I really was getting nowhere. And Alfie just went through stuff of mine. I dug out some tapes; pre-digital stuff that I'd done. And she wrote words to things, and came up with words for **Old Europe**, and **Forest**, and **Lullaby for Hamza**. And then she had some poems that she was working on that became songs. Alfie's here at the moment; she's been upstairs, she's been working on all kinds of stuff, but just came down for a bowl of soup. So if you did want to speak to her, this would be a good moment.

G.P.: *Yeah, I would like to.*

R.W.: OK, I'll hand you over to Alfie.

A.B.: Hello.

G.P.: *Hello, well I kind of wanted to talk to you about your part of the musical thing and your paintings too. Who were some of your influences as a painter, or do you have them?*

A.B.: Well I wouldn't call most of what I do for Robert paintings really; they're sort of illustrations. Ever since I've done paintings and drawings, I draw from life and I paint out of my head. So all these images are out of my head really. They're kind of narrative, most often, sometimes they're more graphic, because I was into graphic design. So I sort of apply various bits of my training, according to what I think or feel the subject is. So, in that sense they're illustrations.

G.P.: *There seems to be a sort of surrealist sensibility to some of them.*

A.B.: Well, I don't know. They're not surrealist; they're more jokey. They're almost paintings of cartoons really.

G.P.: *Uh huh.*

A.B.: My favorite painters don't paint like me at all.

G.P.: *Well, who are they?*

A.B.: (laughing) Well, I like Bonnard. I like the use of paint by Matisse and Bonnard; all the old, boring old masters of the 2Oth century really. I like Kurt Schwitters. I like painters that use paint to paint what they see. I like painters that use space nicely.

G.P.: *Lately I've been obsessed with Charles Burchfield.*

A.B.: I don't know him.

G.P.: *Oh, try to find something by him. He did some wonderful watercolors, he's unlike anybody else.*

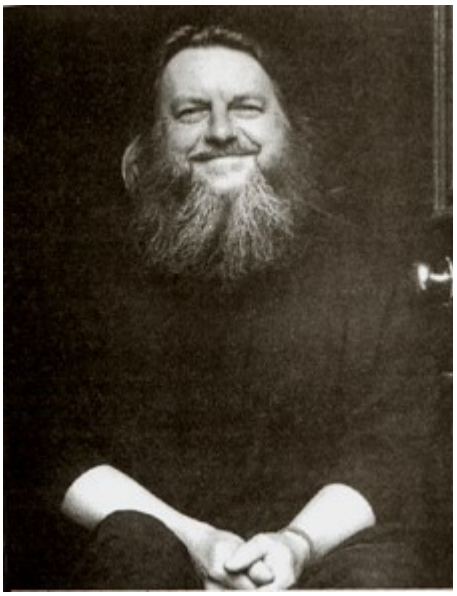
A.B.: Alright.

G.P.: *When you work on lyrics for Robert; is it a poem set to music, or do you hear the music first?*

A.B.: Well they vary. On **Dondestan** they all already existed and Robert just set them to music. They were from a sort of diary, and he thought they had music in them. And the same with the stuff on **Shleep**; except for **Alien** which is the first one actually where he got stuck for lyrics. For **Alien** he actually gave me the music, and I sat about and listened to it for a few days. I shut my eyes and tried to think what the story of the music was. So bits of words would come in with the music. With the music I think where am I in this picture, and sometimes a series of notes will suggest a word, like **Lullaby for Hamza**; I just heard 'lullaby'.



> Zoom



> Zoom

G.P.: *Have you ever thought about doing an album of your own ?*
A.B.: (laughter) Well, I'd love to do that, yeah. I'm a musical ninny; I could get the odd tune, the lyrical tune, but I think, no. I have actually just been asked by a French producer to write some lyrics for him, so I'm branching out. I'm becoming the Grandma Moses of lyrics.
G.P.: *(laughter)*
A.B.: (laughter) I find it extreme fun, I've never found anything more enjoyable actually. Because it's not like dealing with a piece of blank paper. With a painting you've got this big white space and have to put something on it. But to be given a piece of music and to try to find the words in that is real fun!
G.P.: *It's like somebody's done half of the work for you sort of.*
A.B.: Yeah, yeah. They've done all the work really, so the rest is just absolute fun. It's like if you do a painting and get half the way through, and you know you've got it, from then on it's plain sailing; it's that kind of fun.
G.P.: *Yeah, but you've gotta go in there and find that thing.*
A.B.: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, that's horrible.
G.P.: *Yeah it is; that's scary.*
A.B.: Also with poetics it's that blank page, but it has some music to it too, and they all suggest visual things to me anyway. They suggest places. I mean like **Forest**; there was a forest, a river, some trees. Which is not to say that it's always easy; because when you get down to the details; the vowels that go to the right notes, and Robert's ability to sing them. So it's not always easy, but it's always fun.
G.P.: *Have you had any shows of your paintings?*
A.B.: Yeah, well when I was actually doing painting. I don't really paint anymore; I mean I do stuff for Robert, I do stuff when there's something to do it for. Yeah, I had a show about 20 years ago. But I've never actually joined the art world in that sense. A bit like Robert never actually having joined the music industry. (laughter)
G.P.: *(laughter)*
A.B.: We just do what we do.
G.P.: *Yeah.*
A.B.: But in fact it's lovely to do it for records because so many more people will see it than would if it were at a gallery.
G.P.: *Yeah it's a great portable gallery.*
A.B.: Yeah, yeah. The same with poetry as well; with **Dondestan** and **Shleep** it actually reached around 60 or 70 thousand people, and you don't get poetry selling like that do you?
G.P.: *No*.
A.B.: So it's nice when it happens, but it's not too connected to the real world.
G.P.: *(laughter) Not directly anyway.*
A.B.: No, not directly. Only as being a kind of leech on Robert.
G.P.: *(laughing) Oh God!*
A.B.: (laughter)
G.P.: *How parallel are your political views?*

A.B.: Oh absolutely; except, I was born an anarchist, so I would tend not to join things. Robert's more of a conformist; he like the idea of belonging to something. But in terms of worldview, and how things happen, and why they happen; I mean we both it read between the lines in exactly the same way.
G.P.: *Right.*
A.B.: We both scream in horror at exactly the same lies, and I think we're pretty similar.
G.P.: *How do you feel about the current US presidency, and their foreign policies?*
A.B.: (silence)
G.P.*: You don't have to answer this.*
A.B.: Yeah, no I'm just thinking what to say really. Shocking, appalling, extraordinary, just horrible.
G.P.*: Yeah, me too.*
A.B.: Yeah, but you know in a way really I'm more shocked by ours.
G.P.*: Oh really? The Tony Blair complicity?*
A.B.: Yeah, well because he's supposed to be on the our side. I'm not surprised when people on the right behave according to their beliefs, I can understand them. But he was supposed to make things better for us. He's been shocking here as far as being sort of power crazy, and proud of the fact of being Bushy's best friend.
G.P.*: Oh yeah.*
A.B.: It's just so horrible.
G.P*.: Yeah, it's nightmarish.*
A.B.: Well do you want me to give you back to Robert?
G.P.*: Yeah I guess. It's been great to get to talk to you.*
A.B.: Okay, bye.
R.W.: That was a good idea.
G.P*.: For a sense of perspective. You said something about her sort of being the dark side of the moon to your work.*
R.W.: Yeah exactly, which is funny in a way because she gets embarrassed as far as anyone drawing attention to themselves, including me. If I get noticed at any kind of social event she just dies on the spot of embarrassment. But this is how I earn a living, somebody's got to get up there and show their face occasionally, that's how it is.
G.P.*: Well some people are not extroverted in that way.*
R.W.: Well I'm not very either. I mean the bit about music I like is the solitary activity of making it. Anyway; it's just that she is very shy. She speaks so well you know, because she didn't start learning English until she was seven. (laughing)
G.P*.: Oh yeah, where's she from?*
R.W.: Poland, her mother's Polish, well she's a mixture of all kinds of things really. She's from the land, and the forest, and about. I think that's why the **Forest** song came up really. She has ancestral; or at least childhood memories all mingled up with the forest, but also the whole world being a sort of a bombsight; as it was when she was a child.
G.P*.: That's a great song!*
R.W.: Yeah, well it's pretty heartfelt I think. The stuff about Alfie that comes out, probably paradoxically enough, the truth is true of what she does.
G.P.*: And it's always nice to hear Brian Eno singing.*
R.W.: Isn't it eh?
G.P*.: I wish he'd do that more!*
R.W.: Oh I know, I know! I tell you he's been working on some stuff, and we've been seeing quite a lot of it during the last year; and his studio is quite near Phil Manzanera's. He's been making such interesting stuff; but he has the same problem I have, of finishing things. But he's the very opposite to me, in the sense that he's very very high tech, and digital. I mean he's got hundreds of things carefully filed and stored, and making more every day. And he buys every new Japanese toy there is.
G.P.*: (laughing)*
R.W.: He's here one day, there the next. It's on and on; he's out there. It's Barcelona on thursday. He gets around and sees things, and he's always so on top of that kind of stuff. But maybe that's part of his thing, but he we're all able to talk about Brian Eno's thinking; his ideas and so on. I mean just as a pop musician; I think he's terrific, you know. Songwriter, singer...
G.P.*: Oh yeah! And he's got such a lovely distinctive voice.*
R.W.: He has, he has, and funnily enough for all his high tech, he's very old fashioned about it. He stands there full sway like an opera singer, and delivers, and it's really strong. (laughs) He's terrific, a terrific singer. The stuff he did was sort of backing vocals and you will have gathered, we sort of managed to take away the top layer, to reveal what he was doing underneath it, you know. And then David Gilmore, he provides the magic fairy dust on **Forest** for me.

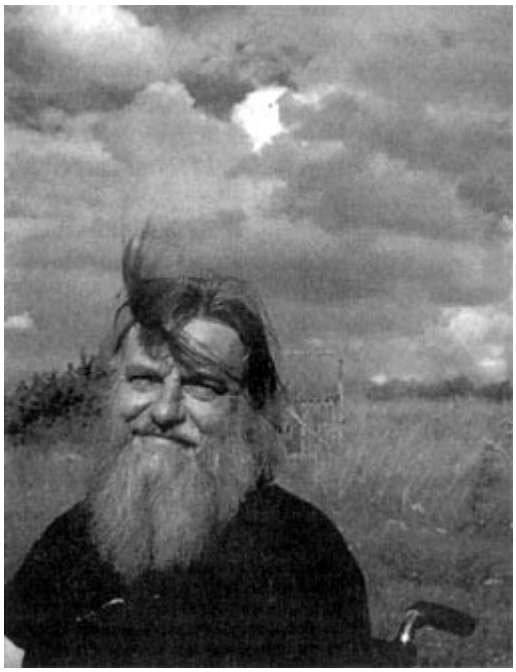


G.P.*: Yeah, it's a beautiful piece of work.*
R.W.: Because he obviously contributes his guitar solo, but also his pedal guitar all the way though it is just terrific you know. He did a lot of work on it, you know. And I hadn't asked him. We met a few times again after 20, 30 years or so, and he and I get along well, and I like his band members. But I get along better with the blokes than the gang. You know groups have a thing that way. Four young men in a box, you know.
G.P.*: Did we cover the making of* ***Cuckooland****; what inspired it?*
R.W.: I knew we had enough stuff; the key to it came when Alfie came up with the words to **Lullaby for Hamza**. And the rest is just getting into gear and getting on with it. And Phil Manzanera who produced the opportunity to work; the way he did it was; he just had a budget for the making of the record, and he just said; "However long it takes." And it won't bring the price up, which is an amazing thing.
G.P.*: That's sensational!*
R.W.: Well it was incredible. I mean he's always had money troubles; but he's just like that. He said "I don't do something by a written company's name, because I don't want to put up with that." In the past so much he'd been part of ended up owned by some alien reptilian...
G.P.*: Corporations.*
R.W.: That's right. Luckily some people from that era, have rescued that era. Lovely folks like Steve Feigenbaum of Hannibal Records, or the folks at Hux Records in England; but on a whole it's as easy to get buggered about by people of that era. There are some nice people to work with; the Ryko lot leading the way in America. They're conscientious, and hard working. These things aren't terribly romantic, but they are absolutely vital. Because apart from everything else this is a job, this is what we do for a living. It's really hard; it does take a bit of time and attention. It just doesn't get the kind of massive sales that like commercial releases get, so they can't really be indulgent in the way that musicians might tend to want them to be. As for myself, I haven't paid anybody like Brian, David, or Paul Weller; because I couldn't afford them. But I pay the regular professional musicians; like Annie Whitehead.
G.P.*: You've chosen some interesting songs to cover over the years: the Neil Diamond/Monkees song* ***I'm a Believer****, Chic's* ***At Last I am Free****, and recently the Bordeleaux/Felice Bryant song* ***Raining in My Heart****; what is the criterion for choosing covers for you?*
R.W.: Well really I always want to remind myself and anybody who's interested, that I do have a great love and respect for pop music and what it can be beyond just being music for teenagers. And I wish to disassociate myself from those elements of the avant garde, and experimental music scene that have openly expressed their distaste for pop music.
G.P.: *Well that snobbery seems kind of foolish to me.*
R.W.: Well it's particularly distasteful coming from a culture that's meant to be a kind of alternative to an antique established establishment. You don't want to see a kind of conservative, elitist, snobbishness reemerging in the avant garde. It just doesn't belong there
G.P.: *You sang with Brian Wilson on a Ryuichi Sakamoto cover of the Rolling Stones '****We***

***Love You**', did you actually meet during that recording?*
R.W.: No, no I didn't know he was on it. Ryuichi just wanted me to sing it; and yes the reason that I did it was because Ryuichi asked me to. The Japanese have such a nice way of asking; I thought, this is such a nice letter, I really ought to do this for him.
G.P.: *It's really a nice version of that song.*
R.W.: Well it is; but the idea that I would ever sing a lyric by that songwriter. I don't know; I wouldn't, myself have chosen that song. But that said; I don't really feel at home in rock culture. But it wasn't because of the song; it was because of Ryuichi has such an amazing, sensitive expressive musical ear. He has a fantastic musical knowledge.
G.P.: *Ah, he's a wonderful musician.*
R.W.: Well he's actually a great musician in the sense of a being a classically trained musician. That kind of refinement of technique; he has it. I didn't know Brian Wilson was on it till I heard it. And you can't fault that.
G.P.: *(I turn over the tape. As I do I tell Robert that I hope it's all recording; part of his reply gets recorded)*
R.W.: Well then you might have to do it back from memory. Like a dream, which seems fitting. (laughter)
G.P.: *Well I can try! (laughter) Do you think it's surprising that you might be doing some of your best work at your age?*
R.W.: Well I'm very relieved to hear you say that because one of the things I felt uncomfortable about was the relentless emphasis... It's a bit like the aesthetic today is that it's only a youth thing. You know it's a wonderful stage to go through; but it's really amazing if you have any luck, how much of your life, isn't youth. It's decades and decades of watching and learning, and finding things out. And you're quite lucky if you survive long enough to really have time to have thought about things, and worked through your ideas. So really it should be the case that, that when you come up in age, you should benefit from that.
G.P.: *Well I think part of the problem is working from the template of a pop artist is erroneous; when looking at artists in other fields their later years are often their most fruitful*.
R.W.: Well that's sort of acknowledged in many arts, but for some reason it's kind of doesn't sit comfortably with the way pop music is promoted; which is fine. I think the kind of central thing of rock, and of pop music is it's a celebration of youth. It's wonderful and I think every generation should happily have it's own sort of coded language, and it's own haircuts, and it's own group sounds, and it's nobody else's business. On the whole pop culture is a wonderful thing and it is about youth. And the fact is that it comes from a much wider and older tradition, which is sort of folk music really. And if you look for the origins of rock & roll and pop, it's sort of Irish and American country music, and then the Black equivalent, and the Italian equivalent, and so on, and so on. And that's the roots of it; and that's a much bigger river. A bigger broader river.
G.P.: *And connected to a lot of other rivers.*
R.W.: Yeah. And there's a lot of music that isn't pop music at all. Still I think the life's blood is singable songs and dancible rhythms. I think Charles Mingus said that.
G.P.: *So are you a jazz artist or a pop artist?*
R.W.: I can't place myself in music at all really. The kind of people that I relate to, if anybody; I'm not comparing myself with the quality of the work of these people, just that I identify with as people who are working their way through their lives; over decades and years. The painters that I like; from the early part of the 20th century. Some of the ones that Alfie mentioned; and Van Gogh or "Van Go" as they probably say in America.
G.P.: *No we can pronounce it right here sometimes.*
R.W.: (laughing) Well it's (correct pronunciation) in Dutch.
G.P.: *Yeah it's got that (throat sound) it's hard to do.*
R.W.: It's like Flemish; it's unsayable.
G.P.: *You know Jonathan Richman wrote that song about Vincent Van Gogh; you may not have heard it.*
R.W.: I like Jonathan Richman.
G.P.: *He said he was really lucky that he didn't know how to pronounce it when he wrote it. Because Van "Go" rhymes with a lot more stuff*
R.W.: (laughing) Yeah, right. Very good. Anyway, you know who I'm talking about. And Marc Chagall, who's original name was Moishe Shagal.
G.P.: *Oh yeah? He's wonderful, very magical.*
R.W.: Great great, and part of the wonderful part of the great Russian Jewish tradition that has given us stuff in every field. I can't imagine what the world of music, or ideas, or science, would be without their contribution. And yeah, I don't know; sorta Joan Miro. Yeah I was very interested in Joan Miro of Catalan, and how those people, grew old interested me. Late Picasso, late Miro; where all of the apparent elements of craft are just gradually discarded, and we just get this sort of like hieroglyphic, childlike scrawl that they would have started out with. And I find that quite a moving process. So those are the sort of people I feel on the same planet as; let's put it like that.

G.P.: *Could you tell me a bit about the BBC documentary, **Free Will And Testament**?*
R.W.: Well that was suggested to me by a man called Jez Nelson, who does a jazz program on radio BBC 3, and had the opportunity through the participation of BBC 4. And I was surprised that he'd ask me, because his main work is in new jazz; but he does other stuff as well. Anyway he asked Mark Kidel, who is a very good filmmaker, a very good director who works in England. And he'd approached us a few years ago anyway about making a film, but hadn't gotten anyone to back it; so then Jez Nelson gave him that. So they went to me; well "What do you do?" Well I got so embarrassed that I don't do anything that I said well; "I could sing some of the songs that Annie Whitehead's band does, and I can sing them with Annie." And it ended up getting done on film.
G.P.: *Well I hope that it gets shown over here.*
R.W.: Well Mark, I think he put it together very well. I think it's difficult work to do, because I just sort of sit here like a cactus in the desert really.
G.P.: *(laughter)*
R.W.: Like some kind of Andy Warhol film really, like the Empire State Building. (laughing) But he made it; he sort of condensed things so that it seemed like lots had happened. I remember they were making a TV film about Quentin Crisp here in England; and John Hurt was playing him. He was talking to Crisp and said "I hope we can get an accurate picture of your life." And Quentin replied "Oh I hope your film is far more exciting than that." (laughter)
G:P.: *(laughing) That's great!*
R.W.: (laughing) Yeah, I hadn't realized till I saw Mark's film how uninteresting I am.
G.P.: *What are some of your thoughts regarding , the current US president and his foreign policies?*
R.W.: I don't know, you see. There are so many great Americans that I get very upset when people say that people like me are being anti-American. I say "No I'm not anti-Michael Moore, I'm not anti-Noam Chomsky." I probably more immersed in great American culture, than most of those people who claim to be representing it. You know what I mean? I could talk to any of those people in his cabinet about Mingus and Charles Ives, and they couldn't catch me out on a detail. So don't talk to me about being anti-American. I can't imagine my life without the American cultural influence; which I attribute to the fact that it's a country of mass immigration from all around the world reconfigured. That's the magic of America to me; and a great gift to the world. I mean looking at American history which is rooted in part in English history, which is why the language that were speaking is called English. And people think that it's something fake, or sort of wishful thinking that the point of America is that it's the land of the free. In fact the freedom that the British settlers, as I understand it; were looking for. Was the freedom to form these very tight strict religious sects, away from the kind of liberalizing influences that were spreading through Europe. So although it was a freedom; there was embedded in it a freedom to be more conservative than their European ancestors. Rather like the Afrikaners who left Holland precisely it was becoming free and easy. They wanted to stay strict to the Calvinist type rigidity; you know tribal rigidity. So it's always been kind of ambiguous in that sense. My message to America is "Look we love you already, so leave us alone!" (laughing) You know what I mean, you don't have to keep knocking at the door saying "Love me more, love me more." You know I think it's an embarrassment for the Americans I know; what's going on right now. Who just sort of sit back and watch this stuff. Well you know, Noam Chomsky was asked "What would you put in its place?", and he said "It's very simple; to start out. Stop doing bad things." (laughter) "Start there."
G.P.: *(laughing)*



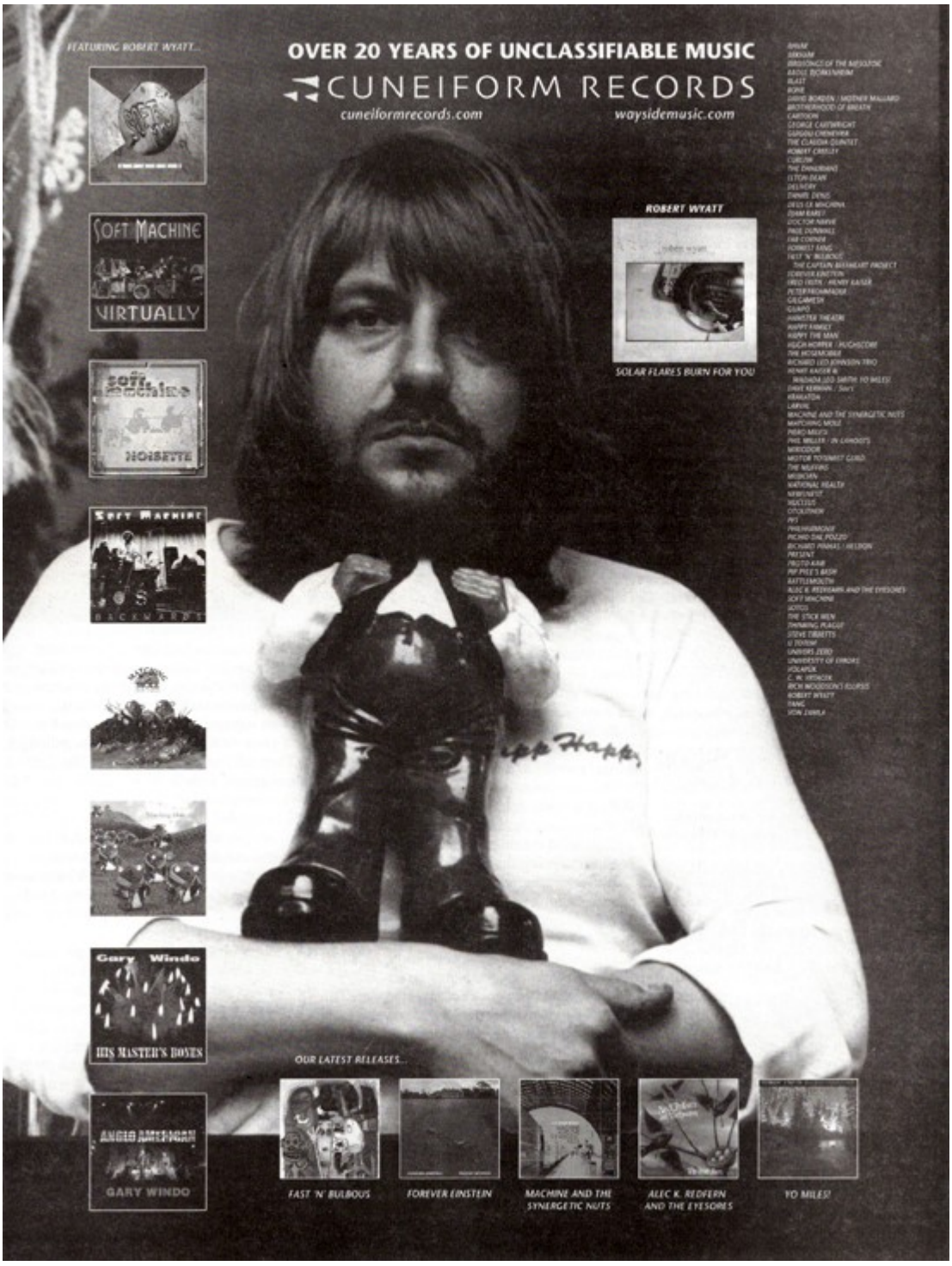


R.W.: That's a pretty good one isn't it?
G.P.: *It pares it down to something pretty simple and understandable.*
R.W.: I think he's great, I love Chomsky.
G.P.: *Oh he's great; and it's nice to hear you mention Michael Moore; he's actually got relatives here and has visited a few times.*
R.W.: Oh really? Well we were lucky enough to see Michael Moore in action on stage in London where he got a full house every night. As great as the films and the books are; the stage performance was uh... I felt "I'd witnessed someone in the great tradition of Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl; you know what I mean?
G.P.: *Yeah, he's brilliant.*
R.W.: That's the dark side of the moon that we hope gets spun 'round to the front one day.
G.P.: *How inspirational was your early meeting with Daevid Allen?*
R.W.: Well the main thing about Daevid was he was older, and hadn't been through the stuff; that me as a schoolboy had been told that I was gonna have to do. You know, passing exams and all that. Well I was rubbish at passing exams, I was rubbish at school. (laughs) Daevid showed me that you are allowed to fail exams really. He was already in his twenties when we were schoolboys.
G.P.: *A sage old fellow.*
R.W.: And he was already out there doing stuff. He already had contacts in Paris and London with some people in the avant garde scene. So that was the influence there really.
G.P.: *How did you and Alfreda meet?*
R.W.: Well we met sort of before we knew we met. She had actually worked at the bar at Ronny Scott's club in London; for starts I must have seen her quite a lot there. I think actually I noticed Alfie at the Roundhouse, which is one of the venues that groups
played in those days. In fact it's the same venue where we saw Michael Moore. In fact when we went to see Michael Moore, we went up to the pillar on which she was leaning when I went and spoke to her that first time. (laughter)
G.P.: *(laughter)*
R.W.: I just saw her; as it were for the first time. And she was so different from the kind of charming sort of stoned wilting flowers around the place. She had a kind of upright dignity; and kind of like a... I don't know, she just looked really good to me
and that was it. And the fact that when I did visit her flat she had the hippest record collection you can imagine! And it was all right there; Sly Stone, Coltrane...
G.P.: *And that tells you a lot right there.*
R.W.: Well you know right there I thought "What's this?"
G.P.: *Yeah, you know it's a good sign. That record collection tells you a lot.*
R.W.: Well it's a start; and then she had these art books of the German expressionists. But mainly she just looked fantastic. She looked sort of like Jean Seberg the great actress.
G.P.: *Oh, I loved Jean Seberg!*
R.W.: Well Alfie was sort of in that mould. I guess I was the lucky one there.
G.P.: *I guess!*
R.W.: It's timing they say.
G.P.: *Well Robert I've gotta tie it up.*
R.W.: Okay. (laughing) Thanks for your interest; and I think your magazine is

extraordinary.
G.P.: I just talked to Terry Riley for the next issue.
R.W.: Oh he's a great man. Please include somewhere in this my great gratitude to Terry Riley. He was very much an important part of Paris; and while we're talking about Daevid Allen. It was though Daevid Allen that I discovered Terry Riley; and he's been a benign and discreet source throughout our lives. Say hello to him through this interview. A lovely man.
G.P.: *Okay Robert, well thank you for your time.*
R.W.: Okay, it's a pleasure, and thanks for your interest in me.

Selected solo Robert Wyatt Discography

The End of an Ear (1970 CBS LP)
Rock Bottom (Virgin 26/7/74 LP)
I'm A Believer/Memories (Virgin 6/9/74 single)
The Peel Sessions (Strange Fruit 1974 EP)
Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard (Virgin 30/5/75 LP)
At Last I Am Free/Strange Fruit (Rough Trade 11/80)
Arauco/Caimenera (Rough Trade 3/1980 single)
Stalin Wasn't Stalin' / Stalingrad (Rough Trade '81 single)
Shipbuilding/Memories Of You (Rough Trade 8/1982)
Nothing Can Stop Us (Rough Trade 3/1982 LP)
With Ben Watt - **Summer Into Winter** (Cherry Red 4/82 EP)
The Animals Film (Rough Trade 5/1982 LP)
Work In Progress (Rough Trade 8/1984 EP)
4 Tracks EP (Virgin 1984)
The Wind Of Change/Naimibia (Rough Trade 10/1985 single)
Old Rottenhat (Rough Trade 11/1985 LP)
Dondestan (Rough Trade 27/8/1991 LP/CD). A completely remixed and revised version of **Dondestan** was released in 1998 by Thirsty Ear /Hannibal
A Short Break (Voiceprint 19/9/1992 CD)
Mid-Eighties (Rough Trade 1993 CD)
With John Greaves and others - **Songs** (Resurgence 1995 CD)
Shleep (Hannibal 9/1997 CD)
Free Will And Testament/The Sight Of The Wind (Island 1997)
Solar Flares Burn For You (Cuneiform, 2003)
Cuckooland (Hannibal 2003)



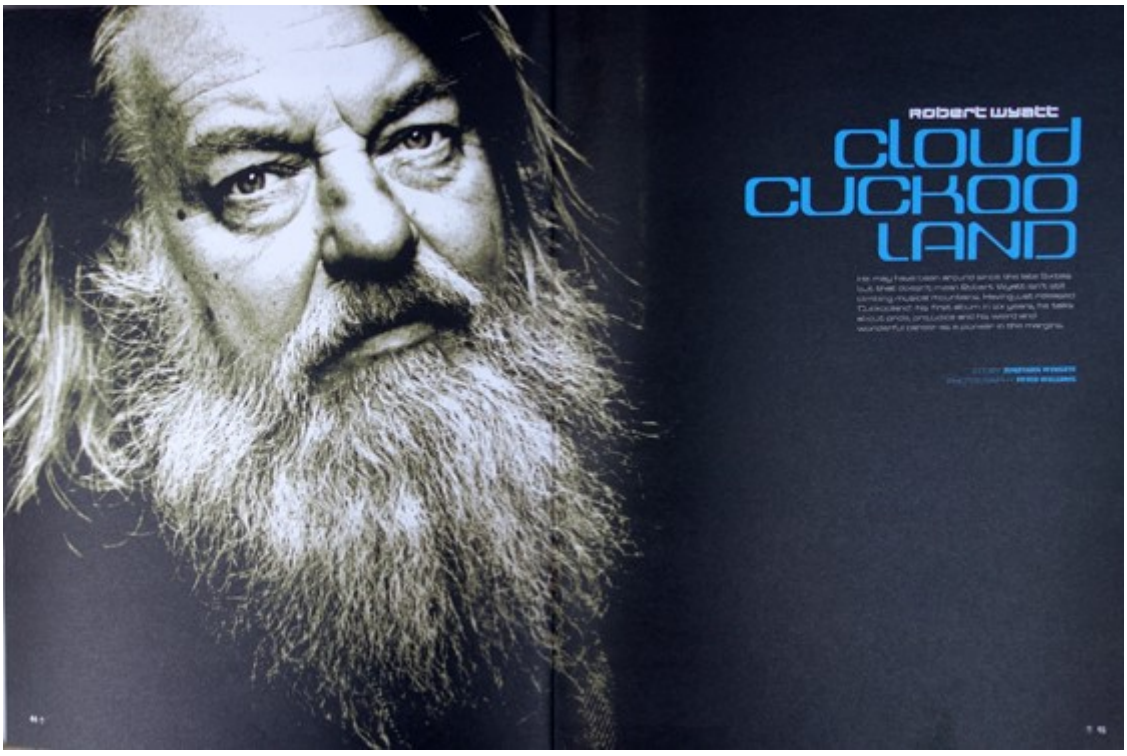
Ad for CUNEIFORM RECORDS in the same issue

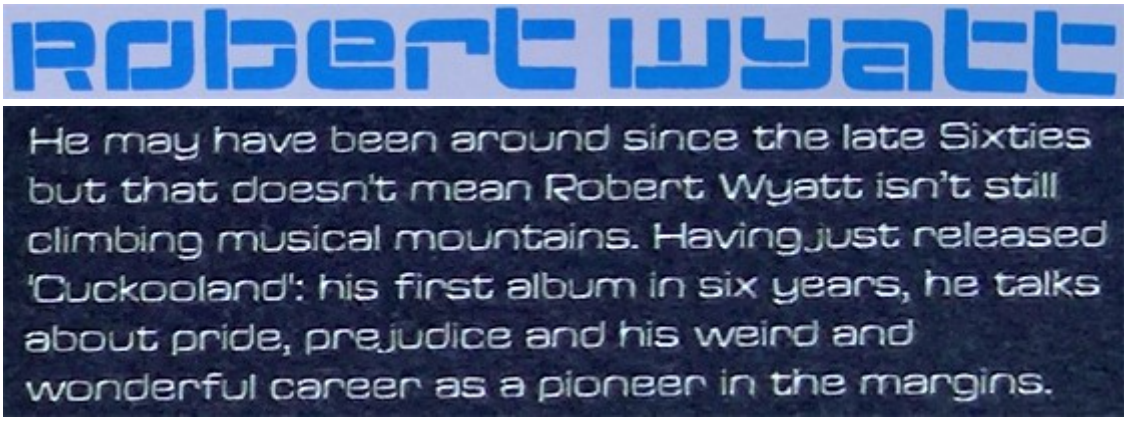
Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Robert Wyatt Cloud Cuckooland - Straight No Chaser - Winter 2003





" I like being interviewed, but: I'm quite nervous beforehand,"
he says, maneuvering his wheelchair next to one of the gleaming chrome tables that line the balconies on the South Bank on a boiling hot August afternoon. He removes his black gloves and offers a firm handshake and a warm but ever so slightly wary smile. "Making music isn't an intellectual activity for me. It's an animal activity, like eating or sleeping. The moment you talk about it, it's inevitably pretentious. It's such a physical activity that anything you say about it has a vague whiff of bullshit about it."

We are here to talk about the release of 'Cuckooland', his first LP since 1997, yet by the time we say our goodbyes, our interview has lasted closer to three hours than the scheduled sixty minutes, and we have covered a plethora of subjects ranging from Coltrane to Communism, via Hendrix, humiliation...and archery.

'Cuckooland' is probably his most cohesive and accessible album so far, but it is still just as on the money and edgy as anything he's recorded since 1974's startling Rock Bottom. Ryuichi Sakamoto once said that Robert Wyatt has "the saddest voice in the world," although today Wyatt (incorrectly) describes how "my ever decreasing vocal range is now more or less reduced to a wino's mutter.

"Actually, I am incredibly happy with 'Cuckooland'," he says, when pressed, two hours into the interview. "I wanted to see if I could get the whole length of the CD and try and not be boring for a minute. I've never even attempted it before. It's like somebody who's only ever written short stories trying to write a novel. I feel like I've climbed a mountain, and I feel really at ease and light-headed now that we've got there.

"But nobody could call it a solo album. There are some great people on it like Gilad Atzmon, Annie Whitehead and Jennifer Maidman, who used to be Ian Maidman. She's much happier now as Jennifer than he ever was as Ian."

You could never accuse him of doing the hard sell. What Wyatt doesn't mention is that his guest list of pedigree chums also includes Paul Weller, David Gilmour and Brian Eno, whom Wyatt has worked with on numerous occasions since he sang on Eno's Taking Tiger Mountain. What does Brian Peter George St. John le Baptiste de la Salle Eno - the ultimate mystery man - actually bring to the making of an album?

"Well, it's very hard to say," he smirks. "I couldn't really define the contribution made by Brian Eno, who darts in and out of things in an entirely unpredictable way, leaving a trail of discreet magic in his wake. He played some synthesiser, he sang on Forest, and he put some extraordinary little guitar effects on the last song. He's just around, really. He gave Alfie a fantastic massage when her back was hurting, he brought a fantastic piece of fruit from abroad that we ate...and it made us all sort of better. He's just a magician...like a magic fairy."



Robert Wyatt's mother Honor, worked as a producer for BBC programmes like Woman's Hour, while his father, George Wyatt, was on industrial psychologist until he was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. "My dad played piano, but I didn't meet him until I was six. Shortly after he joined us, he contracted MS, so he couldn't play piano or work by the time I remember him. So as a teenager, my parents were living off lodgers. My big brother, Mark had an alto saxophone, and he used to bring home jazz records, so there was always music in the house."

What music were you hearing when you were growing up? "The first things I heard were my dad's records - 20th Century classical music like Stravinsky, Bartok, Debussy and Stockhausen. My brother brought things home like Ellington and Mingus, although it still didn't occur to me that I could play jazz because it seemed so bloody difficult. I started to hear people like Ray Charles and Nina Simone, and I knew I wanted to do this. Then I looked in the mirror, and I thought: You don't look a lot like Ray Charles, son," he laughs. "That was the start of it, really.

"I've got the same record collection now as I had as a late teenager," he continues. "I used to like the records because they were new, and I now I like them because they're old. Mingus, late 50s Miles Davis, Coltrane...right back to Louis Armstrong. I never thought I could play this stuff. It was just music that I used to listen to. Jazz certainly seemed like another world. My dad loved the whole thing of bohemian Europe in the 30s. The avant-garde movements in

the arts, surrealism, Dada and all those things were steaming away in my dad's mind, and therefore, in our house. I'm still working on what my parents gave me in terms of culture. I don't think it would have mattered if everybody had stopped making records in 1962. I'd still have plenty to listen to."

Robert Wyatt was born in Bristol in 1945. As the drummer and sometime singer with the legendary Soft Machine, the group he formed in Canterbury in 1968, he established a unique style that mixed melancholy music with his strange brew of English eccentricity and avant-garde jazz-rock.

"I spent all of '68 on tour with Hendrix," he recalls. "It was all just a bit of a blur. The Paradox is that it was because he'd done such disciplined homework on his music that he was able to be so free with it. If he went off on a solo, he could go anywhere and get back to base because he was so well drilled in the first place. He'd worked with The Isley Brothers and Little Richard - those bands were run like army units.

"It was soldiers coming, lock up your daughters stuff," he says. "Rock musicians tended to be like little princes with their retinue of servants. Hendrix was very courteous...an absolute gent. My eyes still actually water at the memory of him as a person, I can tell you. Compared with the boorish lumpiness that one associates with rock, Hendrix was a very feline person among a lot of very lupine characters."

After three groundbreaking LPs, Wyatt found himself having less and less say in the creative direction Soft Machine were taking, and by the time they came to record their next two albums, he had already made his first solo effort, 1970's patchy End Of An Ear. "I recorded End Of An Ear while I was with Soft Machine in exasperation. I just wanted to open the Windows and shout my head off a bit, which is what I did. But it was useful preparation."

Wyatt was soon fired from the Softs without warning for reasons he still doesn't understand over 30 years later. "I don't know why they kicked me out," he says sadly. "You'd have to ask them. I just got a phone call saying 'we've got another drummer'. I respected them so much that I thought they must be right and I deserved it. I thought Soft Machine was my family. I've thought of a million reasons why they asked me to leave - all perfectly justified - and that didn't leave me feeling any better.

"I think what really hurts is humiliation," he continues, staring out blankly over the Thames. "When people try and analyse the unrest in the world, they always think in terms of the haves and have-nots, but I think humiliation plays a big part in unrest, politically. Oscar Wilde was right - nothing is worse than physical pain, but in terms of debilitating battles of the mind, anyone who's been rejected will know that it's such a bombshell that it's unbelievable how it can wreck you."

Wyatt now looks upon the 60s as "a bit of a waste of a decade, at least as far as me getting anywhere was concerned. I think I'm probably a late developer. It wasn't until the 70s that I started really working on how to write tunes and put things together. I'm nearly 60 now, and from my point of view, I preferred all the other decades I've lived in. A lot of things came to the surface via popular culture in the 60s, but they were mostly things that had already been steaming away in various underground circles, whether it was Rhythm & Blues or the whole psychedelic scene. It was all put through the rock 'n' roll sausage machine and made accessible. But I was quite happy when it was just underground myself," he laughs. "I like this secret Society thing. When these secret society's persisted, like the Mod thing and the Northern Soul thing, I really admired that, because you didn't have to read the fashion magazines to find out about it.

"I thought The Beatles were alright," he says, "but not transcendental. The Beatles was cosy, whereas people like Coltrane take you to Planet Z and then drop you back gently on earth. If I'd got into The Beatles before jazz, maybe it would have moved me more."

He soon got another group together called Matching Mole, who made two albums before disbanding. "It was such a chaotic time. I suppose I started to drink for the same reason as anybody else does - because I've got a low boredom threshold. We were all drunk, and the only thing I salvaged out of it was that somewhere in there I married Alfie and had two kids."

In the summer of 1973, Robert Wyatt got drunk at a party, fell out of a fourth floor window and broke his back, leaving him confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

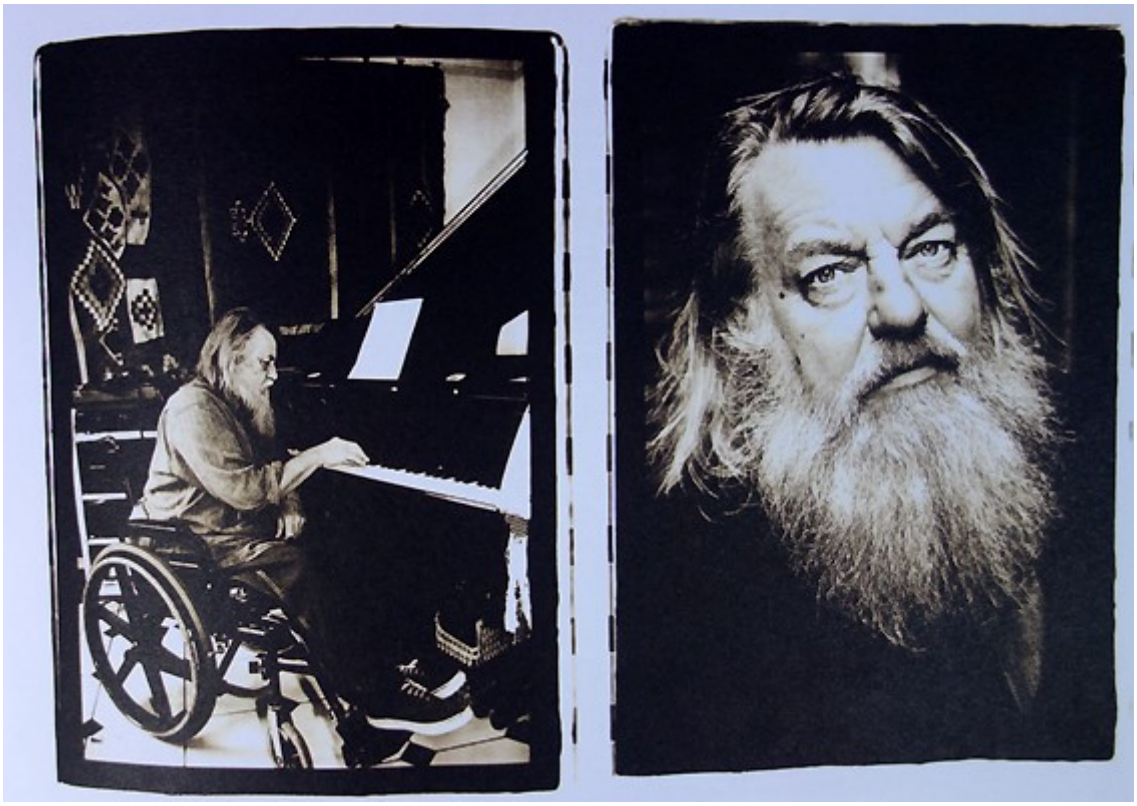
"I was barely conscious when I fell, and I wasn't conscious at all when I landed," he says. "It's like it happened to somebody else. I remember lying there for a second and hearing this

amazing scream echoing across the courtyard that I'd fallen into. Later, somebody told me that that was me."

Did the accident change your attitude to life? "No," he replies, stubbing out a cigarette. "It was like falling off a bicycle. I just fell off and got back on from another angle. It was a bizarre diversion...a bit like a long dream. When you wake up, you're disorientated and you can't quite remember the story. I was unconscious for six weeks, although I was in hospital for nearly a year. When I came out of hospital, I got stuck straight into the music. I'd actually written a lot of 'Rock Bottom' just before the accident.

"I found an unused room in the hospital with an upright piano in it. The alternative to hiding in that room was being taken off to do archery or wholesome exercises. The archery teacher was a funny bloke," he continues with a grin. "He'd come up to you and say: 'I used to work for the LA Police, you know. I don't have to be doing this.' I'd say: 'Right. OK.' So, archery didn't really take off with me."

'Rock Bottom' was followed a year later by 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard', another astonishing box of tricks that included the first of Wyatt's two hits, a cover of The Monkees' I'm A Believer' as well as the song, 'Sonia', composed by South African trumpeter, Mongezi Feza, who died from double pneumonia in an English hospital. Wyatt believes that if Feza had been born white, he would have survived. He also believes it was this incident that acted as the catalyst to kick-start his lifelong fascination with politics. He spent many years as a member of the Communist Party, although he is not a member of any political organisation these days.



> Zoom

"When he died, I was so angry that I think that was a sudden jolt into much more immediate politicization," he recalls. "I suddenly realised that politics wasn't such an abstract thing...it wasn't just conceptual or a theoretical thing. Why is it that he'd come all the way here and bring us such fun with his music and then die like a dog in an institution? I just thought: Fuck this, you know? So I really started to find out what apartheid was all about, because I was such a fan of black music. I just couldn't square the circle of these wonderful people and their music and how life seemed to be so unfair.

'Then I started reading up about it, and the only people who ever really explained things in a way that made sense tended to be anarchists and Marxists. I started to get interested in how the world was run and who ran it on whose behalf. Mongezi's death definitely kick-started politics into the frontline of my consciousness. I got more and more involved in politics, and

in looking for musical connections in politics."

How would you define Communism? "I have a very simple motto - an old trade union motto: Nothing is too good for the workers. If there's one spare penny going out of any enterprise, then it seems to me that the people who should get that spare penny are the people who did the work, not the people who own it."

Wyatt became increasingly involved in politics and enjoying a normal life. "I got involved in Communist Party activities, but I was also enjoying having a life with Alfie. I wanted to have a life and just get by, you know? But you can't. You've got to earn a living. Me on about the workers - there was no point in just watching them."

He was introduced to Rough Trader Geoff Travis, who persuaded him to get back into the studio and start making music again after a five-year hiatus. "I released a few albums with Rough Trade. I try and make records that I don't think anybody else is gonna make. There's no point in thinking: I'd really like to be able to play alto saxophone like Ornette Coleman.

"I shift through all the various noises in my head until I hear something that I can't imagine anybody else making," he explains. "When I actually write, I pick up a certain harmonic idea and it will float about like a virus for years in my brain. It's a very slow process. I wrote a lot of 'Cuckooland' within a year, but I was also using bits and pieces I'd had knocking about for 10 years. Some of the songs are older than the stuff on 'Shleep' - they just hadn't found a home. I find it quite hard to come up with more than about one song a year, so I sometimes find other peoples' tunes to do to complete my CDs."

His other chart entry is his breathtakingly beautiful take on 'Shipbuilding', Elvis Costello's anti-Falklands War lament from 1983. "I didn't really understand the song," he says. "They're amazing lyrics. I was very honoured that someone as on the ball as Elvis Costello had written to me and asked me to do it."

Wyatt's career has brought him precious little commercial success, although today he is undoubtedly one of the most influential avant-garde artists of all time, and albums such as 'Rock Bottom', 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard', 'Old Rottenhat', 'Dondestan' and 'Shleep' are considered to be timeless classics by those lucky few in the know.

"I have no idea what influence I've had, because, like I said, my record collection stopped around 1962," he grins. "I mean, you talk about the effects of paraplegia... I suppose I can't easily get around in a practical way, but it seems to me that I have probably compensated for that by becoming fantastically emotionally and mentally connected with lots of the rest of the world through my music."

How did you feel when you were asked to curate the Meltdown Festival a couple of years back? "I looked at my record collection and thought: There's nobody in it who's still alive," he chuckles. "Then the bloke who organises it sort of nudged me into realising that there was life beyond Miles Davis."

Wyatt hasn't stepped foot on a public stage for over 20 years now, and says that he will never do so again at any price. "I can't cope with a room full of people staring at me," he says. "I get so nervous. I tried doing it a couple of times, and I'd drink, and then I'd forget the words. I last sang on stage in 1983 with The Raincoats. For a lot of people, their main source of income is from touring. It would make me absolutely sick with fear. You know when you turn the water on with those rusty taps, for the first five minutes it's just brown water until it's cleared? Well, my music is a bit like that."

Robert and Alfreda Benge aka Alfie, who has contributed poetry and cover art for many of Wyatt's albums ever since they got married almost 30 years ago, tend to spend most of their time at home in a big old house in Louth, Lincolnshire. Wyatt sits at his piano downstairs and plays his records constantly, while Alfie is often to be found sitting upstairs painting her pictures: "I do karaoke at home...I put on records and join in. I listen to music incessantly...day in, day out. Alfie's art room is upstairs, and I can't go up there because of the wheelchair. She could stand at the top of the stairs and throw buns at me and say: "Fuck off," Robert Wyatt laughs. "But she doesn't. She's too polite."

Robert Wyatt's 'Cuckooland' is out on Rycodisc

Special Brew - Mojo - N° 119 - October 2003

Special brew

Robert Wyatt ★★★★

Cuckooland HANNIBAL



Wyatt's first album for six years features guest appearances by Annie Whitehead, Brian Eno, Phil Manzanera, David Gilmour and Paul Weller.

Review by
JIM IRVIN
Illustration by
LOUISE WEIR

FEW OF the Class of '68 - the year Robert Wyatt made his recorded debut with The Soft Machine — are doing much more than oldies shows these days. Even fewer are actually making new music which stands comparison with that of their heyday — all of which makes Wyatt's achievements with *Cuckooland* even more remarkable. Winding back 30 years, his tenure as one of Britain's most imaginative and energetic drummers ended abruptly when he broke his back in an accident. This forced him to concentrate his energies into his singing and songwriting — areas in which, fortunately, he was also exceptionally talented.

A slow worker but one who has never released a poor record, he has inched forward over hard-won ground to the point where, at the ripe old age of 58, he has made an album which ranks alongside his strongest work. Wyatt's voice, a uniquely affecting instrument which Ryuichi Sakamoto claimed to be "the saddest in the world", still sounds in good nick. Perhaps, as he claims, he has lost a few notes off the top of his range, but his manchild tones ring out sweet and true.

Maybe we should start putting up the bunting and proclaiming Wyatt a 'National Treasure', but somehow you can't imagine that title fitting him too comfortably. True, his work has always been imbued with a generosity of spirit and a chummy, often surreal, humour, but on *Cuckooland* other equally typical characteristics re-emerge: in particular a profound melancholy and a sympathy with the plight of those at the wrong end of geopolitical powermongering. Imprisoned Israeli scientist Mordechai Vanunu, former Iranian leader Mohammad Mossadegh, the dead of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the persecuted gypsies of the Czech Republic are among those who move through these songs.

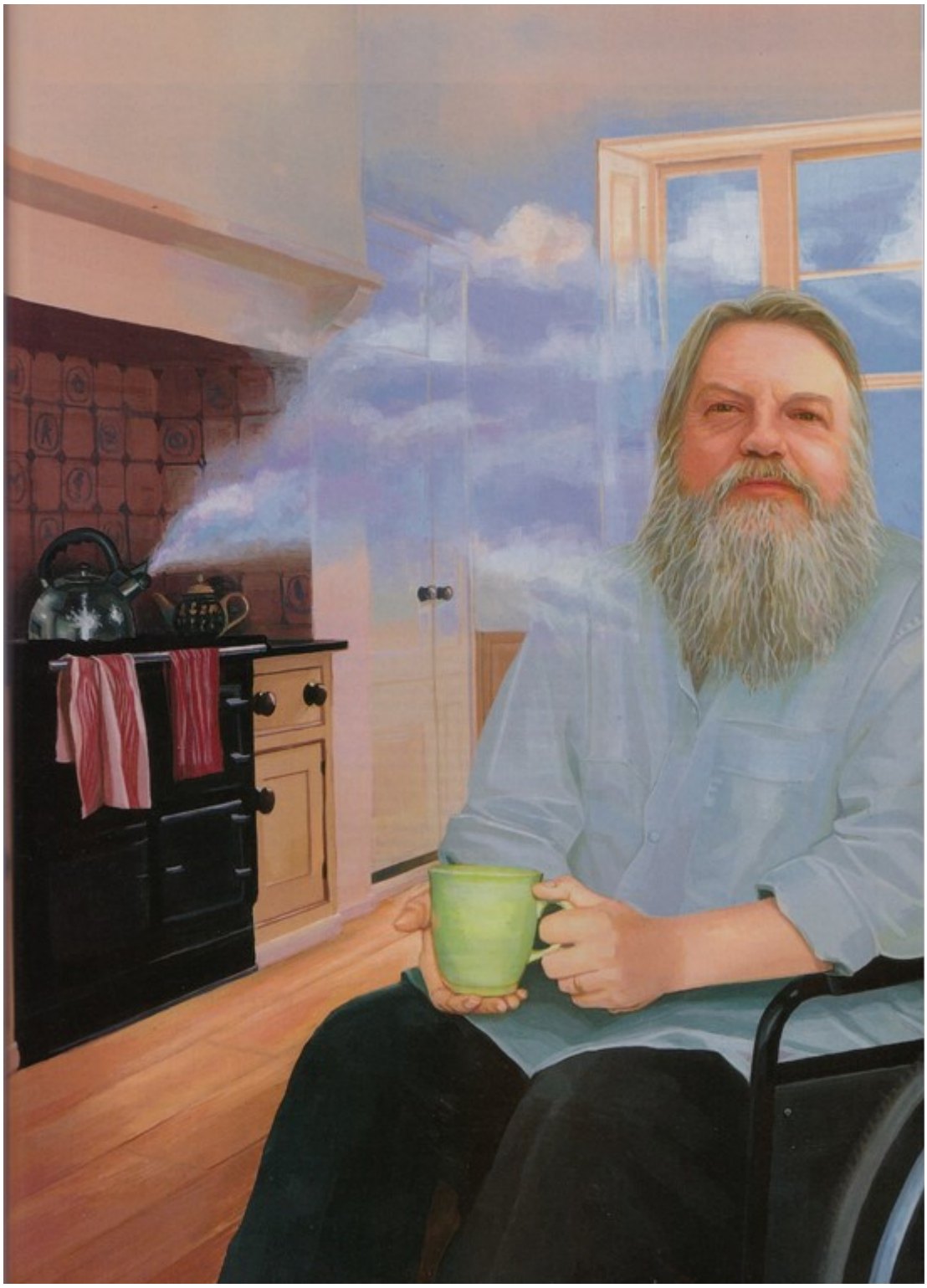


Cuckooland weighs in at 75 minutes, but for those with a limited attention span Wyatt demanded half-a-minute's silence in the middle to allow the listener to "go put the kettle on" or maybe to start with the second half first. Its predecessor, *Shleep*, came after a similarly long wait, but whereas that album was suffused with a light and warmth, *Cuckooland* is grainier and grittier, albeit punctuated by joyous eruptions. One of these is Old Europe, a vivid evocation of the Paris jazz scene of the '40s and '50s, including Miles Davis's romance with Juliette Greco, set to a springheeled bop rhythm. Here Wyatt plays drums, trumpet and keyboards, with saxes and clarinet provided by Israeli reedsman Gilad Atzmon.

Back in die '80s Wyatt chose to stop agonising about his limited songwriting output, pointing out that it had never held back Sinatra or Elvis. Cover versions assumed a greater role in his music and, latterly, collaborations with his partner Alfreda Benge have also become increasingly important. Here he tackles a number of songs by vocalist Karen Mantler, daughter of Mike Manlier and Carla Bley. Thee ominous Beware is one of their many vocal duets on the album, with her New York twang providing a satisfying contrast to his Home Counties enunciation. On Cuckoo Madame, Wyatt makes helium-high samples of Mantler's voice flit around his own as he sings Benge's creepy narrative, and the two trade more orthodox vocal lines on a languid cover of Antonio Carlos Jobim's bossa nova classic, Insensatez.

Wyatt has assembled a cast of exceptional musicians here and directs them with a mercurial touch. Although his heavy friends make some telling contributions, the lesser known Atzmon and his compatriot Yaron Stavi on double bass are particularly impressive, playing with strength and sensitivity. But Annie Whitehead is the crucial presence here. Her clear, singing trombone style is a perfect foil for Wyatt's dolorous tones, particularly on Lullaby For Hamza, a song addressed to a boy born just as the bombing of Iraq commenced. Given Wyatt's leftward political leanings one can hazard a guess what he felt about the attack, but this is a wonderful vocal performance. Over a gently bustling rhythm he sings "The world is wrong again, I need your lullaby/Night is long and sleep's just a dream," transmuting any residual anger into a healing song of tenderness and quiet defiance.

Jim Irving



> Zoom

Robert Wyatt talks to Mike Barnes.

Cuckooland seems quite dark in places.

'There have been some worrying events and we do live under what is the most unpleasant government in living memory, and I find that puts a dark grey cloud over the sunniest day, to be honest. Even if I'm not singing about politics it affects my general sense of alienation. I'm disappointed with the way English governments completely cave in to Washington all the time, it just makes me ill. I'm not against real Americans, they don't vote for these bastards any more than we do. So that's where the gloom comes from. Alfie came up with Lullaloop, about an old git trying to get to sleep and thank God she did, 'cos it does lighten it up a bit. But I feel as happy with the album as anything I've ever done in terms of

getting stuff out of my head onto tape - it's just a great sense of relief."

Your drumming on this album sounds more flamboyant than it has done for a long time.

"Yeah, for years I was traumatised by the thought that I don't want people saying, 'Not bad for a cripple', so I would just do percussion or no drums at all, or get in a drummer. But more recently I've had the room to leave the top of the kit out and actually you can do quite a lot with a couple of cymbals and a snare, and go into the studio and add a bit of bass drum. I thought: Well, what's stopping me?"

Do you agree with commentators who say that contemporary rock music lacks any political bite?

"I wouldn't think it was fair to single out musicians to have a duty to respond or not respond to things. I don't have a theory about it - if I'm writing stuff, whatever I'm thinking about comes out. Music is music and all I'm really trying to do is make nice sounding records. As Charlie Parker once said, I'm trying to get the prettiest notes in the right order."

Given the success of the Soupsongs tour of 2000 - where your music was played without your direct involvement - is there any chance we might actually see you on-stage in the future?

"Tell, the nearest I got was on the telly thing for BBC 4 -I did a few tunes with Annie's band on that but there was no audience. I like to be a back room person, a cook in a kitchen. I lose my nerve if I have to go out and meet the customers (*laughs*). Put it on a plate and let someone else take it out. But hearing someone else do something with my tunes is my favourite thing - it's fantastic."

You've described your voice as having being reduced to a "wino's mutter", which alarmed me until I realised it wasn't true.

(*Laughs*) "Well thank you, that's a relief! I'd rather it was that way round than me saying, Yeah, I'm still singing like a songbird, and then someone says, 'Sounds like a dozy old git to me.' There was a programme on Radio 2 the other day on Nina Simone and I thought, Blimey, this is the real thing. I feel like a molehill looking up at a mountain when I listen to that kind of voice. Luckily, the standards in rock music are so incredibly low that people like me can earn a living."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Epiphanies - Wire N° 235 - September 2003

EPIPHANIES



Robert Wyatt learns the value of cheap music from a Ray Charles ballad.

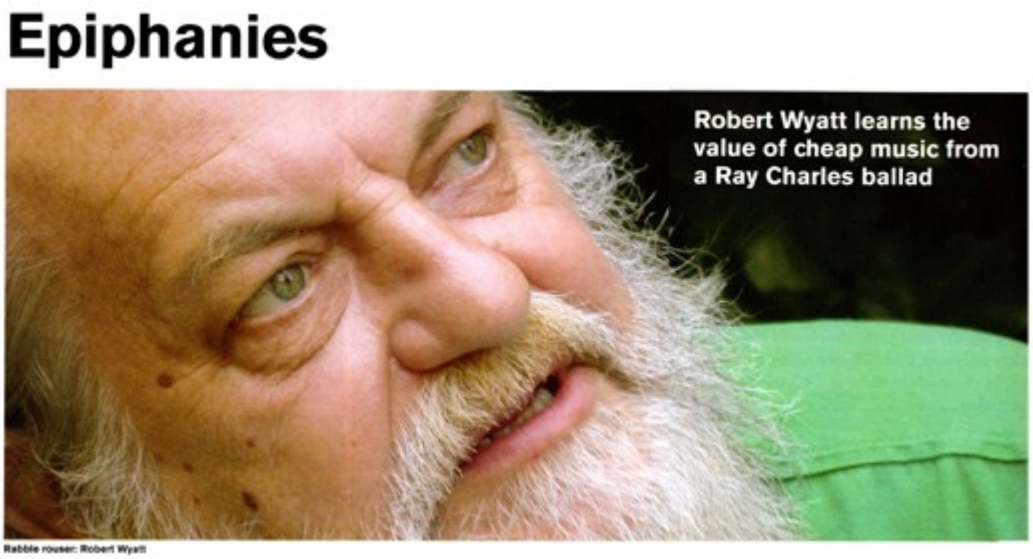
Rabble Rouser : Robert Wyatt
Photo : Keiko Yoshida

Before I can start, there's a caveat... well, two really. One, the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham said that the English don't know much about music but they like the noise it makes. The other is, Gunther Schuller, writing about jazz listeners, talks about the kind of cloth-eared lefties who think that "Strange Fruit" is a good song [Wyatt famously recorded the Billie Holiday song on a Rough Trade single in the 1980s]. I don't feel I'm an authority on music outside of what I know, there's all kinds of stuff about music I don't understand.

I'd been brought up to believe in serious music. For my Dad, most serious was Bartok and Hindemith. He had liked Fats Waller and Duke Ellington before the war, even though he didn't think they were serious music. I did, but my Dad knew they were real music at least, and as I was young, they were allowed. By then I was getting as much out of Gil Evans as I was out of Hindemith, and as far as I was concerned it was just as serious. But at that stage I still accepted the idea that there were intrinsically serious and shallow idioms, and my Dad's thing was that pop music was intrinsically shallow. I'd heard quite a lot of it because my sister had records, and they didn't interest me a lot. So I didn't have a problem with Dad's idea.

Until I came across an LP called *The Genius Of Ray Charles*. I thought, Genius? How could he be a genius if he's only a popular singer? Clearly a misuse of the word. I was like that. I didn't really have any argument with my Dad. I really liked my parents and I liked what they liked, the art of the 20th century, the surrealists, the dadaists and all that stuff. But with Ray Charles, it was a difficult moment because as far as I can hear, bearing in mind my caveats, Ray Charles singing a ballad, even a soppy one like "Don't Let The Sun Catch You Crying", is as good as Bartok's *Violin Concerto* or Miles Davis. I knew it was a slushy

pop song, just a tune with tinkly cocktail piano, and because it had violins on it, it didn't have any jazz cred. I couldn't even work out what the words were half the time, but I thought, it's an astonishing record, absolutely beautiful. Suddenly any idea of a hierarchy of art crumbled away in my mind, and as far as I was concerned, there was no intrinsically superior idiom.



It was only a small crack in the music listening in the house, but it opened the way for absolutely anything. I could now enjoy Buddy Holly or Beethoven or whatever. After that. I found out I was constantly going against the grain in the sense that every new idiom sets up a hierarchy: good versus naff, quality versus crap, and so on. and on my new trajectory I always seemed to be finding serious, solemn beauty in what was considered naff. Later, when I was making music myself, it was bit embarrassing because we [Soft Machine] weren't playing regular pop music. People said, "This is better than pop music, it is superior." Once again. I could see incipient hierarchies reemerging. like there was this need to have them.

On *The Genius Of*, one side was big band Ray Charles, "Let The Good Times Roll", things like that, and the other side was strings. Well, the jazz hierarchy at that time had it that the respectable side was the big band lot, the other side was the girls' stuff, and I always liked the girls' stuff. I went to absurd lengths, it now seems, to break this hierarchy. I was into The Bee Gees. Lynsey De Paul, The Monkees, anything. Gary Glitter? Let it roll. Fantastic. I wasn't just asserting something against an old guard but the very new guard as well, which was very busily constructing an intellectual hierarchy, of which we [Soft Machine] were petty princes. It was completely mad and I thought, I have got to deal with this. So I did a Monkees song [in 1974, several years after leaving Soft Machine, Wyatt released "I'm A Believer" as a solo single.]

"Don't Let The Sun Catch You Crying" interested me as well politically. My parents and a lot of their friends on the Left, not revolutionaries, were egalitarian when it came to economic political issues. But in their minds an intellectual aristocracy had replaced the cultural aristocracy that they had relinquished and abandoned. Similarly, as much as the Socialist countries abandoned economic hierarchies in the Western sense, they vociferously embraced bourgeois cultural values and had an almost hysterical fear of popular culture. They were taken with a thing called improving music, improving culture, which is good for you, and naff culture, which is bad for you, and children must be guided away from all these bad things. The more I read about it, I realised that this tendency had been going on for centuries. The church, for example, used to have a problem with rabble music. Organised church music was elevating, and the music of the rabble, when they got pissed, caught sexual diseases and that sort of thing, was the bad kind. The church monitored the rabble with totalitarian verve, intervening constantly to break down the power of mob culture and mob music. Following on from that, you couldn't shock my parents' communist or egalitarian friends by saying. "I don't believe in God", but you could by saying, "I don't believe in Mozart".

Well, I really disagreed with that. The Left missed a trick there, because the idea that serious music was morally elevating took a bit of a battering after the Second World War.

What they talked about as serious music, basically, was the music of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Opera, symphony and all the great structures of music gave us the Axis powers, and how morally elevating was that? There wasn't anything wrong with the music, but the claims made for it were ersatz religious claims made out of fear of the mob.

All this came out of listening to Ray Charles, who made it perfectly all right to be a genius and I have clung on to that key assertion nervously ever since. Even so, I hadn't yet finished with hierarchies myself. Before buying a record, which wasn't very often in those days, I went on and on subdividing jazz into participants and innovators and geniuses and not-geniuses. All right, we got the geniuses here: Thelonious Monk, yes; Charlie Mingus, yeah; Charlie Parker, yeah; Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, yes... Ornette Coleman, can I buy Ornette Coleman? Well, OK, for the tunes, yeah?

Of course, I was missing the main event, which was hundreds and hundreds of people playing music and having a fantastic time doing it, out of which come some people with a few diamonds. But genius is in the whole culture, fermenting away in hundreds of different ways and every participant is part of it.

Interview by Biba Kopf. Cuckooland is out this month on Hannibal

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

'I've no idea what's next' - The Guardian - 22 September 2003

The Guardian

'I've no idea what's next'

His voice may be a wino's mutter, but Robert Wyatt's optimism shines through. Tim Cumming meets the former Soft Machine singer

"Delfina was a Spanish woman we knew who had a farm in Wiltshire and invited us to stay after the accident," says musician Robert Wyatt, looking back on the making of his 1974 cult classic, Rock Bottom. The "accident" happened when he fell, drunk, from a fourth-floor window at a party. He broke his spine and was left confined to a wheelchair. Thirty years after that life-changing fall, Wyatt and his partner, Alfreda Benge, are once again Delfina's tenants at her live-in studios for visiting British and international artists on an untidy stretch of Bermondsey Street in south London. The studio has been Wyatt's London base for the past few years, during which he has recorded a new album, Cuckooland. It is an appropriate setting, with a spirit of internationalism and communalism that mirrors his own art and concerns.

"I was brought up on the music of Europe from the first part of the 20th century," he says, citing Webern, Hindemith and Bartok, "which sets you up for what happens in the second half. I was used to the idea that there were no wrong notes, and I was ready for the postwar stuff like Stockhausen. But what really grabbed me was black music: Duke Ellington, Ornette Coleman."

And then pop music, which came with coffee bars, girls and painful adolescence, and was the medium that held them all together. "I'm really grateful to Buddy Holly and Little Richard for providing the background to all that. To make it all OK."

Pop, jazz and the breakdown of harmonic structure; the three-cornered hat of Wyatt's career was already in place before he had even raised a drumstick. "I left school at 16 completely unable to do anything at all," he remembers. "Then the Beat Group thing started, so I started playing drums and singing, the two instruments you can play without learning a thing about music." He laughs heartily, a three-packs-a-day laugh. "They seemed about the right career choice for me."

Soft Machine, the band that established him as a drummer, vocalist and composer, emerged from what is retrospectively called the Canterbury Scene. Alongside Pink Floyd, they were psychedelic totems of late-1960s London. But their development into cerebral avant-jazz slowly eclipsed Wyatt's more playful, homespun conceptualism. He left the band after their fourth album in 1971, in a familiar tale of musical differences and personal conflict that led him to establish Matching Mole, its name a pun on the French for Soft Machine.

Originally intended as a vehicle for "simple love songs", Matching Mole's music soon expanded on the free style of Soft Machine, with Wyatt's exploration of vocal drones and myriad electronic effects. Remarkable live recordings recently released on the American label Cuneiform reveal a group whose inventiveness flirted with chaos yet came out on top, their avant-garde seriousness tinged with Wyatt's spirit of play.

Wyatt had been on the road almost constantly for a decade until his accident in 1973. Afterwards, Matching Mole was disbanded, and though there were a handful of solo gigs, his performing days were over. "I couldn't really handle it as a singer. It was too naked. I got stage fright."

After the accident he started crafting his own art in the studio. The submarine lyricism of Rock Bottom was the result, composed in Venice before the accident and on a piano in the hospital afterwards, during Wyatt's long convalescence. After a solo recording session on Delfina's farm, the tapes were taken to London, where musicians such as South African trumpeter Mongezi Feza added their parts. It had originally been planned as a band recording, but the accident freed Wyatt from the "terrible difficulties" of being the leader. "I didn't know how I was going to do it, and it was decided for me by circumstances. So what could have been debilitating turned into an excuse to work in a different way without the pressure and responsibilities of performing or being in a group."

Feza's trumpet also featured on Wyatt's next LP, Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard, but his unexpected death while being treated in hospital for a nervous disorder - a death Wyatt puts down to neglect engendered by racism - galvanised Wyatt towards a decade of political engagement with the Communist party. It was seven years before he released another album, and by then the musical climate had changed completely.

"What I liked about the Communist party," he says, "was that it was internationalist and opposed to the totalitarian global empire in which we're enveloped. It was the only party to see things on that scale." But as he joined, a new generation were about to embark on what Wyatt calls "a practice run for new Labour. So I was in the ludicrous position of joining it as a new member and immediately becoming an anachronism."



Wyatt: 'what could have been debilitating turned into an excuse to work in a different way without the pressure and responsibilities of performing or being in a group.' Photo: Eamonn McCabe

Punk and the rise of independent labels finally brought Wyatt back into the studio, but on his own terms. Geoff Travis at the Rough Trade record label secured his release from the huge debts and tiny royalties saddled on him by Richard Branson at Virgin, and, for the first time, he felt a degree of emancipation from a music industry that he felt had exploited him from the beginning. "My contemporaries felt alienated from music, just as I thought there was somewhere in it where I felt at home. Two Tone came along, Weller and all that lot, and I liked them, I felt more at home in their generation."

The 1980s albums - Nothing Can Stop Us Now and Old Rottenhat - were militant, impassioned and idiosyncratic, the former mixing Chic's Now I Am Free with Stalin Wasn't Stallin', a 1940s black American gospel song in praise of Uncle Joe. There were just two albums in the 1990s. He released Dondestan in 1991: the title is the Spanish phrase for "Where are they?" The highly acclaimed Shleep followed in 1997. By then he had won ownership of his back catalogue from Virgin, and struck a deal with Ryko after Rough Trade was bought out, giving him a measure of freedom and control rare in the industry. "Since Shleep," he says, "it's been the first time in our life when we haven't been poor."

These days he tends to work alone, or in pairs - with fellow musicians, and with Jamie Johnson, the co-producer on Cuckooland. "I concentrate exactly like a painter, with tape instead of canvas and instruments instead of brushes." Percussion, keyboards, cornet, trumpet, and vocals are all part of his palette.

The making of Cuckooland was one of slow accumulation. The jazz-tinged Trickledown dates back almost a decade. "I get ideas and put them on tape, and they're like viruses looking for a body." With the freedom to record at ex-Roxy Music guitarist Phil Manzanera's studio without watching the clock, he could give free rein to his cinematic process of composition. "I like to work with musicians one at a time - get them in for a day or two, and go right through the material and find bits where they can add colour."

Guests on the album include trombonist Annie Whitehead, Israeli sax player Gilad Atzmon, as well as Floyd guitarist Dave Gilmour, Paul Weller and Wyatt's friend and collaborator for many years, Brian Eno, whose role he describes as "making appropriate discrete contributions, a very specific nudge in the right direction on all fronts".

The album is heavily instrumental, with as many textures and tangents as a late Picasso, or his beloved Juan Miro. "I do get my sense of form and rightness, the texture, the number of events and where they're placed, from painters. It makes sense to me what happened to Miro during his life - I can absolutely feel it."

His singing voice is lower than it was - a wino's mutter, he calls it - and he plays trumpet to reach the higher ranges where his melancholy falsetto used to take him. "I can still hear those high notes," he says. "I didn't want to feel pinned down as a singer, and the trumpet frees me from that."

Cuckooland retains that disarming humour that characterises much of Wyatt's work, mixing the celebration of what he calls "hopeless optimism" with the melancholy of that same feeling. Its brass fanfares hark back to the clear, bright playing of Feza on Rock Bottom, as well as his enduring love for Ellington, Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane. Often avoiding conventional song structures, it is a music you can almost reach out and touch.

"I think sometimes you can get rather lonely," he says at one point, referring to not only a personal alienation but a political one, too. "I feel a chill of alienation when I'm told what Britishness is by someone for whom I feel contempt, or at least revulsion." For Wyatt, the nationalism of David Blunkett, the home secretary, on the front page of that day's paper is the kind of political and cultural parochialism that his music has long fought against.

As for the future, there are three new tracks on Cuneiform's Solar Flares for You, a fascinating collection of Wyatt's solo rarities, two of them home recordings completed this year with ex-Softie Hugh Hopper. Their looped and layered brass patterns sound as fresh and exciting as ever. "I've no idea what will happen next," Wyatt says. "I've got loads of things I could do, but they're all little viruses and flimsy bits. I never talk about what I'm going to do before I've done it. Not in my line."

Tim Cumming

· Cuckooland is released on Ryko on September 29. Solar Flares Burn for You is out now on Cuneiform.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Primer : Soft Machine - The Wire N° 232 - June 2003

THE PRIMER : SOFT MACHINE







A bi-monthly guide to the core recordings of a particular artist or genre. This month: John Cratchley and Samantha Brown trace Soft Machine's passage from London's psychedelic underground to their later jazz rock peaks, while picking up the trails of founding members Kevin Ayers, Daevid Allen and Robert Wyatt, and touching base with their fellow pioneers Keith Tippett and Nucleus. Illustration: Savage Pencil



> Zoom

Pre-Soft Machine incarnation The Wilde Flowers on stage in Canterbury, 1966

Common criticism of jazz-rock argues that it pursued the worst excesses of each genre, and caused irrevocable damage to both. Peter Schulze, who produced many jazz-rock concerts for Radio Bremen in the 1970s, recalls that during this time many jazz groups incorporated rock sensibilities, but far fewer rockers repaid the compliment. The outstanding exception was Soft Machine. At the height of their powers, this polymorphous British outfit achieved a complete synthesis of rock and jazz by drawing not on the excesses, but the strengths of both: raw energy, high volume, intricate time signatures, exemplary musicianship, expressive improvisation, gravitas and whimsy. To arrive at such a successful amalgam required a rare mix of alchemy and serendipity.

The journey starts in the early 1960s, in Canterbury, Kent, where grammar school friends Robert Wyatt, Hugh Hopper and Mike Ratledge bonded over a shared passion for the bop

and free jazz of Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk and Ornette Coleman. In early 1962 Wyatt befriended Daevid Allen, an itinerant Australian guitarist and Beat poetry aficionado. Allen became a mentor to the three friends, inviting them to join him in London for an event at the ICA performing free jazz and poetry in the company of Brion Gysin and William S Burroughs. Soon after, Allen moved to Paris to conduct tape experiments with Burroughs and the then relatively unknown Terry Riley, among others. Back in Canterbury, meanwhile, Ratledge left for Oxford to study philosophy; and Wyatt and Hopper formed The Wilde Flowers with Hopper's brother Brian, Pye Hastings, Richard and David Sinclair, Richard Coughlan and Kevin Ayers. A few Voiceprint compilations documenting the so-called Canterbury scene quickly scotch the legend about it being the UK's Haight-Ashbury, but they usefully reveal The Wilde Flowers as a not untypical local group - bar the odd jolt of free jazz - playing R&B and soul covers and originals. Allen eventually returned to Canterbury with unknown American guitarist Larry Nolan to rehearse with Ayers. The trio invited Ratledge, back from Oxford, and Wyatt to join them, leaving the rest of The Wilde Flowers to form Canterbury's other great mainstays, Caravan.

When Nolan left as quickly as he came, they went out as a quartet with Allen taking over on guitar, Wyatt on drums and vocals, Ratledge on organ, and Ayers on bass and vocals. After a mercifully brief spell playing out as Mr Head, in mid-1966 they renamed themselves The Soft Machine, after the Burroughs novel, with author's blessing. Although in the beginning Soft Machine worked from a song base, it was fed by two highly idiosyncratic writers in Ayers and Wyatt, while their penchant for improvisation meant they were soon taking their songs beyond the standard three minute pop barrier. About the only place the group felt any sense of belonging was in London's burgeoning psychedelic underground, which in its pre-"Itchycoo Park" period was a loose amalgam of heads open to all shades of weirdness.

Residencies at the UFO and Zebra clubs and extensive touring in the UK followed until July 1966. Outside London's head set, however, the group quickly ran into hostile, uncomprehending audiences with little sympathy for the Soft Machine brand of psychedelic revolution, which was founded on porous medleys of songs and jams at excessive volume. In the summer of 1967, they temporarily quit the UK for dates in France, only to lose guitarist Allen on their way back, when he was refused UK entry as an undesirable alien.



> Zoom

Gong, pictured in 1971 in Hérouville, France, with Kevin Ayers (2nd left) and Daevid Allen (centre)



> Zoom

Soft Machine touch down at the UFO Club, London, 1967

For the remainder of 1967, Soft Machine carried on as a trio. In January 1968, they departed for San Francisco to join Jimi Hendrix's US tour as support group. Before returning home, Soft Machine recorded their first album at the Record Plant Studios, New York. It was eventually released the following year, but only in the USA. Before it came out, Soft Machine had rejoined Hendrix for the winter leg of his US tour. The punishing schedule left the group exhausted, causing them to split up as soon as it was over. But with a two-LP contract to honour, Wyatt and Ratledge were persuaded to reform, recruiting Hugh Hopper on bass in place of Ayers, who had disappeared somewhere in Spain. In 1969, they fulfilled their contractual requirements by recording *Soft Machine Volume 2*.

The chemistry of this Soft Machine trio, experimenting with song segues and ever extending instrumental bridges at deafening volume, triggered the chain reaction that caused the tectonic plates of rock and jazz to shift, grate and collide. In an incredibly fertile three year span between 1969-71, Soft Machine concertina'd between three and

seven members, as the core trio experimented with a horn section involving trumpeter Marc Charig, Elton Dean on alto sax and saxello, Lyn Dobson on soprano and tenor and Nick Evans on trombone. The horn section, minus Dobson, had been lifted piecemeal from another pioneering jazz-rock outfit: Keith Tippett's Sextet. Tippett was a jazz pianist who was already integrating rock sensibilities seamlessly into his music. His sextet had a fixed horn section, but employed the rhythm players best suited to his music's fast-changing demands. Tippett's bass pool included Jeff Clyne, Roy Babbington and Harry Miller, and the drum seat was filled by Phil Howard, John Marshall, Bryan Spring or Alan Jackson. Both Howard and Marshall were destined to replace Wyatt in Soft Machine, when the drumming vocalist was finally squeezed out of the group he founded by an instrumental faction which thought they were above or beyond mere songwriting. Babbington also collaborated with The Softs, eventually replacing Hopper. In the meantime, the impact of Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew* period on the rock world was sending ripples to British shores, which was echoed in the electric jazz of lan Carr's Nucleus, the third indispensable group of UK's great jazz-rock experiment, featuring a rhythm section of Jeff Clyne and John Marshall.

The music exploding out of this Soft Machine/Keith Tippett/Nucleus triangle was a powerful, often astonishing rock-driven fusion fired up on free impulses as it enthusiastically negotiated jazz's trickier time signatures. Between them, they opened up a space where the likes of Henry Cow crossfertilised with their oppositional rock Improv; where Soft Machine founder Daevid Allen located an audience for Gong's loopy synths, busking saxes an space rock silliness; where The Softs' Canterbury colleagues Caravan timidly raised the hemline of their post-psychedelic Prog whimsy, if only for a tantalising moment; where Hatfield And The North forged a thrilling, if shortlived, fusion-tempered rock just before the deluge of thrill-seeking second-string jazzers washed the excitement out of the jazz-rock adventure. But these are bit players of varying importance in this particular story. Besides, most of its principal players managed to engineer their own downfalls without any outside help. After six albums Soft Machine had shaken out the last of its experimental elements with the loss of bassist Hopper and reedsman Elton Dean, whose playing kept the free flame burning through The Softs' *Third*, *Fourth* and *Fifth* releases. Ratledge, meanwhile, sulked his way through *Seven* and *Bundles* (1978), Soft Machine's first record for their new label Harvest, and then quit the spotlight for a career in library music, apparently. By the time Karl Jenkins took the helm, Soft Machine had completely frittere away their earlier phenomenal ability to orchestrate monumental blocks of fuzz bass, organ and brass noise with wit and grace.



> Zoom

Soft Machine (Kevin Ayers, Robert Wyatt, Mike Ratledge and Daevid Allen) in Dulwich Park

With Jenkins doggedly running the franchise until 1981, Soft Machine accelerated the erosion of the group's reputation that had set in for real when Hopper left after *Six*. But in truth, the damage had begun earlier. Indeed, some argue it was seeded in the same impulses that drove them to become one of the heaviest, most powerful and at times pitiless innovative forces in any field at the dawn of the 70s. These peaks were attained at the great cost of Robert Wyatt's vocals and humane lyrics, not to mention his inspired drumming. Fortunately, labels like Cuneiform, Voiceprint and, latterly, Hux have unearthed a rich vein of archive releases that attest to the group's astonishing power and capacity for change between 1967-71.

It is no coincidence that all Soft Machine's early absconders - Daevid Allen, Hugh Hopper, Elton Dean and Wyatt, both with Matching Mole and solo - went on creating absorbing music, while Jenkins made his mark on the charts in the 1990s with the execrable chill-out/Gregorian chant project Adiemus (which, incidentally, credited Ratledge).



> Zoom

Recording at Olympic Studios, February 1967

THE SOFT MACHINE

JET PROPELLED PHOTOGRAPHS
CHARLY SNAP133 CD 1967/1989
SOFT MACHINE TURNS ON VOL 1
VOICEPRINT VP231 CD 1967/2001
SOFT MACHINE TURNS ON VOL 2
VOICEPRINT VP234 CD 1967/2001

In April 1967, Soft Machine - here, Daevid Allen on guitar, Kevin Ayers on bass and vocals, Mike Ratledge on keyboards, and Robert Wyatt on drums and vocals - spent three days in De Lane Lea Studios recording with producer, impresario and entrepreneur Giorgio Gomelsky. Rumour has it the group thought they were making music publishers' demos, but Gomelsky insists they were there to record an album and took the tapes away with him. Years after the fact, these have disseminated under various different titles and compilations, and here as *Jet Propelled Photographs*. Its raw playing and sound quality argue that these were indeed intended as demos, but there's no mistaking the potential latent in the material, a good portion of it written when Ayers and Wyatt were still in The Wilde Flowers. Whatever, the group's unique approach to song stirs itself in early versions of Ayers's "Shooting At The Moon" and Hugh Hopper's "Memories" (later covered by Allen on 1971's Banana Moon and Wyatt on the B side of his surprise 1974 hit "I'm A Believer"). Though he's basically comping keyboard accompaniment, Ratledge's ear is finely tuned to the nuances of Wyatt's falsetto, tracking mood shifts as the vocal slithers between melancholy, heartbreak and slapstick punning. But Allen's playing ranges from rudimentary to just about competent. He has not yet evolved the shimmering glissando - an echoing, spacey bottleneck technique he devised after watching Syd Barrett - that distinguishes early Gong. Complementing his own thin, resilient vocals, Wyatt's careering drumming consolidates early Soft Machine's swinging proto-psychedelia.

The bootleg quality live recordings and studio demos constituting the two volumes of *Turns On* confirm the early potential of early Softs with and without Allen, but you have to listen hard to hear it. You have to weigh the significance of their handful of recordings from the Middle Earth club and elsewhere, documenting the group's participation in London's psychedelic underground, against the cruddy sound that renders it nigh impossible to divine the ways they were expanding the psychedelic bubble. Sadly, none of these sets include Soft Machine's only single, "Love Makes Sweet Music" (by Kevin Ayers), backed with "Reelin', Squealin', Dealin'" and released on Polydor in 1967.

THE SOFT MACHINE

THE SOFT MACHINE
ONE WAY RECORDS MCAD22064 CD 1968
VOLUME 2
PROBE SPB1 002 CD 1969

To all intents and purposes, Soft Machine's debut album was recorded live in the studio, with 'non-interfering' producers Chas Chandler and Tom Wilson. But they weren't being jazz-purist about it, and when they did indulge the odd studio intervention, such as a 'phased' drum solo zapping between speakers like a stereo

demonstration record, they did so to glorious effect. Though they're still song-orientated here, their tunes are as much vehicles for the trio's dazzling instrumental interplay as vessels for the lyrics.

Ratledge's organ is bursting with ebullient energy, while Ayers has developed a keener balance of rebounding rhythm and bass-led melodies in the absence of a guitarist. Wyatt, meanwhile, is already incorporating 'found' lyrics and everyday speech patterns in songs like "Why Am I So Short?". But the highlights are "We Did it Again", an awesome exercise in numbskull minimalism hobbled to a riff every bit as compelling as The Kinks' "You Really Got Me" and Velvet Underground's "What Goes On"; and Ayers's mental wake-up call, "Why Are We Sleeping?"

With Ayers retired hurt after their two 1968 American tours, Wyatt and Ratledge recruited bassplaying roadie Hugh Hopper to make *Volume 2*. Now their sole vocalist, Wyatt is in fine form throughout, scatting through " A Concise British Alphabet" and his more complex wordgames. Ironically plummy sleevenotes claim, "in general everybody's heads are more together" and that the music "may impose cerebral responsibilities on the listener".Too true.





> Zoom

Wyatt and Ratledge joined by Hugh Hopper, 1971 ; Recording at Olympic Studios, February 1967

The early Soft Machine sound is a minefield of contradictory elements. Wyatt's drumming is magnificent from the outset: confident, strident, polyrhythmically complex and refreshingly unpredictable. And he's already a wonderfully enigmatic singer, his expressive falsetto negotiating lyrical passages of intellectual realism, elegiac frailty and absurdist improvisation. At this stage, Ratledge is the most technically advanced player and his organ work is as concise as it is magisterial. The departure of both Allen and Ayers had precipitated the group's move into extended improvisation. Upon Hopper's arrival this direction was sealed. With additional saxophone input of Brian Hopper, Soft Machine were steadily moving away from song qua song.

SOFT MACHINE
SPACED
CUNEIFORM RUNE90 CD 1969/1996

A fascinating digression more than their next move, Spaced occupies a unique position within The Softs' output. Resulting from an invitation to produce music for artist Peter Dockley's 'living art installation' at London's Roundhouse in early 1969, the group declined to perform live (although they had famously accompanied a Picasso play in the south of France a year or so earlier). Instead they duly set about amassing prerecorded material to cover for their non-happening at the happening, so to speak. Brian Hopper was again drafted in to add a horn voice. Rehearsed and recorded in an East London warehouse, the finished soundtrack was constructed around loops and effects, and cut together with engineer Bob Woolford using distinctly Heath Robinson methods like looping tapes around milk bottles. The ad hoc methodology produces a distinctive musique concrète feel, with the resulting tonescapes anticipating the textures of Ambient.

SOFT MACHINE
BBC RADIO 1967-1971
HUX HUX037 2XCD 2003
BACKWARDS
CUNEIFORM RUNE170 CD 1969/2002

Both these live compilations illuminate how Soft Machine were far better live than in the recording studio, even if the only audience actually present was a radio engineer. Covering the eight sessions the group recorded for John Peel's BBC *Top Gear* show, the Hux set spans every significant incarnation of the group after Daevid Allen's departure, including their septet experiments with an expanded brass frontline borrowed from Keith Tippett. On Hux's evidence, Peel and his producers had a knack for catching the group on the cusp of change, and happily gave The Softs free rein. Even though Wyatt ironically comments on the necessity of shortening tracks to standard pop length in his amazing stream of consciousness rendition of "Moon In June", their song medleys mostly break the ten minute mark. Even so, the group exercise remarkable economy in their Peel contributions, making the Hux set a wonderful summary of Soft Machine's growth from their 1967 summer of love to the colder mausoleum monumentalism that prefigured Wyatt's departure in 1971. Wyatt has commented how he got interested in the idea of writing songs where the melody line followed the pattern of everyday speech. Thus, in this legendary version of "Moon In June, "*I can still remember/The last time we played on Top Gear/And though each little song/Was less than three minutes long/Mike squeezed a solo in somehow/And although we like our longer tunes/It seems polite to cut them down/To little bits/They might be hits/Who gives a... after all.* "



> Zoom

Matching Mole with Bill McCormick on bass

Backwards collates live material from various UK and European dates, including some septet tracks from Paris in November 1969, and a demo recording of "Moon In June" by Wyatt solo. Its solitary nature evidences Wyatt's increasing sense of alienation, as The Softs' power base shifted.

THE KEITH TIPPETT GROUP

YOU ARE HERE... I AM THERE

DISCONFORME DISC1963 CD 1969

DEDICATED TO YOU, BUT YOU WEREN'T LISTENING

AKARMA AK227 CD 1971

Pianist Keith Tippett's first album unequivocally laid the ground rules for his particular jazz-rock agenda. With all the material written by him, the album has a satisfying continuity. More importantly, this is composition of the highest order: measured and balanced in his positioning of instruments to give maximum dynamic effect. The pieces unravel slowly, with Tippett gradually introducing rock-flavoured influences, while the playing throughout is forthright and sometimes openly aggressive. E Even at this early stage in Tippett's development, the integrity of his thought process makes any reference to specific forms superfluous, be they jazz or rock. The second track "I Wish There Was A Nowhere" introduces a repeated vamp over which Elton Dean weaves an accomplished alto solo, while trumpeter Charig and trombonist Evans supply swelling chordal overlays. Bassist Clyne and drummer Jackson build a mesmeric pulse over the 14 minute duration of the composition.

If Tippett's debut album is impressive, ranging from fractured avant gardism to pulsating repetition, *Dedicated To You* is, quite simply, indispensable. The compositional credits are more evenly dispersed here, with Evans, Dean, Hopper and Charig aIl contributing. From the outset the album is a rhythmic maelstrom, utilising drummers Wyatt, Phil Howard and Bryan Spring as well as conga player Tony Uta. Spontaneous joy is the result, with Charig and Evans in particularly raucous mood, melding free jazz and rock sensibilities even as they boil to the surface in a fierce bid for independence from each other. Tippett's writing is so integrated, however, that these competing elements are never allowed to rip the piece apart. Instead, they generate a terrific and continuous tension. "Thoughts To Geoff" illustrates this perfectly, with Evans contributing explosive trombone, while Dean's saxello solo on "Green And Orange Night Park" is worthy of Roland Kirk. Tippett, meanwhile, ranges aIl over acoustic and electric pianos to great effect.

SOFT MACHINE

THIRD

COLUMBIA 4714072 CD 1970

The third studio album is The Softs' most complete statement of intent. It was originally released in 1970 as a double LP, with a side each given over to Hopper's "Facelift", Ratledge's "Slightly AIl The Time", Wyatt's "Moon In June" and Ratledge's "Out-BloodyRageous". "Moon In June" is pretty much a solo Wyatt recording, except for Ratledge's fuzzily scrawled organ signature towards the end. Wonderful as it is, it suffers in comparison with the full group's inspired response to the same piece on the Hux *BBC Radio* set. On *Third*, the absurdist element that once defined Soft Machine's group character has been all but ousted by the Ratledge-Hopper axis's heavily pedalled emphasis on fuzzed-up jazz-rock with horn charts, with new recruit Elton Dean's alto and saxello mostly displacing Wyatt's vocalising. The sacrifice of his voice does not preclude Wyatt bringing the relentless swinging energy and invention of his drumming to Ratledge's and Hopper's splendid side-Iong compositions. Recorded live at Birmingham's legendary Mothers club and Croydon's Fairfield Hall, Hopper's "Facelift" rises out of a circling electric piano rondo, until it's abruptly halted by Ratledge's heavily fuzzed organ squalls. Gradually Dean works up the courage to begin a conversation for the whole quartet. The core of Ratledge's loveliest composition, "Slightly AIl The Time", is Hopper's fabulous walking bass part. The organist's other track, "Out-Bloody-Rageous", bursts into being out of endlessly circling keyboards and swooping sax squeals, with an augmented brass section pitching precarious choruses between Dean's and Ratledge's grandstanding.



> Zoom

ROBERT WYATT

THE END OF AN EAR

COLUMBIA 4933422 CD 1970

Matching Mole

Describing himself on the sleeve as an "out of work pop singer", Wyatt was still Soft Machine's drummer when he recorded this first solo statement in 1970. Though it's a predominantly vocal album, with Wyatt playing "drums, mouth, piano, organ", he's got anything but pop on his mind. The album's two takes of Gil Evans's "Las Vegas Tango Part One" are the closest he gets to actual song. Otherwise the music centres on Wyatt's astonishing montages of his multitracked vocal scatting. Mark Charig and Elton Dean provide multitracked horn and sax treatments, Mark Ellidge and Caravan's David Sinclair contribute piano and organ, but the fascination here is the way Wyatt overdubs his many discrete parts into an uneasy and frequently heartbreaking interrogation of his role as a singer in a group that claims to have outgrown the song.

SOFT MACHINE
NOISETTE
CUNEIFORM RUNE130 CD 1970/2000
FACELIFT
VOICEPRINT VP233 2XCD 1970/2001

Noisette is sourced from the same recording of The Softs' January 1970 concert at Croydon Fairfield Hall from which "Facelift" was partially lifted for *Third*. Here they went out as a quintet, featuring Lyn Dobson's soprano, fIute and vocals. At this stage, The Softs were restlessly seeking new elements to keep themselves fresh, and here the trio respond well to the evident empathy already existing between Dobson and Dean.

When they returned to Croydon just three months later on the *Facelift* double, they had already reverted to their standard 1970 quartet. Captured on an audience recording made by Hugh's brother Brian on a failing portable cassette player, *Facelift* nevertheless offers today's listeners an accurate impression of how the group must have sounded from 'out front'. The music's so monstrously good, it's almost terrifying. The quartet throw up stock repertoire props, only with all the supports removed. The way they race around shoring up these towering and teetering compositional blocks with improvised bridges is astonishing. Soft Machine's rehabilitated reputation is largely founded on this pair of releases.



> Zoom

Nucleus with (left) Ian Carr

KEVIN AVERS
JOY OF A TOY
EMI 5827762 CD 1969
DAEVID ALLEN
BANANA MOON
CAROLINE C1512 CD 1971

These early solo albums by two founder members underline how a long and happy life in Soft Machine wasn't really on the cards for either of them. On Ayers's irrepressible debut *Joy Of A Toy*, the first of a great trilogy that included *Shooting At The Moon* and *Whatevershebringswesing*, Wyatt drums on most tracks and both Hugh Hopper and Mike Ratledge contribute; but it's in no way a cloned Soft Machine album. Ayers's songs are beautifully arranged throughout by pianist/composer David Bedford, with Paul Buckminster on cello, Paul Minns on oboe and Jeff Clyne on double bass. The album's hazily surreal pastoralism veils Ayers's deeper interest in articulating his Gurdjieff-inspired attempts to awaken humankind from its slumber. Well, this was 1970 and Ayers wasn't the type to take umbrage if everyone snoozed through the message. For *Shooting At The Moon*, Ayers put together a ramshackle improvising group to rattle the symmetry of the earlier album's arrangements. His group The Whole World turned around Bedford, Lol Coxhill on saxes and 'zoblophone', Mike Oldfield on bass and guitar and Mick Fincher on drums. His earlier jazz influence rears up in crudely effective see-sawing rock improvisations to terrorise fans of his sweeter songs, like the charming opener, "May I?".

Daevid Allen's solo debut *Banana Moon* is simpler but no less inspired. Wyatt is again present on drums, and by now Allen's lead guitar is a little more accomplished. You can tell how far he's come by contrasting this album's version of Hugh Hopper's of "Memories", also featuring a poignant Wyatt vocal, with the same song on *Jet Propelled Photographs*.
Now taking it at a slower pace, Allen brings out an
elegiac quality beyond the young, blushing Soft Machine's reach. All the other songs are Allen's own.

SOFT MACHINE

FOURTH/FIFTH
COLUMBIA 4933412 CD 1971 & 1972
VIRTUALLY
CUNEIFORM RUNE100 CD 1971/1997

Fourth is Wyatt's last outing with the group he founded and squired through their difficult years. It's no coincidence that it is The Softs' most overtly jazz album. You can put this down to Elton Dean's growing influence, and it's his exuberant playing that largely determines the character of the album, even though he, like Ratledge, only contributes one composition, compared with Hopper's pair: the side-Iong "Virtually" suite and "Kings And Queens". Again, Charig, Evans and Hastings fill in brass ensemble interjections, and this time they're joined by the tenor sax of Alan Skidmore. If *Fourth*'s overall balance represents a step forward from *Third*, with Ratledge's electric piano much in evidence, it's not immediately clear exactly what they gained with that advance. For all the brass frontline's free bluster, it's Hopper's compositional Iyricism that shines through this album. Wyatt might have been muted, but his drumming is simply sublime throughout. Even so, the album's momentum is all but severed from the group's psychedelic rock roots. For the first time, The Softs sound less themselves and more like Keith Tippett's group. Jazz now prevails.

Fifth is hinged around the two drummers who were auditioned for Wyatt's vacant chair. Phil Howard and John Marshall got a side each on the original vinyl LP, and the music correspondingly vacillates between their opposing styles. Roy Babbington is once again in evidence on double bass. Howard is an incredibly exciting drummer with free music propensities, who promised much in his shortlived tenure. Sadly, he wastes his energies driving the group into a free Improv corner that no one else particularly wishes to inhabit. John Marshall, on the other hand, is a more precise timekeeper. His side of *Fifth* is altogether more disciplined and less spirited.

Virtually is a pristine recording from the vaults of Radio Bremen that captures the classic Wyatt-Ratledge-Hopper-Dean quartet in its final stages. It offers live renditions of "Teeth", "Kings And Queens" and a truncated "Virtually". More intriguing are the early versions of "All White" and "Pigling Bland" (from *Fifth*), which suggest how that album might have turned out had Wyatt stayed on. But by this point the group's internal power struggles have resolved themselves in Ratledge's favour, and though Wyatt sings, the set is curiously introverted, as if the group are playing it as a private rite of passage sounding an elegy for their own doomed youth. Under the shadow of such composerly sobriety, Dean's freeblowing tendency has also been brought in for questioning.



> Zoom

Fisheye frolics with Ratledge and Ayers at the South London house where Soft Machine resided in early 1967

ELTON DEAN

JUST US
CUNEIFORM RUNE103 CD 1971

He was ousted soon enough. Dean's recently reissued solo debut provides clear evidence of his indomitable free spirit. Here, the emphasis is on fiery improvisation over Phil Howard's flailing polyrhythms of a kind that no longer fitted Soft Machine's masterplan. Dean augments his core trio of trumpeter Charig, bassist Neville Whitehead and Howard with contributions from Mike Ratledge and future Softs bassist Roy Babbington on two tracks. Further, *Just Us* reprises Soft Machine's "Neo-Caliban Grides" in a set otherwise spontaneously 'composed' in the studio. Relishing such spontaneity, his playing throughout is exemplary.

NUCLEUS

ELASTIC ROCK/WE'LL TALK ABOUT IT LATER
BGO BGOCD47 CD 1970
THE PRETTY REDHEAD BBC SESSIONS
HUX HUX036 CD 1971-82/2003
LIVE IN BREMEN
CUNEIFORM RUNE173/174 CD 1971/2003

Trumpeter and Miles Davis biographer lan Carr formed Nucleus with the intention of electrifying jazz-rock, and *Elastic Rock* more than fulfils his sonic vision. Carr's cool, muted trumpet and mellow flugelhorn combine with the meandering soprano of Karl Jenkins, who also plays electric piano to great effect, and Brian Smith's tenor. Their unison playing is dramatically offset by the tension created by guitarist Chris Spedding. Driven by the outstanding rhythm section of Marshall and Clyne, their impact is as immediate as rock.

Spedding's 'slack' style of elongating chords and phrases made him a much sought-after session player, but he still constituted part of the stable lineup that recorded its successor the following year.

We'll Talk About It Later consolidates the group's pole position in jazz-rock. Nucleus's approach to fusion is cooler than Soft Machine's, and their more sophisticated arrangements are directed towards ensemble unity. At this stage, that ambition doesn't inhibit their ability to rock, however, and Spedding even adds a certain funkiness. But it's Carr's clarion brass that directs Nucleus's forward momentum, leaving Jenkins and Spedding to alternate spiky interjections of guitar and electric piano behind his and Smith's precision soloing.

Recorded in 1971 for BBC's *Jazz London*, Hux's radio set reveals Nucleus weren't the kind of guys to let it all hang out live. On the double *Live In Bremen*, Spedding is replaced by guitarist Ray Russell for a set drawn from their first three albums.

MATCHING MOLE

MATCHING MOLE
COLUMBIA 5054782 CD 1972

MATCHING MOLE'S LITTLE RED RECORD
COLUMBIA COLM4714882 CD 1972

SMOKE SIGNALS
CUNEIFORM RUNE150 CD 2001

MARCH
CUNEIFORM RUNE172 CD 1972/2001



> Zoom

Matching Mole was a Robert Wyatt solo project until CBS pressured him to form a group to promote it. Named by distorting the French for 'Soft Machine' ('Machine Molle'), and made up of old Canterbury mates David Sinclair (keyboards) and Phil Miller (guitar), plus Bill MacCormick (bass), Matching Mole weren't about to interfere with Wyatts original intention to record "an album of love songs". Much of it largely features his melancholy musings at the mellotron he found in the studio. He stretches that instrument's lumbering tonalities over skeletal piano to utterly disarming effect on the poignant "O Caroline", where he steps out of the frame to describe his new group in the act of recording the broken love song he's now singing. Hemmed in with his multitracked harmonies, the piano song "Signed Curtain" finds him intoning "*This is the first verse*", etc, as he slowly works his way through the template of a pop song to the devastating last line, when he admits to the futility of attempting to communicate his feelings in words. Thereafter, Matching Mole quickly developed into an erratically effective improvising group headed by guitarist Phil Miller's relatively mood-sensitive "Part Of The Dance".

Unhappy with Mole's change of direction, Sinclair jumped ship, and was replaced by former Nucleus electric pianist Dave MacRae on their second album, *Little Red Record*. What with its daft skits and gooning satire framing tracks as great as "God Song" and their increasingly assured rock Improv, the album is as funny and inspired as early Soft Machine. Somewhat ironically, the two live CDs compiled from the group's 1972 and 73 US and European tours reveal Wyatt's increasing reluctance to sing. Now shaping up around McRae's jamming vehicles, Matching Mole's rock Improv orientation might well corroborate Wyatt's statement. "I was happiest in Soft Machine when it was an all electric trio - after that it wasn't quite my dream band anymore." Though they strike a few sparks, whatever energy they muster is sunk into the group's losing struggle with its growing sense of entropy. Unsurprisingly, Wyatt dissolved the group and was in the act of forming a third line-up when he fell out of a window at a party, a tragedy which left him permanently confined to a wheelchair. The accident prompted Wyatt to embark on his ongoing quest to construct one of contemporary music's most affecting and idiosyncratic songbooks, on a string of releases which has continued up to 1997's *Shleep*.

SOFT MACHINE

SIX
COLUMBIA 4949812 CD 1973

In keeping with their by now established ratio of a major line-up change per album, on *Six* Elton Dean has been replaced by Nucleus's Karl Jenkins. Originally a double LP, *Six* has some very fine moments, but it's a long way from the original group's sensibilities. A virtuoso oboe player, Jenkins also plays baritone and soprano saxes and electric piano. The first half of the album was recorded live in Brighton and Guildford, with Ratledge and Jenkins sharing composing honours with John Marshall's "5 From 13 (For Phil Seaman With Love & Thanks)". Unsurprisingly, given the presence of Jenkins and Marshall, some tracks bear Nucleus's hallmark accentuated rock riffing. On its original release, *Six* drew criticism that the group were now prone to rambling, and that they had lost their essential spark. Such remarks evidence a partial deafness to the careful pattern building of the Marshall/Hopper rhythm section. They consolidate these new compositions' reliance on overlapping

structures, which recall the systems musics of Philip Glass and Steve Reich. Yet this quartet haven't entirely lost their urge to improvise. They may no longer appeal to the rock-biased contingent of Soft Machine's fanbase, but its jazz aficionados go home satisfied. By this time, the numbers were running out for Ratledge, The Softs' last surviving original member. He shuffled and sulked through the desultory *Seven* and *Bundles* and then quit.



> Zoom

KEITH TIPPETT'S CENTIPEDE

SEPTOBER ENERGY

DISCONFORME DISC1965 CD 1971

The inspired insanity of Tippett's *Septober Energy* is arguably the peak of the jazz-rock collisions Soft Machine set in motion back in the mid-60s. To realise the work, Tippett created the 50 piece organism Centipede, whose sections move independently yet attain unstoppable momentum and keen direction. Lord knows what possessed him to assemble such a beast; it took a musician/producer with the marshalling skills of Robert Fripp to help him tame it on record. "When I formed Centipede," wrote Tippett, "I wanted to enfold all the friends that I knew as much as possible, from the classical world, to the jazz world, the jazz-rock world, and the rock-rock world." Naturally, it embraces all and none of these genres simultaneously.

HUGH HOPPER

1984

CUNEIFORM RUNE104 CD 1973

Hopper's first solo album is a musical realisation of the visionary George Orwell novel from which it takes its name. Partly responding to The Softs becoming "a rather ordinary British jazz-rock outfit", Hopper revisited his early 1960s tapeloop experiments with Daevid Allen in Paris to recover his creative curiosity. In the event, he adapted the tapeloop method itself as the shaping metaphor of his musical realisation of the totalitarian condition Orwell describes, interspersing darkly brilliant loop pieces with short funk rock interludes that conjure the exhilarating taste of freedom attained in the act of resistance. These passages are delivered by a group including John Marshall, Lol Coxhill and Nick Evans. Having tasted freedom, Hopper soon made his escape from a group that now frowned on uninhibited creativity.



> Zoom

Previous article

Next article

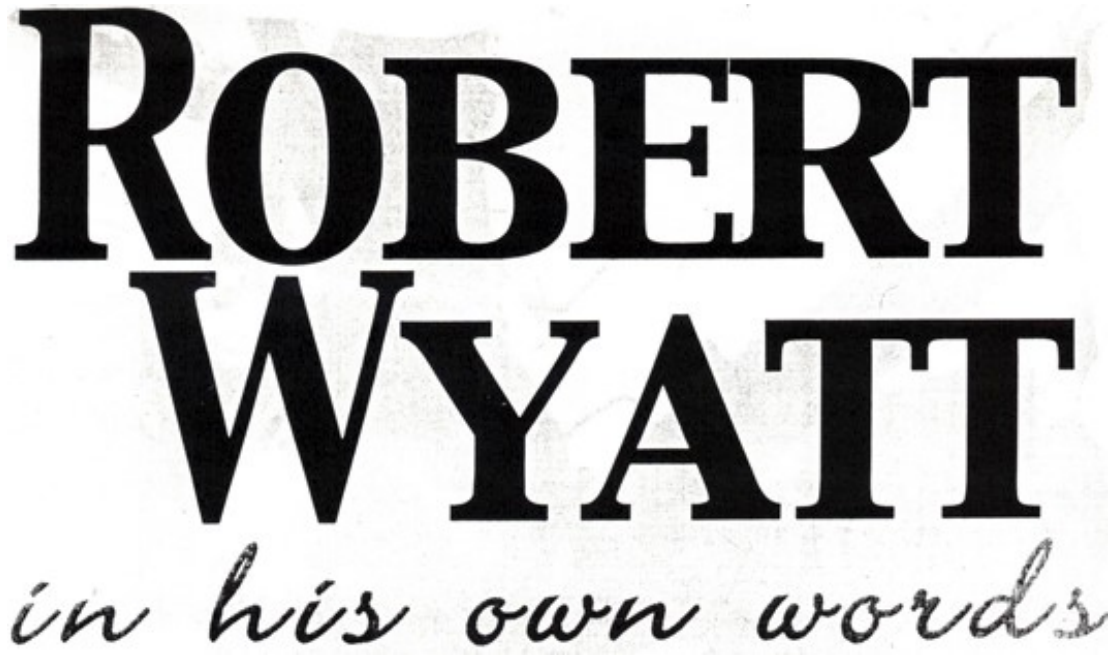
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt in his own words - Get Rhythm - Issue 6 - August 2001



From Soft Machine and Matching Mole, via Syd Barrett, Elvis Costello and Jerry Dammers, Paul Weller, Ultramarine and Gorky's Zygotic Mycini, Scritti Politti, Ben Watt and Ivor Cutler, Wyatt has instilled such love among his followers and fellow musicians that, through his many attributes - his emotional energy, his integrity and his generosity of spirit over a career spanning four decades - he is unique. Here he comments on five of his own classic albums and his EP box set (released by Hannibal Records) with Andy Farquarson.

THE PAST

Looking back over my career, I feel I got a second chance. In the 1960s, I think I was a bit too cocky, a bit too drunk, never saw things through properly. In one way, being in a wheelchair has been a blessing. It's slowed me right down, stopped me being so manic. And, of course, being married always civilises a chap. The paradox is that in order for your mind to wander freely, you need a fairly stable routine life.



CURRENTLY

I get asked to do a lot bits and pieces with other people, mostly abroad. Recently, I've sung for the double bass player and composer Laurie Scott Baker and also sung on a compilation CD celebrating the centenary of the birth of Lorca the Spanish playwrite.

I've got enough bits and pieces lined up for a recording in my own right but finding the time and space to do things is difficult. It takes me ages to develop things and I don't have a professional composing technique. Rather, I work organically. I suppose that's why I've only made six albums in the time that many of my contemporaries have made forty or so.

I feel rather left behind by the ever-more-rapid developments in recording technology. Machines nowadays seem to designed by electricians determined to dazzle one another at endless trade fairs - an admirable and exciting lifestyle no doubt - rather than to co-incide with what musicians actually need. Today you are saddled with complicated processes involving confusing technologies that don't give you the result you wanted.



ROCK BOTTOM

Like one's children, it's hard to pick a favourite from one's work. Obviously, everything I do

is as good as I can make it. 'Rock Bottom' was me as a grown-up at last, me more in control of what I was doing. There'd been a couple of practice runs, such as the first Matching Mole LP, where I developed the technique of multi-recording myself. 'Rock Bottom" had a long incubation because it was interupted by a year on my back in hospital. That's when I realised you don't have to be in a group: it's not a law. My first influences were painters, not musicians, so I was at home with the idea of doing the drawing, putting on all the colours myself, the whole picture in fact.

RUTH IS STRANGER THAN RICHARD

'Ruth...' was more to do with acknowledging the work by the musicians who had enriched 'Rock Bottom', of thanking them. I was extremely lucky with them all Ruth was intended to bring them out more, bring them into sharper focus. There were features for Mike Oldfield, Gary Windo, George Kahn, Mongezi Feza and Fred Frith and the others. It was their record - I was much more just the coordinator really, and I did the singing. I think this was probably the first recording where I covered other, people's material.

OLD ROTTENHAT

'Old Rottenhat' was a real solo effort. I wrote it all and played it all on fairly primitive equipment I recall that one was for Jeff Travis on Rough Trade label. Vivienne Goldman had introduced me to him, explaining that he was an indie producer. I thought 'indie' meant proto-Bhangra - I always get these things wrong. 'Old Rottenhat' came after a break. I'd been with a certain high-profile label with what I thought was a ludicrous, even slightly pervey, name. Suddenly their mask as innovators and nurturers fell and they wanted hits. I thought 'Oh no, not all that again'. They told me my stuff was too lugubrious - I looked it up in the dictionary - and apparently that was a bad thing in a happy happy place full of happy happy people. Besides, you had to use their very expensive studio and be published by their rapacious publishing company. I found all that tedious and humiliating - perhaps I'd got too old or too posh. So I dropped out for a while and devoted a lot of time listening to other people's records, spending time with my wife Alfie, generally having a life. The Rough Trade got me back to work!





DONDESTAN

In the eighties, Alfie and I moved north. I could make more noise at night and have a proper music room with piano, drum kit and tape machine. At that time I had more tunes, more musical ideas, than I had lyrics, so 'Dondestan' is based on poems and word sketches by Alfie. She'd not written them for singing, they were just for herself really, but she writes very singable lines, very sibilant - I'll look that word up later. Setting words to music was a reversal of what I usually do, which is to start by building a musical landscape then populating it with words. I learnt the technique, though not in a formal sense, from working with the composer Michael Mantler. I had to mix Dondestan rather quickly because Rough Trade had a modest budget and studio time is very expensive. It wasn't until I got Ryko's backing recently that I could re-mix and resequence it properly and see it reissued under the title 'Dondestan Revisited'.

SHLEEP

Phil Manzanera made this record possible and I'm very grateful to him. He had a studio and said I could use it without having to watch the clock which was a breakthrough for me. He was near to London which meant I could work with musicians I hadn't seen for ages. I'd met and become friends with Brian Eno years before and he came in to sing on 'Heaps of Sheeps' and helped me mix the track. The mixing is a bit of a jumble but that's not Brian's fault - I buggered it about a bit. Paul Weller came into the studio to record so I said 'If you need any lugubrius backing vocals, I'm happy to do some for you'. He said very politely that he didn't but that if I wanted a bit of strumming on my record he'd drop in. Which he did. The trombonist Annie Whitehead, who I'd worked with in the past, came in too and Evan Parker the saxophonist. Everyone on it has their own character and that shines through so it is very much a group record.

THE EP'S

It was Geoff Travis who first suggested I speak to Hannibal and Ryko Records. I went and met them and they were terrific, lovely people. They not only put out 'Shleep' but reissued the earlier albums. That was wonderful for me. Then Ryko offered to collect and issue all the bits and pieces, the singles, the odd songs. We've put them out as a boxed set of EPs because Alfie suggested the material was too disparate to go on a single CD.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

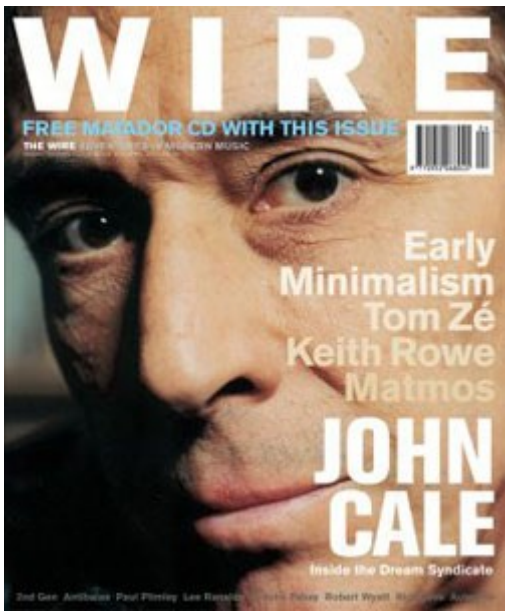
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Epiphanies - Wire N° 206 - April 2001

EPIPHANIES



Having breathlessly chased after Robert Wyatt, Damon Krukowski explains how his hero's example now helps his music to grow older with grace

I think I officially crossed the boundary into obsessive fandom when I chased Robert Wyatt's wife Alfreda Benge down the street. This was in 1991, and my partner Naomi and I had been listening to Wyatt's 1974 record *Rock Bottom* in an endless loop - it was the only album that spoke to the simultaneous grief and joy we felt from music at the time. Robert Wyatt's voice entered my consciousness then in a way that made me feel I was hearing it internally, as if it would sound funny were I to hear it simply tape recorded. I had already been listening obsessively to his drumming for a few years, and similarly, as it were, from the wrong side of the kit: *Soft Machine 1, 2*, and *Third*; plus, a live bootleg I had found while on tour in Holland, *Soft Machine Turns On* (since released officially as *Live At The Paradiso*), had changed the way I saw the drums in front of me each day. What I heard initially in Robert Wyatt's drumming is similar in many ways to what I heard later in his melodies: a phrasing that flexes the boundaries of the bar without abandoning it. He is the 'free-est' drummer in rock because he finds freedom within its simple constraints. Like the great jazz musicians I know he admires, Robert Wyatt stretches and contracts time seemingly at will - and that, to my ears, communicates freedom more powerfully than even the wildest anarchic flailing.

Epiphanies

Having breathlessly chased after Robert Wyatt, Damon Krukowski explains how his hero's example now helps his music to grow older with grace



Above: Robert Wyatt. Right: Damon Krukowski and Naomi Yang

No wonder, then, that Robert Wyatt has such a strong commitment to leftist politics: freedom, in music as in society, is a glorious gift that should be shared by all. His generosity fuels his playing, his politics and, as I have since learned, his dealings with obsessive fans. The incident when I chased Alfie down the street took place in London, outside the offices of the Rough Trade label, to which our former group Galaxie 500 had been signed. Wyatt was also involved with the label at the time, and Naomi and I had arrived for a meeting just after Alfie had left hers. No sooner was her retreating form pointed out, than I raced out of the building after her. I didn't think first what I would say, and when I reached her I discovered I hadn't anything better to offer than, "Are you Alfie? I'm a huge fan of yours and Robert's!" - this delivered out of breath from my chase, no less. Her startled look brought me back to fan reality: the situation I had created for her was undoubtedly not a delightful one. I retreated hastily.

Years later, Naomi and I would meet both Alfie and Robert under better circumstances, though my heart was beating no less fast than during that encounter on the street. We had become labelmates once more, at Rykodisc UK (not a coincidence, exactly, since our music had each found a home there largely through the efforts of Andy Childs, who had previously worked at Rough Trade). But this time the folks at Ryko, knowing my obsession, deliberately arranged for me and Naomi to show up at the office just as Robert was taking a break from a round of press interviews. He and Alfie invited us to sit with them while they ate their Indian takeaway lunch, and they were so gracious, funny and warm - just the way I had imagined - that I once again had the strange sensation of experiencing the encounter as if it were a happy internal memory rather than an event in the external world. Later Naomi and I even tried to write a song about the experience, but it came out an awful maudlin mess. The feeling generated by meeting Robert and Alfie — joy — is one we don't seem to be able to translate successfully into a tune. We seem doomed to write songs only about much darker emotions.

Robert, on the other hand, has the facility to sing about anything and everything and make it beautiful. His and Alfie lyrics can be deceptively mundane, describing a trip to Spain or the life cycle of a salmon, yet they can contain the germ of all feelings at once, like they say white contains all colours. The openness of their lyrics is not the blank generation's emptiness; it's a fullness of feeling expressed through details. Robert Wyatt may be the Chekhov of pop music.

He may also be our Billie Holiday. No one else in English language pop incorporates the expressiveness of jazz like Robert Wyatt. He sings a line as if it were unfolding before him,

a landscape just coming into view. The surprise he generates in his melodies, an his phrasing of existing melodies, is something you can never get used to. I know *Rock Bottom* by heart, but that doesn't eliminate the jump it always has on me, the unexpected rhythmic and melodic turns that keep it surprising every time I hear it.

In my first age in music, Robert Wyatt taught me to look at my drum kit as an instrument rather than just something to hit; in my second age, he showed me what it might be to sing a meaningful tune; and I hope to learn from his example how to have a third age in music. Because Robert Wyatt, of all rock musicians, seems to know how to live with knowledge, and how to use it to improve his music. His latest album, 1997's *Shleep*, made a lot of people wake up and take notice, but they have all been great.
Uncompromised, and uncompromisingly lovely.

Damon & Naomi begin a UK tour in May with Ghost/White Heaven guitarist Kurihara, marking the release of their album Damon & Naon With Ghost*. Their publishing imprint Exact Change has just published* Give My Regards To Eighth Street*:* The Collected Writings Of Morton Feldman.
For info, see www.exactchange.com

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

New Model Army - Mojo - March 2001





Soft Machine
Third

Personnel: Mike Ratledge (organ, piano), Hugh Hopper (bass), Robert Wyatt (drums, vocals), Elton Dean (sax), Rab Spall (violin), Lyn Dobson (flute, sax), Nick Evans (trombone), Jimmy Hastings (flute, bass clarinet)
Tracks: Facelift / Slightly All The Time / The Moon In June / Out-Bloody-Rageous
Producers: Soft Machine
Recorded: IBC Studios, London, spring 1970. Facelift recorded live at Fairfield Hall, Croydon (January 4, 1970) and Mothers Club, Birmingham (January 11, 1970)
Released: CBS, June 1970
Chart peak: 18 (UK)

THIRD, SOFT MACHINE'S TANTALISINGLY titled third LP, marked their full transformation from pop-psych Pink Floyd understudies to pofaced purveyors of complex jazz-rock epics. Out went paisley shirts and poetry, replaced by chinstroking, muso extravaganzas. "Mike Ratledge had studied classical music, including theory;" recalls bassist Hugh Hopper, "and Robert [Wyatt] was very into jazz, like we all were."

It was bassist/vocalist Kevin Avers who briefly steered the group towards psych-inspired pop for their debut album. "The songs went after Kevin quit, " Hopper says - and so, very nearly, did the hand. "We spent much of 1968 touring the States with Jimi Hendrix, but the group ceased to exist for the last half of the year," he recalls. "Kevin Ayers had gone, Robert stayed in California and planned a solo career - and besides, he and Mike weren't speaking."

Despite the acrimony. The Soft Machine regrouped, with Hopper replacing Ayers on bass (and sax), to record a contract-fulfilling second album. "It was still mainly songs, though Mike's stuff was already leaning towards instrumental pieces," Hopper explains. After supporting Hendrix and Traffic at the Albert Hall early in 1969, the trio were playing full-time again and in the autumn, at Wyatt's suggestion, experimented with a four-piece brass section. "This hastened the demise of our commitment to songs," says Hopper, "because the brass tended to play Robert's vocal parts."

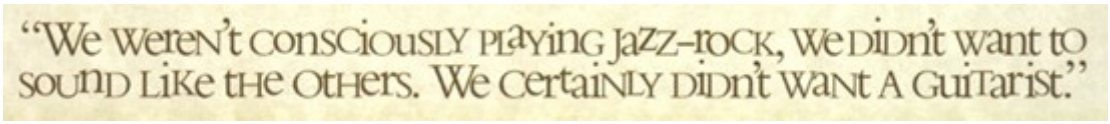
By the time work began on *Third*, only Elton Dean from the enlarged group remained (the octet was trimmed after the live recording). Musically, though, the Softs were progressing nicely. "We weren't consciously playing jazz-rock," Hopper insists. "It was more a case of not wanting to sound like other bands; we certainly didn't want a guitarist." Rock was a dirty word.

The bassist's chief contribution was the extraordinary Facelift, a live/studio cocktail of jerky, Zappa-inspired riffs, squealing tape loops and hazardous keyboard solos. "It was bravado," Hopper claims. "We were making that music for ourselves, really."

Mike Ratledge's two pieces, Slightly All The Time and Out-Bloody-Rageous, were less abrasive but hugely ambitious ventures into full-blown jazz-rock at a time when that genre had barely learnt to walk.

Most memorable was Wyatt's The Moon in June, a virtuoso piece featuring probably the longest coda in rock and - gulp - vocals. "The myth was that we refused to play on it," Hopper says. "Actually, he'd originally recorded it in the States after the Hendrix tour. He simply knew how he wanted it to sound." A little over a year on, Wyatt was fired. "I loved playing their music," he says, "but one day I got a phone call from the organist and I was out."

MP



Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Christmas (*Lindsay Cooper on Robert Wyatt*) - Tone Clusters - Mar/Apr 2000



Christmas

I spent the entire holiday period alone. In early December there was a concert of works by Robert Wyatt that a lot of his friends were giving so I arranged to go. Two of my friends offered to take/wheel me and I was really looking forward to it. It was going to be in the Royal Festival Hall, which was built the same year I was born and my father had a job doing admin there.

I spent a lot of my childhood there and remember it very clearly — it still appears in my mind's eye like a '50s black and white film. I was introduced to Sir Thomas Beacham when I was 4 and I imagine a lot of my later interest in music came from those years. I'm very proud that Robert Wyatt's last live appearance was in the Piazza Navona in Rome with Henry Cow. We continued to have a very productive relationship. When we were recording the second News from Babel album and needed another singer we asked Robert. Chris Cutler asked him to contribute to a record that was being made to raise money for the striking miners, and was very pleased that he agreed to do it and wrote the song in only a few hours. These things are very pleasurable but quite dangerous to look back on later: one imagines that a new song is going to come as quickly as the Miners' song did.

When I was stuck for who to ask as a bass player in OH MOSCOW, Sally Potter suggested I pick the first record out of my collection and see if that gave me any ideas. The first record I picked was ROCK BOTTOM by Robert and I couldn't understand why I hadn't thought of Hugh Hopper before. A quick call to Robert established Hugh's correct telephone number and the rest of the story is... the rest of the story. As I was sitting in the Royal Festival Hall to see the show my mind was full not only of images from the '50s but the entire Canterbury School. I've never liked being included as part of that but it certainly brings you a few friends.

Annie Whitehead, whose trombone playing I like a lot, had put an incredible group together to play Robert's music and included in it was Didier Malherbe, who I used to know when he played with GONG (the Canterbury School, you see, lives on), and Harry Beckett, who I've always thought of as a marvelous trumpet player. The vocals were provided by Julie Tippetts and Ian Maidman, who both sounded so spookily like Robert, I found it incredibly enjoyable. The drums were played by Liam Genocky and the piano by Janette Mason, who I hadn't come across before. More saxes were provided by George Khan, who I hadn't encountered since his days in the Westbrook Brass Band.

After a very successful show I went back to the dressing room and had a long chat with (amongst others) Julie Tippetts. I've always liked her work, particularly the stuff she does with Maggie Nicols and although we have played together several times there's never been the chance to talk. I wonder how many other musicians are affected by hardly anything being said.

I think David Jones and John Cumming did a wonderful job of putting the London Jazz Festival together. Just after the concert Robert and Annie had space to sign a lot of CDs and a lot of Robert's fans were made very happy indeed. Annie made very intelligent arrangements of Robert's songs, rangiong from old records like ROCK BOTTOM and RUTH IS STRANGER THAN RICHARD through to his most recent CD, the excellent SHLEEP.

L.C.

(Lindsay Cooper, multi-instrumentalist, composer and essayist, is the author of this regular TC column. She welcomes Email comments at cooper@cooper.sonnet.co.uk.)

Previous article Next article

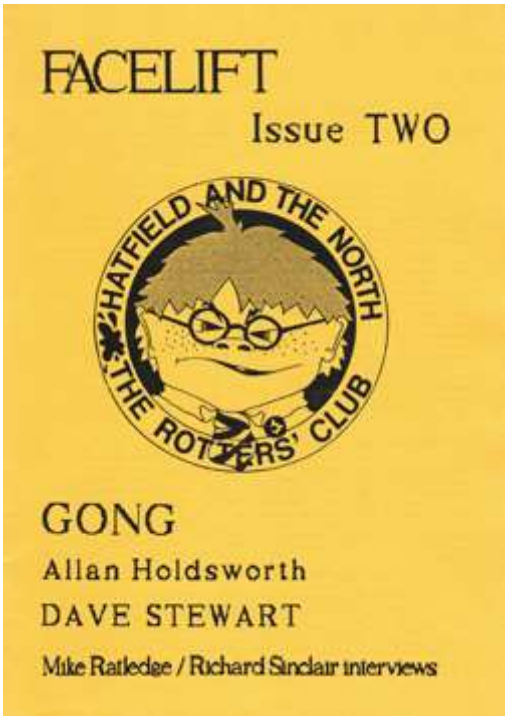
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Mike Ratledge Interviews - Facelift - N° 2 - September 1999



THE MIKE RATLEDGE INTERVIEWS

Two very different Mike Ratledge interviews are printed for you this issue: the first is taken from a bootleg and was conducted in the heady period between Volume Two and Third, sometime in late 1969 ....

(fade in) **.... extension of the personnel of the Soft Machine. Who are the new members ?**

The new members are Lyn Dobson, who plays soprano and tenor, flute, harmonica and sitar (but not with us) and Elton Dean who plays alto, who is also playing with Keith Tippett.

Why did you take them in the group?

Because the idea of expanding the group was simply that you are more and more into writing; spending more time writing than playing, and every time we write something we have to kind of cut it down to limit it, because there is a definite amount that three people can. So we felt the need to have other instruments to be able to carry other lines, to give sufficient complexity to what we originally have written.

How do you arrange it, how do you rehearse, how do you build up your show ?

Well it starts off, any kind of writing is used, but suppose one person definitely writes a number, then he usually writes out all the parts; and there are various areas that are free : either as a solo for someone, or they're kind of cooperatively free, I mean everyone has a free hand. Then we go and rehearse it (if possible, because we're working too much at the moment). And then we hope in performance it loosens up, ie everybody knows the basic arrangements, and the more familiar you get with it the more you can depart from the basic arrangement and you know exactly what other people are going to be working to .... and

it's like the old medieval principle of composition : you compose the tenor line, then write two lines that fit the tenor but not that necessarily fit each other. I mean you don't know whether they're going to fit each other, but because they've got the same arrangement / reference point, you know it's going to work more or less.

To me it seems that there is some similarity between the development that Frank Zappa has been making in the last few years and your development.

Yeah, well, basically in terms of the fact that we're both getting away from the commercial pop song and going more into kind of the instrumental things .... but I think there are other groups that are doing that too. There is a similarity, but there is also a big difference, I hope.

I agree.

It's not that I don't like the Mothers - I like them very very much, but if we were both doing the same thing it would be a waste of time for one of us.

Finally, about the name of the group : first of all where did it come from and how did you get it ?

Well it came second-hand through a book by William Burroughs called 'The Soft Machine' and he in turn had taken it from a lecture by a physiologist in America (I can't remember what his name was) and Soft Machine is like a generic term for the whole of humanity and we are all Soft Machines and at that time being kind of ... we hope to be a pop group: ie; we hope to appeal ... well our basic assumption is what we like, everybody is going to like as well .... we all have things in common and therefore we are all Soft Machines and we're all going to like Soft Machine music. It might have been a wrong or false assumption.

> The second interview comes from I glossy Italian magazine 'covering everything from Led Zeppelin to free jazz' called GONG. It was translated and subtitled by Saverio Pechini .....

Would you like to put in perspective the early Soft Machine period and your coeval feelings?

The band had been together for a long time when the first album was recorded. It was only a tiny episode in the overall history of the Soft Machine. The recording session followed four months of exhausting tours in the USA, but maybe that was the best period concerning human relationships between us (the festivals in the South of France above all). In a way everyone of us felt that something different was happening : many bands then appearing for the first time were breaking barriers. The main feeling was that everything was possible and people would have accepted everything we played. Many things, unbelievable things, happened between then and now : many changes occurred in the group's line-up.

The problem is: people followed our music by records only, and they saw them as stages of a continuous evolution. So people always noticed a huge difference between records, as between Second and Third. From our point of view, there were never exaggerated gaps between Second and Third, but only a gradual process. When someone decided to quit, that was the outcome of an ongoing evolution and not the start of it.

Criticisms fly concerning the absolute lack of cultural weight in Soft Machine's recent music.

Well in a way it never pretended to have one. To me, a cultural message is a decal job from the outside: if there is one, I reckon it should be the sociologists' task, or something like that, to pigeon-hole it, within a century. Anyway, if ever one of us was interested in any

form of message, that was Kevin (and he still is), but I don't believe you could tag the early Soft Machine with Kevin as a group committed to any kind of message. Music is a medium, which in some ways, requires musical solutions.

Prior to recording the Third album, were you aware of the important evolutive stage to come?

It's really difficult to answer. We played for fun, we had a really naive attitude ... you see, people are very intricate : they always see more than music actually offers. People nurse every kind of illusion about what they are doing: I think it is something innate. Sure, our early tunes were about Dadaism and Pataphysics - things we were, as individuals, really into - but actually there weren't any links with the music, save the ones people want to find in it. Anyway, a link does exist, because it's us who play that music and who are into that kind of stuff, and that's influencing you. You see, nowadays I'm mainly interested in the same things of yore, but it's also true that, since they are outside the group's area of interest, they are more feebly linked to the musical things, or at least compared to Third. In this way, I really hate interviews. To me, to deliver a good interview actually means to lie: and I'm less and less interested in lies. Fact is that you can't take too seriously what you are saying, because there isn't so much to say about the music.

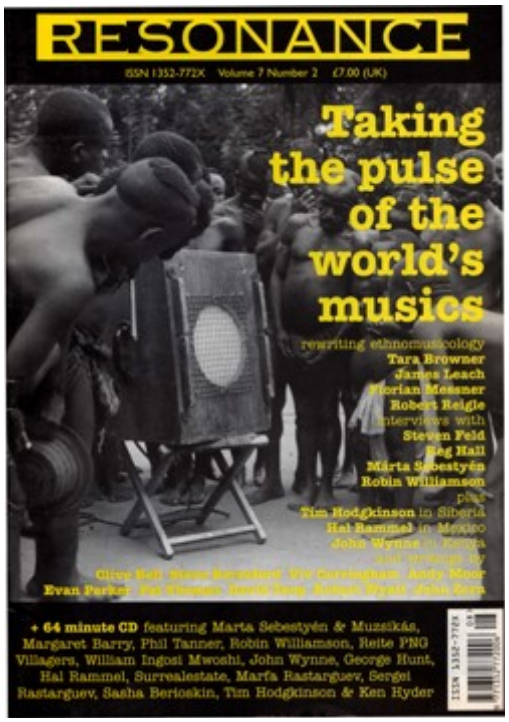
Nevertheless, you are the only original member of Soft Machine still playing in the group. From Sixth to Bundles, compared to Jenkins' ever expanding composing vein, your role seems more and more removed from the music Soft Machine is developing now. What is your actual role and commitment in the 1976 Soft Machine?

Well ... truth ... truth is I'm leaving the group to follow my own direction: in a way I stopped composing music for five elements to concentrate on something more personal. You see, after Sixth I felt like I should develop something that was really mine. After that record, I became more and more involved in things which had nothing to do with the group and I became less and less interested in composing. I think that, compared to the prior period when I was forced to compose since no other did it, now Karl is able to do it, and I've obviously stopped. The present line-up will go on as Soft Machine: I'm unmoved about that; nevertheless many people hate those kind of changes, without understanding how difficult a situation is involving many persons. When Kevin quitted, then maybe we had to change the group's name but we didn't. And then people have their point of view about it, and sometimes you're criticized because you are no more the one you were yesterday. Every band always generated an enthusiasm due to the musicians who played in it for a certain period of time, but a person quitting is just a person quitting. I'm unfavourable to the chaos due to a person quitting the band: it only means that the other members of the band actually flogged a dead horse. Not to diminish the contribution of the musicians who play in the group: Marshall, Holdsworth, Jenkins, but it'll take a little time to re-shape an identity, which now is missing. Music is always more than the persons involved in it: probably that's why it's all right to go on playing how they do. It's up to each one of them to be main or less involved. By this time, to be in the Soft Machine was a drudgery, and playing music should never be like that. You see, there was never a leader (if so, everything would have been different) totally responsible for the music played by the others, and one of the reasons that drove me to stop composing was that I felt trapped in the whole Soft Machine's legendary image; trapped in the overall needless tagging about It. I think it was the same with Robert and Kevin. To be the only original member is horrible: this probably is the main reason for quitting and losing interest in it. When people want to identify you with an entity called Soft Machine and to consider you responsible for what's happening, your first reaction is to get away ..... you feel responsible for, without being obsessed by people, by critics, and the legendary '68. Yes, Sixth, I was rather involved in it, but not 100 per cent; Fifth was an incredibly unsuccessful album, due to changes in the line-up; Fourth is OK; Third, probably the last time I enjoyed what I was doing. It's really difficult to see these things from the outside. It's like peering up at a family in a house. When someone quits, automatically you figure the remaining people are maybe in a better situation compared to the one waiting for the person to leave, but there is the other side of the coin, because that person suddenly make difficulties for the ones who stayed. Trouble is, you can never actually escape from misunderstandings and myths created by the press and by the people. For now, I'm glad to escape from just one thing, that is the thing which journalists call Soft Machine.

Previous article Next article

My Favorite Ethnic Recording - Resonance - Volume 7 - Number 2 - 1999

MY FAVORITE ETHNIC RECORDING - ROBERT WYATT



Le Coran - psalmodie par Cheik Abdelbasset Abdessamad Sourat Yassin

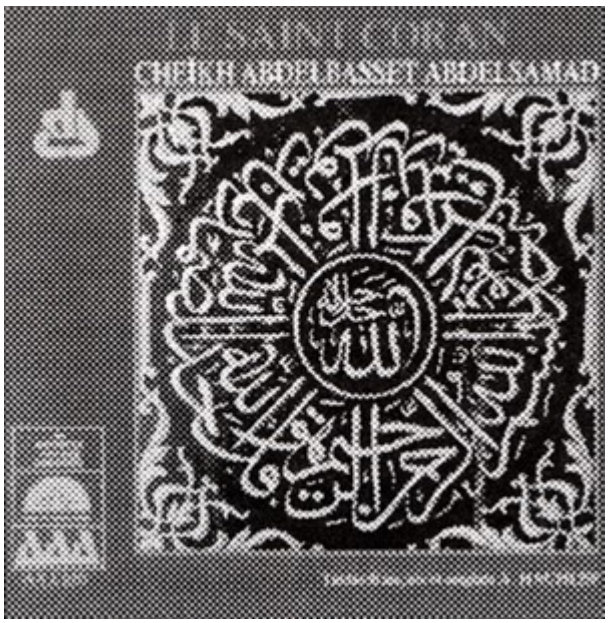
Sono Cairo

(My pressing distributed by Sono Disc, Paris and imported to England by Conifer Records, but this just happens to be a recording of the Muezzin's call to prayer to which I have easy access: any would do really, or none if you've a mosque nearby).

BY WHAT I DARED NOT IMAGINE WAS anything but a lucky coincidence, I found I could tootle along on trumpet using some of what they call I think a gypsy scale mode (I am not a trained musician myself), from an approximate Eb (*i.e.* Eb, E, Fsharp, G, etc) and blow me - literally - the unaccompanied Muezzin on this record seems to tag along with me for the whole first side of this long-playing record.

I followed along more tentatively through side two until about two thirds of the way, by which time he seemed (to my irrelevantly harmonically oriented ears) to be moving around an implied tonal centre from G to D, Eb and F, in which I recognised the phrasing, the phrases and indeed the melodic twists and turns themselves. Then by some luck I was playing this section through the speakers whilst simultaneously listening to a piece which seemed to echo it on a pair of headphones: Miles Davis's rubato solo on the Saeta he recorded with Gil Evans Orchestra for *Sketches of Spain*.

And although the connection is obviously the Deep Song (Cante Jondo) of Andalucia, the odd thing is that despite the widely acknowledged and profound Islamic influence, it's rare to see anything more than references to generalised connect¬ions with Arabic and other Semitic culture derived from the era when Andalucia was the jewel in the crown of the Arabian Empire. Flamenco is after all as quintessentially Romany-Iberian as r'n'b is quintessentially Black American. And I suppose that, since Romany Culture is traced back primarily to the Indian sub-continent, it's only in the names Tzigan, Gitan, Gitano and



Gyspsy - with their misleading but historically understandable origin Egyptian words -that the near-eastern/ north African element apparent.

The Saeta itself I've witnessed in northern Spain in one of the Andalucian 'immigrant' areas around Barcelona, Catalunya. As described in the sleevenotes to *Sketches of Spain*, a kind of dignified but appealingly shambolic slow marching band of drum and bugles halts in a silence - broken only by the simplest of taps on the side-drum - under the balcony of the subsequent Saeta singer, who releases a dramatically fractured chant over the whole proceedings before the band shuffles on mournfully down the street. I remember thinking then, 'There she is up on the balcony sounding for all the world like one of those Muezzin's calls to prayer from a minaret and overlooking a whole neighbourhood.'

I've not seen any flamencologist make this direct and specific link, so I have to assume it's just a hunch, like many others, about a music without much verifiably documented history.

Luckily there are enough mosques around now for virtually anyone to be able to make the comparison, since every comprehensive flamenco anthology contains a Saeta (I've got a great one by Manola Caracol from his La Salvadora session). There's even an appealing but far-fetched theory that the famous flamenco shout "Ole!" could be derived from that other more ubiquitous evocation "Allah!"
But, you know, returning to this record of the Coran (or Q'ran) which is similar to the Coran sung anywhere (Arabic being to Islam what Latin is to Roman Catholicism and English is to transnational corporations), I can't help feeling that this is indeed evidence of the vibrant survival of 'non-European' cultural habits which illustrates a deep-rooted cross-fertilisation between Islamic and Christianised cultures -something that has all but been buried in modern European history books, which airbrush out the Arabic component of Semitic culture with exclusive terms like 'the Judeo-Christian tradition'. And it thrills me to come across a re-affirmation that Europe is not and never has been an Island continent.

R.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Artist Shop IRC Chat with Robert Wyatt on Sunday, March 21, 1999

WotanCCC: Welcome to today's Artist Shop - An afternoon with Robert Wyatt..

Robert Wyatt is a true giant in progressive music. He was a founding member of the legendary Soft Machine (not to mention Matching Mole and other bands) and one of the main pillars of the entire Canterbury movment.

Robert has recently joined the Thirsty Ear label and has released a new CD called Shleep. Robert, thank you for joining us today.

GaryArtistShop: Hello, Robert. So glad to have you here.

Robert Wyatt: Thank you very much for having me. It's an honor.

Theuglyjanitor says: Where did the title "Shleep" come from? And what does it mean?

Robert Wyatt: Shleep, I couldn't think of whether to call it something from sheep or what. It's a kind of Yiddish thing. You do it in America as well - money, shmoney - the 'sh in front of it kind of negates it. It's kind of a joke thing.

I suppose it means 'sleep not'. It means sleep - chance would be a fine thing! It just means I wish I could sleep. That's what it meant. But it's not a complaint, really. Just a joke. I just remembered a saying which might be appropriate which is 'no sleep for the wicked'

Tandomtask says: What contemporary music interests you? Are there any artists out there doing work you really respect?

Robert Wyatt: Yes, there certainly are. I'm thinking of some americans I've heard recently. There's Karen Mantler, daughter of Mike Mantler and Carla Bley.
With parents like that she should be good and she is! Other great daughters include Emily Haines, daughter of Paul Haines, the Canadian poet who does really good songs. And to round up my trio of daughters theres Anja Gabarek, daughter of Jan Gabarek... There's a pianist I've been listening to...improvised music...since working with Evan Parker.

Most recently I've been listening to a pianist named Matthew Shipp, a fellow Thirsty Ear artist. He has a couple of CD's with a violinist named Matt Manieri which are very good. And then there's a keyboard player named John Medeski of Medeski, Martin and Wood. I really like that band and many other bands I hear on CD from the Knitting Factory in New York.

As for rock'n'roll, Paul Weller, his Heavy Soul album.

WotanCCC: Speaking of Paul Weller, were you a Jam fan?

Robert Wyatt: I always liked Jam, yeah!

WotanCCC: Great band, I wish they had been more accepted here in the states.

Robert Wyatt: He reminds me of a very English phenomenon a decade or two ago which was the Mod. The meaning changed when it left England. And I haven't time to go through the sociology of the word, but it's a kind of style, a kind of attitude that I've always found admirable.

In America the word 'mod' I think lost the political edge it had in England. It's not just about style.

WotanCCC: Very artistic connotations.

Regneag says: Robert, Alfie does the brilliant illustrations for your recordings - does she exhibit anywhere?

Robert Wyatt: Well, Alfie has exhibited in the past, but her life is so full, perhaps, that she has too many talents and too many commitments to accumulate enough material for many exhibitions. But her artwork is crucial to my records and in particular these re-releases.

Doktor_j says: just before your accident, there was supposed to be a reformation of Matching Mole - rumour has it that some of the material planned for the MM record was re-worked and became "*Rock Bottom*" (one of my all-time favourite albums, by the way!) - is there any archival material that might someday still be released?

Robert Wyatt: Well, thank you for the kind words about Rock Bottom!
No, most of my practicing and rehearsals were done on a tiny cassette player and I would be embarrassed to let anybody hear them because until I get things right, I really do get them very wrong (LOL)!

Regneag says: Robert, Are you aware of any CD releases of "*Loves Makes Sweet Music*?"

Robert Wyatt: The record company that owns "*Love makes Sweet Music*" won't let anyone release it and won't release it themselves. I think it was Polygram or Polydor. I've heard of copies of the original single still in existance. But I haven't got one. Maybe Kevin Ayres who wrote the song has a copy, I don't know. I myself haven't heard it for thirty years. I think I preferred the b-side (LOL)! Kevin wrote that, too, BTW. It was called *Feeling, Realing and Stealing*. A much better title we would all agree. I don't mind talking about thirty years ago, but it's sometimes hard to remember since I was probably drunk at the time (LOL)

Aboxofrogs says: Being an artist thats been working a long time, do you have any thoughts about the music industry and how it works you can share with us?

Robert Wyatt: Well, it might sound, from what I've just been saying as if I think they're all scoundrels, but I'm happy to be able to say now that I've found some really helpful and friendly record people to work with. It's just a question of mutual trust, mutual confidence, and nobody thinking that they own anybody else.
In the case of Thirsty Ear in the US and Hannibal/Ryko in England and the rest of the world, I couldn't ask for friendlier or more consciencious people. So my advice to anybody starting out in the business would simply be to look before you leap.
It's not all bad. Some of it's very good, even for musicians.

Doktor_j says: i read on Phil Manzanera's web-site that you will be on his new album - can you tell us more about it?

Robert Wyatt: Well, only a few weeks ago Phil and one of his engineers, Jamie Johnson, visited me in my own music room at home where I added a few bits 'girly' choruses to his husky vocals and the occasional note on my new toy which is a cornet. I really like his material, that he's doing now. Up till now the Manzanera that became well know was the Manzanera that's the son of an Englishman. Now the fact that he's also the son of a Columbian woman is taking it's place in his repertoire. And I can hear a romantic side to his nature that I think other people will really warm to.

Strongcomet says: Hi Robert: you probably know that you have gathered a lot of followers and fans throughout the years. Do you feel a need to know who they are, communicate with them (besides this chat), or do you just take it as a side effect of your work ?

Robert Wyatt: Well, first of all, hello and it's nice to here from you (strong comet has put up a Wyatt website for which I'm grateful). I tend to agree with an actor I heard on the radio recently who said, 'Strictly speaking, what other people think of me is none of my business.'

In other words, I try not to be effected to much by either praise or insult. I don't do live gigs so I don't meet many of the people who listen to my music. But I'm very grateful

they're out there somewhere and all I can really say is, 'Thank you.

'The communication on the whole has to be on my side anyway, but through the music. And through Alfie's paintings. Because as you probably immediately understand, I'm slow thinker in real life conversation. Also I don't want to embarrass people by expanding on opinions they may not share.

I don't expect people to think what I think out of politeness as I know that many musicians that I enjoy have inspirations and ideas that simply baffle me. I'll leave it at that.respisces says: Your earlier records were often markedly political - but Shleep seems to downplay this element.

Respisces says: Your earlier records were often markedly political - but Shleep seems to downplay this element. Has your political outlook changed over the years?

Robert Wyatt: I love these names! Ivor Cutler once asked me, 'You still a communist?' And I replied, 'Are you still Jewish?' You are what you are, you know, after a while.
The most important thing to me was dealing with the nightmare of Apartheid. Not just because I have South African friends, but because the very idea that you can have an officially racist government seemed to me a betrayal of what my father fought for in WW II. And if Apartheid still existed, I would be on the barricades.
And I haven't gone to sleep on that yet.

Because there are still governments which see foreigners and even different cultures in their midst as aliens and inferiors.

Darbyccc says: what do you think of the whole mod scene overall musically?

RobertWyatt: In England mod is a contraction of the adjective, Modernist and originally it simply meant that a whole bunch of mainly working class English kids took their inspiration from Black American music, particularly modern jazz and soul music. It's inspired, I suppose, what became known as blue eyed-soul in the end, a universal phenomenon.

But there's something very specific about the way, for example, Paul Weller found a way to expand his music by listening to an awful lot of Marvin Gaye records. In England, Mod also implied a certain 'cool' to use a word that's been much overused in the last 10 years. And discretion, in matters of dress for example, which may surprise people who think that 'mod' meant flamboyant and colorful. In fact, mods were in great contrast to the more ostentatious arm waving rockers, etc. and teddy boys who did not appreciate the world of secret codes that Mod came out of.

But that doesn't answer the question.
If Mod music means The Jam and all the two-tone bands such as the Specials and Madness, then, yes, I love it!

Doktor_j says: there was an article in the March "MOJO" that said you were picking out words from an Esperanto dictionary to use as titles for your next album - how close are we to having more new music from you?

Robert Wyatt: Alas, I've only got as far as the Esperanto dictionary (LOL!). I'll explain the process with analogy.

Think of a cactus in the desert just sitting there being prickly for years and suddenly blooming with pretty little flowers for a very short time before returning back to the apparent inertia of it's prickly state.
That's how I function. Blame it on the desert I live in (LOL)!

But I have recorded a couple things since Shleep, just individual songs including my first ever song in Italian for a CD released only in Italy on Sonica Records.
It was for a compilation of songs I have sung or have written.
The rest of the songs were sung and played by some lovely Italian rock bands who made a CD called Robert Wyatt e Noi. They invited me to contribute a track to their record of my songs. So I did a song by one of these groups called CSI. I have also recorded recently for a Spanish CD dedicated to Lorca who's centenary it was last year.

Regneag says: Is there any plans to re- release the "Obscure" album that you did with Brian Eno and Carla Bley?

Robert Wyatt: Ah, what a good idea! I would love to see that on a CD! That would be up to Brian, I suppose. I have one very happy memory in particular of that recording which is of Carla Bley teaching me the songs that I sang. A couple of John Cage tunes. I had difficulty with it as simple as it is. Carla was very patient with me and I'm grateful for that.

Kentsmith says: What projects (music or otherwise) are you looking forward to next?

Robert Wyatt: Well, at the moment, what I'm doing (and I don't know what it'll lead to), I'm practicing playing cornet, but it's really just cornet karaoke with me favorite records ;-) But owing to my limited technique, it's the slow versions of songs that I can play with. Most recently I've been duetting with John Coltrane on his 'Ballads' LP. Who knows where this will lead?

I do write, of course, songs and words. But slowly. So many things seem to come in the way in real life and I love listening to music and watching videos and sitting around with Alfie so much that I probably don't do as much work as I should on my next project.

Thetrip says: What would it take to get you to come here to the States for some performances -- not, God forbid -- a dreaded tour, of course!

Robert Wyatt: LOL! Thanks for the idea, but I just don't do live gigs. I tried a few in the wheelchair, but I found the logistics of organizing events around the chair too difficult to be worth the effort and the money I would need. But thanks very much for the idea. Recently a few other people have been playing my songs live. I know that Karen Mantler among other people sang a couple of my songs at the Knitting Factory a short while ago. And there is a concert being organized for October in England of a band put together by trombonist Annie Whitehead playing some of my stuff. I like the idea in particular of women singing my songs. Since my voice seems to be suggesting that direction in the first place. I may be a biological male, by I'm a musical hermaphrodite.

Phasedin says: Robert, with Midi nowadays, are you tempted to do an all-solo recording perhaps of keyboards and hand percussion? I'd love to hear it!

Robert Wyatt: Well, even without the use of anything particularly modern, I certainly enjoyed making Dondestan and trying to sound like a whole band all on my own. But I do get lonely in the studio even with a friendly engineer like Jamie. So I think I will most often be inviting friends to help me out. But I don't know. Maybe they won't come. Then I'll have to do a solo record again (LOL!).

WotanCCC: Is there anything else you would like to mention before we conclude today?

Robert Wyatt: I would just like to say thank you very much for setting this up. And I can now answer and earlier question (I told you I think slowly) by saying, I now realize it feels great to hear people who are interested in what I do!

WotanCCC: Its been our pleasure Robert. And I think your fans are very cool. (not to overuse the word..) B-{)}

Robert Wyatt: LOL! Well, it's a good word, let's face it!

WotanCCC: Looks like our time is up. I'd like to thank everyone for joining us tonight. Robert, we appreciate your taking the time to come and chat with us tonight, and hope you'll come back to Talk City again soon!

Robert Wyatt: Thank you everybody. Have a nice spring!

>>**The original chat**

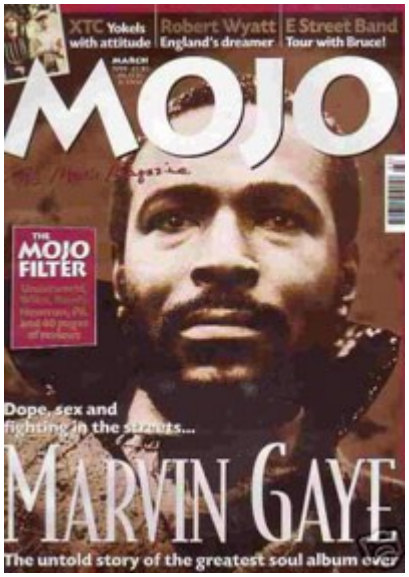
Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

8 out of 10 cats prefer whiskers - Mojo N°64 - March 1999

8 OUT OF 10 CATS PREFER WHISKERS



Home Counties jazz fan, psychedelic Heath Robinson, protest caroller and musical internationalist, Robert Wyatt is one of Britain's best-loved institutions. "I'd have to be some kind of paedophile to be that interested in youth culture," he tells Barney Hoskyns.
'"I'm a bleedin' grown-up." Portrait by Peter Anderson.

THE DAY BEFORE I DRIVE UP TO Lincolnshire to interview Robert Wyatt, there is a march through the streets of Santiago - a procession of relatives of men and women "disappeared" years ago by the regime of General Augusto Pinochet, the former dictator of Chile. On this march, every wife, mother, and brother clutches a placard bearing a picture of a disappeared beloved and the simple, stark question, "DONDESTAN?"

I bring a newspaper photograph of the march to show Wyatt, who in 1991 released a quietly militant masterpiece called *Dondestan* - and who, as might be expected, is following the current Pinochet affair with keen interest.

"There you are!" he exclaims as he peruses the photograph. "And people think I make these words up! When I told people *Dondestan* meant Spanish for 'Where are they?', they didn't really believe me."

Although the song Dondestan itself concerns Palestine rather than Chile, the new five-CD collection *EPs By Robert Wyatt* does feature Wyatt's version of a heartbreaking song by one of Pinochet's most sainted victims. Victor Jara's Te Recuerdo Amanda, translated in the box set's booklet, is an exquisitely simple sketch of a woman, radiant with love, rushing to meet her lover on his five-minute factory break. Except that her lover turns out to be a man who "left for the hills / Who never did any harm / And in five minutes / Was destroyed...".

"Talk about brave protest singers," Wyatt almost shudders. "I think that's about as brave as it gets, really. And there's great pathos in singing about a disappeared person and then becoming one yourself. So it's pretty timely."

I ask Wyatt and his wife Alfreda Benge - the "Alfie" who has long been his caretaker, collaborator, and muse - if they think Jack Straw will let Pinochet go home. "I was gonna bet with Alfie that he'd want to stay on the right side of Spain," Wyatt says. "But now that the White House has spoken and said send him back to Chile, I think that's what he'll do. There's no question in my mind now".

Straw will prove Robert and Alfie wrong, but one can forgive these former card-carrying Communists for a certain ingrained cynicism about the cosy relationship between Blighty and Uncle Sam.

l never do get to ask them about the blitzing of Iraq that follows two weeks later.



The release of *EPS by ROBERT WYATT* is the final chapter in the reissuing of almost alI the recorded work by this English master, a paraplegic with a Marxian thicket of beard and the sweet, doleful voice of a chorister. Comprising such Wyatt projects as the 1983 EP Work In Progress and an edited version of his 1981 *The Animals' Film* soundtrack, the box ties up alI the loose ends of the man 's mercurial career, including his 1974 Top 30 hit version of The Monkees' I'm A Believer and the 1983 Top 40 hit version of Elvis Costello's Shipbuilding.

EPs also features remixes of tracks from 1997's acclaimed 'comeback' album *Shleep*, a serene, playful collection that chose the personal over the political and returned Wyatt to the murky dream-states of his post-Soft Machine classics *Rock Bottom* (1974) and *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard* (1975). As a fan of the spartan, one-man-and-his-Casio loveliness of *Old Rottenhat* (1985) and *Dondestan* - and of the wonderful Rough Trade '80s singles collected on *Nothing Can Stop Us* (1982) - I was initially thrown by the spirit of collaboration that brought people like Paul Weller into the Wyatt frame. But in time I came round to *Shleep* as one comes round to everything this sharp, big-hearted man has done.

When I finally locate the house in the unspoilt Georgian town where Robert and Alfie live, I find them leafing through a dictionary of Esperanto in their dining room. Wyatt is trying to find a title for his next proper album, and Alfie is suggesting musical terms to look up.

"What's 'strum'?" she asks as she disappears into the adjoining kitchen.
"It's *ludate*, which is rather nice. "
"Look up 'sing'," says Alfie, out of view.
"I did. That's *kanti*."
"'Hum'?"
A pause of several seconds.
"Hum itself is *zumi*. That's *very* nice. That's good, isn't it?
I was going to call the record *Humdrum*, so if I now look up drum... *Timburo*? *Tamburo*? That's aIl right, I suppose."

The Wyatts have been in Lincolnshire for 10 years. Prior to that, they'd been wedged into a flat in Twickenham where Robert never had any space to work and into which friends would drop at aIl hours. One day Alfie set forth and drove as far north as it took to find a house for the price that the Twickenham flat was worth. "This house simply worked," she tells me. "It was somewhere we could go out and get everything with the wheelchair. It's quite hard to find a place like that in a place where you're not cut off and imprisoned. Of course you miss culture. This is a total culture-free zone. No films, no art. Once a year there's some jazz in Grimsby. If we hadn 't got a Tardis full of entertainment that we've gathered along the way - books and videos and things like that- it would be a desert island, really. "

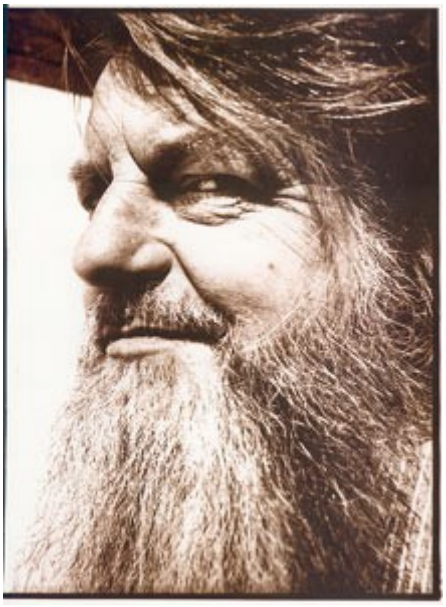
Alfie says the worst was when the Gulf War broke out and she was on her own here. (Wyatt was in the studio working on *Dondestan*.) "I was watching it aIl happen and it was so frustrating not being able to express your disgust and anger in any way, because the town went on as it was before and nobody talked about it. In London you could have gone out and sort of stood somewhere with other people. On the other hand, we're the right age where we know what we need and we've had our stimulation and our adventures. God help any child that's brought up here without any access to the Science Museum or anything else."

"The ones that worry you," chips in Robert, "are the ones who are brought up in Lincolnshire as children and then go on to become Prime Minister. Then you really see what the pay off of that deprivation is."

Given that the Thatcher years coincided with Wyatt's most trenchant musical statements about exploitation, imperialism and the like, this seems a suitable moment to ask him if he is dismayed by pop's wholesale retreat from political commitment.

"Ooh, that's difficult," he says, wincing slightly. "I'm not a sociologist, for a start. And I never felt that anybody *ought* to do anything at aIl in that regard. I was always pleased when people - Jerry Dammers or Paul Weller - got stuck into an issue, because they didn't talk obscurely. But I'd have to be some kind of... *paedophile* to be that interested in youth culture! I'm a bleedin' grown-up. I listen to grown-up music."

MOJO : You've talked about how hard it is to fight against the "ideological soup" that is the centrist politics of Blair and Clinton. Was it easier to shout out against Margaret of Grantham?



> Zoom

Thatcher was exorcism for me. The other night we were watching Harold Pinter on telly being asked about this transition he made to where he was overtly and directly engaged politically, where there were goodies and baddies. He said he was traumatised in the early '80s. He was stifled by the climate. . . *suffocated* was maybe the word he used. You fight your way out of it like you do out of suffocation. When propaganda is disseminated in such vastly effective ways there is a feeling of, well, somebody's got to say the other side of all this. You get baited. The purpose of conservative establishment propaganda is simply to demoralise the opposition, to gas you into submission. You fight because you fight for your own mental survival. That's all it is.

There's a fair amount of political/protest music on the EPs box, from Peter Gabriel's Biko to *The Animals' Film*.

I would like some of my stuff to be more anachronistic than it is, but sadIy it's not an anachronism to be singing a song like Te Recuerdo Amanda, written by someone who was tortured to death by Pinochet's people. And the version of *The Animals' Film* is also timely. There's a central contradiction in the vivisectionists' argument: they say it helps to experiment on animals because they're so like us, but at the same time they're saying animals are so unlike us that they don't suffer like we do. Well, you can't really have it both ways. There is actually an organisation called DAARE, Disabled Against Animal Research - it adds moral clout if disabled people themselves say that the whole purpose of doing good is to reduce the amount of suffering in the world.

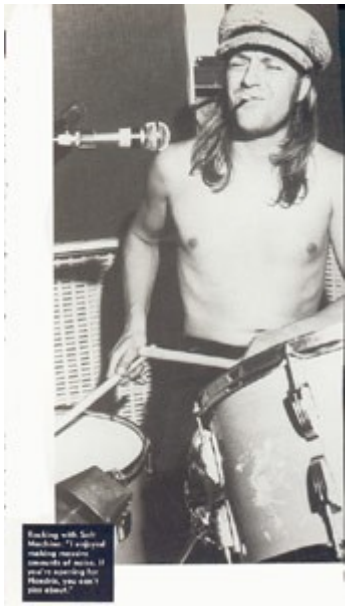
Have the Rykodisc/Hannibal reissues - including Dondestan *(Revisited)*, which afforded you the chance to improve on an album that you thought had been rather hurriedly mixed - brought a cheer to your heart?

Yeah, it's made me feel like I've been *doing* something! I'm really grateful to Ryko. They're a terrific bunch of people - really friendly and helpful and conscientious. The way Joe Boyd has done his repackaging of people like Sandy Denny, who are completely outside the fast traffic of the commercial record world, keeps these safe little pockets accessible to anybody who wants to make that effort. It's also been a chance to refresh things, like Alfie redoing or adding to the artwork, and also getting some of the words printed that weren't there before. And really having another crack at *Dondestan*, putting it in more of a context with Alfie's photographs. It's a great feeling.

But I have been doing other things as well. New recordings that I've really enjoyed. One was the Federico Garcia Lorca centenary this year, and this bunch of Spanish people put together a compilation *[De Granada A La Luna]* setting Lorca to music. They sent me a bit of text and I did it just with a bass player called Chucho Merchan, who's based in England and played on a couple of tracks on *Shleep* - a lovely geezer and a shit-hot musician. They invited us to Granada for the presentation, even though I don't do any live gigs, so I was just there in my capacity as... mascot teddy bear. The other thing was an Italian group called CSI, who got a bunch of groups to do a CD of tunes that I've sung *[The Different You: Robert Wyatt E Noi]*. Half of them were my songs and the rest were things I've sung, like Yolanda. So I sang a track on that, one of their tunes called Del Mundo - the first time I've ever tried to sing in Italian. It was incredible to be asked. And the general principle of other people doing my tunes while I sit at home drinking tea is, I think, to be encouraged.

Going back to the start of your story, would it be fair to say that you were blessed with unusually hip parents?

My parents were great. I've only just been orphaned, in fact: my mother died about a month ago. I've actually very rarely been directly questioned about what went on in Kent. I don't remember it being as breezy and glamorous and easy-going as people describe it. My dad contracted multiple sclerosis when I was about 10, and my parents moved out to near Dover. So the backdrop was my dad retiring early and fading away fairly fast, and my mother struggling as a freelance journalist to make ends meet. They put their last money into a falling down old house, and we were there six or seven years. I went to school a one-hour bus drive away to Canterbury, and I have to say I was very unhappy there. And although it's true that I became interested in music and started playing with other people who were interested in music, this idea of some swinging scene is simply not how I remember it. It was grimmer, and I found Canterbury a rather pofaced sort of town - I remember going into Canterbury Cathedral and signing "Jesus Christ" in the visitors' book, and a school prefect came up behind me and I was caned. I couldn't keep up with school work at all, so I left when I was about 16 and spent six years or so floating about.



> Zoom

Floating about where?

It was a rather lonely time. In late teens people might be going to college or university, whereas I was having to earn a living. My parents went off to live in Italy, and then I worked in a forest, and then as a Iife model at Canterbury Art College.

Then I worked in London, a large kitchen, funnily enough at the LSE, though I'd only ever see the students through the hatch. There was a staff of about 80 people there, and I was about the only bloke and about the only non-Caribbean. They were such a laugh, and they made me so welcome. I didn't really know London very well, and they used to take me back to their places and to their parties. They mothered me around and sat me in dark rooms with cans of beer, blasting me with what was I suppose proto-bluebeat music.

Do you generally retain good memories of making music in the '60s?

I've been quite shocked to see bits of old film where I'm drumming, and I obviously used to get stuck in on the old drum kit. But it all collapsed in such an unhappy way that, to be honest, I don't dwell on it, no. Of course I worked with some great musicians, but in the end I never really found a home as a drummer. So that my period of stimulus and excitement sort of goes from having a really good time until I was about 10 or 11, until school started to get hard. Then it's sort of blank, really, 'til about 1971 or 2. What I do remember enjoying was just that little bit later on: working with people like Henry Cow, that kind of thing.

I know that your ejection from Soft Machine is something that's still painful to you. I wondered if the *Shleep* song Was A Friend, which Hugh Hopper co-wrote, had any bearing on that?

So did I!

Alfie: At the end of that song, when Robert sings "We are forgiven", I wanted to join in and say: "No! Never!"

RW: Alfie's a tough cookie. The thing is, I don't really like reading stuff where musicians talk about this stuff. It all gets so Spinal Tap when you start talking about "musical differences". How can anybody expect any number of lads to be able to do their own thing and stay together that long ? I could have done with some of the money when we came out of it, but we managed. So we must all be like Nelson Mandela about these things.



> Zoom

Could Soft Machine have ever been as big as their great rivals at the time, Pink Floyd?

No, it was too different. Pink Floyd had hit singles from the start, and terrific ones too. And they had a whole grandeur and presence that wasn't anything to do with us. The only thing we had in common was that some of the audiences were the same in the sense that they were prepared to listen to tunes they hadn't heard before. I don't think Soft Machine had enough vision or coherence to get a loyal public. We didn't really know what we were doing. I was too much of a jazz fan. I like to travel light, with a little drum kit. I honestly don't need a lot of the other stuff. I do like eating fried-egg sandwiches.

Do you still feel a connection to the avant-garde spirit of that period?

It's an odd thing, that. In fact, there were a lot more things like what we now call World Music before the beat group hegemony took over the record shelves, actually. People did go and see Ravi Shankar, and they did listen to calypso and bossa nova and all kinds of things. There was a reach to outside the local culture, a very wide one. Really this aIl happened in the '50s, and a lot of the stuff was cannibalised years later in the rock field - by people like us. I wasn't culturally a rebel at all in terms of my parents. In fact, I really liked my dad's records and paintings and stuff that he liked, which was the avant-garde of the first half of the century. Picasso, Prokofiev. So that was a starting point, but it was already a nostalgia for an imagined world that my dad lived in. And even when I got into bebop and modern jazz in the '50s, it was already nostalgia for an imaginary Harlem or something. When some people say art's got to be new, it's got to be cutting-edge, it doesn't mean anything to me at all. I have no ideology of newness.

When you played with Jimi Hendrix, did you think, this guy is light years beyond what most of us are doing?



> Zoom

It was a shock, yeah. It was a lurch. Just how far he'd got, having not seen the roots of it. Always underestimated, I think, was his group, and Mitch Mitchell particularly. There's very few drummers who could have ridden the storm and clocked where the beat was, what the time was, and dealt with that funky beat but at the same time flying like the wind and following Hendrix all over the place. Then again, Hendrix has to be given credit for such a loose group, far looser than anyone else at the time. As someone who'd spent much longer listening to the glorious disintegration of bebop into Sun Ra and Charlie Haden and Don Cherry, this felt more comfortable to me than the strict time and neat and tidy blocks of sound that rock music was locked into. The music breathed, it had air in it. Of course, bits floated off and got lost, but that suited me fine. They were a great encouragement to us, particularly Mitch, who at the end of the tour gave me his kit. Which I've still got [upstairs]. I've never used another. Everything you hear of me on a drum kit is on that maple-wood kit.

Also, Hendrix was not a prima donna. He was actually quite a modest gent, a bit of a grown-up. He' d done those things that conservatives say young men should do. He'd done his stint in the forces. So between the forces and Little Richard's band, he knew all about discipline! He was very, very secure in that way. But he took risks aIl the time. A great inspiration. I can't imagine that period without him. He was pure light. I did see him every night playing something like Red House, and every night it just made the hairs stand up on the back of your neck. I feel quite tearful about it, even now.

Do you think if you hadn't had the accident in 1973 that you would have found the musical voice that you have, and made the music you've made?

No. One thing I'm really grateful for is not being a drummer anymore, as a primary thing. That forces me to take charge of my own music. I should have done it before. It was a good career move... as everyone said when Elvis Presley died. I just carried on with what I do, which is basically slightly out-of-tune nursery rhymes. Up to that point, as a drummer and arranger, I'd been trying to sort of take on everything there was to take on, in terms of music-making - all the harmonic and rhythmic ideas that were available. Which is a great apprenticeship in music, but then you end up saying: What actually is your voice? What is it you yourself have to offer? And the accident made me have to work that out.

I was thinking about how hymnal many of your songs sound. The keyboards sometimes suggest an organ in a little country church, and the voice is like some doleful choirboy. Any idea where that comes from?

The first things I remember my dad playing, before MS stopped him, involved us standing round the piano and singing things like Away In A Manger. I've always liked that rather static feel. In fact, you get it in surprising places. Some South African music has it - you can hear the hymns in the background somewhere or other. Also, some of the most influential music l've listened to was the Charlie Haden stuff, as arranged by Carla Bley. *Liberation Music Orchestra* is stateIy but ramshackle at the same time. I loved the feel of it. The whole thing came up again in one of John Peel's daft projects, getting everybody to sing Christmas carols in the studio. I did Good King Wenceslas with Ronnie Lane - he was Wenceslas and I was the page, singing in this sort of falsetto. It came straight out, I had no problems with it.

Is it accurate to say your voice is a countertenor?

I don't know quite what it is. I've lost some top notes recently, a semitone every year, just about. I can get comfortably up to about a G above middle C. I've got a falsetto in my voice that a lot of people use and comes from black music. I used to listen to a lot of women singers like Dionne Warwick. I could sing along to Dionne Warwick easier than I could to Ray Charles.

**I've always been curious to know how the sound of Rock Bottom - that dreamy, murky minimalism - was born in your head.
Where did the keyboard sound originate?**



> Zoom

The keyboard itself suggested it. Alfie got this thing called a Riviera in Venice, and what I liked about it was that you were able to slow the vibrato right down - normally with things like the Hammond organ the vibrato is quite fast and it's set. So with this Riviera I was able to tune in with the kind of vibrato I wanted, and I was able to play rather like I would sing if I could be a little choir. I could set my voice right into it, and it was like stepping into a warm bath of sound. I felt really at home. But where it comes from, I don't know. I was impressed by the way Rick Wright used to play in the Floyd - it was nothing like the only way I knew how to play at that time, which was somewhere between Booker T. and Jimmy Smith. He left all the drama and dynamics to the other instruments and just created these glacial harmonic backdrops - a very good bit of stage-setting, and rather underestimated. So I was affected by him, although there's a grandeur to what they do, which is not a word that comes to mind with my tunes!

You sit at this intersection of so many different strands. There aren't many people who connect Eno to The Monkees, or Paul Weller to Mike Oldfield. Why is that?

I don't sit down and try and be eclectic. I really like Paul, and I really like Evan Parker. And me in the middle is just the same old thing. No, it's just that I really like all these people and the way they play. Sometimes it's not to do with their genre, but with the character of the particular musician. It's the thing I really like about music and working with other musicians. As a jazz fan, when you had an Art Blakey, there they were - Horace Silver, Benny Golson - and you felt these people in the room, you got a sense of the actual characters. The sense of contrast between Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, and Miles Davis I really felt them as people. There's a particular character trait of someone like Paul that I really find appealing, and it gives you an extra musical thing. It's the actual company, the imagined character that comes through the music.

Did you always intend *Shleep* to be a more collaborative venture than its predecessors?

Shleep was recorded like *Rock Bottom*, which is to say that I was prepared to record the whole thing myself like *Dondestan*. So that any musicians coming was a lovely luxury - a bit of virtuosity, whether it was Annie Whitehead's trombone or Paul's guitar or Evan's saxophone. But I'd mapped it all out myself, and wasn't relying on anybody else to make it work. Their role was to enhance it. Most of the guests on there would come for a weekend or something, and they'd work on a couple of songs. They really brought out stuff that hadn't occurred to me, or at least had in my head, but I couldn't write the sort of early Mingusy thing with trombones and saxophones weaving about, but Annie and Evan concocted much nearer what I had dreamed of. And I wanted Blues In Bob Minor to be a proper sort of blues, even though with my rickety rhythm section thing it's not as beefy as a blues would be done normally. With a bit of encouragement - he didn't wanna disturb the mood of the song - Paul took it much further than I had planned to.

Alfie: Robert's one weakness is that he's not assertive, so he can easily let things go in order not to hurt somebody's feelings, or because he doesn't want to be seen as a prima donna. He knows what it is in his head, but he lets things go because he doesn't want to mess up the atmosphere.

You've talked often of "rock" as opposed to "roll". Do you think "rock" as a phenomenon has burned itself out and become a bit of a joke?

I'd have been quite happy coming out of the '50s into the '60s if there'd never been any rock at all. I'd have been quite happy listening to jazz and bossa nova and rhythm and blues and Cuban music and African stuff. My favourite guitarist's still Wes Montgomery. I can't think of anything that was going on that wasn't quite enough for me already.

On the other hand, you'd never have had Hendrix.

That's right. When I actually think of it, there's lots of lovely rock bands and rock musicians. What happened in rock music was that the guitar took over the role that brass sections in rhythm and blues had had. If you listen to The Contours' original Do You Love Me, it strikes me as being a stronger, more powerful record than any beat group cover version: it's got a drama and a clarity and it swings like fuck. Who could ask for anything more?

Is it an argument, at the end of the day, about power versus sensuality?

I've got ears, and I can hear how dramatic and exciting electric guitars can be, but I can live without it. Maybe I'm not as eclectic as I've been suggesting. A difficulty I had with rock was that I wasn't altogether happy with what happened to drumming. I'd been following the history of drumming in jazz, where rhythm was broken up by drummers like Kenny CIarke and Philly Joe Jones into this wonderful breathing thing, and rock'n'roll seemed to me to take it back to that march-bond thump-on-every-beat, and it just gave me claustrophobia. It's also a musical thing - a lot of rock'n'roll is in eighth-note and 16th-note intervals, whereas what I really love about jazz, and why it's my music of the century, is the triplet feel of the 12/8 signature, the implied three and four simultaneously, which you'll hear in even the most simply equipped West African groups. That seems to me the organic live element that made jazz solos possible and gave a kind of flow to the music, and I'm sticking with that flow... But you could probably stick a bit of John Bonham on and I'd be going, Yeah!!



> Zoom

Do you try to keep abreast of pop music?

I don't feel I'm missing anything, but I can't say that I need much, either. I'm very intrigued by people like Tricky, and what's going on around his vocals. And a lot of what happened with dub, those lo-tech ideas of what you can do in the studio, and then that being picked up by New Yorkers and them doing pan-tonal stuff with hip hop. Perhaps the most recent influence I've had was Björk's last record. I took a bit of courage from her about how to place things. You have to have no fear of technology. There was a nice thing she said in an interview: "I'm not scared of technology, my dad was an electrician!"

Alfie: We really love this record by Wyclef Jean we've been hearing. Something about November.

Gone 'Til November?

RW: Oh, yes, that's great. As a bit of pop song stuff, that's the best I've heard since Björk.

You are - are you not? - a godfather of lo-fi. The very primitive drum machines on East Timor [*Old Rottenhat*], for instance.

Absolutely right. And it goes back to when I used to like Paul Klee's drawings: those spidery pen-and-ink drawings with splodgy bits on and rather feeble colouring-in. I really like precarious, rickety things and always have done. I spent quite a few years in very loud bands, making massive amounts of noise, and I enjoyed all that. If you're opening a concert for Hendrix in front of 15,000 Hendrix fans, you can't piss about. You can't be whimsical, you've got to come up with something. So I do know about all that.

What was the last occasion on which you performed on a stage?

It was in a little club, doing Born Again Cretin with The Raincoats. That would have been about 1983. They did it very nicely, as it happens.

Could you ever see yourself giving a live performance again?

I couldn't, no. I dream about it sometimes, and they're alwoys nightmares: I can't remember the words, the band doesn't know what key the songs are in, and I've forgotten what order we're doing them in.

THE CONVERSATION WINDS down with tea and doughnuts. Outside, a damp, grey sky unfolds across Lincolnshire. When Robert briefly leaves the room, Alfie tells me conspiratorially about a new keyboard a Yamaha "dance keyboard", she calls it- that he acquired after *Shleep*.

"I'm always trying to get him to buy something new," she says. "And he does buy something; but then of course he can't make any of it work. He's just not made for machines. He doesn't even know how to turn them on. He still has the Riviera, but some of the notes started to break up. The next thing he was really fond of was this Wasp, a little small computer thing that made a very good bass sound - he did a lot of *Old Rottenhat* with that. There are alI these sort of dead things upstairs. Like this old trumpet I got him in a car boot sale."

When Wyatt re-enters the room he plays me the nine-minute Cancion De Julieta that he contributed to the Lorca album. It's a huge, mournful thing, with groaning keyboards and horn sounds like baleful whale noises, reminiscent of something off Charlie Haden's *Liberation Music Orchestra*...

Un mer de sueno
Un mer de tierra blanca...
(Oceans of dreaminess
A sea of white earth...)

"This one was obviously meant for me," Wyatt says as we listen. "Sometimes I react against that kind of typecasting, but in this case they were absolutely right. It's serendipity I think... though I never quite know what that means. "

Alfie smiles across the table at him.
"I think it's the future, myself," she says.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

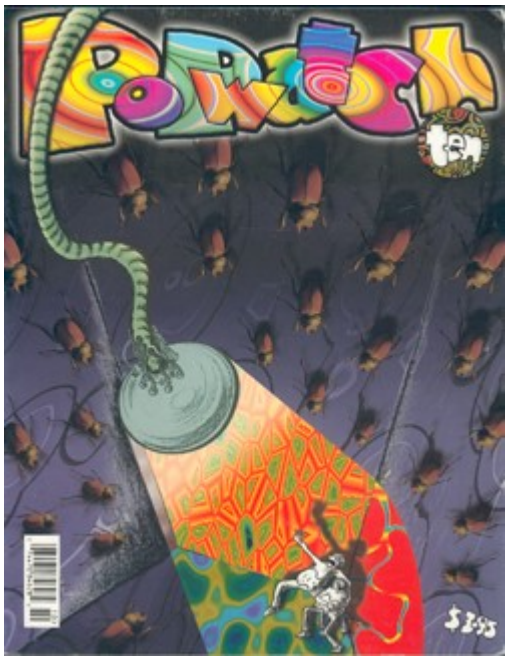
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Not just different dialects... but different languages - Popwatch N°10 - Winter-Spring 1999 / An interview with Robert Wyatt by Dave Cross

NOT JUST DIFFERENT DIALECTS... BUT DIFFERENT LANGUAGES



An interview with Robert Wyatt by Dave Cross

The way he sees it, there are two different Robert Wyatt.

The first was Robert Wyatt the bi-ped. As late-60s guideposts of British avant garde freak culture, the Soft Machine had few peers and certainly no rivals. A necessary ingredient to all great rock bands is tension and infighting, without which you wind up with a rather bland end product. There was an overabundance of tension in Soft Machine (whose great name certainly outlived the effectiveness of the band itself) and most of those involved can't look back at their tenure with fondness. Few members of the Softs ever transcended being a "former Soft Machine member". Luckily, Wyatt was first and foremost in distancing himself from his former band - a move that would allow him to go from flower-child freak to far-left political advocate with credibility intact.

After being booted his band (still a source of much bitterness for him), Wyatt formed Matching Mole. At that point, perhaps not distanced far enough from his former unit (indeed, the name Matching Mole was a pun drawn from the French translation of Soft Machine), the Mole was not the greatest financial or critical success. Wyatt folded the first version and was in the process of reforming a more compatible Matching Mole when he fell out a window, breaking his back, and permanently winding up in a wheelchair.

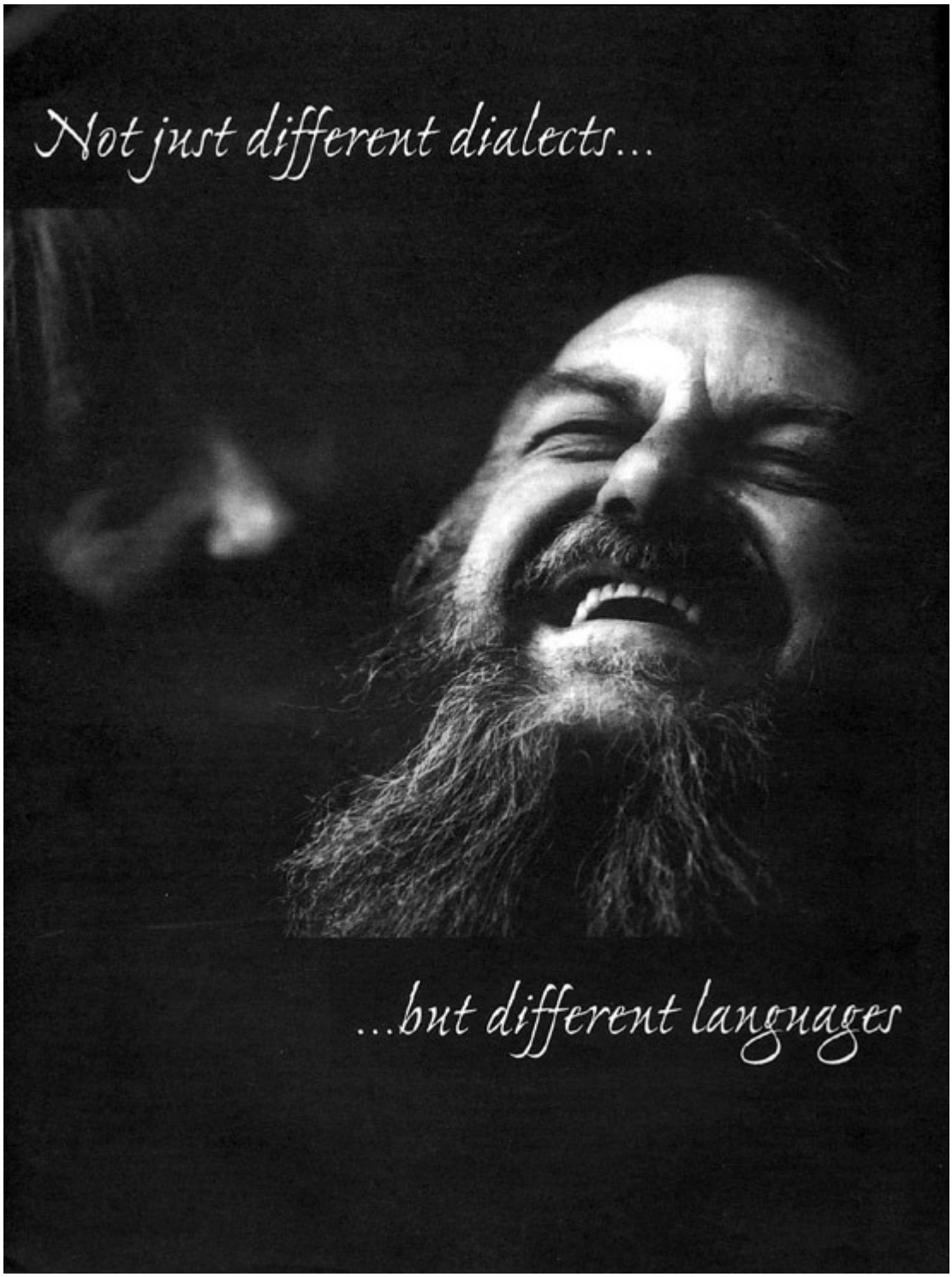
The second Robert Wyatt emerged in 1974 with the release of his fully realized lyrical, political, and musical vision. Although Rock Bottom was actually his second solo record, by all accounts it was the perfect debut of the fully mature Robert Wyatt. Intense, harrowing, and introspective, the record was a critical success, and soon Robert found himself on the English charts with a couple of successfully, designed and executed singles. As Robert would later say, "I'm a girl who likes to say yes".

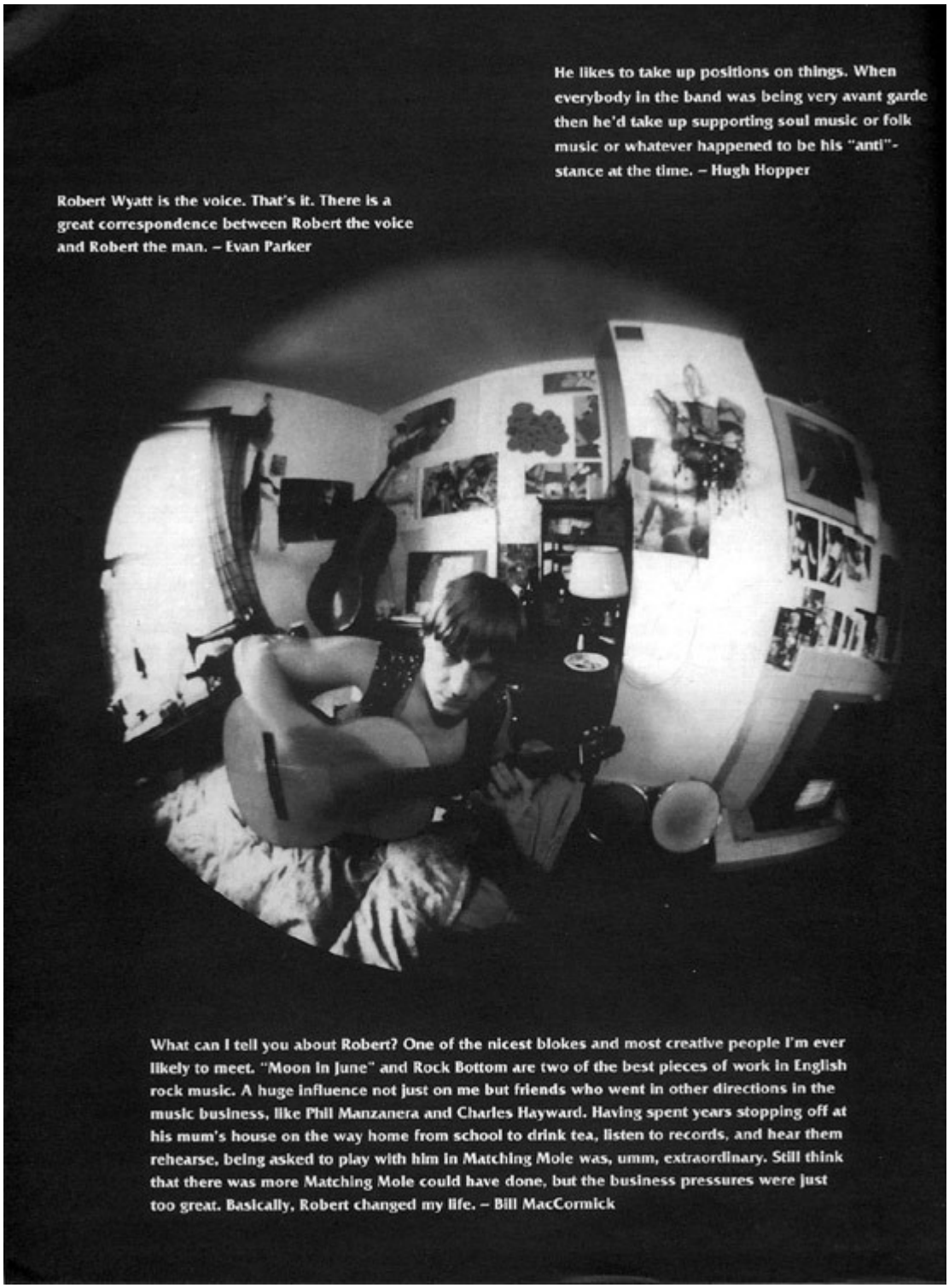
Soon after, punk rock would rear its ugly head. Rather than take the reactionary view of many of his former colleagues, Wyatt embraced the post-punk culture and

worked with some of the leading lights of post-punk U.K. Although it was never meant to last as a permanent document, Wyatt's work of the early 1980s is both politically vitriolic ans musically superb. No thinly veiled political art rock hinting at Communist orientation, Robert's work for Rough Trade is direct and personal. It's as if he's singing those songs just for you; perhaps his most endearing and long-lasting trait.

There are always long gaps in the recorded history of Robert Wyatt. It's as if he realizes no one will ever forget about him, or else he'll reinvent himself to a brand new audience whenever he decided to return. Whatever the reason, the 90s have only seen two new Wyatt releases so far (there were two compilations as well). His latest, Shleep, is a superb romp through many of Robert's old musical playgrounds with cutting-edge jazzbos bumping heads with pop superstar understatement. But don't think for a second that all the high-profile guest stars or superbly glossed production can overshadow. Mr. Wyatt himself. He's the little wizard waving his wand over this whole alchemic brew; at point it comes off like a digital retelling of his classic Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard, other times there are elements of most of his other works.

1998 has been a very busy year for Robert Wyatt. The U.K. release of Shleep finally landed in the U.S., thanks to Thirsty Ear. Additionally, Hannibal/Ryko in the U.K. are readying most of the Wyatt back catalog for reissue on CD (likewise to follow shortly thereafter in the U.S.., again on Thirsty Ear).


Not just different dialects...
...but different languages



THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED ON JANUARY 6,1998.

Popwatch - You play trumpet on your new record, Shleep.

Robert - Yeah.

Have you played trumpet on any of your prior records?
I don't think I ever did, although I seem to remember playing a trumpet mouthpiece solo, an imitation Roy Eldridge trumpet mouthpiece solo, on an ancient thing of Daevid Allen's about being an Australian, called "Fred The Fish," in about 1966. I always played mouthpiece at home and I studied it a bit at school, but I didn't like the music I was being taught and I couldn't really read the little dots. So I dropped the lessons and, in fact, left school when I was about 16 altogether. Long before I was even singing, the ultimate sound in my head that a human could make was Miles Davis with a mute. That's always been my favorite sound in the world. And now all my heroes on the trumpet are dead... I just wanted to remind myself of some of the sounds of the trumpet. That was all really.

Does this make you approach composition of melody a little differently?
I think possibly because that was what I was listening to that that's what comes out a bit. I'm not a singer that is obviously influenced by singers. I don't even think about the art of singing, really, when I'm singing. I'm thinking about the notes. And when I think about notes I think about the musicians I like rather than any particular singers. Although I've got to enjoy some singers more recently.

It definitely sounds like your took your time on this new record and really worked it quite a bit, using editing techniques and other studio features that really aren't on a lot of your other records.
That's right. It's just that the circumstances were there, basically. It was just a nice atmosphere being in a studio run by a musician, who's an old friend as well you know... and he helped. We were just able to go back and rework things.

How long did it take you to record this album?
Well, the actual recording time... I work pretty fast, but it was spread out. I would do a couple of days recording and then take the tapes home for sometimes a week or two or more. It was over a year ago... for maybe a couple of months. About a year ago (1/97-ed.) I was right in the middle of it I suppose

How was it working with Brian Eno in 1997?
Just the same! He hasn't changed at all. He's just so fast in the studio. All the particular things that I'm illiterate about... which is like what the little buttons on the machine do and so on... he's quick and fast and very imaginative.
Perhaps he's even quicker and faster now. He gets so quickly to what he wants to do. He doesn't spend hours thinking, "Maybe we can do this." He sort of hears something and calculates an appropriate response, such as the kind of dripping water sound on track two; he got that in minutes really, from hearing the track, and it just goes so well with the cymbal. He just seems to be able to make the machine do it. Whereas other people can do these things but they take hours to find the place on the machine.

It's an interesting combination, putting Brian Eno and Evan Parker together.
Well they're from completely different disciplines. Not just different dialects but different languages almost. But they're both very interested in the idea of not relying on musical clichés or at least making their own language.

Evan Parker being a huge, huge European sax giant.
He is indeed. I think he is one of the few non-American musicians from the jazz tradition who's made a distinct contribution that you could say is not just participating in the American tradition.
There are a few, like Django Reinhart, and I think he is one of those in my opinion.


photo: Mark Ellidge, 1997

> Zoom

You work with Paul Weller on the new record as well.
He was recording anyway, on and off, in Phil's studio, and I left him a little note saying hello really. He said if I needed any strumming on any songs that he'd be happy to give it a try.
There were a couple of tunes, particularly the one by Mark Kramer which I'd altered a bit, "Free Will and Testament," and then the sort of Bob Dylan blues thing at the end, which is really just a blues with slightly altered changes. He just seemed to feel very comfortable with those. He really worked hard. I was very grateful because he was right in the middle of doing his own trio LP, Heavy Soul. It would've been perfectly acceptable had he said, "I can't think about anything else right now," but he loves to play as long as it's serious. He doesn't like fucking about, he likes to get on with it. I was very honored that he spent the time for me.

You play with some other old friends on Shleep. Phil Manzanera makes an appearance.
Yeah, he does. He was sort of hovering about discreetly... because he knows the studio so well.

He also knows my music better than I do. We have a mutual friend in Bill MacCormick, the bass player I used to work with. I think they were school friends, they had a group together before I knew either of them. So he knows what I do and he knows what his studio does. He didn't intrude in any way, but he was discreetly extremely helpful and just made things easier. And he played, of course, on the only track that I really wrote with Alfie... that Alfie was part of the actual writing of the song in the first place, which was " Alien." He played on that. Alfie is very happy with that solo, which is good because that was a very important track for us. It's something of an innovation in the sense that it was a real collaboration. I mean, the word collaboration is used a lot, but that was a real one.

Was Alfie in the studio when you recorded that?
Yeah. She actually sort of wrote what the voices ought to be like. She wanted that effect of accumulating strands, not in terms of just a choir effect but of loose, accumulating strands getting slightly denser towards the end. She mixed the vocals and got the sound on each one... sometimes she would have a bit of treatment on one word and take it off the next word. It was very much her project as well as mine and then Phil just put the icing on the cake.

You work quite a bit with Alfie on this record.
Yeah, that's right. Well this, in common with the last recording, she wrote about half the lyrics as well as ideas on the musical side of how to do things.

You play with another old friend, trombonist Annie Whitehead.
It's funny, because when people think about the musicians I work with they tend to think about the people in the groups I was in when I was a drummer.
But in fact, a lot of the people I know best are musicians that I've known, really, since that period. Since the 7Os in particular... from being around the little jazz clubs in London. Annie, like Evan Parker, spent a lot of time with the African musicians I knew - Dudu Paquan and so on - and that's really how we became friends. We did actually record together once, on Jerry Dammers' recording, but I just really like her. The thing is that she's also a composer and arranger and I really wanted somebody who could think a bit Mingus and not just play a solo.

Is writing lyrics something you've had difficulty with on the past couple records?
Funny... none of the things I am, like being a singer or a songwriter, I never really planned to be any of these things. I'm still surprised that that's what I seem to be and I'm amazed that I still do it. It really surprises me when I write any songs at all - not that I don't write more. I'm really grateful to Alfie though. She doesn't write lyrics as lyrics, apart from "Alien"; she actually writes them as autonomous little pieces and I tend to just steal things from her poetry notebooks and sketchbooks and so on. And that's very useful to me. I have difficulty very often, working from words to music... that way around... but in the case of Alfie's things, I've been through a lot of what she writes about with her. Apart from "Pa in Madrid" which was, of course, a trip she took with her own father to Madrid. So I find I can empathize very closely with what she writes. I mean, I was with her when the swallows disappeared into the sky. I've watched swifts with her. I've seen the same little sparrow underneath the postbox. So it's easy for me to write tunes for that.

There are a couple of thematic strings running through Shleep, one being sleep and another being migratory birds.
Yeah. That's right.

Is it a concept album?
No, absolutely not. A concept album suggests a predetermined plan, and if anything I think less and less about what I'm doing as I get older. I'm working more on a kind of infantile instinct level... just doing what feels right and alive. I used to be much more theoretical than I am now. I've done my, sort of, theoretical homework and I know what I think, and I don't even think about what I think about anymore. And so it's other people's guess, really, as to how these images resonate. Their guess is as good as mine.

Are you thinking in terms of recording another album anytime soon?
Well, I've got bits of more material. It's a question of not recording more than I can deal with at any one moment because I like to tackle each song in its own right. Each song might require quite a different treatment so I don't want to get into sort of a factory process thing. I've noticed that with even some musicians that I really like, especially on the CDs, they just go on and on and on and you feel like after about a half an hour that that whole way of doing things is sort of starting to repeat itself too much and I don't want to do that. So I keep material back. But I've been asked to do a couple of things for other people which I'll get out of the way first... before I get back on to the next thing.

It seems like you're an ideal artist for 7" records. It's too bad they've gone away.



What do you mean, like singles and things?

Exactly. Like the series of singles you made for Rough Trade.
Well it's funny that you should say that. Rough Trade has a singles club, which is a just a subscription-only thing, where they issue one single a month on vinyl with a proper packet. A couple of months ago they... although I'm not on Rough Trade anymore... Geoff Travis at Rough Trade asked me and Hannibal Records if they could use a couple of tracks of mine for one of their singles. They used "Free Will and Testament" and on the other side they put an earlier piece, one of Alfie's things, "Sight of the Wind" from Dondestan. And it was just as a single just for their club, so it was nice to see that. It was very nostalgic. In the 50s, when I was a lad, you got jazz on singles. There were Thelonious Monk singles let alone more obviously commercial things like Art Blakey and Cannonball Adderly and Joe Zawinful and that kind of thing - you know before Weather Report he was working with Cannonball - and that merged into some kind of Nina Simone and Ray Charles stuff and the soul records. And the best jukeboxes in London... I just loved them for that and I do miss that.

> Zoom



> Zoom

Do you have any other thoughts on the album?
Only that there are things that I would now do differently. Brian, for example, sang on the first track, and now listening to it I would have his voice equal up with mine when he comes in. And I regret the fact that I don't think my voice is quite good enough on its own in the verses. That's the thought I have on that! It's a very simple point but there's a couple of little bits like that, and I'm also a bit worried about my drumming as I get older. Having heard some of my drumming 20 years ago I'm not sure how long that I can get away with it.

I think you can get away with it for a little while longer.
(Laughs) Thank you.

Has drumming affected your health at all? I hear Rashid Ali has quite bad tendonitis.
Oh, goodness me. I know Jerry Dammers has that. That's a terrible curse for musicians. I've heard there are some ways of dealing with it, but... that would be a nightmare. No, I don't have any problem with that. I think that what the real problem is - it's an obvious thing about being a paraplegic really, or maybe it's not so obvious - even if you're just keeping time with your right hand there's something about squeezing the hi-hat with your left foot which keeps

your whole body at one. You know, working as a single (piece of) athletic machinery. Whereas when you're just working with your hands, even like playing bass drum by hand on overdubs of the song, it's harder to get that organic unity in the playing. It's as simple as that really.

You seem to regret a lot of the decisions you've made.
Well, some people are very good at the actual craft of living. I seem to spend a lot of time at the wrong place at the wrong time. Or trying to be harmless and actually fucking people up a bit, like Alfie's career for example.

Oh no.
No, really, I feel very uneasy and I think it's because I just can't work it out. There are moments, especially when I sing on other people's records, say, Hapless Child, or more recently for John Greaves (a bass player here in Europe), that if I just did one thing then I could really get around that. But when I'm working on things then I try to think like a drummer or a keyboard player or a composer or a word writer and then I'm just not sure what I'm meant to be. And I've got an awful feeling that just 5 minutes before the end I'll suddenly realize which one I should be (laughs). How I should have approached it all. I wish we could have a test run - it's an old cliché, I know. I just feel like we're all in a play on a stage but nobody's given us a script and there are about eight directors going around shouting out different instructions. And nobody knows who's supposed to be on the stage and who is supposed to be off it, and that's life (laughs).

If we could, I'd like to discuss some of your early band history. Did the Daevid Allen Trio actually participate in a multimedia event with Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs in 1963?
I can't remember that! The thing is there was a lot of interest around jazz and poetry, that is, poetry, music and effects and other general things in the early 60s when I was in school. We got involved with various multimedia events but I don't ever remember doing anything with Burroughs, certainly. Daevid himself may very well have done so... he got around a lot more. I was just having left school and kind of not knowing what to do then. Daevid himself may have gotten in much more. I mean he was always moving around a lot. Going back and forth from Paris and Australia and all kinds of things. But, no. I consider that period just as an apprenticeship, in terms of what we were doing, more of a learning period really. It was like going to a school. Instead of going to university, because I couldn't afford a proper university with proper things, I went to a kind of culture university with people like Daevid.

The next band, The Wilde Flowers, seems to take a step back. They were more rhythm and blues based.
The Hopper Brothers were very locally based, in a way that I had never ever been in my head. You know, they were born and went to school and lived in one town. And they had a group that played in that town and they used to play, you know, material of the day that was on the charts that was do-able, and quite a lot of soul stuff as well. There again I was surprised, really, because I didn't used to live around there that often. When I had left them Brian had being trying to learn some Cannonball Adderly kind of thing on the saxophone and Hugh had been learning Charlie Haden things on bass... I came back and they were playing Chuck Berry tunes and I was as surprised as anybody! It was good fun drumming, and also socially it was a way of getting out of just playing in people's front rooms and sitting out in the hall. To get to play in public was a most incredible youthful discipline, and to play for dances, even more so.

Your next band was the Soft Machine. Obviously there's bad blood there.
I'm not going to go on about that, don't worry. I'd just like to say for the record that when things wind up badly it's difficult to recapture the hope and excitement that came before that, because it gets tainted.

How many times did Soft Machine tour America?
I don't know. We spent most of 1968 in America, following Hendrix around. In the middle we did a few gigs on our own and Andy Summers came out and joined us for a little bit.

What was his role in the Soft Machine?
He just joined us on guitar about halfway through for a few weeks. I think he was on his way to the west coast, basically, because he had some friends in the Animals. Andy himself had been in a band called Zoot Money Big Roll Band - more or less a kind of a big band soul outfit. And, if fact, he had been the first person to be generous towards us in an interview in the press in England. He was interested in trying different things, away from just being a rhythm guitarist, so he joined us for a bit but he stayed, of course, out on the west coast.

There was another guitarist for the Soft Machine for a while, Larry Nolan.
He was an American lad. He was a very nice bloke... used to write words for songs. Yeah, I think it was sometime in the mid-60s, but he went back to America. In the end, with the guitar

business... we never found a way with guitars. The main thing people seemed to have around that time seemed to be built around the guitar, whereas the music we were making and arranging didn't seem to be comfortable for guitarists. Which is why in the end we didn't have any.

How did the work on Picasso's play come about?
I can't really remember that. It could have been one of Daevid's Paris connections. It's simply where artistic Paris spends its summer and they would all organize various things, though it wasn't all French people down there. There were a lot of Americans there who I didn't know very much about. In fact, Taylor Mead and other people around the New York Andy Warhol circuit seemed to be down there as well. I loved Taylor Mead, he was a great man, very funny... and some other people. It was just that they needed music. We had already done music at the Fringe Edinburgh festival for "Ubu Roi," an Alfred Jarry play, and they wanted musicians that were comfortable outside the regular song format.

Did Soft Machine compose new material for that?
Yes. Yes, we did.

Did that ever get recorded?
I shouldn't think so. Mostly we played on a beach, in a big dome - a temporary structure that was built. A geodesic dome built by Keith Alban, right next to a German beer festival, I remember. That was a bizarre pairing. We had no money, we were just sleeping around on the beach, I think, half the time. Which you can just about do in summer at the south of France.

Could you put the Soft Machine into perspective for someone who's never heard them?
Ah. (Pause)

No?
The thing is... I wouldn't use the word "rock" really. I would say that as a basis we used actual pop song type music. When you think of rock you think of a blues-based guitar, sort of getting heavier and heavier, based in rhythm and blues, and I don't think we were really anything to do with that. I think we were people who like improvising endlessly on fragments of pop songs. That's really what it was, that's the odd combination.

And huge volume.
Oh, it got very loud, yeah. Did you ever hear Lifetime, Tony Williams's band with Larry Young?

I sure have.
It seems like that was the kind of thing that happened around that period. In 1968 our rather steep learning curve - if I can use that very modern cliché - came from having to open for Jimi Hendrix every night. If you're playing in front of an audience of thousands of people who are restlessly waiting for perhaps the greatest rock performer of all time (laughs), they really get impatient unless you come up with something. It knocks the whimsy out of you and you really have to get tough and strong and get on with it. And so, after a year with Hendrix, certainly, that tended to be our approach.



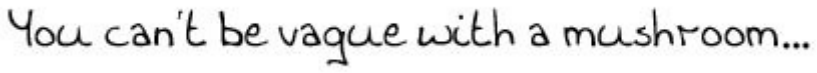
Let's talk about Matching Mole. Certainly there's some similar ideas to the Soft Machine, but movement in a different direction.
That's right. Yeah, certainly from my point of view. I wanted to carry on playing drums and I was always looking for friends to play with. In the end, to be honest, I don't think I ever found somebody to play with. It may be my fault as a drummer, maybe I'm not playable with. Maybe I was never meant to be a drummer. As I'd said, at the end of my life I'll suddenly say "I wasn't meant to be a drummer" and the whole thing will make sense, but anyway... What I was pleased about was that we managed to record a couple LPs on which we got a lot of ideas that I had, and which the others had - Dave McRae, Dave Sinclair, and Bill (MacCormick). It was very democratic in a sense, but with the LPs in particular, the first Matching Mole record, I was able to anticipate what I was going to have to do later on my own on keyboards by doing so much Mellotron on the thing because it was in the studio. It gave me a better grasp on some of the harmonic implications of some of the tunes I was trying to write.

This was aIso the first appearance of your politicaI orientation.
Well I suppose so... in joke form anyway. Although funny enough, I think there's a couple Soft Machine songs where I refer to... I don't know what I was trying to say... "If I were black and I lived here I would want to be (a big man) in the CIA or the FBI." I don't know what that was about. I've always thought about these things.
The politicalization actually coincided with getting to know Alfie. And when I got to know Alfie, there were things around her flat which I had never seen before. Newspapers called the Workers Press and so on (laughs). Alfie's father had been a professor of Libriarianship and had set up Libraries in Trinidad and Nigeria. Between them, they were able to show me the other side. To me black culture had always been another aesthetic phenomena, like Picasso and his sculpture. I was just very grateful for what I consider the main ingredient to make the 20th century culture distinctive, which was the black contribution. In terms of all the music I'd heard - be it Bartok or Buddy Holly - the music that really struck me as having both the emotional and intellectual weight that I wanted was, in the end, Coltrane. So I'd always had this feeling of great gratitude to black culture and more and more, particularly in England... England really invented Apartheid, we distance ourselves from it superficially. Apartheid was a very European phenomenon, funny enough, and there were a lot of Africans who made us aware of that. Somehow you couldn't reconcile the enormous debt to black culture with the general way that black people were being treated politically and economically. You couldn't tally it. You couldn't reconcile it. It was via politics that I opted to try and make sense of that.

Do you continue to do that?
Yes, I do. I would say of all the illuminations of the way I think, the most consistently bright light in the dusty little attic of my brain is based on a few Marxist insights into the nature of power and economics - of who wields it and why. I'm not talking about a failed attempt to do anything about it. I'm simply talking about an analysis of how the world runs. The political analysis helps to sweep away some of the mystification which tends to be used by some of the conservatives to disguise what they are doing in the name of the church and patriotism and the family and all this sort of thing.

Let's jump ahead a couple years to Robert Wyatt the Rough Trade artist and your fierce political agenda of that time.
Right.

To me it is very interesting how the politics of the 80s finally played out.
Well, that would be true of any period. It would also be true of the 60s for me how that played out. Things have their life span. As I say, it's one thing that's really stayed with me. But it's just as you don't have to be a gospel singer if you're a Christian but you might make a few gospel records when you become involved in the first place, then it might just imbue the rest of your life. And I think this has happened with me with my political stuff. People always think reactionary means right wing reactionary; but I think I would call myself a left wing reactionary, that is to say, as harsh as the climate seems to be in terms of right wing ideas being sold around and being considered culturally accept able. I feel the need, not as a missionary or indeed to communicate at all, but just for my own mental well being, to kind of correct the balance in my own work.
So during the harshest period of Reaganomics and Cold War banalities, I felt the need to verify my own separateness from the actions of my own government at the time. As long as there was some form of alternative going on in the world, I would look hopefully at any of these developments. Of course, in the meantime, NATO and the World Bank Organization have won the Cold War. There is no one posing a serious challenge to the western victory in the Cold War. I'm not a revolutionary in the sense of starting something on my own. I can support people who are trying - and in there are people still resisting, I'm always very sympathetic. But the reality at the moment is the Cold War is over and our side lost.



I'm going to give you the names of some people you've worked with. If you could, give me a word or two about them. There's a lot, so if you get bored tell me to stop.
(Laughs)

Jimi Hendrix.
A gentleman.

(Note from the ed. - OK, so the two-word answer wasn't such a great idea. It took Robert one name before he expanded his answers to a length that would give these folks some justice.)

Mongezi Feza.
This is not one word stuff you know. I feel like - and this is presumptuous - he feels like an alter ego to me. Someone I might have been. He was exactly the same age as me and he was 32 when he died. I almost feel like what I've read that twins feel when a twin dies. Not that I was that close to him but that's the feeling I had musically.

Syd Barrett.
Well I thought he was an extremely good songwriter and singer and I was very happy playing on Madcap Laughs, although he left the credits off because we were only practicing in the studio when he recorded it and he didn't want to embarrass us by putting our names on such a shambles, but I thought it was very witty. People think, "Was he mad?" "Was he crazy?" - and I didn't think that at all. A lot of people were crazy, but not Syd.

Dave McCrae.
He's the only session musician I can think of offhand who kept his soul.

Laurie Allen.
Laurie Allen's a great friend. There again - Alfie knew him before I did. And he used to play with the South African musicians with Chris MacGregor quite a lot. And he was the first person I thought of when I couldn't play drums. He would play what I would have wanted to play.

Kevin Ayers.
Kevin Ayers wrote perfectly formed songs right from the beginning. He didn't seem to have to learn how to do it. But I think he puts himself down too much. I've heard him say "The group got too clever/ jazzy/intellectual for me." He was very much one of the main minds behind the innovations and fresh ideas for new things that we were doing in the late 60s. I think one of the reasons he never became a pop star was he just had too many other ideas to obtain in the pop format.

Nick Evans.
Oh, Nick Evans... I think he's a math teacher now. He might even have been then. He's just a totally friendly jovial Welshman - and being slightly Welsh myself I'm quite happy about that - and a lovely trombonist. His big hero was Roswell Rudd, which is fairly appropriate.

Lol Coxhill.
Lol Coxhill is a wonderful musician. I've heard him, I'm sure, playing tenor. I asked him about that and he says "Oh no, no I don't do that." He's a very lyrical player and there again - he's a very good friend. When people are friends it's hard to say an objective thing like a critic might want or you as a writer might want. I mean, it was in his home that Alfie stayed when I was in hospital in 1973 because he lived in the same town as the hospital. He was so poor then. It's incredible - this man bringing up his two children on his own. You know that there's an old saying, "Those who have least give most," and in terms of material possessions Lol definitely qualifies for that remark.

Jerry Dammers.
Well, Jerry Dammers is someone I really miss. He's one of the people who was actually in the rock star industry who really did it consciously and did the right thing but kept it stylish, like Paul Weller. There is a way of doing that. You don't have to become a pranny. I think he put so much... he took his stuff so seriously that every penny he made went into things like Nelson Mandela's birthday party thing that he organized here - a massive concert with Harry Belafonte and so on. He really meant all that stuff and he got kind of lost in it.
I would like him to reemerge and play some more, because I'd hate to think... He's too young to die, you know? In fact Carla Bley said to me... when I was feeling old... she says, "Oh you've got to keep playing. Who do you think you are a fucking rock star?" (Laughs). I'm talking about Jerry, you know. He's too good to stop.

John Cage.
Oh, John Cage... the two interesting things about him that I recall... One was his interest in mushrooms, and I've since acquired a great interest in the biology of mushrooms as a kind of missing link between animals and plants in the sense that they can 't live directly off the earth. That might seem irrelevant to you. The other interest, I believe, was chess. In both cases they're studies which require meticulous indexing. A sort of scientific rigor in studying them - the very same characteristics he led the way in throwing aside in music. I think it's funny that he should still have this love of discipline and indexing but he stripped it away from music.

You have to be very disciplined with mushrooms.

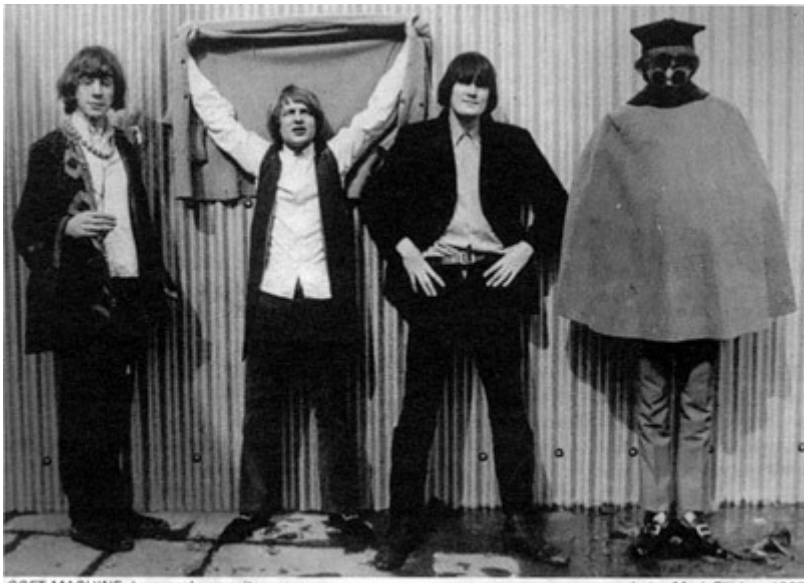
(Laughs) Exactly, you can't be vague with a mushroom. You have to know what you've got there. (Laughs)

Gary Windo.
Well Gary was just a lovely tenor player really. I think he was quite unlike the musicians who were around in England, he was much more like the Americans and, I suppose, the African musicians in England. Although he was English, the fact that he had spent a long time in the States... for example, he played with Wayne Shorter's brother, a trumpet player in various jazz things, and was very much part of the post-Albert Ayler generation. Really, that wasn't happening in England at that time. The jazz musicians in England were more, I don't know, just not that anyway... much more academic. As a consequence of that I've really got on very good with English jazz musicians, and indeed I can't think of many who would work with me anyway because I would be considered too primitive. But not by Gary, and I'm grateful to him for that.

Mitch Mitchell.
You know, I think he's in some kind of hospital thing in America right now. He's been very ill recently, so I have thought about him in the last few years. He's a great drummer, very important. Hendrix benefited a great deal from having Mitch. I remember Mitch and I used to listen to a drummer who was actually a couple of years younger than both of us but we felt of as a kind of a mentor nonetheless - Tony Williams. The stuff he was doing when Miles was making the transition from the earlier forms of jazz to the later ones that he did. The fact that Mitch had that stuff in his mind and knew about it, as well as the more John Bonham heavy rock thing that the English drummers were doing around that time, made him really perfect for Hendrix. That also gave me confidence to move around the kit a bit in a way that I subsequently didn't.

Bill MacCormick.
Well, Bill... yeah. He was a very good bass player. He didn't play like a bass player, really. He didn't seem to play the sort of things bass guitarists are likely to play. He didn't really have a normal bass guitar sound at the time, but I found his playing very bright and imaginative. He was always trying to get the most out of things. He was very good company to have around at the time when we were very, well, destitute really, and things weren't working out. Things never worked out with Matching Mole, but he was always good fun and cheerful and that kept us going.

Richard Sinclair.
He's just an extremely good organ player. It seemed very difficult at the time for players, especially people playing the Hammond, to find a way of playing that wasn't simply based on the Jimmy Smith or Booker T way of playing it. I think that some of them who did play that way were wonderful, and in England there were Georgie Fame and Zoot Money who did so and very well indeed. But he found another way... much more pastoral, a much more European sound and harmonic sensibility which fitted the tunes I was working on at the time perfectly, and I'm very grateful for that.



SOFT MACHINE, here and opposite page photo: Mark Ellidge, 1967

Daevid Allen.
Daevid. Ah, yeah. Now that's a difficult one. That's really a long way back. My father didn't approve of him, really, when he stayed at our house when I was a teenager. I think the main thing was that he provided an escape route for me from school, of which I was a total failure. He was a lot older than us, certainly a lot older than me. And in the early 60s, maybe even the late 50s, he got a houseboat in Paris and I went and stayed with him there and got a taste of what was then the underground focused around Paris and the jazz musicians there. Various pre-psychedelic people like Brion Gysin and so on. He opened some doors. The official doors of schooling had been a total failure in my life, so Daevid did show me there are whole other worlds out there to make. You don't have to worry about being a failure in school.

Daevid is going to be 60 this year.
I think he always was, wasn't he? He always seemed like he had that guru thing.

Phil Miller.
I think the real thing about Phil was that he really liked to work on a harmonic thing and chords and so on on his guitar, and I think that really the most appropriate things done with Phil was when he had actually wrote the pieces for which I was able to write songs. It was one of those periods when I was torn between being a drummer and a singer in that sense... in the Mole... and I could do it both on record. Things like the tune "God Song," which enabled me to write a song that really meant a lot to me to write, and I couldn't have done it without his music suggesting the phrasing. I would have liked to have pursued that side of it more rather than the live things we were trying to do.

Hugh Hopper.
He was a school friend from the age of 10 or 11, I suppose. I've always enjoyed singing his tunes, he himself doesn't sing. He has a harmonic slant on things that I've always found very compatible with the way I sing. And of course I'm still singing some of his songs. On Dondestan I sang a tune of his, I think it's "Left on Man"; and there again on this LP, "Was A Friend" is a Hugh Hopper tune. That must be the longest-running musical association I've ever had, as sparse as it is these days.

Carla Bley.
Oh, Carla's great! This morning I was just listening to a record, actually by her daughter, her and Mike Mantler's daughter, Karen Mantler. I love that record. I've got an LP and a CD by Karen and one of the things is that Karen has learned so much from her mother - the throwaway irony of the lyrics, and the meticulously interesting harmonic developments - she hates a boring harmonic progression and always puts a little angle in there with a kind of dry wit. It's a family trait, I think. Carla was very, very funny to work with. She said, "You have to be tough, if you run a band in New York you've got to be tough." And indeed she was extremely tough, and you could see why. She was very , very witty and had extremely sensible ears. Her father apparently was a piano teacher. She was Swedish - her name was Carla Borg before she married Paul Bley. I had to sing a John Cage song once and it was she who taught me what the notes were.

Mike Ratledge.
Ah, yes. Well, I can't think of very much there. Too much blood has flown under the bridge.

Elvis Costello.
A wonderful bloke. He kept his enthusiasm going all the time when I met him. There again, like Jerry Dammers, he didn't become a blasé supercilious rock star. I've never known anybody with such wide-ranging tastes that he actually did something about. He would work with the Brodsky String Quartet, he would get Chet Baker into the studio, he tried his hand at country music. He was just awestruck by the whole business of music and being allowed to participate in it.
A very, very nice man.

Lindsay Cooper.
I spoke to her about 2 days ago. Of course I've sung a couple of her tunes written with Chris Cutler. I liked all of those musicians very much from the Henry Cow setup, and she was always very inventive in that genre of playing, and a good bassoon player. But you know she's very ill now. I don't know if you knew that.

No.
Yeah. She has multiple sclerosis and, in fact, she's had it for apparently 10 years. She just didn't want to face it herself. And then she decided to sort of say it because she was having such difficulty doing anything. So she's now, as it were, come out with it and has let it be

known, so it's alright for me to tell you. I'm very pissed off about that because she can't really function as she did at all.



SOFT MACHINE

photo "collage": Bill Ellsworth, 197

Fred Frith.
There's a side of Fred that I would have really brought out more. I would have really liked to worked with Fred in a group. I think that if I had found him earlier we could have been in a late 60s group together somehow. Some sort of Henry Machine or Soft Cow or something.

Soft Cow.
(Laughs) Because there's something wistful about meeting someone I felt so compatible with, almost at the end of my career as a drummer or as a group musician. But still, I enjoyed singing with their band, and now particularly I'm having to listen through lots of stuff of mine because it's being reissued by Ryko, and some of it's lasted better than others. At the moment some of the stuff I most enjoy is the duet with him on piano doing his tune "Muddy Mouse/Muddy Mouth" on an LP I did called Ruth is Stranger Than Richard in the mid-70s. It's just wonderful how lyrical it is. He could easily have any kind of career apart from the, kind of, post-Derek Bailey career he has chosen.

Pye Hastings.
Blimey, I haven't heard that name for a long time. There's the brothers of course, him and Jimmy Hastings, the saxophone player. He was a fine musician. He was never amateurish in the way he played guitar. He didn't seem to go through that period like the rest of us went through, I think, perhaps having an older brother who was a superbly schooled musician. Actually, there's a session musician who never lost his soul - another one to add to the short list - his older brother. But I haven't heard from Pye or had any contact with him for decades.

Brian Eno.
Oh! Brian Eno... well, yeah. just a good friend - really helpful. What can I say? He's helped me out of some difficult things. Like a couple of years ago all the microphones I'd had for 20 years, they all started to pack up, and it was Brian who sent me a permanent loan of really good new ones for me to work at home on. Things like that. So he's not just knowledgeable, he's sort of generous like that. He likes to help things happen.

Elton Dean.
Elton. Well, the thing is... I remember hearing him with Keith Tippett's band and asked if I could borrow their front line for the group in 1968 or 1969. But it was, in fact, him that got me kicked out of the Soft Machine because he didn't like the singing, I don't think, and he didn't like the more heavy side of my drumming. He wanted that sort of free jazz thing. Well, I had been listening to free jazz in the late 50s and early 60s and I didn't want to do that again. But he got the others to out-vote me and to get rid of me. So there again, it's a bit similar to the previous question about the organist.

Nick Mason.
Yeah, well, drummers often become friends with drummers of different groups... and there's

no exception there. The Pink Floyd did a benefit concert for us when I had my accident, and sort of to return the favor - I mean, I couldn't return the favor - but I invited Nick to sort of produce Rock Bottom and we became good friends at that time, him and his wife, Lindy. We used to go see them and we developed some mutual friends like Carla Bley and Mike Mantler, who we also did things with later, and in fact when they did a record together, called Fictious Sports, they asked me to sing the tunes, and I really enjoyed doing that. It was very nice to be on their record and to just sing something without having the responsibility for the rest of the band.

Michael Mantler.
Well, Mike got us to sing... I think Carla sent him a copy of Rock Bottom and said "Here's a singer we can use." I don't really know how it happened, but that gave me the opportunity to sing with the most transcendental rhythm section I could have imagined which was Jack Dejohnette on drums, Steve Swallow on bass, and Carla Bley on piano. I doubt if I'll ever work with a better group than that.

Evan Parker.
Evan Parker is one of the few European musicians who've taken an extended line of late Coltrane and turned it into a whole new thing... both on tenor and soprano saxophone. Although with his music he sticks very firmly to a serious line of approach. He himself is a very eclectic listener. Which is why I didn't feel too nervous about asking him to play on my record.

Alfie Benge.
What can I say? She's sitting here. (Laughs) Well, we've been together since the early 70s - I think that, really, we are a group. People think I've been in two groups, but in fact I've been in three. The longest lasting one, the one that's really worked, has been me and Alfie. In every possible way. And when I say every possible way that's exactly what I mean. So, there you are.



"I draw from life and I paint from my head"

A brief interview with Alfreda Benge

by David Cross

While it may be perfectly clear to many people who Robert Wyatt is, far fewer have a clear understanding exactly who Alfreda Benge is. Before you even listen to a Robert Wyatt album you first have an impression created by the accompanying art. From the debut underwater seascape of Rock Bottom to the dry abstract expressionist deserts of Old Rottenhat and Work In Progress right through to the ultimate slumber/dream accompaniment of his excellent current endeavor, Shleep - all have had superbly executed visual echoes of Robert's musical worlds, and all were created by Alfie Benge.

Sadly, in pursuit of the bigger picture, Alfie has let credit slip where credit is due; many of the older CD issues of Robert Wyatt albums feature little or no documentation as to where the source art originated. Hopefully, this will deservedly be rectified by the current spate of reissues by Hannibal/Ryko/Thirsty Ear. If not, perhaps this will help shed some more light on the subject.

I didn't ask Alfie if she has done other interviews, but you can bet that she probably hasn't done very many...

PW - You've done illustrations for a children's book?
Alfie - Yeah. Two children's books, which are out of print now. Ivor Cutler wrote the stories. Do you know of Ivor Cutler who's on the end of Rock Bottom?



> Zoom

Yes. How did that come about? Did he approach you with that?
Yes. He suggested to his publisher that they see my paintings and so I went along and showed them my work. I was going to do four but, in fact, it took 6 months to do each of them and in the end my eyes almost closed with straining because they were so tiny... tiny paintings. I ended up just doing the two: Herbert the Chicken and Herbert the Elephant. (Laughs)

So he lined it up with the publisher.
Yes, he had worked with quite a few illustrators in the past but they were usually ones that were known to the publisher, so he suggested that I may be able to do it. He's a very encouraging person. He gives people confidence; he tells you you're wonderful and makes you believe you can do anything. It was not what I'd been used to because obviously making 24 pages match each other and all of the people look the same and inventing characters is not the same as doing one-off paintings, but I was very pleased with them. I think they're rather good. But like all these things, poor ducks, they go off the shelves. I still get a few pennies every year from libraries. So they exist somewhere, but they're unbuyable. They don't exist anymore.

When did you do those?
Round about '82. The beginning of the 80s... and the next one in '83 or something.

Did you do much illustration other than that?
Other stuff... yeah. I did a bit for a magazine called Time Out... a few things. Obviously Robert's covers, a couple of Fred Frith covers, an Annette Peacock cover... I was trying to be a painter, so it wasn't a career that I was after. I can only really do things if I can connect with them. I mean, I couldn't do a cover for the Rolling Stones. I'd have to know the person and know their inside really.

Have you made some films?
Well, I went to film school. I had a long art school history - I did painting, then I did graphics, then
I went to film school. Obviously at film school I made films. After I left school I had an extraordinary job called Films Officer at IBM, which was a strange thing for me, and if you knew me you'd think it was really strange. And then I did a bit of editing here and there, just before Robert's accident. In England, to work in big stuff at the time you had television or industrial films and quite boring things. I did do one film for the BBC at the end of my student days. I was paid for a half hour thing. And then I got a job as a third assistant editor, which is

just basically writing down numbers on "Don't Look Now," a Nick Roeg film with Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie. But I was just in the cutting room and that was going to get me my union ticket which was quite hard to get in England at that time. So it meant you were much freer to get good jobs. That was in Venice - Robert came with me and wrote Rock Bottom there. Not long afterwards he came back and had his accident and I had to decide what to do... throw him in the river or look after him. At first he wasn't as independent and obviously needed looking after. So I thought the film industry is a bit of a racket, really. I'll give it up... and I hadn't done any painting for about 12 years and Robert said "Why don't you do the Rock Bottom cover?" and that started me back on painting, which I could do at home. So I had meant to keep carrying on in the film industry but gave it up. But last year I did a tiny, sort of, job of rewriting some dialogue in an Aaron Rudolph film. Do you know Aaron Rudolph?

No.
He a sort of protégé of Robert Altman. Occasionally I get dragged back to do little things, basically by Julie Christie, who's my old friend, and she finds things that she occasionally needs me for.

For Robert's covers, what one's have you done?
I've done everything since Rock Bottom except the "Shipbuilding" cover. I remembered Stanley Spencer's wonderful painting and thought nobody could do it better than that. And it turned out we were able to use it for nothing so... apart from that, I've done them all, except for the compilations that have been out of our control

You've worked in a couple different mediums on his covers too. On Nothing Can Stop Us it's some sort of graphic illustration.
It was just a pen drawing. Rock Bottom was pencil, Ruth and Richard was gouache, and then the rest have been oils. They're all oil paintings now. I did graphic design and typography and that kind of stuff, so I really enjoy doing things which are more abstract. Where you're using space and things.
That's one half of what I can do and the other half is strange, narrative pictures with people and stories and goings-on in them. Also, I do very uncharacteristic charcoal drawings which are quite... stronger.
I mean, I draw from life and I paint from my head, basically, and the drawings don't look like mine at all. That's the range, really.

Do you paint specifically for a purpose or do you paint for the sake of painting?
My dream would to be able to paint for the sake of painting all the time, but life gets in the way most of the time... either crisis or something else to do.
When Robert's working I'm also his manager, so I have to do incredibly dull things like the accounts and arguing about contracts, and I'm also his roadie, so I have to get him from A to B. I'm also his nurse, and things in the world happen which need shouting about and you have to go about shouting, protesting about them. So, I get dragged away from the idea of just painting. I mean, if I had a wife I think I'd paint more, but I haven't got a wife.

"I think everybody should have a go at their Cecil Taylor impersonations"

A ROBERT WYATT ANNOTED DISCOGRAPHY

By Robert Wyatt

THE END OF AN EAR

I was very grateful to CBS, I have to say, for the opportunity to go into the studio and make an album. I don't think they realized that I was going to make a totally improvised album like

that, and I didn't get invited back. One of the things that mucks up some of the earlier memories is that we didn't get any more money from those early records at all. None of them. Our managers were total crooks and since they are dead I can name them: Mike Jeffries and Chas Chandler. I mean they just took everything. The record companies were no help, they seemed to close rank with managers rather than see musicians go their dues. In my real life I don't remember much peace and love in the music industry era at all. Having said that, I was very happy to have the chance to record, there again, to play piano and do my little Cecil Taylor impersonations. I think everybody should have a got at their Cecil Taylor impersonations.

ROCK BOTTOM

In my mind, if I ever made a transition from adolescence to adulthood it was by that record. People think it must have been a very tragic period of my life, with breaking my back and all, but 1974 was the happiest moment of my life. The record came out, it came out how I wanted it to come out, it was made with friends. Alfie married me on the day it came out, which was a disgracefully self-sacrificial thing of her to do, but made me feel great.

RUTH IS STRANGER THAN RICHARD

On that record I wanted to give the musician I was working with more space to do their own thing. I set up "Team Spirit" as a tenor solo for George Kahn.
And there again - I got Fred Frith to play some of his own tunes - still some of the favorite things I've ever recorded actually, "Muddy Mouse/Muddy Mouth."
In fact, before doing those tunes he played this note, I can't remember what it was, some sort of high D or even an E flat, and I said to Fred, "I can't sing that," and Fred says, "Yes, you can. Your range is from a low F to a high F#." He listened to my records and knew exactly what notes I'd hit on various records and told me I could do it, so I had to do it.

NOTHING CAN STOP US

This wasn't intended as an LP. Virgin was very angry with me when I disengaged myself from them and they threatened us not to make an LP or there would be legal trouble. While Geoff Travis at Rough Trade was trying to sort that out and placate Richard Branson, they allowed us to make a few singles, which is what I did. And it allowed me to sing some songs by people like Violetta Parra and so on... that meant a lot to me. But I did them, more or less, as a musical journalism. I didn't feel these ideas had to last forever. It was Geoff Travis's idea to put them together onto an LP.



> Zoom

THE ANIMALS FILM SOUNDTRACK

Julie Christie had been invited to do the narration on that by Victor Shoenfield, who made the film. They had asked the Talking Heads to do the music. They used one song of the Talking Heads for the opening credit tracks and it cost them 500 pounds. Well, since the budget for the whole film was just a few thousand pounds they couldn't afford them for the whole score. Julie said "I've got a friend who'll do it for really cheap." And it's true; one thing I'm really proud of is I work cheap. Geoff Travis at Rough Trade once said "you may not be the most successful or the best musician we've ever had here at Rough Trade, but you're certainly the cheapest." And indeed, I did the rest of the film score for 100 pounds. They wanted it released to help publicize the film and that's what I did.
I think making music for films is very good because you have to break out of the normal song cycle structure. The structure is given to you by the film. There is a structure but it's quite different and that makes you do things quite differently. I know Miles Davis had the same breakthrough when he did music for a French film, "Lift to the Scaffold." I really appreciate how useful that would have been for him when I was doing the Animals Film.

OLD ROTTENHAT

That was done when I was very isolated from other musicians, although I felt very at home spiritually with the musicians of that era, perhaps even more than with the musicians of my generation. The post punk people in England who were dealing in extraordinary surrealist combinations of punk and reggae and using old ska rhythms. There was a lot of great political music, like Jerry Dammers and, indeed, Paul Weller around that time, but musically it was very different from me because it was very guitar based and I come from quite a different line of thought musically. So I found myself, more or less, on my own and working as a kind of miniaturist there - just trying to get distilled, pure song on it. And as political as the songs are, the main exercise was really an aesthetic one. To try and to get essential song. Just to see how you could pare it down to that point. I'm also interested in artists in other fields in that way. Whether it's Samuel Beckett in writing or Mondrian in painting, it's a very interesting exercise... to try and pair things down like that.

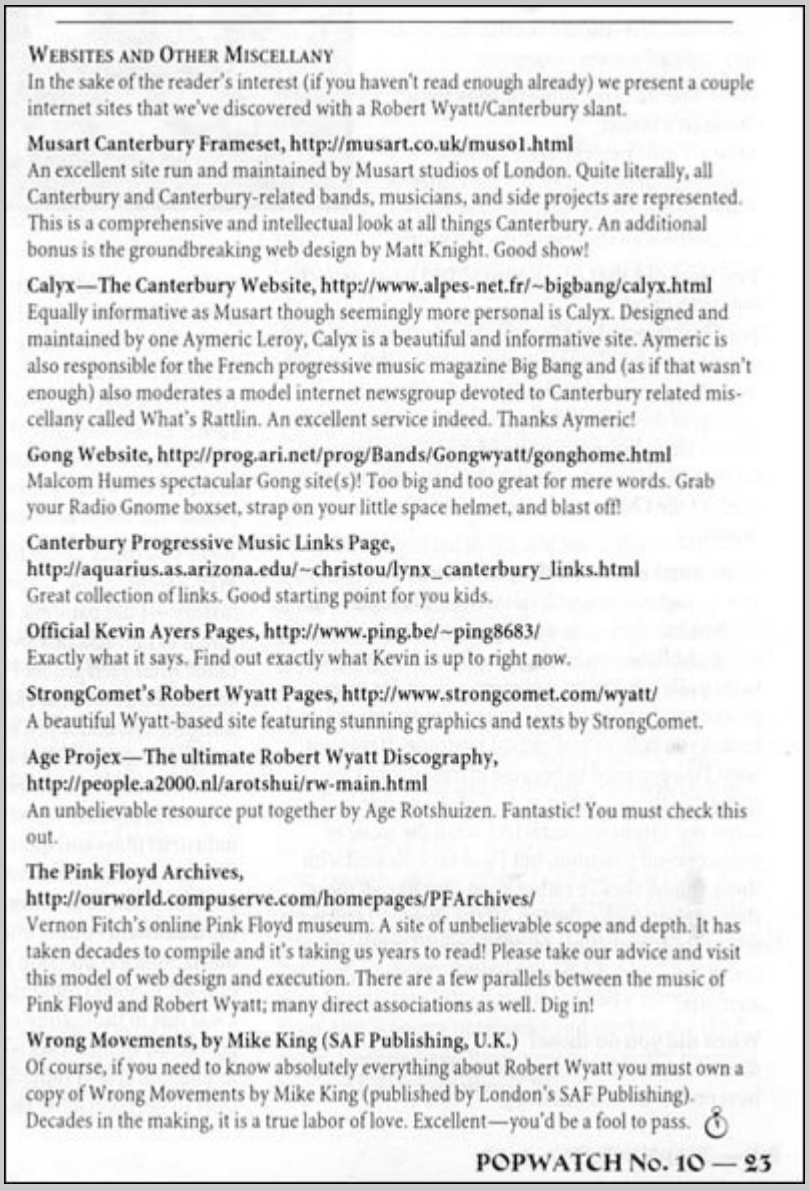
DONDESTAN

Dondestan was after we left London and came to live up north of England, quite near the

coast. We had spent some time in the 8Os in Spain. England was a difficult place to be, so we took any chance we could to go away. Alfie had written quite a lot of poems in Spain. I think there's something about sitting in a Spanish cafe in an out of season holiday resort with a glass of brandy in front of you which brings out a little poetry in Alfie's soul. Especially with the flamenco posters on the wall. So that provided the basis for Dondestan. One of the possible titles for the LP was based on a Cuban film called "Memories of Under Development (Memorias Su Desorio)," that was nearly the title of the first track anyway, and a lot of it has to do with that sense of underdevelopment and dispersal. Not in the third world, but right among us.

SHLEEP

I had a rough period in the mid/early 9Os, musically speaking, and there were some problems here at home as well. I mean, I don't like people to go on about their problems because it's boring... but I broke my legs here in 1993 or 1994, I think, and had to spend some time in the hospital. I fell out of my wheelchair... so those kind of things delayed my activity somewhat. But as much as I get the exact sound I want when I'm on my own I get lonely, and music is a social act in the end. I was very happy to be reminded of Phil's studio and I went because it's near enough London where I can phone up people like Annie Whitehead and Evan without feeling that they had to spend 5 hours on a train to get to the studio. There again, I started exactly the same as I did with Dondestan. Which is, taking half a dozen pieces from Alfie's poetry notebooks and working on the music from that and then carry on with that momentum and finish it up myself.



WEBSITES AND OTHER MISCELLANY

In the sake of the reader's interest (if you haven't read enough already) we present a couple internet sites that we've discovered with a Robert Wyatt/Canterbury slant.

Musart Canterbury Frameset, http://musart.co.uk/muso1.html
An excellent site run and maintained by Musart studios of London. Quite literally, all Canterbury and Canterbury-related bands, musicians, and side projects are represented. This is a comprehensive and intellectual look at all things Canterbury. An additional bonus is the groundbreaking web design by Matt Knight. Good show!

Calyx—The Canterbury Website, http://www.alpes-net.fr/~bigbang/calyx.html
Equally informative as Musart though seemingly more personal is Calyx. Designed and maintained by one Aymeric Leroy, Calyx is a beautiful and informative site. Aymeric is also responsible for the French progressive music magazine Big Bang and (as if that wasn't enough) also moderates a model internet newsgroup devoted to Canterbury related miscellany called What's Rattlin. An excellent service indeed. Thanks Aymeric!

Gong Website, http://prog.ari.net/prog/Bands/Gongwyatt/gonghome.html
Malcom Humes spectacular Gong site(s)! Too big and too great for mere words. Grab your Radio Gnome boxset, strap on your little space helmet, and blast off!

Canterbury Progressive Music Links Page, http://aquarius.as.arizona.edu/~christou/lynx_canterbury_links.html
Great collection of links. Good starting point for you kids.

Official Kevin Ayers Pages, http://www.ping.be/~ping8683/
Exactly what it says. Find out exactly what Kevin is up to right now.

StrongComet's Robert Wyatt Pages, http://www.strongcomet.com/wyatt/
A beautiful Wyatt-based site featuring stunning graphics and texts by StrongComet.

Age Projex—The ultimate Robert Wyatt Discography, http://people.a2000.nl/arotshui/rw-main.html
An unbelievable resource put together by Age Rotshuizen. Fantastic! You must check this out.

The Pink Floyd Archives, http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/PFArchives/
Vernon Fitch's online Pink Floyd museum. A site of unbelievable scope and depth. It has taken decades to compile and it's taking us years to read! Please take our advice and visit this model of web design and execution. There are a few parallels between the music of Pink Floyd and Robert Wyatt; many direct associations as well. Dig in!

Wrong Movements, by Mike King (SAF Publishing, U.K.)
Of course, if you need to know absolutely everything about Robert Wyatt you must own a copy of Wrong Movements by Mike King (published by London's SAF Publishing). Decades in the making, it is a true labor of love. Excellent—you'd be a fool to pass.

POPWATCH No. 10 — 23



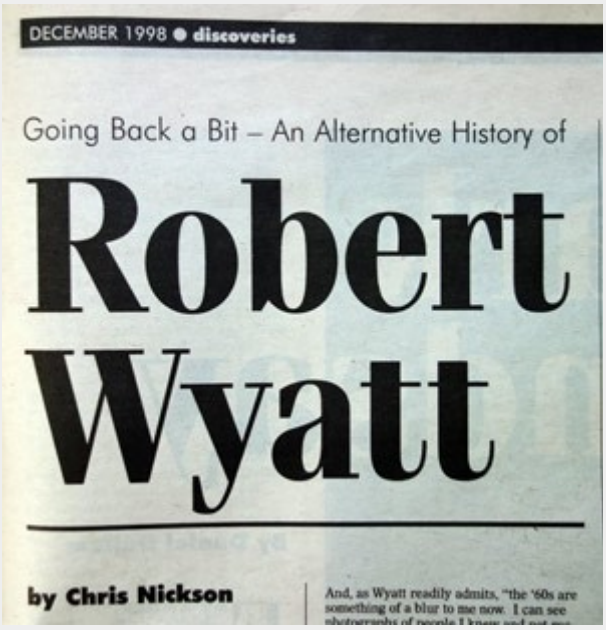
> Zoom

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Going Back a Bit - An Alternative History of Robert Wyatt - Discoveries Issue 127 - December 1998





"I'm not interested in career moves. I have a puritanical thing about music. You should do what the music wants to be. If that happens to be what a lot of people want to hear, you're lucky, but you shouldn't bend it. I can live off what I do, and even if I couldn't, I wouldn't try and change it. I'd get money some other way.

" It's a fine philosophy to live by. But then again, it's exactly what you might expect from Robert Wyatt, who's cut his singular furrow in the musical field for more than three decades now. As a member of the (legendary) Wilde Flowers, Soft Machine and Matching Mole he was a vital part of the Canterbury scene that produced so much wonderful music in the late '60s and early 70s. He developed a reputation as a subtle, inventive drummer, and a singer with a marvelously emotive voice.

In 1973 a fall from a third floor window left him paralyzed from the waist down; drumming was no longer an option. He was forced to look closely at himself and at his

music, and found that plenty of options were open. In many ways, it was the real start for him, and his records since then have been chronicles of the phases of Robert Wyatt, the man. Of course, they haven't been the limits of his work. Both before and after the accident he's worked with people in a number of fields; the idea of boundaries doesn't seem to come readily to him. Michael Mantler, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Henry Cow, Brian Eno, he's recorded with them all, and along the way he's managed to become something of an icon for musical integrity. In 1987 a young Ben Watt, of Everything But The Girl, recorded an EP with him, recently reissued by Cooking Vinyl on "North Marine Drive." A complete discography would fill pages.

Wyatt isn't the most prolific artist - there was a six year gap between Dondestan and the new *Shleep*, and five years between *Old Rottenhat* and *Dondestan*. But this isn't someone who puts out "product"; this is art, accessible and melodic, but still definitely art, individual and creative.

And 1998 might be the year that finds him a wider audience in the U.S. *Shleep* has big name guests, people who admire Wyatt and are pleased to help out, people like Eno, Phil Manzanera (Roxy Music), and Paul Weller, the Mod Boy himself. More than that, Thirsty Ear is reissuing his solo records (all but 1970's *End Of An Ear*) in the U.S., some seeing domestic release for the first time.

This article isn't meant to be a full history of Wyatt: Michael King's book, *Wrong Movements*, covers that quite admirably. And, as Wyatt readily admits, "the '60s are something of a blur to me now. I can see photographs of people I knew and not recognize them." Instead it's more a series of linked thoughts, of what helped make him who he is, and his philosophies of music.

Robert Wyatt Ellidge was born January 28,1945, to Honor Wyatt and George Ellidge. In 1955, George Ellidge was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and the family moved from the London suburb of West Dulwich to the village of Lydden in Kent, some ten miles outside Canterbury. He had a slightly unconventional childhood, with parents whose friends were - for the times - quite bohemian.

"It seemed perfectly normal to me. My father didn't join us until I was six, and he died ten years later, having retired early with multiple sclerosis, so I was brought up a lot by women. My Dad was a psychologist, and my mother a journalist. He was from up North [of England], and she was posh, so I'm a subject of class miscegenation!"

A myth has grown up, making the Wyatt house in Kent something of an offbeat cultural center. Wellington House, as the place was named, was an 18th century building, and the family did take in lodgers, who included Daevid Allen and Kevin Ayers, both of whom would play major parts in Robert's future. But, he says, "I don't really remember musicians coming down to play. I think maybe they did, but when I was no longer there, already on the trot around Europe. We were actually closer to Dover than Canterbury. It was a one hour bus ride into Canterbury. I'd get the bus home at five to my village, so I didn't mix much. It was rather a somber house, really. They supplemented their drop in income by having lodgers, and they were pretty interesting. But most of us, when we could save the money, would go to London for our stimulus. I left school when I was 16 in ignominy, having failed everything in sight, and went off with 20 pounds. I worked in a forest, kitchens, things like that. I remember Canterbury as a rather lonely time, to be honest, and I'm a bit baffled by the subsequent view of it as a kind of country Harlem. I had friends and people did play things, but no more than anywhere else. I was brought up on things that weren't taught in school, like painting, modern classical music, and so on. Nothing at school matched those for interest. I preferred it at home. I lived in my head."

His interest in music would lead him to play in the Wilde Flowers (whose mythical reputation is really undeserved), the band that eventually became Soft Machine, whose other members were originally Mike Ratledge, a Cambridge graduate, on organ and piano, Daevid Allen on guitar, Kevin Ayers, bass and vocals, with Robert behind the drumkit and singing.

This ensemble became a part of the early London hippie scene, along with Pink Floyd Mark 1, and took advantage of Allen's French connections to travel and make a strong mark there. Early sides were produced by Kim Fowley, the man who was everywhere, and in 1968 the Softs toured America as the opening act for the Jimi Hendrix Experience.

"What doesn't come up in these things is the extreme loneliness, even when I was in bands. In retrospect it seems like new, bold things are going on, but my memory is that we didn't know how to do any other things properly and we didn't have a lot in common, so when we formed bands, they were extremely odd. The trouble with bands is that in the

end they're all like Spinal Tap. I didn't make sense of how to function until the early 70s."

Soft Machine went through their ups and downs (their first two albums never saw release in the U.K.), moving slowly towards the more experimental jazz that marked *Soft Machine 3* (with Wyatt's lovely, and virtually solo "Moon In June") and *Fourth*. They became the first "rock" band to play at the prestigious Promenade Concerts.


DECEMBER 1998 ● discoveries 45

Going Back a Bit – An Alternative History of

Robert Wyatt

by Chris Nickson

After *Fourth* Wyatt left the band, envisioning a solo career, but instead formed Matching Mole (a play on words: Machine Moule is French for Soft Machine), who issued two records, then collapsed under the weight of money, or the lack of it.

Then, at the start of June 1973, Wyatt took his fall from the window.

"That's when I found my feet, ironically when I lost the use of them! I could no longer function in a regular group, so I could choose the appropriate musicians for a particular song, or none at all if I felt I could get the mood right myself, and that gave me the freedom to do what I'd done as a teenager with painting, which was take responsibility for what went on. It was so much so, that I felt sheepish about *Rock Bottom*, (1974) that the musicians had done my thing so conscientiously that on *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard* (1975) I gave the other musicians more space, and took a back seat slightly. Sometimes it's nice to let someone else drive, someone you trust. Those two really go together."

1974 and 75 were also the years when Wyatt recorded two singles for his label, Virgin, covers of "I'm A Believer" and "Yesterday Man," the first of which actually made the U.K. charts, and gave people the pleasant surprise of seeing Wyatt on "Top Of The Pops."

"I've had several singles. The reason I recorded pop songs is because I like them, and I'm really interested in them, and it's good to get inside them. I've never written one, but I've got inside them. It was a funny thing. Simon Draper, Richard Branson's ears, wanted me to do singles, and I thought 'Why not? I like pop music.' I had a go of it. He got very excited about it, but I was thrown by the restrictions in the singles market, like the fact that people wouldn't like a Fred Frith violin solo. I thought 'Stuff that!' I'm not going to give people less freedom. I had a lot of fun in the studio, trying to improve Neil Diamond's dull little chord sequence and so on. I don't regret it, but I was baffled, because I thought the whole point of what Branson was doing was to enable people not to be restricted by the pop scene. So I felt a bit pushed, and that's probably why the relationship deteriorated."

After that, it would be the 1980s before Wyatt again issued anything under his own name, pulled out of silence by the independent Rough Trade label. And what he did come up with was *Nothing Can Stop Us*, largely a collection of work issued on singles, and *Old Rottenhat*. Both were quite brazenly political albums, and produced Wyatt's other hit single, a luminous cover of Elvis Costello's "Shipbuilding."

"It seemed to come to the surface. I don't think it was deliberate. I work instinctively, whatever feels right at the time, and certain things come to the surface. It surprises me what does and what doesn't. In the '80s I was reacting to what struck me as a fairly barbaric climate. People talk about Reaganomics, but I was talking about the media. When I get down to doing the songs, I'm just doing what comes out. But a lot of thinking and considering goes on before and after. A lot was about how to keep my pecker up in what seemed like an increasingly alien, reptilian world, how to keep your soul warm. There's a certain amount of desperation in that. I'd say, without shame, there's a certain amount of intellectual vigor in that. At times I like thinking deeply and analytically, but they're the times when I'm most uncomfortable, so I have to rethink how I'm functioning. That comes out in the lyrics, and in the music, in a way. There's a kind of tight discipline in the music. When I'm more at ease. It gets looser and sloppier."

The '90s brought a complete about-face with *Dondestan*, an amorphous, shapeshifting sort

of work, impressionistic and often abstract in its moods.

"It's partly a thing I've had about music. Sometimes I wish there was a kind of music that was halfway between silence and music. I think sometimes musicians feel obliged to fill your ears, like a chef who piles up every plate. I'm drawn to the idea of music sometimes not being a great solid substance, but rather gaseous and nebulous, which is translucent, so you can still hear what's going on around you, I've always been drawn to the idea of that. Brian Eno and I had a lot in common in those ideas. He has different references. He's not a political animal in the sense that I am, or a jazzman in the same sense."

And jazz is what's informed all of Wyatt's work, to a greater or lesser degree, whether explicitly - his version of Monk's "Round Midnight" - or in feel, as in the elastic rhythms of "Alifie."

"I don't know; it's the music I listen to. But I don't think the people I listen to would call me one of them. Although I take a lot from jazz, like the shifting harmonic thing, and the rhythmic slipperiness, my tunes are more based on nursery rhymes, folky and primitive. Most jazz musicians would regard me as too unsophisticated to be one of the lads."

Perhaps, perhaps not. He may not be a jazz musician in the conventional sense, but his vision is unique and fully formed as any jazzer's, and people like Keith Tippett, Don "Sugarcane" Harris, Michael Mantler, and Carla Bley don't choose their accomplices lightly.

"I certainly have worked with some great musicians, but I don't read reviews, so I have no idea what anyone thought. And musicians don't say what they think of each other. They say 'D'you want another drink, mate?' 'All right, then.'"

The reviewers, though, have consistently been kind to Robert. He has a sympathetic audience among them, and a cult following around the world, people who've come to his music at different times, for different reasons, and loved it enough to discover the entire canon. As good a place to begin as any is *Going Back A Bit: A Little History of Robert Wyatt* (Virgin U.K. CDVDM 9031) a double album that spans from the Softs to the '90s (even if the '80s are a bit thread-bare here). From the intensely moving version of "Moon In June" to the finale of "The Internationale" (Wyatt was a member of the Communist Party) it's 29 tracks of delights, some rare, all excellent, with the two 1974 Virgin singles included. And for those elusive '80s, Gramavision put out a CD (79459) that compiled tracks from *Nothing Can Stop Us* and *Old Rottenhat*.

The best way, though, is to pick a record - and the new *Shleep* is as accessible as anything he's done - and dive in. It's music that somehow couldn't be anything but English, with lyrical subjects like insomnia and birdwatching, playful but deep. From there all the others are but a step or two away.

It's not for mass consumption - there probably won't be any more hit singles for Robert Wyatt; the climate where that could happen is a thing of the past. But his music - will be very much his own. And that, after all, is what art is all about.

Chris Nickson

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

An interview with the late Hugh Hopper - Panmodern.com - September 6, 1998



An interview with the late Hugh Hopper

by Mark bloch
The Knitting Factory
New York City
September 6, 1998

June 9, 2009--Hugh Hopper, underrated songwriter and the late great bassist for the Soft Machine and a great many other bands, passed away this week after a battle with leukemia. Here is an extended interview I was privledged to do with him in 1998 on a late summer's day between two gigs at New York's Knitting Factory. The first was the U.S.A. debut of Brainville with Daevid Allen, the late Pip Pyle and Kramer and the second, a few days later, was a tribute to Robert Wyatt with a wonderful array of performers from Fred Frith to Karen Mantler. Hugh and I covered much of his wonderful career in this conversation and I was grateful to ask him these questions after decades of enjoying his contributions. We will miss him and his unique musical inventions. His playing and compositions on The Soft Machine Volume II remain unparalleled in music history!

Mark Bloch: The Soft Machine really drew me into the avant garde. You guys were a big influence on me. So it's great to finally meet you.

Hugh Hopper: Here I am!

Ever since you made that *1984* album, I've always felt you were the most "out there" of all the Soft Machine musicians (and that's really saying something!) Yet, I hear the last time you came to New York you played a bunch of James Brown songs. Is there a pop side of you I'm not aware of?

I used to... I still do... love James Brown. But the last time I came to New York, I was playing with Kramer. So in fact, no, in fact we were doing even weirder things. Because Kramer had this set that he wanted to do, of his songs, but also a couple of things like a Roy Orbison song and also we did a Lennon song- the *Jealous Guy*. Stuff like that. That was Kramer's gig. We were going to Japan and he wanted me along. So really, that was a Kramer gig, that wasn't my gig. But yeah, I'd be happy to do James Brown.

But do you like pop music? I remember reading somewhere you brought a pop

sensibility to the Softs.

I'm so mixed, anyway, now. There are so many influences. Like everybody else, I started listening to the radio when I was--whatever--13, 14, and hearing all this stuff. And at that time, when I was that age, it was things like Chuck Berry and Little Richard and stuff like that. Even Presley, things like Presley. I mean, I hated Presley later on but the early stuff... it probably had to do with… It was just the first time I'd heard electric guitar. I mean, Scottie Moore playing electric guitar on those early Presley records... I mean that was the beginning, probably, on my soundscape. As big as other things like John Coltrane, later on, and Ornette Coleman and stuff like that. But when I was 14, I had never heard an electric guitar before. I mean, you can't understand that now because the electric guitar is such a part of life, but then, it wasn't. It was like a dirty word. Especially in England. It was a dirty word and a dirty thing to do. Because it was a whole modern thing-- of rock 'n' roll and electric guitar. "That's the American stuff. Send it back across the Atlantic." Because people, in fact, still had a hangover from the Big Band ages and crooners and stuff like that. Things like Bing Crosby, and the English version-- which was terrible-- that's what the Hit Parade was, before things like Presley and Bill Haley that came across in the Fifties.

So for you that Hit Parade was interrupted-- first by the electric guitar and then, later, by the stranger jazz?

That's right.

T**he jazz after the electric guitar?**

Well after. Yeah, I started playing guitar. Actually, my brother started before me. He's two years older so I always followed him in music for a couple years. And then I took up bass. And the very first, kind of, things we were doing was stuff like Chuck Berry numbers and Little Richard numbers.

So you played the bass and your brother played the guitar?

That's right.

And was your father a musician too? Is that right?

Not really, no. I mean both my parents played. As people that age did, they played the piano. People learned the piano when they were kids. They played the piano much further than I ever learned to do because I never had lessons. But yeah, they were very musical. There was always music in the home. You know, on records or on the radio. Light classical stuff, middle-of-the-road classical stuff. So yeah, my father wasn't ever a musician but both my parents loved music.

And Richard Sinclair told me he came over your house, once, because he heard you had a bass?

Yeah, that's when we first started getting the band together, Wilde Flowers. It was Robert Wyatt, Kevin Ayers...

But that was before that, right?

It was about the same time.

Wasn't that the first thing that happened? How did it all actually begin?

I think Richard... No, that's right. Because I started playing with Robert and Daevid, actually, first. It was the first musical thing I really did outside of playing at home with my brother. Which then developed into a kind of avant garde, jazz thing. And it was after that. We had decided in 1964 that it was OK, suddenly, to play-- because the Beatles were so big-- that it was OK to play songs again and stuff like that. But it was after a while, actually. OK, so that was '62 and my brother and I were playing rock and roll at home.

Just the two of you?

In fact there's a tape of the two of us doing that. Playing songs like *That's Alright, Mama*, *Kansas City*, all that kind of stuff.

Did you have an electric bass or a stand up bass?

No, an electric bass. OK... that's the first moment, kind of thing. And then after that, I got involved with Robert again. I'd been at school with him but he'd gone off and left school earlier than me. And I got ahold of him again and started listening to jazz and Ornette Coleman. I actually came from the other end of jazz. I didn't know anything about jazz at all I didn't know you were supposed to go through mainstream jazz and then later get to the far out stuff. Unlike many people my age, I listened to the wrong stuff first and then worked backwards. I didn't know anything about the technique of jazz or what was happening at all. I just liked the sound of it. I liked the sound of Charlie Haden on bass and Ornette Coleman, of course, and stuff like that. So I started getting into that, started playing with Daevid and Robert and Mike Ratledge. Yeah, then that was about it. It sort of became respectable to play songs again. After things like the Beatles it was OK.

So then we set up Wilde Flowers and *then* we invited Richard along, I think. In fact, his father knew my father. We lived in the same town and his father was a bass player, in fact —Richard's father-- so that's how that connection came about. But I think we'd already started with Kevin Ayers and Robert just trying to play stuff. Kevin played a bit of guitar but didn't really know many chords or many... Richard knew all the chords of all the songs. He was a great technician on the guitar.

He was?

Yeah, even then, yeah. He was 16 years old he knew all the Beatles songs, all the chords immaculately, you know. I don't think-- he wasn't, actually, playing bass, then, at all. He didn't play bass until much later.

Do you remember when Kevin and Daevid came around to Robert's house? Because they came from elsewhere, right? And you were in school with Robert. So do you remember them coming on the scene?

Yeah, in fact, because Daevid came from Australia so, I mean, he came to England and Robert's parents had a-- it wasn't an enormous house, but it was a quite a big house-- in the country outside Canterbury. But they didn't have any money because Robert's mother was a writer-- and you know the problems with writers-- so they used to let out rooms to passing strangers, hoping to get some money. But, of course, most of the strangers didn't have any money either, so they didn't get paid. But they got some interesting people there. So that's how Daevid came to meet Robert.

And Kevin was actually in school-- a private school-- fairly near where Robert lived. I think that's the connection how Kevin got to meet Robert. Although Kevin was from the region, from the area, just because he was at school nearby.

And so you and Brian were the prime song writers?

Hmmmm...(hesitates), yeah we were, yeah. I used to write alot of songs. I mean, I've never found it hard to actually sit down and write a song on the guitar or piano. At that time people like Robert, in fact, weren't writing much of any songs. Kevin was writing songs because he's quite a natural songwriter. But yeah, I think I never found it hard to write a song. I know there's a craft... I never had any sort of block about sitting down and writing a song. I could do it now. If you asked me to sit down at the piano and write a song I'd do it.

OK, go!

I'm not going to.

A ot of those early songs kept popping up, didn't they? Like on Wilde Flowers and on the early Soft Machine?

That's right. Alot of that stuff. I think I'd never written a song before Wilde Flowers started. I mean, we were doing covers. We were doing all the Beatles stuff, whatever. All the stuff that was... Yardbirds, Kinks. We played all that stuff because that's what there was. Stones, we did some Stones numbers. R&B numbers. And I don't know why, I just started writing stuff. Robert liked trying that... singing them... so, yeah, I never found it hard to write songs.

I asked Robert why he didn't write songs back then and he said that he just didn't have a piano or anything.

Yeah. It's true.

It's interesting that you would write them and he'd just sing them.

It is weird when you think; especially what he developed into. But it's true. Because I'd started on guitar, you've immediately got something you can play a chord on, you know. But because he didn't-- he does play guitar a bit and he plays the piano a bit-- alot-- but that's right, he was living a, kind of, fairly nomad life most of the time. Whereas, I mean, it's like one of those things: most of the time I had at least a part time job. So I had some kind of support. Also, I was living at home, at my parent's house, so there was a piano there. It's crazy, things like that, you know.

And you didn't like to sing?

I don't. I have no confidence in my singing voice at all. Brian used to sing-- my brother. I did a few backing vocals on Chuck Berry things.

But, generally, you'd write songs and they'd have lyrics and you would hand them over to Robert or Kevin or whomever?

Yeah, that's right. I mean, a couple of songs I did with Robert. I started a collaboration with him which, in fact, still goes on today. Where I'd write the music and he'd write the words. A couple of things we did with Wilde Flowers that was true. But, yeah, at that time, most of the time, I'd write the words. They were not profound words. You know, just sort of, "Whoa, baby, why have you left me?" with a few decorations.

I think the Wilde Flowers Voiceprint CD is pretty good!

I'm glad it came out. Because those songs, I was happy with them at the time. They're not bad songs. I mean, and it would have been a shame if they hadn't ever appeared.

So what were some of your earliest songs?

Actually, one of the earliest songs I ever wrote was *Memories*, which was... It's funny it was one the ones that is most covered by other people. And it's probably one of the simplest songs I've ever written, in fact. I think it was about the second thing I ever wrote. You know, it's like B minor, E minor. There's not even a proper bridge to it. It's a very simple song and it works for that reason. People can sing it in different ways. Yeah Robert did a version as the B-side of one of his singles. And it was copied by... did you ever hear the version of Whitney Houston singing it?

Yes, by the band Material! One time only. I couldn't believe it!

If you check it out, Whitney Houston, obviously before she became famous, she was just, like, used as a session singer by (Bill) Laswell. But she actually copies Robert's phrasing on his record-- exactly. Because that's what they gave her. They gave her the record to listen to. She actually copies the same phrasing!

That's not a bad model.

No-- its good!

So you actually get royalties for that song?

Oh yeah! Over the years it's been one of the... obviously I'm never going to make a fortune from it unless they release Whitney Houston's version of it saying "featuring Whitney Houston." But, yeah, its been covered by quite a few people in interesting different versions. A couple singers in Germany called the Rainbirds-- two female singers, a couple female singers, did a very haunting version with simple piano. And Damien and Naomi. I think Galaxy 500 did a version of it.

One of the nicer versions is the one on the Wilde Flowers record that was a demo of your songwriting with Ratledge playing the piano on it...

It's nice isn't it? I kind of half-wrote an idea for Mike to play it with, kind of, an Eric Satie feel to it. A very simple, floating thing and he developed it. Because I'm not a keyboard player in that sense. I just gave him an idea of the notes that I thought would sound nice and he worked it out to a more professional sound. But yeah, it's a good version of it.

Yeah, and it's nice to hear him play the piano in that sedate way. Don't get me wrong-- I love his organ playing-- but it's nice to hear him playing piano calmly and not freaking out. Which leads us to him freaking out on organ and you on the fuzz bass. What's that all about?

Well, yeah, in fact it was Mike Ratledge's idea that I should use fuzz. Because for the second Soft Machine record-- which is the first one that Iplayed on-- alot of the stuff was written by him. And it's kind of... very constructed. And lots of lines of the bass. And the bass had to be as strong... it wasn't just sort of playing... you couldn't... it had to be a strong melody line or a counterpoint line to something that he was doing on the organ. So it had to be really strong and sustained. So he suggested why didn't I get a fuzz box, as well. Because you get a much more powerful sound with it-- a much more linear sound. So yeah, it was Mike Ratledge's idea, really, that I started playing fuzz.

You played it last night. It's part of your thing now, isn't it?

Yeah, it is. I stopped playing fuzz completely about ten years ago because I was a bit embarrassed. You know, "Hugh Hopper-- doesn't he do anything else but fuzz?" …So many people kept asking me to do it and I started working with Lindsay Cooper's *Oh Moscow project.*

So tell me about the transition from the Wilde Flowers to you being in the Soft Machine. How the hell did you become the roadie for the Soft Machine?

In fact because I stopped playing. I left Wilde Flowers. I even stopped playing bass in Wilde Flowers. I started playing sax because the band became, more and more, kind of like a soul band. We were playing Tamla-Motown stuff and James Brown stuff, Otis Redding. Because, in fact, that's what we were enjoying doing and it's a little easier to play that kind of stuff. Yeah, it was easier to get gigs but also I was really into it. All of us were all really into that kind of music.

So, anyway, I started playing sax and gave up bass and then I sort of lost interest in the whole thing and I didn't play for a whole year or so. By which time Soft Machine had started with Kevin and Daevid and Robert. So they asked me if I wanted to be a roadie and like a fool I said yes!

Was it foolish or...?

God, yeah. We did... the first tour I did in the States was supporting Hendrix and we did two and a half months non-stop, coast-to-coast and back again and back again. In February of '68, which was very chilly. You know, it's great looking back on it now. But it was hell at the time, you know, because in those days you didn't have giant crews. It was just one guy for Hendrix-- Hendrix's roadie-- and one guy-- which was me-- for Soft Machine. And that was it. In a U-Haul truck.

Just driving from town to town?

Overnight. Maybe getting a couple of hours sleep before the gig. So it was like... you can do those sorts of things when you're young, you know, but I couldn't do it now.

And you didn't even get to be the rock star! You had to be the roadie!

Yeah, that's right, but I got better pay!

Is that right? But I imagine it was a close-knit group.

Yeah, it was. Although the roadies didn't see much of the band because they were flying to gigs and we were driving overnight.

You would go with the Hendrix roadie?

It was just the one truck and the two roadies. We started off sharing equipment and it was disastrous.

So then Kevin couldn't take it and he dropped out?

I did two and a half months. Then they recorded the first record and then they came back again in the summer and did another 3 months tour or something.

I'm sorry, I don't get it. You did two months...

...as a roadie. I had enough after two and a half months. They went on more tours, basically.

So then, how did you end up being asked to be in the band?

Well, yeah, at the end of that year Kevin had enough. In fact they'd all had enough. Robert stayed in the States and did a demo of his stuff. Mike Ratledge didn't want to do anymore. In fact, what they'd overlooked is the fact that they had a contract to do a second record, which the record company insisted they do. So Kevin didn't want to do it and said, "Not interested," so they asked me to do it.

So when you say Robert did a demo, that wasn't when he did the *Moon In June* stuff was it?

Yes.

So he did that before you'd even done the second Soft Machine Album?

Yeah. In fact he lived out in California at Hendrix's house.

Yeah, he told me about that. And some of those early Wilde Flowers songs ended up in *Moon in June*?

Yeah. That's right. Alot of the stuff on the second record were, in fact, my tunes with his words... which he'd rewritten the words. Alot of the songs we'd done in the Wilde Flowers, he wrote new words for most of them.

On the Wilde Flowers album there's that song *A Certain Kind* sung by Richard Sinclair.

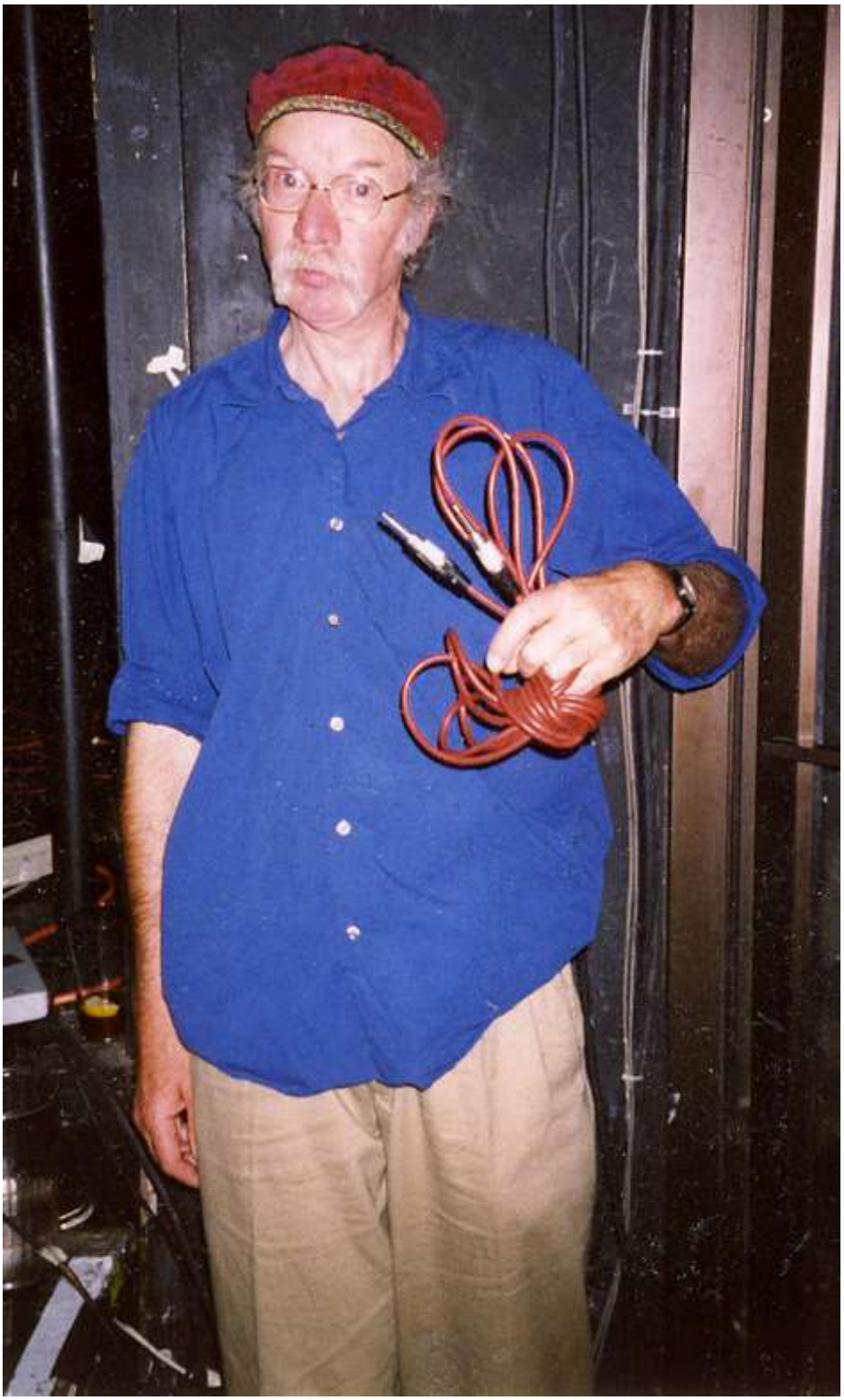
Yeah, wonderful isn't it? It's Like a sergeant major in the Army singing it, yeah. (sings in funny voice) "A Certain Kind..."

Right. And that song's one of yours that ended up being on the first or the second Soft Machine record?

That's from the first one. Yeah. There's a couple of my songs on the first one.

So you were a roadie and honorary songwriter. What about that whole Giorgio Gomelsky thing? I guess you weren't in the band then?

He was here last night, Giorgio. We had a drink with him afterwards.



Hugh Hopper, in 1998.

Hugh Hopper, pausing to mug for the camera while gathering up chords and cords, after a gig at the Knitting Factory in New York in 1998. (Photo by Mark Bloch)

Robert has said so much, just in the last couple years, about the fact that he was kicked out of the Soft Machine. What do you think about that?

Well, it's right, he was kicked out of the Soft Machine. But what's sad about it is that he's becoming more and more bitter about it now. For a long time he just didn't give a shit. I mean, you know, he was annoyed but, OK, that's gone. That's part of something else. But the last couple of years, it's true, in interviews I've read, he's been more and more bitter about it, which is a shame. I mean, it's true, he was kicked out. I mean, well, he was encouraged to leave, you know.

Because you guys were just going in a more intellectual direction?

Well, not intellectual.

How would you characterize it?

Just instrumentally. We were not interested in doing songs and stuff. That's what he wanted to do, yeah.

When you say songs-- you didn't fancy the vocals?

At that time I wasn't at all interested in vocal music... words. Where now I'm more interested. But at that time I was only interested in instrumental sounds.

Do you think you had, in your head, what happened later, more or less? Like, say, on Soft Machine 5?

Well, not that particular record. For me, Third and Fourth Soft Machine records was the kind of stuff I liked doing. Not so much the fifth one. That was kind of... that was more...

Was that the last one you were on?

No, I'm on Six, as well. Because there were so many personnel changes, anyway, after Robert left. Trying different drummers. And Karl Jenkins came in, which was a different influence. For me it became a more of an ordinary kind of band. You know, it was like it didn't have that quirkiness that it had before. Its probably a better musicianship but less, kind of, quirky interest for me.

Yeah, Robert was such a quirky element then. You weren't worried about losing that quality? The Soft Machine definitely lost something then.

Well, I can see that. But, in fact, in the end my feelings against him were much stronger than any logical feeling I might have had about the music, you know. We just weren't getting on. It was like "divorce time," you know? It's a miracle that bands ever stay together. When you think, three or four young males fighting over their territory... their creative territory...

So, as well as the musical differences there was a personality conflict?

In a sense, that was more important than the musical differences because, I think, if you can't get on with someone... It's like in a marriage. You can't logically say what's wrong about it. It just doesn't work. There's no rapport anymore. It's that kind of stuff.

He doesn't seem to be angry so much at you. It's more Ratledge.

Yeah that's right. Because, in a sense, he asked me to join the band and I wasn't one of the first members so it's, kind of, not so deep-standing. Also we've worked together since and we get on OK. We still collaborate on songs. But with Mike it was like, "Boom. Finished." There was no real respect between Mike and Robert, as such. It was, like, Robert felt rejected and Mike wasn't interested.

And now you still collaborate. On *Shleep*, *Was a Friend* is one of yours.

In fact, that's quite an old song. I wrote the music of that about... early eighties... about '83, '84. And it's had several different lyrics. And Robert always liked it and thought maybe he'd do something and it never got done. And then he wrote some different lyrics for it quite recently-- about a couple of years ago.

Actually, we did a version of it-- which still exists, which hasn't yet been released-- which was going to be on a compilation. Do you know a record label called Ponk? It used to be Fot Records. They do very irregular, sporadic compilations of different things, with odd tracks that would never see the light of day. I've done a couple of things for them before. And Robert and I did a version of that song. I layed down the tracks in a studio and sent him the tape and he just sang it on his four track and sent the tape back. And it's a nice record. And it should have been out years ago but their latest compilation just ran out of money or something.

And it's the words from *Shleep*?

Yes. It has a slightly different feel to it. It has more of a sustained organ feel rather than on his record he has drumming and bass guitar, something like that...

Yeah. How about what he did with *Free Will and Testament*? It's a whole different feel...

It's great! Right. That's Kramer's song. Kramer wrote the music. In fact, that was the first collaboration I did with Kramer. That was one of the pieces he came up with in the studio. And I did some bass stuff on it. I just remember saying to Kramer, "This would sound great with Robert's voice, you know." So, in fact, I sent it to Robert when we finished the first, sort of, recording and he just said, "Great," and wrote some words straight away. And it was one of the quickest collaborations I've ever done with him. Within a week he'd sent back a tape with his voice on it, which I sent to Kramer and just like that... it was a really famous way of working.

What was the remark you made that inspired the title, *A Remark Hugh Made*?

I was trying to work out a title which had both our names in it-- in anagram form. Because "remark" is an anagram for "Kramer" and his first name is Mark as well-- Mark Kramer-- though he never uses it. But I can never get mine because I have such an awkward name. There's no anagram for Hugh. Or Hopper. At least I haven't found one yet.

I'll work on that. So your brother Brian just bagged it at some point? The music I mean?

The thing is, he always had a daytime job. He never actually gave it up and started playing like the rest of us did. He always had a career. So in fact, he's just taken early retirement. So he's just getting back into music. He's always had keyboards at home and stuff like that. He's gotten into MIDI music recently. Sequencers at home, stuff like that. He's getting back into it.

Does he ever wish he were you-- career wise? Or vice versa? Do either of you ever think the other one made the right choice? Do you ever talk about that?

No. I mean, yeah, being a musician is weird. I can't say if I'm going to be starving in six months time. Or in three months time! But, yeah, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages for me.

So you like the choice you've made?

Yeah. I have a free life-- as much as anyone does.

As far as art vs. commercial success, do you feel like, "Fuck acceptance"? Have you, at different times in your life, gone out of your way to be more accepted than others?

Yeah, I think, when you're younger, you're more "Fuck you." It's like, "This is it. This is me." It's like, "If you don't like it, fuck you." Where as now, I'm more mellow. I can say, "OK, yeah, I better make some concessions." But on the other hand, I would never make a record just to make money. I hope all my records are going to make money because I need to live like everyone else. But I'm never going to make a record just to be commercial. I couldn't do it, anyway. I don't have that kind of approach to music. And I don't really want to. For me, if I produce something successful it's because I have a certain voice, myself, you know, a creative voice for writing music or playing bass. And I can work for... practice twenty hours a day and become another good session musician but I don't really want to do that. I don't want to work in a factory, either. For me, doing things for commercial reasons is not what I want to do music for.

Why did you leave the Soft Machine?

Basically, because I wasn't interested in the music they were doing and I wasn't friends with them as people. There was not a reason to stay in there, except for money. That was the only reason I was staying. Laziness. Plus I was getting paid reasonably well for staying in there. I wasn't happy musically, or with the people.

Was that a time when you were making a reasonable amount of money? Or is it better now?

Reasonable. It was more regular. In Soft Machine times I could always say, "I want so

much a week," or whatever. Or, "Can I have a couple of thousand to buy a boat?" or something. And I could say that and there was a good chance it'd be no problem. Whereas now, there could be a month where I didn't have any income at all. Or two months, it depends.

Was that because you were on a major label or because Soft Machine had a loyal following?

Yeah, both those things. The two things went together. The Soft Machine, particularly in Europe, was quite a big name. It wasn't as big as the pop groups. But, nonetheless, it was a living. It was reasonable.

In the 70's there wasn't much going on and you guys definitely had a good reputation.

Yeah, that's right. And on CBS Records it sold OK. But with all that I'm actually much happier now-- just scrambling around for things and doing weird things here and there and maybe not anything for six months. With Soft Machine I could've told you what I was doing for 18 months. All the dates were there. I mean, it's nice for the money. On the other hand, I became very... I lost interest in the music because it was like a job, really, a job doing something else. Where as now I get a chance to come to New York. And next week I could be doing a gig in Canterbury. Someone could ask me to do a gig in a pub in Canterbury.

And Brainville... Kramer made that happen because he'd worked with both you and Daevid separately?

Yeah, that's right. Daevid worked with Kramer before I'd worked with Kramer. Yeah, I've done two records with Kramer and a couple of live things and yeah.

Tell me about your album *1984*. When it came out I was young and baffled by it but now I have a greater appreciation for it.

Then you can tell me. I've been wondering myself!

Well, I mean the context. At the time Soft Machine was already pushing the limits of what I could fathom.

Strangely enough, *1984* was really stuff I'd been doing well before Soft Machine. It was really the stuff I'd been doing working with Daevid before all that stuff, when I was still in a, kind of, avant garde period-- before Wilde Flowers, before Soft Machine. Working with loops and stuff like that. Tape loops and cutting up sound collage, that kind of stuff. But I, sort of, messed around with that stuff when I worked with Daevid and also later on, at home, just cutting up pieces of tape, sticking them together and running them-- stuff like that. And then it was the first chance I'd really had enough money and studio time to get to go into a studio. And just record it in a big studio, in good conditions, where I had the time to do it with proper machines.

Did you bring homemade tapes or...

Mostly not....

...or did you make them there?

Yeah, in fact, we even did some big 16-track tapes looping with a big two inch...16(-track) machines, making loops which... you're not supposed to do that. It's against the sound engineer's golden rules. But we did all that stuff. Also, I suppose, it was a kind of reaction against Soft Machine because I was starting to get bored with Soft Machine-- not happy-- and wanted to do some stuff differently from being in the band.

And when was that? Were you still in the band?

Yeah. No, I actually started working on it the year before I left. So it was, yeah, '72.

So were you thinking Stockhausen? Terry RIley or that sort of thing?

Those are two good names, certainly. Certainly Terry Riley. I mean, that was a big influence. And there was a couple of pieces of Stockhausen. There was one called *Kontakte* which is.... now you could do it in, like, 5 minutes on the computer. But then it

was... you'd be sitting in a studio for months getting all this stuff down. Treating, electronically, stuff, which now, you could do with an effects box on stage.

And what about the whole Dada angle?

I've got it now. I didn't, at all, get involved with it, at all. There were people on the outskirts of Soft Machine who were very into that but it...

Who are you thinking of? What types of people?

Actually, people who were really Soft Machine fans, but were not part of the music world. They were, kind of, part of the art world or poets or artists or critics or, kind of, writers.

You mean, like those Pataphysical guys?

Yeah. All that stuff. I forget the guy's name. There was a guy in London who was the official Pataphysical Chairman of Britain. I forget his name. Oh god.

They had a whole organization, right?

That's it, yeah. And we were the official orchestra of the Pataphysical Society of Great Britain. But it was one of those things. It was fun. It's part of Surrealism and Dadaism and stuff of the thirties. I mean, it was very hard to tie down what it means. If you ask someone what Dada. means, it's just the art of the ridiculous or something... or the art of... give it some crazy definition. But it was really, kind of, a rebellion against logic and, kind of, being straight-- the straight world, really.

On the one hand, the tape loop has a dada connection but so does Robert's whimsical singing.

I think Dada is like one of these loose terms everyone has their own definition of...

The art of the absurd. Or making art out of every day life...

I think, mainly, it was a desire not to be part of the mainstream of art or of life. Do something ridiculous because life is ridiculous. Therefore you shouldn't do serious things. Or if you do serious things, you should do it in a weird way that's going to surprise people. Which is great. But, for me, it's not a clear philosophy. It's, sort of, an approach to other things rather than a clear thing in itself. But, then, that's because I was never particularly involved with it. It's something I saw from the outside.

I stayed a fan of the Softs though the seventh album. But it seems to me, when Robert left, that's part of what ended: that whimsical thing. The music became very serious after that.

That's right. Well, Mike Ratledge was always very serious about music. Unfortunately, he never really enjoyed playing live. He hadn't really enjoyed being on stage. It wasn't his life. He really was much happier composing stuff-- which he was very good at doing-- or arranging stuff or working at home. He didn't ever really enjoy being a touring musician.

Did you enjoy it?

I enjoy it now more than I did then because I have more freedom in my life to do what I want to do. At that time I was rather... also you get mellow with age. You see what the good things are and you avoid the bad things. Whereas when you're younger, you go head first into everything and you want everything just to be what you want.

Did you ever tour with the Soft Machine in the US? The three of you guys?

We did a couple of things in the States but mostly in Europe. Well, actually we didn't do it as a trio. Yeah, we did it with a quartet. With Elton Dean in '71, I think, was the first time we went back. We were supposed to do... we were with CBS Records and we had a lot of work with the jazz festival circuit. We were following Miles Davis everywhere. I saw so many Miles Davis gigs in those days... '71, '72.

How did you feel about that?

It was great. I loved that music at the time. I like the electric bands of Miles.

So now you and Daevid are together in Brainville.

I think it was Kramer's idea, really. I think Kramer had an idea for doing a record or a tour. An idea to tour with Daevid and me. First of all, it was going to be David Licht, a drummer who he'd worked with before. But David couldn't do it so we asked Pip. We were supposed to go to Israel and had some gigs in Europe but it's been very hard this year. Things seem to have been cancelled left, right and center for different reasons. But this is the first time we worked together-- in New York-- first time.

And this was the first time you'd been together musically with Daevid since the Daevid Allen Trio in 1963?

That's right. We did five gigs in England in June just as a trio because Kramer didn't come over. But before that I hadn't worked since... what?...1963 with Daevid. How long is that? That's 35 years!

But it's been fun?

It's been great. The five gigs we did in England as a trio were great. It was really nice. I can always work with Pip. It's never a problem. We've done so many gigs together over the years. I know we can get on together, especially improvising. But I really didn't know how we were going to get on with Daevid. Because Pip has worked with Daevid in Gong and they've been together and they've been apart and they've had problems and they've been together. But it really worked out well. We all enjoyed it. I think it was creative. It was improvised with a few songs. Stuff like that. Basically what you heard last night. That kind of approach.

Why did you decide to do *Hope for Happiness*? That was surprising.

I think that was Daevid's idea, actually. In fact, it's my brother's song. Brian wrote that. I can't remember how it came about. I think somebody suggested it. So we tried it and it's a good, open vehicle to do things on, you know.

What songs do you think you'll play for this Wyatt tribute?

We've had a look at *Sea Song* and *The Last Straw* from *Rock Bottom*. And a couple of the ones off the new record *Shleep*. There's one called *Heaps of Sheeps*. We might try that also there's one I co-wrote called *Was A Friend*-- the one we were talking about before. And plus Kramer's *Free Will and Testament*. Oh and *Memories*!! We might do *Memories* again.

It's got that kind of schmaltzy, nostalgic feel.

Everybody take to the dance floor!

You played on *Alifib* didn't you? That was quite an opus, huh?

Yeah, it was great. In fact, Robert had already recorded his piano part and I think it was like a tape loop rhythm part on that and Gary Window had recorded sax on it. Then they sent a demo to me to see if I could come up with some sort of bass line afterwards or whatever-- which I did at home. Then we went into the studio to record it. So, yeah, I really liked it. I was pleased with that, also, because it was a reconciliation with Robert. It was the first thing we did together after he'd left Soft Machine-- a year later.

(*Joking, as Pip Pyle walks by*) Can you shed some light on the whole Pip and Robert Wyatt wife-swapping controversy? Was that a coincidence?

Nothing is a coincidence. By chance, Alfie was Pip's girlfriend at one point. And Pip's ex-wife was also Robert's ex-wife.

Girlfriends seem to play a large role in all of this. Kevin used to go out with Pye Hastings late sister?

That's how we met Pye Hastings, because he was Kevin's girlfriend's much younger brother. He was a 15 year-old schoolboy when we first met him. That's right.

And what about Caravan? You didn't overlap much with them?

Well, I did really. Because that came from Wilde Flowers, as well, and yeah, they were

really the more melodic pop song... or poppier songs from Wilde Flowers and they developed that side of it. Pye is a very good song writer, a very natural song writer. He says, himself, he doesn't consider himself to be a great guitarist. But he plays guitar well for what he wants to do. It fits well with his music. He's not interested in being a jazz musician or in a fancy conservatory. He doesn't do that.

That must have been difficult to reconcile with Robert after his accident. Were you still on the outs with him?

No, we'd made up by then. It was a shock. I remember I heard it from Gary Window, I think. Yeah, Gary phoned me up and told me about Robert. I think at the time I didn't see that he'd be able to handle it. I'd never thought of him as being a particularly strong person to be able to handle a thing like that. I thought it could be easy to try and take his own life because he couldn't stand the idea of being in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Which certainly would have occurred to me, you know. You can't tell until it happens what you would feel like. But he handles it OK.

If I call Robert or Robert calls me, I mean, I just don't think about it, really. He was never a sporty person. He never went sailing or he never went hiking. Although he's lost the ability to play a drum set--he can't play the bottom half of a drum set-- he would laugh at the idea of going jogging, for instance. So for him, most of his life was actually sitting at home and having cups of tea, anyway. In fact sometimes I have to remind myself that he is in a wheelchair. But then that's because I don't see him very much.

Do you think his music has changed since then?

Yeah it has. Well, he certainly hasn't switched off because of it.

What about, drums versus singing, and doing them at the same time. Was that a factor when he left the band?

It was all part of it. In fact, as I was saying before, it's all because we just weren't getting on as people. If he'd been the greatest drummer in the world or the greatest singer in the world, if you're not getting on with someone then it just doesn't help. You can't say, "I must get on with this person because he's the greatest drummer in the world." It just doesn't work. You can't even tie it down to those logical things. You just don't get on with someone so you just hate their face. They walk in the door and you think "I wish you'd go away," or something. It's like any other relationship. Since you've got to play together it makes it twice as bad.

Do you have a family?

Yeah, Several! One daughter of 19 and another one of 2 1/2 from two different mothers.

How's your daughter of 19?

She's actually started playing bass about three years ago but then she's given up now. She's into music but doesn't really have that kind of neurotic desire that you need to have to really get involved in an instrument. But she's always been into music.

How about that neurotic thing? Tell me about your own neurotic relationship to the music. Do you agonize over your recordings or do you have a more laizze fair attitude?

I'm more laizze fair than I used to be. Because I know now what I can do and I know what I can do easily and I know what it's going to be hard for me to do and I accept those problems. I mean, I can now trust myself. If it's someone I'd never met... then I'd say "Yeah, sure," and it wouldn't worry me. I might think, if they presented me with this chart that was really horrendous-- and I'm not a particularly good reader-- so I'd have trouble with that. I know I can do certain things if people ask me to do them and I know I can do them well. I can contribute to a project. So it's not a problem anymore. Whereas when you're younger, you have alot more bullshit about you. You think, "Ah! I can do this." and if can't do it, if you're proven wrong, then things get nasty. Whereas now I can see that it's no problem for me to admit that I can't do something so it makes me more relaxed. So I can probably do things better than I could've done before.

Did reading ever become a problem after Robert left Soft Machine? That horn section you played with was pretty serious wasn't it?

Yeah. It wasn't a problem for reading in that band because the bass lines were mostly riffs anyway.

Did you ever feel a conflict between a more academic approach vs the Chuck Berry School?

Not really. Not at that stage, anyway, because it wasn't that academic. The whole thing about Soft Machine, when I left it, it was becoming kind of a jazz-rock funky thing, which I love-- played by the right people. But I, for one, was not the right bass player for that kind of stuff. And then, in my opinion, they weren't the right writers and other players for it. They all had a lot of qualities but that wasn't one of them. Certain people dearly want to be black, you know. And then they weren't black players and whatever that means. Or they wanted to come from Harlem. I never have come from Harlem, and I know what I can do. I love some of that stuff. I love a lot of it but I don't necessarily want to play it myself.

You did that recent CD *Spaced*, right?

That's right. That was kind of... Alot of that was just the same kind of approach as 1984-- working with tapes and recording stuff live and then cutting it up. Making loops of it, overlaying things. I did a little bit of that on the beginning of one of the tracks on Soft Machine Third-- Facelift-- which has some live stuff mixed with studio stuff. The Spaced project we did it, actually, for a show in London which had dancers and acrobats and they asked us to do the music for it. So we did this tape and it's recently come out on Cuneiform.

Did you have something to do with remixing it?

In fact, there's a guy called Mike King from Canada who tracked down where the tapes were. The engineer who recorded it for us went to live in the States and he's now a bicycle repairman in Connecticut--great! He had it in his loft or something. In these boxes of tapes.

What about the Wilde Flowers tapes? Didn't Mike (King) get those from your brother?

Yeah Brian had alot of them. We had them on acetates; on vinyl demos because that's how you had them in those days. It's like a seven inch EP. ???...tracks on there. That's why its scratchy sounding.

I don't think they're bad, considering...

They've been cleaned up. That was Brian's project-- my brother. He got that going. In fact Voiceprint's going to put out a further, even earlier, archive project of stuff. Like I was telling you about my brother and I singing Chuck Berry songs... more interesting early stuff with Robert and Mike Ratledge. Kind of playing free jazz around the time of the Daevid Allen Trio. We used to get together in each other's homes and pretend to be John Coltrane and things like that.

You guys always have a kind of self-effacing attitude about jazz. It seems to be something you all share that survives from those early days...

We've always got a, sort of, interiority complex about being real jazz musicians, that's right.

Was it because you were young guys in England?

Yeah, young white guys. And also speaking for myself, I never really studied jazz technique and jazz harmony and all that stuff you really want to go into. I just played by ear I'm really kind of a rocker with jazz tinges. As well as other things. I have other interests as well.

What do you think of when I mention Mark Boyle ?

Mark has become quite successful because he's, kind of, been taken up by the art world in London. He did all the light shows for Soft Machine. He does paintings. He's really become quite successful.

Do you see him still?

I haven't seen him for about 20 years.

I saw him in 1980 or so. He did a show in California and played some Softs tapes and talked about the light shows.

Even when I was in the band he came along and did a few special shows for us as well. He gave Mike, Robert and me one of his pictures. He had this project to throw darts at an atlas of the world and wherever the dart landed he would go there and make this epicoat casting.

Yeah, that's what was in the show I saw. It was amazing. So he gave you one of those?

Yeah. Mine is actually a part of the coast of England, the south coast of England-- sand at low tide. You know how sand goes all... kind of... you can see the shape of the wave, the ripples. You can see shells and stuff in it.

And he wasn't involved with *Spaced*?

He wasn't, actually, although it was pretty much composed by the same family... I forgot the guy's name. It was his show really and he put it together.

Who was Ted Bing?

Ted was a school friend. He got into photography. He used to take photographs of everyone. He's now living in Norway-- lives like a Viking! He's about 6 foot 6 anyway. Now, having lived in Norway for the last 20 years, he really looks like a Viking.

You guys always had a multi-media aspect to the Soft Machine.

Yeah, we did. Daevid was very important in that he encouraged... he was the instigator of some of those things. He would get Ted to take a picture of him-- real kind of freaky pictures-- and then project them on him while he was playing and reading poetry and stuff like that.

Well thank you, Hugh. I'm sure there's more I'd like to know but that about does it for now.

Thank you, Mark.

>> Interview with Hugh Hopper on the Panmodern website

Previous article

Next article

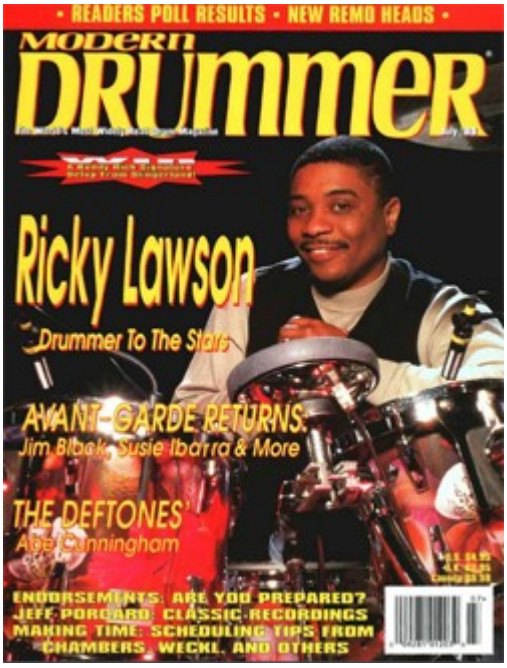
Back to the list

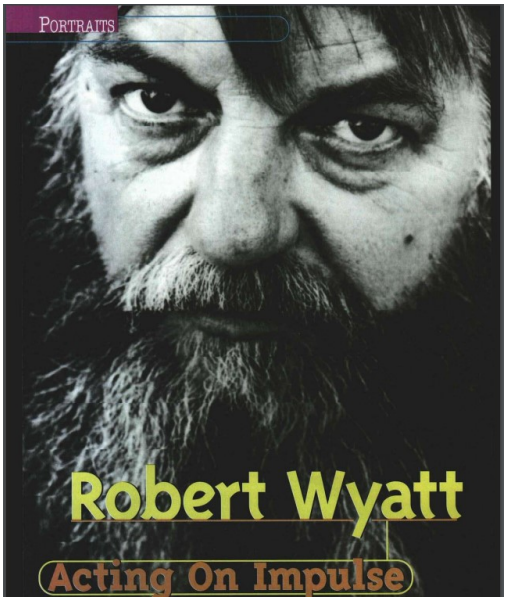
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt - Acting On Impulse - Modern Drummer - July 1998





> Zoom

Few musical careers parallel Robert Wyatt's. As the drummer and singer with England's Soft Machine, Wyatt literally helped birth the genre of jazz-rock in the mid '60s. After four albums and mounting tensions, Wyatt split, took a stylistic about-face, and released a handful of amazing—if esoteric—solo albums. He never looked back at the potentials of stardom, though, and in fact seems to relish the artistic freedom available outside the mainstream. When the topic of Sheila E's mass exposure via a *7-UP* commercial is brought up, Robert, tongue firmly in cheek, quickly responds, "Well, there's been no *7-UP* commercials *this* way—though it has a busy year."

by Adam Budofsky



child prodigy born to British intellectual "bohemian" parents, and mostly self-taught on drums, Wyatt's taste for modern jazz and twentieth-century classical music helped make Soft Machine one of the most critically acclaimed bands of the '60s. Along with keyboardist Mike Ratledge, guitarist Daevid Allen (who left early on to form the inimitable Gong), and Kevin Ayers (bass, soon to go solo), the group baffled audiences with their music, which clearly had more to do with amping-up Coltrane than weirding-up the Stones.

Despite most people's inability to comprehend the odd band from Canterbury, Jimi Hendrix invited them to open up his 1968 American tour, and forward-thinking musicians in attendance began to dig their unique sound. Of particular note was Wyatt's unbridled kit work, which was oddly accompanied by his fragile yet emotive vocals.

Directly after leaving the band, Robert formed the group Matching Mole, participated in a number of side projects, and released his first solo album, *The End Of An Ear*. A fall from a window in 1973 left him paralyzed from the waist down, after which his albums took a fascinating turn. Without the option of heavy kit excursions, Wyatt's music became rhythmically simpler—but more detailed. The treatment of every element now took on much greater importance: The subtle adjustment of a ride pattern signaled a change in scenery, the turning off of snares beat a new path through the woods. "Despite all this highfalutin education," he says today, "my songs are very simple. They are nursery rhymes half the time."

Wyatt also collaborated with an astounding diversity of artists, including jazz pianist Carla Bley, intellectual dance-poppers Scritti Politti, electronic/soundtrack legend Ryuichi Sakamoto, and Namibian consciousness-raising group the Swapo Singers. This last project in particular highlights his passion for political activism, which continues to be a constant source of inspiration.

Today Robert Wyatt holds demigod status among a small but fanatic group of followers. Among them is Elvis Costello, who co-wrote the magnificent surprise hit "Shipbuilding" specifically for him, as well as Brian Eno and Paul Weller, both of whom made important contributions to his first long-player in seven years, Shleep. Modern Drummer caught up with Wyatt upon the release of the album.

AB: What have you been doing since your last album, *Dondestan*?

RW: I've done some singing for other people. A friend of mine, John Greaves, did a record called *Songs*, and I sang three tunes. More recently I sang a bit for Austrian composer Mike Mantler.

AB: You've worked with Mike in the past.

RW: Yeah, I have. One of the most exciting things I've ever sung against was the rhythm section that he and Carla Bley provided with Jack DeJohnette on drums on *The Hapless Child*.

AB: Your new album seems to be more about collaborations than past records. You recorded at [Roxy Music guitarist] Phil Manzanera's studio, and you played with Brian Eno again, and Paul Weller—for the first time?

RW: Yes, although we've been involved in some of the same sort of political pressure groups, but never as musicians. People have been telling me that I should really work with some other people occasionally, [laughs]

AB: You have done your share of collaborations, though.

RW: I have played with a lot of people, but I do like working on my own. It's a paraplegic thing: We like to do what we can whenever we can, given that in a lot of the world we can't do as much as other people. So even on this album, I've done as much as I could myself. I

try and be my own sort of mini-group. But I wanted the company. I get lonely out here, [laughs]

AB: Are you way out in the country?

RW: Yeah, I'm in a little country town. But I just thought it would be nice to see some of those musicians I used to know in London, and because Phil Manzanera's studio is very near London, I felt free to ask people on a quite casual basis to come 'round for an afternoon or two.

AB: A couple of people actually got pretty involved.

RW: Paul and Brian—neither of whom charged me anything, incidentally—actually mixed some of the tracks that they played on. I thought, well, they've made their contributions, and they worked very hard. I was really grateful, and I also didn't want to misuse their contributions. But they both seemed most concerned with getting my voice right in the mix, which was very kind. And I have to thank Phil Manzanera for providing an atmosphere where I felt I could take time on things.

AB: One thing that is consistent throughout your career is a willingness to let the ride cymbal provide almost the entire driving pulse in a song. From the new album, "Was A Friend" and "Blues In Bob Minor" come to mind.

RW: It's a generation thing I think. I'm just about a year older than people who were brought up on the closed hi-hat concept of timekeeping. I come from the Kenny Clarke ride cymbal era. It's not that I'm a jazz player, but to me that seems to be the natural feel for the kit, and I'm a very top-of-the-kit person. I don't really play "rock 'n' roll"—I don't play "rock" anyway. I like to roll around my tunes rather than rock.

I also particularly like the jazz 4/4, which is of course a 12/8. It just seems to me you can sort of imply the triplets with the ride cymbal in a very organic way, and with a very light touch. One of my favorite rhythm sections was Dannie Richmond with Charles Mingus. I was very impressed with the way they would sort of tug against each other. I don't always use that feel, but on "September The Ninth" on this album the bass and drums are sort of pushing and pulling against each other.

AB: You also seem to enjoy playing with the snares off.

RW: Oh, yeah. I did a whole LP with the snares off, which was the second Matching Mole one, *Little Red Record*. There are ways of getting a cutting edge without the snares on. I really like that slightly hollow sound. There are drummers I used to like, like Ed Blackwell, all of whose drums sounded like toms. And even now, on this record, I have the snare kind of floppy and rattly, like Max Roach. In R&B and other styles, an extremely tight snare is perfect. But not for me. I like an organic, grubby sort of sound.

AB: A long time ago in an interview you made mention of "submerging yourself in the work of learning to play three or four drums." You have always had a relatively small kit, even with Soft Machine...

RW: It's even smaller now! [laughs] All I'm really using now is a snare and two cymbals, with a few little toy ones for the odd "*psh*."

I like the gradations of sounds you can get on one drum rather than always having sudden steps from drum to drum. It just seems to be more organic than the rock thing. I really departed from the rock thing, where you have this: [sings descending notes]. I just like the sounds to merge into each other more. My favorite drummer was Elvin Jones, and the thing about him that really impressed me was that nearly every drum was almost tuned the same.

It's the same with cymbals. I'd rather play a different part of a good cymbal than have like eight cymbals up and only hit the same place on each one. It's not intimate enough for me. To me, each cymbal and drum is a complex instrument in its own right. And of course it's a physical thing now. I can't reach out all over the place; I'm quite liable to fall over, [laughs] So I like my kit close to my body and tight and everything within very easy reach. That also concentrates the mind.

Impulse Buying

a selected Robert Wyatt discography

Most of Wyatt's solo albums are available in the States on CD, but some of the other records he's appeared on are either out of print or available only as imports. Original recording dates appear following label names, except in the case of re-releases or newly available live recordings, in which case the original recording dates appear in brackets, while the latest release dates follow the label names.

WITH SOFT MACHINE

* Vols, I [1968] and 2 [1969] (Big Beat, 1989)
• Third (UK CBS, 1970)
• Fourth (UK CBS, 1971)
* Jet-Propelled Photograph [1967] (Charly, 1994)
* Live At The Paradiso 1969 (Voiceprint, 1996)

WITH MATCHING MOLE

Matching Mole [1972] (Columbia, 1992)
* Little Red Record [1972] (Columbia, 1992)

AS LEADER

* The End Of An Ear (UK CBS, 1970)
* Rock Bottom [1974] (Thirsty Ear, 1998)
• Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard [1975] (Thirsty Ear, 1998)
* Nothing Can Stop Us [1982] (Thirsty Ear, 1998)
• The Animals Soundtrack [1982] (Thirsty Ear, 1998)
- 1982-1984 (Rough Trade, 1984)
• Old Rotten Hat [1985] (Thirsty Ear, 1998)
* Compilation (Gramavision, 1986)
* Dondestan [1991] (Thirsty Ear, 1998)
* Going Back A Bit: A Little History (Virgin, 1994)
• Shleep [1997] (Thirsty Ear, 1998)

AS SIDEMAN

* Daevid Allen: Bananamoon [1971] (Charly, 1990)
* Kevin Ayers: The Joy Of A Toy [1969] (UK Beat Goes On, 1990)
* Kevin Ayers: Shooting At The Moon [1970] (UK Beat Goes On, 1990)
* Ayers, Cale, Nico, Eno: June 1, 1974 (UK Island, 1990)
* Brian Eno: Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy) (EC, 1974)
* Brian Eno: Another Green World (EC, 1975)
* Brian Eno: Before And After Science (EG, 1978)
• Brian Eno: Music For Airports (EG 1979)
* Ryuichi Sakamoto: Beauty (Virgin, 1989)

Also, check out the book *Wrong Movements: A Robert Wyatt History* (ISBN 0 946719 101) from SAF Publishing, UK.

AB: Do you think there is some connection to your lyrics and your drumming style? You've made mention in the past of a conscious decision to make the lyrics simpler and more conversational. Your drumming has taken on a similar kind of evolution.

RW: Actually, I've never really thought of that comparison before. I'll have to think about that; you may be right. I should point out, though, that when I'm talking about music, everything seems more deliberate than it actually is. When you are actually playing, you are acting on instinct. You do a lot of calculating before you play, and maybe after you play, but not while you are doing it. I don't always know what I've done till I sit and think about it. Actually, more and more, I've discarded every theory that I ever had about what things *ought* to be like—even the thought that they've got to be different. I'll use a common device just as happily as an unusual one. All I think now is, "Does it feel alive; does it feel right?"

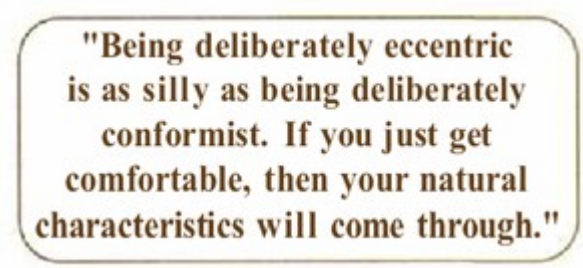
It's like when drummers are worried about their personality coming through their playing. I don't think you have to think about that. Being deliberately eccentric is as silly as being deliberately conformist. If you just get comfortable, then your natural characteristics will come through. We are all unique without trying, as anyone who has studied fingerprints or voiceprints will tell you.

AB: If you can call it this, one happy result of your not being able to play a traditional trap set is a sort of elimination of the *sound* of a drumset on your albums. When most drummers sit behind a kit, they seem obliged to have to make noise with every limb.

RW: People do like to wiggle all four limbs at least once every four seconds; I've noticed that. Actually, I don't think like a drummer really, or a singer, or any of these things. I'm thinking like a composer. That may sound a bit pompous, but that's the best word for it. I'm just trying to think about what the music needs. It's really exciting to realize that on some tracks I only need to keep time, that I don't need to have a drum on it at all. It's amazing what you can leave out, because immediately the space becomes available for some other instrument. Everybody is in the rhythm section in the end—not just the drummer. You won't fall down a great vacuum cavity if you stop using a limb temporarily.

AB: If you try that in rehearsal, you're liable to have the rest of the band look at you like, "Well, why aren't you playing the whole kit?"

RW: Right. Very often the difference between an amateur and a professional musician is that the amateur is playing and the professional is listening. That's really the job. That's another reason I like the translucence of the cymbal sound, because you can hear right through it. It's important for me to be able to do that. The real problem I had after my accident was not losing the bass drum, because as I get older my tastes get more old-fashioned, and I really don't need that bass drum thing very often. But I did have trouble not having a hi-hat. Listening to Billy Higgins playing and realizing that he was squeezing the hi-hat with such a light touch led me to think, I'll just go one step further *and fantasize* about playing the hi- hat, and my body will kind of move with that.



AB: I'd like to go back in time a bit. You were lucky enough to grow up in a home where you were encouraged to listen to music that a lot of your peers probably never even knew existed.

RW: I was very lucky. For one thing, a lodger came to stay at our house once whose name is George Niedorf. I think he had taught at Valley Drum City in California and had run clinics with Joe Morello. But his favorite was Philly Joe Jones, and he used to teach me to listen—not to drummers, but to rhythm sections. That was very, very useful to me. So I used to listen to a lot of things, like Jimmy Cobb with Miles Davis. My older brother had a terrific record collection, so that was perhaps why my tastes were a bit more old-fashioned than some of my contemporaries'. I mean, at school most of my friends were listening to the Everly Brothers. I just liked my brother's records more than theirs—it's as simple as that.

AB: So by the time Daevid Allan *[sic]* came along, also as a lodger at your parents' house, you two were listening to the same sorts of things.

RW: He had a lot of the same records as my brother. Even before then, though, my father had listened to twentieth-century classical music a great deal—not extremely avant-garde,

but certainly Prokofiev and Benjamin Britten and so on. So I got used to kind of dense, twentieth-century harmonic ideas. I never had any problem with what people called "discord." There's no such thing; it's just conditioning as far as I can see.

It was only later that I discovered pop music. I didn't understand it at all at first. When I heard the Beatles I thought Ringo Starr was just so banal. Now I can see what a perfect drummer he was. But it took me years. The people that are called "avant-garde," I hear it straight away. [laughs]

AB: In the mid '60s, audiences were becoming open to more out stuff. The timing seemed pretty good for Soft Machine.

RW: I think we would have been better off a couple of years later. We had some pretty rough rides with audiences, I can tell you. I think I had this need to kind of lose the beat and find it again. People found that very unnerving—including a lot of musicians I played with! But sometimes I just like to stop playing. Dannie Richmond used to do that quite a lot with Charles Mingus. There would be whole sections where he would just, BANG, stop, the band would carry on, and he'd come back in a chorus later. But that was because Mingus told him to. Nobody told *me* to.

AB: You've said that touring with the Jimi Hendrix Experience was positive for the group, musically at least.

RW: First of all, they were encouraging personally. They didn't pull rank, which headliner groups can do. Second, Hendrix very deliberately allowed Mitch Mitchell a lot of space to create drum parts and to improvise. And they were doing it, not in front of tiny jazz club audiences or avant-garde elite, but stadiums full of rock fans—and they were getting away with it! And I realized that if you do something with authority, as if you mean it, people will go with that.

AB: Soft Machine and Pink Floyd have some common history. Nick Mason, the drummer in Floyd, almost seems like your stylistic opposite, yet you've worked together a few times.

RW: The Floyds were always very helpful to us. When I was working on *Rock Bottom* I was taking the responsibility for more than I had taken on before. I just thought it would be great to have the ear of someone else who wasn't in the middle of it, who really had a lot of experience working in studios and making things sound right. Nick drummed in order to make the piece of music sound right, not in order to show off. He would just gently increase or decrease the pressure throughout the song where appropriate. I felt that sense of space and structure could help me in the studio, and I was right. He was extremely helpful.

AB: The drummer on *Rock Bottom* is Laurie Allan, who American audiences might not be familiar with.

RW: When it came time to do my first record where I couldn't really play the kit, Laurie was the first person I thought of. He was part of the London scene and worked quite a lot with some show bands and various free-jazz groups, but he understood rock music as well. I felt in tune with him because of that. I also really liked his sound and felt a real kinship with him, and that makes a difference. Without friendship and companionship it's just a cold exercise. Cleverness is not enough.

AB: You and the other members of Soft Machine worked on [Pink Floyd founder] Syd Barren's first solo album. That must have been quite a task, since his behavior had become quite erratic by that point.

RW: I was actually very touched that he asked us. People say, "Are you upset you weren't given credit on the record?" But I think he left our names off out of kindness, [laughs] We went into the studio and he was virtually mute. He just played us the songs that he had recorded, and they were quite difficult in the sense that there was hardly any sort of steady, regular time going through them. They were structured around the words, which were not in any kind of regular meter.

We rehearsed the songs a little and then were ready to record them, at which time he said, "Right, that's it. Thank you very much." So those initial takes became a few tracks of *The Madcap Laughs*. But I think it was a wonderful record, and today I can see exactly why he wanted to leave it as this clumsy searching sound. He didn't want a smooth thing. I enjoyed the experience very much, and I liked him. All the Floyd were very nice people.

AB: It sounds like his ideas were more intentional than people assume.



RW: If you look at other art forms—like the paintings of Max Ernst or the dadaists or early surrealists—you see that there's nothing unusually eccentric about people like Syd Barrett. I myself was brought up as much with painters as musicians. Syd didn't strike me as particularly eccentric; he struck me as a perfectly normal and sensible songwriter—which maybe says something about me that I don't want to know!

But I do think that we are not here to please the structures in music, or in life. The structures are there where and when we need them to help us out of the chaos if we are lost. But they shouldn't be our masters. I think when any idiom sort of petrifies, it is precisely because the structures have taken over from the impulses that have set them up.

AB: You've mentioned being influenced by visual artists, but are there any particular musicians you've been into lately?

RW: Some of the things I've been listening to include a Japanese group called Ground Zero, who do remixes and sampling and things, but not as dance music. I also listen to a lot of the great American standards—Gershwin, Cole Porter. And I've been listening to an old singer named Jimmy Scott a lot, as well as a record that Linda Ronstadt did with Nelson Riddle, which was done with a lot of respect.

People sometimes listen to my lyrics and think, "Oh, he must be really anti-American," but that's not the case at all. It's just that I find all imperialist governments a pain in the bum. But it's not the people's fault; don't blame the culture. The fact is that something extraordinary happened in American culture in the last hundred years or so: Diverse immigrant groups came together and reinvented their identities alongside each other in ways that have just been fantastic. When you think of Miles Davis and Gil Evans doing *Porgy And Bess*, and you think of the history of the ideas on a record like that—from black Americans to Jewish Americans to goodness knows who else...that's really the area that interests me most at the moment.

I don't feel any obligation to keep up to date. I agree with Byron, who said, "Every time somebody tells me about a wonderful new book, I go out and buy an old one."

AB: There does always seem to be old stuff to discover.

RW: That's right. In fact, I didn't really appreciate Bob Dylan so much at the time, although Hendrix used to say how great he was. But since then I've liked him more and more, which is why I've got that little Bob Dylan tribute on the record, "Blues In Bob Minor."

AB: I guess you haven't heard from him on it yet.

RW: No. I just hope that he will realize that I'm "Bob Minor" and he's "Bob Major"!

Thanks to John Godlewski from Absolute Vinyl in Montclair, New Jersey for invaluable research help on this article.

Previous article

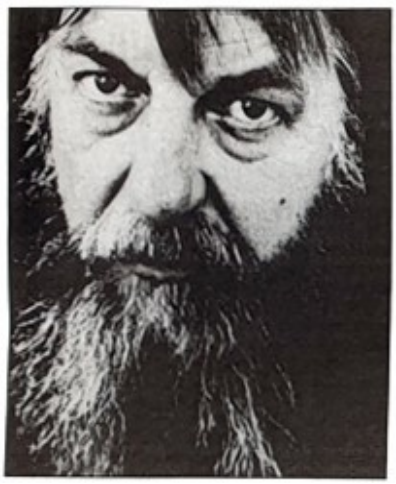
Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

Singer/instrumentalist (& ex-Soft Machine drummer) Robert Wyatt reveals the secretworld of dreams with Shleep - USR U.S. Rocker Magazine - Number 6 - June'98



Singer/instrumentalist (& ex-Soft Machine drummer) Robert Wyatt reveals the secret world of dreams with *Shleep*

BY SEAN CARNEY



Robert Wyatt? Who the hell is Robert Wyatt!? Well, unless you buy a lot of out-of-print vinyl, you might not have heard of the man before. But now with a new record, *Shleep*, available domestically from Thirsty Ear and a reissue of his entire back catalog planned for summer release, it's time to catch up.

Robert Wyatt was a founding member of the '60s art rock band Soft Machine from Canterbury UK. Although Soft Machine debuted in the middle of the decade-long British rock explosion, the band was quite different from its contemporaries. First off, Soft Machine - in its classic configuration - had no guitarist. Instead, the musical focus was on the hyperactive interplay between Hugh Hopper's fuzz bass, Mike Ratledge's even fuzzier organ, and the drumming and singing of Robert Wyatt. The band careened recklessly from cabaret-sounding jazz to completely frazzed-out rock, bypassing the flaky psychedelic idiosyncratic approach and took Soft Machine along on the Experience's first U.S. tour in 1968.

Wyatt's percussion style was unusual in its fluidity and ratty energy - a mid-point between Keith Moon's manic approach and the precision, "pro" sound of Bill Bruford. Even more remarkable than his drumming was Wyatt's unbroken, high-pitched voice that sounded more like it belonged to a teenage boy than a man. His phrasing on the first three Soft Machine albums is amazing. He breaks the words at unusual points and often indulges in "wordless vocal guitar solos," scatting along in an eerie register, tripping and trilling along

with the melody. His words were exceptional, too, and had nothing in common with the insipid "let's boogie" come-ons of other English bands of the time. He employed whimsical surrealist imagery that was also wise and subtly political. "Virgins are boring," Wyatt sang on "Pig" (from *Soft Machine II*). "They should be grateful for the things they're ignoring."

Wyatt left Soft Machine after three albums to form Matching Mole, an even more spontaneous and jazzy ensemble. Then, in 1973, Wyatt fell from a window at a party and was paralyzed from the waist down. Although this ended his career as a kit drummer, Wyatt was soon back at work, singing, arranging and playing a variety of instruments on classic albums by luminaries like Brian Eno (Wyatt contributed to *Taking Tiger Mountain By Strategy* and *Music for Airports* — some pretty cool credentials). Wyatt also began what is now a twenty-five year long solo career that de-emphasized rhythm for vocal and harmonic exploration. On albums such as 1974's *Rock Bottom* and 1975's *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard*, Wyatt plumbed his emotional depths, extracting some of the most heart-rending personal music of all time. His newest record, Shleep, is a bit more light-hearted than his '80s work (which saw him delve into Marxist politics) and features guest musicians like Eno, Phil Manzanera (from Roxy Music), Paul Weller (from the Jam), and avant garde saxophonist Evan Parker.

USR was lucky enough to have the opportunity to spend some time chatting with Robert Wyatt on the phone early in May. He doesn't do many interviews, but he spoke candidly with us about what it means to live as an artist in the late 20th century, and his joyful lust to create infected us all month long.

It's been a few years since you've released any material. How did you decide it was time for a new record?

Well, I spend months on end working on piano ideas and cymbal ideas and trumpet ideas at my home, I'm always writing bits and pieces of songs but only at certain times do they come together into a coherent piece. I can't force it - I can't turn the tap on and POOF! a song comes out. Things have to come together naturally, organically. And when they do, I get into the studio as quick as I can.

Do you have other collaborators in mind when you're crafting the song ideas?

Ever since the early '70s, I've found that the safest way to record is to take responsibility for everything. It's as if you were the captain of a ship: it's a good idea to be able to do everything you're gonna ask everyone else to do in case they get washed overboard. I really try to be prepared to play every instrument myself and only when I need another voice do I invite someone who I think is appropriate to join me. That way, I'm not dependent on them but they can enhance what I do - sometimes beyond recognition. When I'm mixing, I take that into account and change what I already planned.

So the contributions sometimes surprise you?

Yes, though over the years I've learned a bit better who is most happy in each particular context. I don't always get it right but I really try. I attempt to take into account each musician's harmonic palette and the pace they like to work at beforehand so I don't throw them into an uncomfortable situation. If I'm working on something that is rhythmically or harmonically obscure, there are certain jazz musicians that would be more comfortable with that than rock musicians. Rock musicians possess other important qualities, having mostly to do with dynamics. They can really bear down on a tune if they're harmonically comfortable.

I was very lucky this time because there was a such a helpful and friendly bunch of people that came by the studio. I got more and more happy because I realized I wasn't going to have to rely on myself for everything.

Do you think that's a strength of jazz and rock music - the collaborative spirit?

Yes, that's an advantage those musics have. When I was young, my initial tendencies were towards "purist" artforms like painting and poetry because a person does it entirely themselves, straight from their imagination onto the paper. The trouble is "pure forms" don't reflect what real life is: a constant process of interaction and adjustment to the things going on around you. And I've really understood that listening to jazz. I'm so grateful to jazz because it established the idea of an inter-relationship between the composers and the performers, constantly flowing, constantly shifting. Despite the fact that we're not playing what anyone would think of as jazz, those of us working in the more

improvised and extended areas of rock should be thankful for everyone from Louis Amstrong to John Coltrane for having opened up the whole range of collaborative creativity.

Miles Davis used to arrange music simply by choosing the players and then letting their personalities shape the sound.

That's right, yeah. I was just listening to *Miles Ahead* and on one track Miles Davis makes a humorous reference to "When the Saints Go Marching In." To do that, Miles is depending on the other musicians to know what reference he's making - they don't automatically lock into "When the Saints," but they accommodate him for a few bars. They all faintly echo the '20s record he's referring to and then they zip back into the '50s, which was when *Miles Ahead* was recorded. To accomplish that depends entirely on knowing who you're with and that you can trust them.

I suppose it's like what some socialite might say about how you invite people for a party: a good party depends on who you've got sitting next to whom. But it doesn't mean you can control what they say! If you've chosen well you can't go wrong, however.

It's been suggested that the ultimate anarchist art grouping is a party.

Oh, that's a very good idea! Of course, there's always someone who throws the party and there's always someone who has to say "Fuck off, I want to go to bed!"

And someone who has to do the dishes the next day...

That's absolutely right. As Noam Chomsky said, "Anarchy is not a state that can be achieved but it's a useful tendency that should be applied at all times."

As far as the lyrical imagery of Shleep is concerned were you going for an overall concept or unity?

My initial collaboration for the record was with Alfie, to whom I'm married. I turned to her words, the notes she made, and her poems because, although I had a lot of musical ideas, I had very few lyrics in mind. Her words seemed to be based around the imagery of birds: birds in flight and birds not able to fly, etc. This coincided very well with the almost permanent dream state I've been in the last few years, a narcotic state without narcotics - which is an ideal slate to be in if you can manage it! Hahaha! It's what you'd call state of grace or luck. Real life doesn't let you live that way too often, but I aim for it and Alfie's lyrics aim for that as well.

I also think that as you get older and heavier, the lightness of birds becomes more and more romantic. At least it seems romantic lo me — I always eat too much. So I combined Alfie's vicarious bird fantasies with my yearning to recapture the wonderful world of dreams. I know that sounds like a cliche, but I just *love* dreams. The more I look back on my life I'm just so glad for those dreaming moments. Everything is good about dreams. Even the worst nightmares are great - you wake up thinking. Wow, thank God that wasn't true! But if it's a good dream then all the better, and that's the theme of the album.


Singer/instrumentalist (& ex-Soft Machine drummer) Robert Wyatt reveals the secret world of dreams with *Shleep*

Do you have waking dreams?

Yes, crepuscular dreams - dawn/dusk dreams. They're dreams that emerge right as you wake up and creep in on you as you start to go to sleep. There are other dreams that happen while you're fully asleep, but they're hard to recall and pin down. Crepuscular dreams - those moments between being asleep and being awake - are the maddest. The closest parallel we all know, even if we can't remember our dreams, is when we get drunk or stoned. And maybe that's why we get drunk and stoned -to recapture that magical half-world. It can be a nightmare or it can be magical. And there's no one, even people who are really boring and dull, who doesn't have those moments where the most amazing, fantastical thoughts go through their head. We all have them - it's just a question of harnessing them, which is one of the jobs an artist takes on.

Have you always dreamt so vividly or have you used special techniques to enhance the experience ?

I absolutely have. I've always been involved in listening to music and looking at paintings and I realized fairly early on that what made art so extraordinary was that it took me back into the world of dreams. That's what I liked about art long before I ever made my own.

What kind of paintings do you like to look at?

Well, basically those from the first hall of the 20th century in Europe when people got together around Paris. Not necessarily just French painters - although I love Matisse and Bonnard. But also the ones who arrived in France, like Chagall from Russia or Picasso from Spain. That whole period is superb, right up to the American abstract expressionists in the middle of the century like Jackson Pollock. Those paintings are still my reference points, even more than anything that has happened since in any other artform.

In the '80s, you became deeply involved with the communist cause and your art took on a more political slant. How did that happen?

When things are on my mind, that's what comes out. In the '80s, for example, I was deeply troubled by the nasty end of the cold war. It wasn't that I was trying to be political or that I lived in fear of atomic bombs, it's just that the times were so disturbing they got deep inside. It was an intellectual horror at the banalization of ideas by our Prime Minister at the time, with her moronic cliches and the fact that she was going down so well in the world. It seemed nightmarish to me. I have some pride in English people and I was happier when we were represented in the world's eye by John Lennon, quite frankly!

Have you left that state now?

No, I would say that state has left me. We now have governments that have mastered the art of not representing anything in particular. It's turned into a kind of ideological soup. They don't say anything that could offend anyone. Intellectually, I still feel a certain distance but how can you fight soup? I mean there's nothing there - it's all too cloudy and nebulous. It's impossible to tell what you're up against. So to that extent, my revulsion seems kind of diffused. All I can do is stick to what I know is right and defend it at such moments when it's clear to me. And, God help me, keep quiet when I don't know what I'm talking about.

Don't you think that just making art is a political statement? Don't you think that now more than ever, people are looking for things that are imaginative?

Ugh, I have no idea what people are looking for. I'm certainly looking for the imaginative but I'm not sure what use it is. There's a danger in thinking that great works of art and imagination can really profoundly alter *anything* for the better. For example, my father was a very idealistic man, a Christian socialist of a very English type. He believed what he was fighting for - he was a soldier in WWII - and he really loved classical music. But the people who had created the most majestic classical music in the world at that time were from Germany and Austria and were themselves the seedbed of the most cruel and heartless phenomenon the world has ever known: Nazism and Fascism. It left my father totally confused... and me, too.

I don't know what people want or what they're gonna do with it, and that's the truth. All I know is that an artist should always try to be authentic and be true to himself and hope that that's good enough. If that doesn't work, then there are forces at work too powerful for anyone - let alone me - to know what to do about. It's not a soundbite, I'm sorry. After years of thinking about it, it's gotten harder and harder to work those things out.

One of the things that makes Shleep sound so unusual is the way you extend the melody lines over many bars of the music. Do you sing along with the riffs as you're creating them?

Yeah. I was talking about my dad - he was a big influence on me in terms of music. He got me interested in classical music. I remember when he played me my first LP, a piece called "Antarctica" by an English composer named Vaughn Williams. It went on and on - I had never heard anything quite like it. I was very impressed because up until then I had only heard 78s and just the very existence of LPs meant that ideas could flow like oceans, not just go round and round and disappear down the plug-hole like water in a sink.

As much as I love pop music, which I absolutely do, it seems to me that the length of the early 78s still govern pop. Everything is forced into a two or three minute soundbite song, and I've always felt constricted by those restraints. I love pop, and God bless the people who do it well, but it gives me claustrophobia. I like the idea of things flowing and twisting and turning and going where they will.



It's funny how mechanical considerations have often determined artistic standards in music.

That's right - the three minute single is a result of technical considerations. It's very useful in a way. On those old jazz records they kept those solos short and sweet and didn't ramble on too much. It was a good discipline. But in the end, there's just so much more to be done than that.

Sure - those same players were really cutting it up live.

That's why it's so wonderful to hear live concerts by people like Charlie Parker, extending chorus alter chorus, unravelling the whole song. And we would never have known this if

we'd only heard 78s.

Yep, live is where it's at. What about you, do you still perform out?

No, I figured if Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly can get away with not doing any live gigs, so can I.

That's not the same thing at all, Robert!

I suppose it's not. Playing live is difficult because of the way I make my records. I put all the layers on myself in the studio. It would be hard to re-create that live. Also, I've found that I've got stage fright. I've lost my nerve. Being in a wheelchair has sort of removed me from access to the world of getting on and off airplanes and cars and buses. The everyday world of the touring musician seemed to recede into the distance after a year or two of being in a wheelchair. I get invited to do gigs, but if I said yes to one, they'd be offended if I turned down other ones. Plus, when I'm singing a song my technique is very often shit and it takes me four goes to get it in tune whereas live, the first go is all you get. I'm not Aretha Franklin, I can't hit it on the note every time! I'm much more competent as a drummer than I am as a singer.

But you used to sing and play drums at the same time...

Yeah, but the fewer takes anybody has of that period, the better, as far as I'm concerned.

Would you ever have imagined as a child creating music as you are creating now?

No, I assumed that music was completely outside my reach. I was interested in painting and Dadaist art at the time. I had no idea what I was going to do when I got older. I imagined I would be a comic or a comedy writer because I've always enjoyed word games. It would never have never occurred to me that I would be a musician or a singer, it just sort of happened in the '60s. I was crap at school and I couldn't handle any of the careers I was being trained for. So, like a lot of people of my generation, I went into something where you need no qualifications whatsoever — rock music.

It's interesting that you bring up Dada and comedy. My friend Peter has always said that while Dada destroyed modern art, it was a boon for comics.

Absolutely! Comedy is such an underestimated art-form. The ability to be funny is as great as the ability to play violin. The best comedians are as good as the best artists in any other idiom. Maybe it's because of my early introduction to Dada that I feel so confident in saying that.

A lot of your lyrics -and even your melodic ideas - tend to be whimsical and comedic. But I'm impressed by the deeper sense of feeling that's also there. And I think that's what was so great about the Dadaists, too. A lot of people who came along after them in the artworld missed the humanity of it.

Well, I usually have to have two reasons for doing something. I do things that are amusing to me because I try to avoid boring myself. That's number one. But secondly, "interesting to me" isn't enough because I know from having a record collection that albums that are just novel or interesting only get played while they're new and then, after I get used to them, I don't want to play them anymore because I've gotten the point. I've found what I really like about the music and art that I love the most is that even when I know it by heart, I still want to hear it again. And that seems to me to be a whole other level beyond being surprising or witty. So I try to think about records I like and what keeps me going back to them twenty or thirty years later. It's very hard to me to say what that is, it's beyond words really. When I really think about things like that, I'm in the land of music.

Ah, but that's the great thing about music, which is a totally abstract artform. Like with classical music, the person off the street can appreciate it for the pretty melodies but there are far deeper complexities to ponder, too.

Absolutely right. Words fail me when I try to describe how important music is to me. I have fanciful ideas about that. Perhaps because our animal ancestors were originally underseas animals, we need the viscous connection that music provides - we want to re-create a swimming environment now that we're on dry land. Music connects us ear to mouth, mouth to ear in an invisible physical link through the air. We all know about that. When a baby is born the first thing it does is cry to its mother. Only when it gets a tit in its mouth does it shut up. The noise is for a *reason*. There's something pretty serious going on the

whole business of making a noise at all. Our lives have depended on it since the moment we were born.

Sean Carney

Robert Watt's new album, Shleep, is available from Thirsty Ear (274 Madison Ave. #804, NYC 10016).

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Who is ROBERT and WYATT matters - Pulse! N° 170 - May 1998

WHO IS ROBERT AND WYATT MATTERS



AVANT-POP'S ELDER STATESMAN ON HEGEMONY, HENDRIX AND HEAPS OF SHEEP

BY BILL FORMAN
PHOTOGRAPH BY GUIDO HARARI

Given free will, Robert Wyatt would prefer to live his life as part of a dance rather than as if there were some great weight on his shoulders. "Most people think they ought to stop being trivial and get serious, but I'm trying to get light from heavy," says Wyatt in the wake of *Shleep* (Thirsty Bar), the Soft Machine founder's most congenial and collaborative album in many years, featuring contributions from Brian Eno, Paul Weller and other friends, old and new. "When you let it, life can be so heavy, gravity becomes too great, and you can hardly function. And I think the thing is to somehow become some kind of gas and float above it."

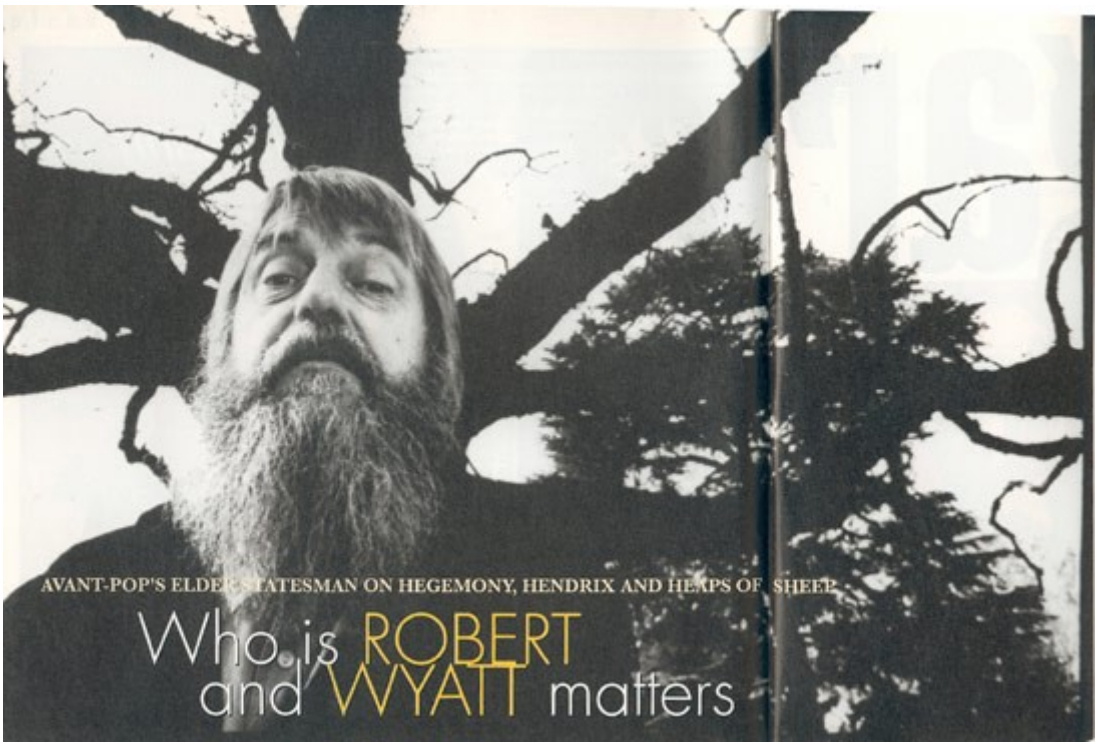
Wyatt has surely had his run-ins with gravity: Both his touring and drumming career came to an abrupt end in 1973, when a fall from a third-story window left Wyatt paralyzed from the waist down. By that point, he had already quit his band Soft Machine and started another called Matching Mole (pidgin French for Soft Machine). Forced to abandon the custom Maplewood kit that Jimi Hendrix Experience drummer Mitch Mitchell had given him after Hendrix and the Softs toured America together, Wyatt switched to keyboards and set about reconstructing himself as a solo artist.
Wyatt's voice, a plaintive countertenor he once likened to "Jimmy Sommerville on valium," has always been unconventional yet oddly accessible. His sad choirboy vocals float serenely through an ambient soundscape of understated keyboard and percussion, colored by the subdued improvisations of his avant-jazz friends. If the most blatant jazz-rock fusion acts combined an excess of technique with a paucity of ideas, Wyatt's approach was more fission, a contemplative yet compelling mix of free jazz, naive pop and English eccentricity.

A year after the accident, Wyatt recorded an altogether unlikely cover of the Neil Diamond-penned Monkees single "I'm a Believer," which became a hit and landed him on the BBC's *Top of the Pops*. Accompanied that evening by Pink Floyd's Nick Mason, Henry Cow's Fred Frith and future Police-man Andy Summers, Wyatt lipsynched his way through clenched teeth after a BBC producer insisted that his wheelchair was unsuitable for prime-time televiewing.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, Wyatt's music grew simpler, more direct, and-with the 1975 death of his friend Mongezi Feza - intensely political. "When Mongezi died, I suddenly

realized that apartheid was killing my closest friends, and that's when politics right across the world becomes just as personal as anything can be," says Wyatt of the exiled South African trumpeter featured on Wyatt's *Rock Bottom* and *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard* (two of the six Wyatt albums Thirsty Ear plans to reissue this year). "You can be theoretically anti-racist or anti-apartheid and say, "I don't think people should be allowed to have a kind of internaI slave population servicing their businesses" - which is what South Africa was, a kind of internaI colonization - and you can know that abstractly. But when you actually have South Africans who come here just so they can play music together and when, in their early thirties, they start dying because you find out they've been living on no food and too much gin from the gin palaces since they were about 9 years old, and even after coming to England, they would be so terrified every time they saw a policeman that they would nearly have a heart attack. Mongezi Feza died a quite unnecessary death of double pneumonia whilst he was in a psychiatric hospital, and he was really only in a psychiatric hospital because he just couldn't handle whether he was allowed to deal with white people or not. He was so confused about what the relationship now was. So then he died. I had actually planned to make a lot of records with him. I had thought I' d found my ideal partner."

Wyatt's songwriting reached its political apex with 1985's *Old Rottenhat*, a starkly beautiful album whose musings on the anti-imperialist theories of Noam Chomsky and the troubles in East Timor earned a mixed critical response. "WeIl, I'm really glad you heard [the album' s minimalist aesthetic] as clarity, because some people heard it as not much going on, which is missing what was going on, I think," says Wyatt. "I mean, there are some people who just don't like my politics, and I understand that, but sometimes they sidestep that by saying they don't like my style. I don't mind. You can't tell people what to listen to. You have to be grateful if they listen to anything you do, really."



It was also during the mid-'80s that Wyatt released a series of 7-inch cover singles on Rough Trade, including the Billie Holiday classic "Strange Fruit," an anthemic remake of Chic' s " At Last I Am Free," and the anti-war ballad "Shipbuilding," which Elvis Costello wrote for Wyatt so that he could hear it sung by the saddest voice in the world. "I think part of the job of a-can I use the word artist? - is not just to make objects, but to find the beauty in objects that already exist and to represent it. It's not that something *has* to be new or indeed perhaps that anything ever *can* be new, but somehow you must *make* it new. And that's really what I wanted to do with those songs."

As a vocal interpreter, Wyatt prefers the understated style of, say, Chet Baker over the melismatic maneuvers that have become de rigueur for contemporary jazz vocalists. "I've listened to singers who are kind of instrumentalists in denial," laughs Wyatt without naming names. "If they really think the voice is just an instrument, they're wrong. The

fact is if somebody is going 'Oooda-da-deeda-dee-da,' you *know* it's a person doing it and there's *no way* it's like listening to a trumpet or a saxophone. We all tend to listen to voices quite differently, which perhaps goes back to childhood when we listened out for our mother's voice. So the human voice carries with it something that no other instrument does, and you just have to remember that when you're singing."

Wyatt says he someday hopes to record an album's worth of Gershwin-era covers: "You know, the Nazis' definition of degenerate music was mournful Jewish tunes sung by Negroes to sexual rhythms, or something like that. Now if I were an American, that's something I'd be really proud of. So I really would like to do some more of those mournful Jewish melodies. But if I'm getting ideas for my own tunes, they take precedence. Not because I think they're more important, but because if I don't do those, nobody else will."

Which brings us back to the long overdue *Shleep*, Wyatt's first full album in seven years. This time out, politics seems to have taken a backseat to semiotics, with Wyatt's crafty wordplay evoking the more enigmatic lyrical terrain of his early work. "I'm not by nature into either confessional personal songs, particularly, or polemics in songs, particularly ," says Wyatt. "Even when I was writing a lot of songs with overt political references, an awful lot of things I was thinking about didn't get into the songs. Songs aren't just sentences set to music. They have to come through [in] that hallucinatory form. They come from somewhere else.

"Actually, a number of *Shleep*'s songs came from Wyatt's wife Alfrede Benge, whose poetry he is forever finding around their old wooden dacha deep in the English countryside. Thus the title cut, recorded over Alfie's mild objections, with its image of an insomniac's sheep-counting gone wrong:

Each sheep, where it landed
refusing to exit, remained.
(Creating a vast writhing
heap growing fast on the left).

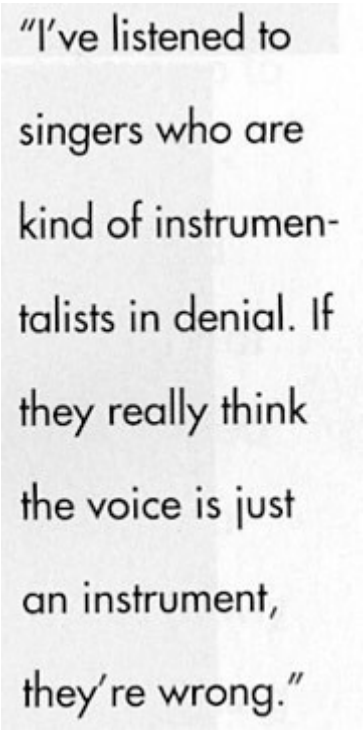
"I couldn 't waste that, could I?" laughs Wyatt. "She thought it was a bit trivial, but it just made me laugh, and it made Brian Eno laugh, too. So we did it anyway. You know, she writes these things and then I find them and then that's what happens. When you're in the same house with somebody, you can't hide everything."

Wyatt has paid tribute to his wife on past recordings, most notably on the surreal " Alifib" and poignant "P.L.A. (Poor Little Alfie)." On *Shleep*, that tradition continues with "The Duchess," a loopy number in which Wyatt vows:

"My wife is old and young,
so sweet with her poison
tongue,
on her evenings off she
blackmails toffs, but her
secret's safe with me."

"We actually wrote 'The Duchess' together, but I got writing credit because she didn't want to be associated with such silliness," he says of his partner, who might have known better after so many years. "That's right," says Wyatt with a laugh, "it' s a bit late now, isn 't it?"

Alfie isn 't the only old friend who turns up on *Shleep*. Roxy Music vets Eno and Phil Manzanera (who lent Wyatt the use of his Gallery Studio) also help shape the sound, as does jazzman Evan Parker and trombonist Annie Whitehead. Citing the "courage of old age," Wyatt even dusted off the trumpet he hasn 't played on record since Soft Machine days. "My excuse is this," says Wyatt, sounding only slightly apologetic. "The particular people who make the exact sound I want to hear on trumpet - Mongezi Feza, Don Cherry, Miles Davis and Chet Baker - have now all died. I really love the great jazz trumpet tradition, you know, people like Clark Terry and Maynard Ferguson and the Marsalis School and now Roy Hargrove, but I'm not trying to do any of that. I'm just trying to extend the range of the song when I'm playing."



With one foot in the folksong tradition, Wyatt has always been more tolerant of simplicity than his jazz friends: "Given that I'd been brought up on the sort of harmonic preoccupations of Bartok and Thelonious Monk, how could I possibly be interested in people who use basic chords and rhythms? And the point is that there is something else going on which transcends the obvious analysis of whether or not this is a complicated or interesting chord. There's something way beyond that with a good singer, someone like Bob Dylan, who just has one of those magic voices."

Wyatt, in fact, pays tribute to Sir Bob on the "Subterranean Homesick Blues" - inspired "Blues in Bob Minor," which culminates, by the way, in a caution not to let the "gringos grind you down." ("So anybody who says there's no politics on this, just point them to that last line," Wyatt says with a laugh.) It's also one of the tracks that features Paul Weller, who was recording down the hall and volunteered his guitar services, just as Jimi Hendrix once stopped by a Wyatt session decades ago and asked if he could try adding a bassline ("You wouldn 't have to use it," whispered Hendrix) . "Funny enough, Paul Weller is the first person I've met who had that same intensity of presence when you're in the room with him, but is equally gentlemanly and modest about what he can do. Hendrix was always worried that his singing wasn't good enough, or his guitar solos were too long or he couldn't write songs as interesting as Bob Dylan. ln that sense, he was almost the opposite of most other guitar legends that l've met, who were very full of themselves indeed. Hendrix was just a considerate person, really; can you imagine that in the '60s!?"

Shleep also boasts a kind of reunion with former Soft Machine mate Hugh Hopper, who provided the melody for "Was a Friend." "He occasionally writes a song that's too simple for the jazz treatments he'll use for his own groups, so he'll send them to me and ask if I would like to use them," says Wyatt. "But we haven't actually met for a long time." Still, Wyatt's lyrics for "Was a Friend" convey a sense of bittersweet reconciliation, a sentiment that resonates throughout much of the new album:

> *"Old wounds are healing.*
> *Faded scars are painless -*
> *just an itch.*
> *We are forgiven. It's been a*
> *long time."*

"There are some songs that you couldn 't even write in your twenties, because you don't know that yet, and I think this is probably one of them," says Wyatt. "That's one of the advantages of surviving, you get time to find these things out."

ROBERT WYATT'S DESERT ISLAND DISCS

1. *Dybbuk*—Moni Ovadia Theatreorchestra (Italian import, Radio Popolare/Sensible Records).
2. *Enrique Morente*—Enrique Morente (Spanish import).
3. *Chet Baker With Strings*—Chet Baker (Legacy).
4. *Lush Life*—Linda Ronstadt (Elektra).
5. "Embraceable You"—Jimmy Scott (song from *All the Way* CD, Sire).
6. *Blonde on Blonde*—Bob Dylan (Columbia).
7. *Ray Charles and Betty Carter*—Ray Charles/Betty Carter (DCC).
8. *Alfie*—Sonny Rollins (Impulse!/GRP).
9. *Man From Two Worlds*—Chico Hamilton (Impulse!/GRP).
10. *Africa/Brass*—John Coltrane (Impulse!/GRP).

Previous article

Next article

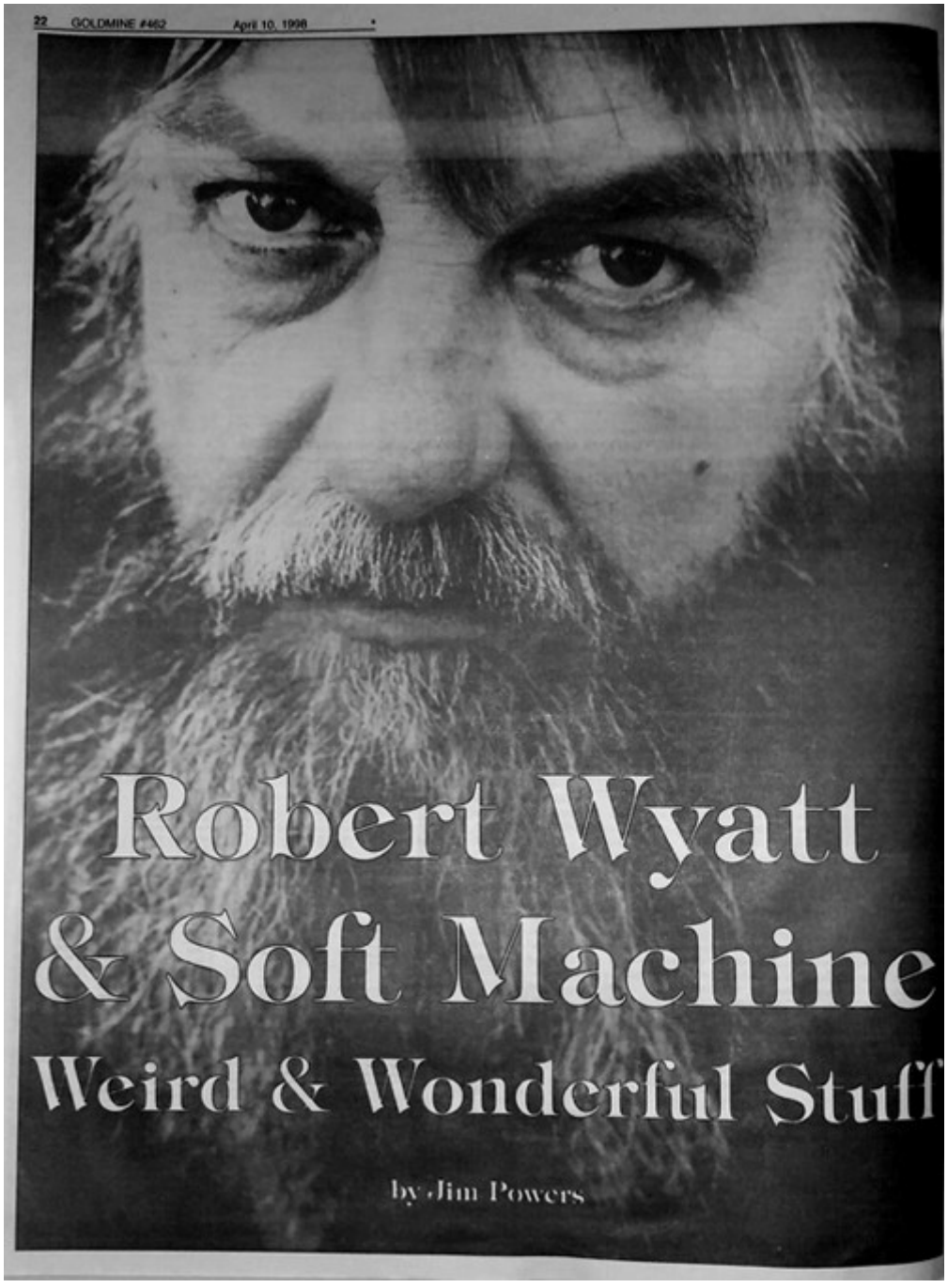
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt & Soft Machine- Weird & Wonderfull Stuff - Goldmine - Issue 462 - April 10, 1998



When in April the sweet showers fall and pierce/The drought of March to the root and all/The veins are bathed in liquor on such power/As brings about the engendering of the flower.

The first four lines of the prologue of Geoffrey Chaucer's classic *The Canterbury Tales*, a pilgrimage of many disparate characters, is symbolic of what has become known as the "Canterbury Scene" of English rock, a loose term describing certain underground rock artists who began playing together there as a small local band the Wilde Flowers in the early sixties. During the mid sixties several Flowers splintered off to become the Soft Machine. The remaining Wilde Flowers members re-emerged as Caravan. As the decades progressed, musicians shuffled in and out of both bands, forming new bands or guesting on each others' solo albums, to the point where today, a complex family tree can be (has been) drawn of the whole situation. Gong, Hatfield and the North, Matching Mole, and Curved Air are but a few of these groups.



While none of the Canterbury artists tore up the charts on either side of the Atlantic, a few hit records have been made. More importantly, these artists have attracted an extremely loyal cult following throughout the world, supported by a number of fanzines, Internet web pages, and progressive independent record labels. This article presents the history of the quintessential Canterbury group, the Soft Machine, the band that first brought Canterbury international prominence and continues to be most frequently associated with the "Canterbury Scene."

Vocalist and drummer Robert Wyatt Ellidge was born on January 28, 1945, in Bristol, England. He grew up in West Dulwich, London, until his father George Ellidge contracted multiple sclerosis, at which point the family moved to Lydden, ten miles south of Canterbury. At an early age, he inherited a free-thinking mind from both his parents, something that has shaped his career to the present. In *Wrong Movements: A Robert Wyatt History*, Wyatt explains, "A characteristic which I've inherited from my mother and father is ... iconoclasm. But if you have this consensus, that we are an iconoclastic home, how does a child react to that with their parents? For example, my mother comes from a generation that rejected material wealth and so on, in favour of culture with a capital C. My iconoclasm seems to have manifested itself in even rejecting the aristocracy of high culture. What this means is that I don't believe in Beethoven, and this really shocks people, although it even shocks my mother, but nevertheless I've inherited the desire to say that, I think, from my mother. That's the irony."

Wyatt's childhood home was filled with music. His father played classics by Shostakovich, Hindemith. and Bartok on the piano, his mother played Monteverdi, and his brother Mark introduced him to jazz artists from Duke Ellington to Cecil Taylor. Don Ellis with Jaki Byard to Charles Mingus. Wyatt attended the Simon Langton Grammar School For Boys; among his schoolmates were the Hopper brothers, Hugh and Brian, Mike Ratledge, and the Sinclair cousins, Richard and David, all future members of the Wilde Flowers.

During this early period, Mike Ratledge and the elder Hopper, Brian, performed music, wrote poetry, and experimented with avant-garde photography. Brian described an occasion in Tales of Canterbury: Brian's Tale where they heard a piece of music on the radio in tune with their sensibilities, "I remember one time we both became very excited over a half-heard jazz piece on a foreign radio station, with reception so bad that it kept fading in and out and other stations breaking in. However, what we could hear sounded so much in tune with what was in our own heads and at the same time heart-stirring. It turned out to be Eric Dolphy's "245" - a wonderfully evocative and soaring theme.

Meanwhile, Hugh Hopper and Wyatt, along with other school friends, were spending their time at Wellington House, Wyatt's parents' mansion, reading poetry and listening to Cecil Taylor, Charles Mingus, and Stockhausen. The Wyatts took boarders; the most significant

was Australian Daevid Allen. Despite being six years older, Daevid got along well with Wyatt through a mutual love of jazz and similar iconoclastic spirits.

"He used to get stoned, so he was my introduction to all that," recalled Wyatt in a 1992 *Ptolemaic Terrascope* interview. He also had a dog which he used to take for walks with him - it was actually a tin can on the end of a bit of string which he would trail some yards behind him. To an impressionable lad of my age, that was pretty far out!"

Allen was forced to leave Wellington when, at the end of high school, Wyatt attempted suicide with sleeping pills. Unable to pass his A-levels to go on to the university and feeling that he lost his childlike vision, he argued with Allen about suicide. Allen was unable to counter young Wyatt's arguments; although Wyatt's attempt failed, enough friends witnessed the argument to convince Wyatt not to kill himself to cause Allen to be blamed for the attempt, and therefore become unwelcome at Wellington House. The poignant "Song For Robert" from Daevid Allen & Kramer's 1992 album *Who's Afraid* is about this series of events. Allen headed to London, Wyatt to visit family friend and poet Robert Graves in Majorca before moving to London to work with Allen.

Early in 1963, Mike Ratledge was attending Oxford and Brian Hopper, was discovering rock and roll and rhythm and blues. In London, Allen formed a trio playing detuned guitar with Wyatt drumming and Hugh Hopper playing bass, occasionally augmented by Ratledge on piano. Their three month residency at the Establishment Club lasted a day and a half, so they moved on to the Marquee Club as part of Mike Horowitz's Live New Departures series. *The Daevid Allen Trio Live 1963*, recorded on June 3 and released in 1993 on Voiceprint is the first recording by any of the future Canterbury legends; it is anything but a polished performance, though Allen's between-song banter is very witty. Parts of songs from this performance would resurface later, such as "Ya Sunne Wot" which was adapted to become "Tropical Fish Selene" on Gong's 1971 album *Camembert Electrique*. The Trio soon dissolved for lack of work; Daevid went to Paris, Robert and Hugh back to Canterbury.

Around this time, a longhaired dropout named Kevin Ayers was the newest addition to the circle of friends convening at Wellington. Born in Herne Bay, Kent, Ayers was raised in Malaya where his father was a district officer. Ayers left home as a teenager, and, lacking a family, fell in with Wyatt and company. They were in the process of forming a band, and while it wasn't Ayer's first ambition to become a musician, he enjoyed the company of the Wellington regulars enough to learn some guitar chords and sing a few numbers. The band named itself "The Wild Flowers" after that volume of the Observers Pocket Book series; Ayers added the "e" to make them Wilde in tribute to Oscar Wilde. Guitarist Richard Sinclair also joined the fold, as his father was a friend of Hugh's father. The group began playing around, alternating originals with covers of popular songs to please the punters.

"I don't remember exactly what I was listening to during the Wilde Flowers period, but all the weird and wonderful stuff I heard at Robert's home: blues, bossa nova, classical, and the most modern jazz was obviously relevant to any music I subsequently produced," Ayers said of his musical influences.

"Hugh Hopper's influences were more rock-oriented. As far as I remember, the main influences on me during the Wilde Flowers in 1965 and 1966 were bands like the Kinks, Yardbirds, Zombies, Small Faces, Hollies, Beatles, of course, and particularly, the Birds. Not the U.S. Byrds - this was the English band that had Ron Wood on guitar before he went on to join the Faces and later the Stones. The Birds were tremendous! Loud, lots of chunky chord parts on the guitars and a demon drummer called Pete McDaniels. There is an EP worth searching for called These Birds Are Dangerous."

The Wilde Flowers did not record commercially, however, they did record lots of demos. In 1994, Voiceprint released a self-titled 22-track CD of recordings from 1965 to 1969. Discs of this nature tend to be of strictly archival value; this one is an exception. The Wilde Flowers is essential listening for enthusiasts of 60s garage bands and beat groups; most of these songs would sound perfect on an Archive International Productions compilation.

There are few cover songs on The Wilde Flowers, and the songwriting is very articulate, notably Hugh Hopper's Canterbury standard "Memories".

"In the early days we were like kids with a new toy whenever one of us wrote something," Ayers said of the band members' songwriting process. "It was a family thing, we sought each other's approval and acceptance - well, I did anyway! The arrangements were usually group arrangements. For me writing an acceptable song was initially a quest for approval from my friends. Later it extended to the rest of the world."

Nineteen sixty-six was a year of turnaround of Wilde Flowers members, included the brief

addition of vocalist Graham Flight from another local band. Upon his departure, Richard Coughlin, drummer for a local dance hand joined, enabling Wyatt to concentrate on singing. Ever the drifter, Ayers could have been in or out of the Flowers at any given time. The Wilde Flowers played local clubs like the Beehive, and recorded demos frequently.

On Easter weekend in 1966, Ayers was in Majorca with Daevid Allen. Wes Brunson, a wealthy nightclub owner from Texas was among the partygoers there; not of sound mind by several accounts, voices in his head convinced Wes to give his money to people who would broadcast the New Age.

"Wes Brunson materialized in Deya, Majorca when I was staying there with Daevid Allen," Ayers recalls. "We had discussed the idea of forming a group and it might have remained a possibility had Daevid not successfully convinced Wcs that we were important spokesmen for the things that matter: cosmic vibes, universal mind etc. He offered to finance the group and we were very pleased to accept his helping hand. Daevid immortalized Brunson in song ["Stoned Innocent Frankenstein"] on his 1971 solo album Banana Moon.

Allen and Ayers returned to Canterbury to begin rehearsals for their new group, tentatively named Mister Head. Wyatt's departure from the increasingly commercial-sounding Wilde Flowers and the return of Michael Ratledge on keyboards cemented Allen's new band's lineup: guitarist Allen, vocalist and drummer Robert Wyatt, bassist and vocalist Kevin Ayers, and keyboardist Mike Ratledge. The name "Soft Machine," after the William S. Burroughs novel, was suggested, and the author gave his consent. Ratledge equipped his Vox Continental organ with a fuzzbox to make it sound more aggressive, and Ayers acquired a songwriting contract with the Animals' Anim Publishing, which got the band signed to Animals bassist Chas Chandler's management company. The band moved into Wyatt's mother's house and began rehearsing.

Living in the same neighborhood as the Soft Machine was Bill MacCormick, future Quiet Sun bassist who would collaborate with Robert in the future. MacCormick visited the Softs frequently.

"They transformed the way I listened to music," he recalled. "Quiet Sun says it all really. But hanging out with them, Robert in particular, was also crucial. Every time I went 'round to his mum's house on the way home from school there was something new to hear. It might have been John Coltrane or Miles Davis or Pharoah Sanders. Equally though, Robert told us about Frank Zappa and the Mothers, Spirit, and the first Chicago album (it's odd to think of that now)."

Among the Soft Machine's first gigs was a week's residency at the Star Club in Hamburg. The Soft Machine also played many of the legendary "happenings" like the All-Night Rave at the Roundhouse in London and the Spontaneous Underground at the Marquee. At this time, it wasn't uncommon for the band to have a motorcycle on stage with a microphone on the cylinder head!

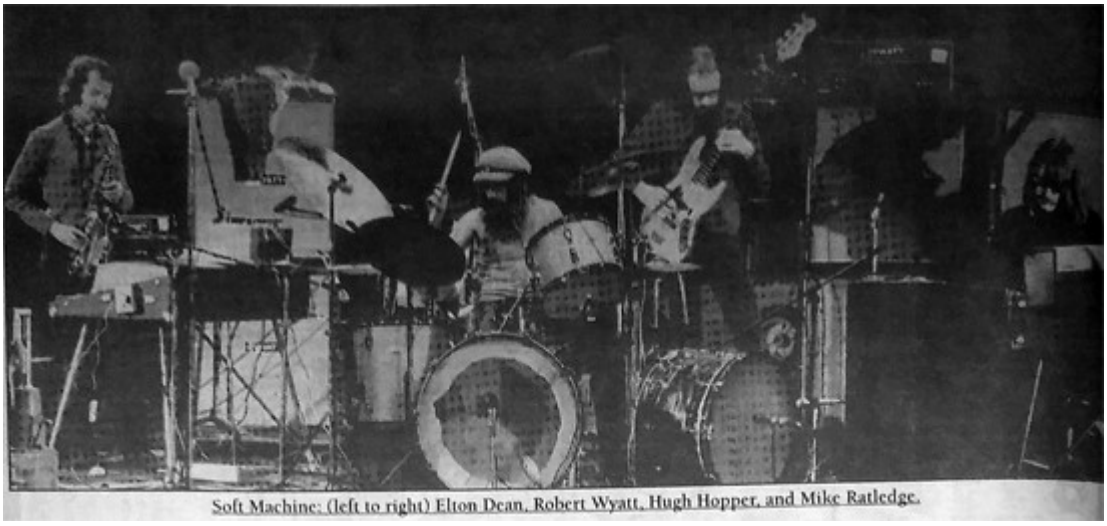
"Those were big events, where every band that was anybody at all performed," MacCormick recalls. "When I saw them a lot, they attracted a hard core of support that grew steadily, so they went from small clubs like the Country Club in Hampstead - a tiny place, you almost sat on the stage, brilliant atmosphere - to the Roundhouse and Lyceum, then concert halls. The audience was full of headbangers, except we gave ourselves headaches thrashing around in 9/8 or 11/4 time!"

Early in 1967, the Soft Machine recorded tracks for its first single, "Fred the Fish"b/w "Feelin' Reelin' Squealin'." Management rejected the A-side in favor of the more commercial "Love Makes Sweet Music." The ubiquitous Kim Fowley produced the B-side. The single is one of the Softs' best releases; it reflects the Wilde Flowers' pop smarts and year's of performing, yet is just different enough to set it apart from other records of the era. Unsurprisingly, on the B-side, Kim Fowley encourages the band to pull out all the "bizarre" stops. Jimi Hendrix is rumored to have participated on this session, but those rumors have since been refuted by both Daevid and Kevin. Rumors that members of the Soft Machine participated in recording sessions by the Fowley associates The Belfast Gypsies are also not true.

Released by Polydor in England, "Love Makes Sweet Music" failed to chart nationally, though it reached #28 on the Radio London Fast Forty. Psychedelia hadn't caught on outside of London, so the band came up with a device to counter the sometimes hostile audience response. Ratledge and Wyatt would improvise links between songs to avoid the silence of confused spectators. Sometimes the audience wasn't the only indifferent party; management would occasionally forget the Soft Machine's paychecks.

Throughout l967, the Softs along with their projectionist Mark Boyle, had a residency at the Speakeasy Club in London, and played regularly at the conical metal Roundhouse. They frequently shared the bill with Pink Floyd. Allen, watching Syd Barrett playing eerie slide guitar, was inspired to create his own "glissando guitar" technique, which he still utilizes. Playing underground venues gave the Soft Machine hip credibility.

"We felt like suburban fakes dressed up on Saturday and visiting the city, I never dared take LSD... Just because we played long solos people assumed we were stoned, which was great for our credibility. I didn't know much about it," Wyatt reflected in *Wrong Movements*.



Soft Machine: (left to right) Elton Dean, Robert Wyatt, Hugh Hopper, and Mike Ratledge.

Spring, 1967 the Soft Machine recorded demos at De Lane Lea Studios in London with Yardbirds associate Georgio Gomelsky producing. Manager Mike Jeffries refused to pay the studio costs, so Gomelsky kept the tapes; he released them on his BYG label in 1971 as *Rock Generation Volumes 7 & 8*, and they have been repackaged extensively since. Two of those songs, "She's Gone" and "I Should've Known" were re-recorded in June with Witchseason producer Joe Boyd (soon to launch the Fairport Convention and other folk-rock artists) for a proposed second single. Polydor dropped the band, however, and the tracks were left to languish until the 1977 compilation Triple Echo.

"The Soft Machine reached the same audience as Pink Floyd, in the same way, with songs as a basis for extended improvisation," Boyd recalls of the Soft Machine. "Daevid Allen was the leader as I saw it, but they were quite democratic. I didn't see them as hitmakers. but some songs were very good - "She's Gone' for example."

On July 1, the band went to St. Tropez in the south of France to play a variety of parties and happenings, including the Discotheque Interplay, the Festival of Free Theatre opening of the Picasso play "Desire Caught By the Tail," the Town Square of Si. Tropez Happening, and the Voom Voom Club, where the band members played in the nude above a large swimming pool, These events would bring the Soft Machine as well as later Canterbury bands a loyal following throughout the Continent. Wyatt recalls the time fondly, and reflects upon the difference between French and English audiences.

"There is just a great tradition in France of listening to music and dealing with the arts that is completely conducive to the creation of and the appreciation of, the sort of avant garde set-ups that we dealt in... It's quite different from [Britain], there's no sense of having to deal with the hit parade.,. You could really stretch out in front of a French audience, [but] you almost had to apologize for it in England."

Returning to England in August, Allen was refused re-entry due to visa problems. Relations between he and the rest of the band were becoming strained, so this just made the break official. The Soft Machine continued as a trio; Allen, with wife Gilli Smyth stayed in Paris to form Gong, the first Soft Machine offshoot. Within a few years, Allen would create a whimsical world of radio gnomes riding flying teapots between the Planet Gong and Earth, dispensing peaceful vibrations through music. Gong's music is an amalgamation of John Coltrane influenced hard hop, rock, and borrowings from various ethnic musics. Essential works include *Camembert Electrique* (1971), *Angel's Egg* (1973), *Live At Sheffield 1974*, and *PreModernist Wireless: The Peel Sessions*. Gong is still going strong with its latest disc *Shapeshifter*.

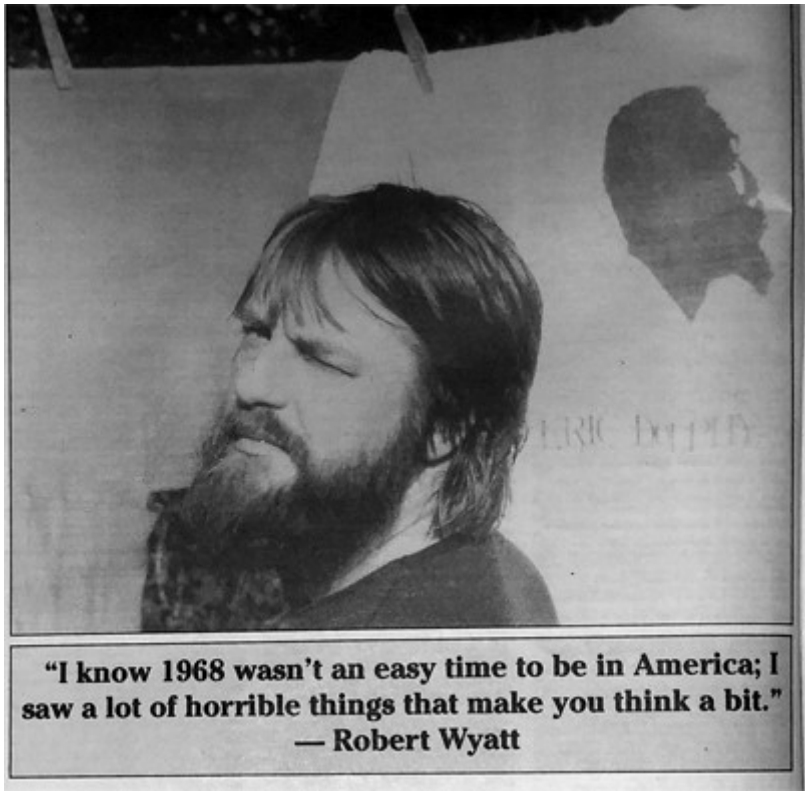
Meanwhile, the French Pataphysical Society named the Softs its official orchestra. Kevin Ayers explained pataphysics to *Trouser Press* in 1977, as "an extension of Dada and surrealism; basically, completely blowing out any kind of given values at any given time...by exploring all the other possibilities. The banana was a symbol for introducing the element of absurdity into conventionally serious situations...[including] - taking yourself too seriously. It's easy to start throwing bananas into society, but with yourself it's really difficult."

From February to April of 1968, the Soft Machine traveled to America for the first time supporting the Jimi Hendrix Experience. In mid-April, the group recorded its self-titled debut album on ABC-Probe Records; Tom Wilson (producer of the Mothers of Invention and Velvet Underground) is credited as producer, but reportedly was not present for much of the recording sessions. For contractual reasons it wasn't released in Britain for several years. *The Soft Machine* became its sole American chart placing, reaching #160.

The album was a replication of the band's live set, and most of the tracks were first takes with few overdubs. "Hope For Happiness" and "A Certain Kind" were written by the Hopper brothers and date back to the Wilde Flowers days, while other songs like "Why Am I So Short" and "Save Yourself" were reworked from the Rock Generation demos. The keyboard-driven sound resembled a more avant-garde Zombies at this point; the overall ambiance of the first album is futuristic. The only detraction is the clumsy stereo panning added in post-production.

Upon returning to England, the Soft Machine briefly expanded to a quartet with future Police guitarist Andy Summers.

Bill MacCormick reminisces fondly about his friendship with the Soft Machine members in those days, "They were a tremendously open and friendly bunch. When Kevin was still in the band and they had all their equipment in Robert's mum's front room, myself and my brother would stop off and listen and sometimes they'd let us mess around with the stuff. We were always 'round there drinking tea, listening to records, and just hanging out. It was a real blow when they went off to the States on the Hendrix tour. But I remember being around the house with Robert's mum when Julian Glover (Robert's actor brother) arrived clutching a copy of the first album. Everyone rushed indoors to hear it, Amazing!"



"I know 1968 wasn't an easy time to be in America; I saw a lot of horrible things that make you think a bit."
— Robert Wyatt

After a second American tour with Jimi Hendrix, the Soft Machine temporarily disbanded from the strain of touring. Each band member's account elucidates:

"The first tour I was completely drunk with the life. Girls lining up outside the door, free drink everywhere, so I was drunk every night, with enormous quantities of girls at my

disposal" said Ayers, from *Why Are We Sleeping?*, July, 1993.

"By the second tour, I had changed completely. I went on a very strict macrobiotic diet and didn't go out to parties. I became alienated from everything that was going on around me because of the violence and extremity of it. At its worst it was literally plane, hotel, gig, plane, hotel, gig. Mike and I used to go around banging on doors shouting, 'I'm cracking up! I'm cracking up!' Mike would read books while I used to lie on the floor and stare at the ceiling."

"Travel in the States with a pop group is like a luxury purgatory," Ratledge said, from *Wrong Movements*. "You stay in Hiltons, then a Cadillac Fleetwood takes you to the airport first thing in the morning. Another Cadillac Fleetwood meets you, takes you to the hotel. You wash, the Cadillac Fleetwood takes you to the gig and back to the Hilton. You sleep. In the end, it completely destroys your sense of geography. You're manipulated like a piece of baggage. You have no control over the direction your life takes. It's like those experiments where they deprive rats of control over their bodies."

"I know 1968 wasn't an easy time to be in America; I saw a lot of horrible things that make you think a bit," recalled Wyatt in *Ptolemaic Terrascope*, January 1992. "You read articles (in England] sometimes about racism and of course we have a right to talk about it, but unless you've spent some time in the States where the streets smell of racism, you have no idea. I saw the kind of things that a sheltered English lad had never seen, the hostility between the police and any kids with hair... the police would ride through crowds on motorcycles without even waiting for them to clear. I saw them pick up a kid, hold him horizontally and run him into a wall like a battering ram. We were pretty much sheltered as a group going from hotel to hotel, but you could see that life on the streets was sticky."

The Soft Machines break-up ended when ABC-Probe demanded fulfillment of the band's two album contract. Ratledge and Wyatt got back together, but Ayers was nowhere to be found. His logical replacement was roadie, and former Wilde Flowers bassist Hugh Hopper. For *Volume Two*, Wyatt added lyrics to a backlog of material Hugh had written before joining the Softs. If Volume Two wasn't as whimsical as its predecessor, it was more cohesive. The humor is still there, its just drier or more subtle.

A high point of the disc is Wyatt singing "A Concise British Alphabet parts I and II," forward on the former, backward for the latter. Hugh's fat, chunky, distorted bass tones became an integral part of the group's sound. Kevin Ayers' spirit was represented by "As Long As He Lies Perfectly Still," a droll account of the effect touring with Jimi Hendrix had on him.

Ratledge, Wyatt, and Hopper decided to produce *Volume Two* themselves considering their experiences from the first album. Lack of technical knowledge plagued them this time, dulling the impact of the final product. Bill MacCormick commented that "nothing has caught the true feel of the Hopper/Ratledge/Wyatt trio in their pomp. The recording studio took the edge off the sound, particularly the Ratledge solo organ. The nearest I've heard it is the live organ solo on *Third* from their Fairfield Hall gig. Live, it made your ears hurt, but it was great!"

As the second Softs album was released, Ayers was recording his first solo album, *Joy of A Toy*, for Harvest Records. His backing group was, for the most part, the Soft Machine, but it wasn't the dream reunion that it looks like on the record sleeve, as Ayers reveals.

"I did the tracks on my little recorder when I lived in Ibiza. They indeed did their parts later in the studio in London. [But] it wasn't strange at all...we were still good friends."

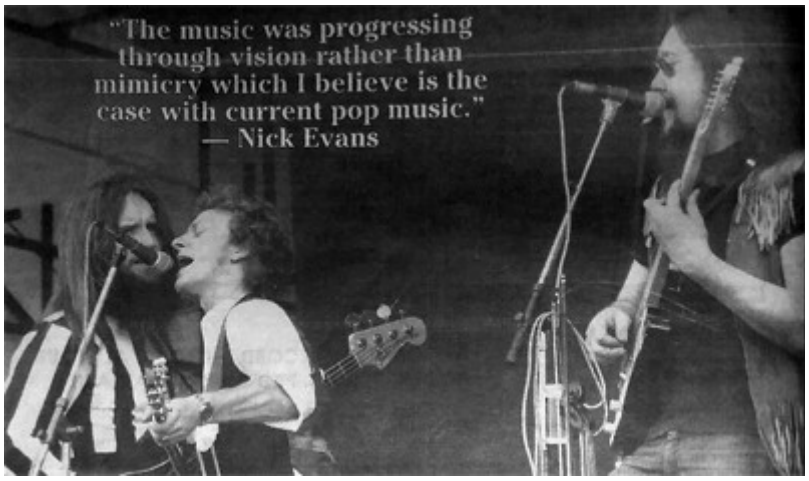
Despite the separation, *Joy of A Toy* is a charming collection of Ayers originals, and one of his best works. Ratledge, Hopper, and Wyatt performed similar post-production recording duties for two tracks on Syd Barretts debut *The Madcap Laughs*.

Meanwhile, back in the Wilde Flowers camp, following Wyatt's departure, a new singer was found in Julian "Pye" Hastings, the brother of one of Kevin Ayers's girlfriends. The Flowers went through a period of playing soul covers until Brian Hopper left for a job in the insurance business (although he would occasionally play with the Soft Machine).

The remaining Wilde Flowers spent a few years woodshedding until re-emerging as Caravan in 1969. While Caravan has a story of its own, it should be noted that its second single "If I Could Do It All Over Again (I'd Do It All Over You)" bears uncanny resemblance to "Lullaby Letter" and "We Did It Again" from The Soft Machine. It also features a brilliant organ solo by David Sinclair, who would later collaborate with Robert Wyatt. Canterbury Tales, released in 1994 by Polygram Chronicles, is an excellent Caravan primer.

The Soft Machine continued touring to promote Volume Two. Once its ABC-Probe contract expired, the band signed with CBS. In light of the band's feelings following the American Hendrix tours, it seemed a strange decision.

"The band built up a momentum after doing some gigs to promote the second album," Hopper explained. "A management machine took over and it was a pleasant enough life most of the time. Robert in particular was very ambitious to make the band successful."



In 1969, between *Volume Two* and *Third*, the Soft Machine's music began to radically change character. Simply listening to those albums would overshadow the gradual nature of the shift. *Spaced*, a forgotten chapter in the Soft Machine's history, was recently unearthed by Cuneiform Records. The reissue documents a piece of music Wyatt, Hopper, and Ratledge created for Peter Dockley's happening "Spaced" at the Roundhouse. The music for "Spaced" was assembled from live performance tapes and tape loops, with help from Brian Hopper and soundman Bob Woolford, between the release of the second and third Soft Machine albums. "Spaced" was a ballet where dancers wore rubber suits with suction cups and were choreographed to the Softs' droning sonic tapestry. While it's not recommended as a first purchase to newcomers, many fans will appreciate this piece of ephemera that hints at the ambient flavor of the upcoming *Third* album.

Also of interest is *Live At the Paradiso 1969* on Voiceprint. This is a recording of the Softs playing *Volume Two* live in Amsterdam on March 29. The band members were approached about releasing it. They declined permission, but it appeared soon after as a bootleg album. The official edition of this fine performance has excellent sound quality and liner notes by Hugh Hopper.

Two factors influenced the changes in the band's material. First, Hugh Hopper's writing was no longer centered around lyrics and second, four new members were added to the band.

"Around the time of *Volume Two*, I lost interest in songs as opposed to instrumental stuff," Hugh says about his writing. "I felt that having a lyric tied the piece of music down to one feeling or subject, whereas an instrumental piece can carry many different connotations for different listeners. I am more interested in writing a good piece of music than a set of words. This may be because I don't sing and therefore don't automatically set out to write the words."

Ratledge invited a horn section from Keith Tippett's band - saxophonists Elton Dean and Lyn Dobson, trombonist Nick Evans, and cornetist Mark Charig - to join the Soft Machine.

"Every time we write something," explained Ratledge in *Facelift*, "we have to kind of cut it down to limit it, because there is a finite amount that three people can do. So we felt the need to have other instruments to be able to carry other lines, to give sufficient complexity to what we have written."

"I didn't know of the Softs when I joined," Elton Dean recalls. "I joined when Ratledge wanted to expand his writing to include horns. He saw the Keith Tippett Sextet at a festival and invited the front line of Charig, Evans, and me to join."

"I took up clarinet at 16 inspired by Dixieland," explains Dean about his musical influences. "Pee Wee Russell, Archie Semple, Acker Bilk, and Tony Coe were favorites. I took up tenor

sax inspired by Bud Freeman and Stanley Turrentine, then soul bands like James Brown, Otis Redding, and Ray Charles, on to Miles Davis, Joe Henderson, and John Coltrane."

"When I joined the Softs, compositions were presented by the individuals - they weren't collaborative. Playing with the Soft Machine spread my name further afield than the jazz scene would have. A "career" did not exist for me, as a concept.

Trombonist Nick Evans also listened to Dixieland as a youngster. A significant event to his musical development occurred "around the age of 20, when I signed up for a Summer School Jazz Course in a Welsh town called Barry," Evans recalled. "That course attracted players from all over Britain, and it was there that I met Graham Collier, Keith Tippett, Elton Dean, and Mark Charig."

"The group that was formed during the summer school with Keith, Elton, Mark, and myself was magic," Evans continued. "Keith's charts were unique and the group hit it off musically and socially. The course was, unfortunately, only two weeks long but it was probably the most important weeks musically to me."

After the course, Nick Evans went to London to join Keith Tippett's sextet.

"That group' held down a residency at the 100 Club in London and became highly regarded by jazz fans," said Evans. "Keith's tunes were so different from the normal that we attracted listeners from other fields. It was at the 100 Club that Mike Ratledge heard us. He offered Elton, Mark, and me the chance to join the Softs, and although we knew little about them, went ahead as we enjoyed each other's playing so much and the Softs simply provided another outlet."

"Mike Ratledge was the main composer of the Soft Machine, although Hugh and Robert also wrote quite a bit of the material. The charts would be rehearsed endless times, and any bits that didn't work were modified rather than rewritten. The set we played was about 58 minutes, so there was little improvisation apart from the solos that each member had. Even so, the soloist had a set number of choruses and therefore the overall time remained the same for each gig performed. I remember that this used to amuse me because Keith's band could play the same tunes at two gigs and the length of each gig would be totally different."

Nick Evans remembers his Soft Machine days fondly.

"The Softs had a fine following. The audience was young and, compared to today, educated. We went down well everywhere and were given star status at most venues. It was a heady time - good players, exciting music, popularity, and lots of work - an effective combination! The music was progressing through vision rather than mimicry which I believe is the case with current pop music."

The only recordings to feature the full septet were for the BBC; they appear on *The Peel Sessions*, released in 1990. Seven members proved too expensive and impractical. Nick Evans, Mark Charig, and Lyn Dobson left the band a few months later.

In August of 1969, Hugh and Brian Hopper recorded four publishing demos; it was a Wilde Flowers reunion, with the Soft Machine and Caravan guitarist Pye Hastings participating. The tracks were released on *The Wilde Flowers*.

"I hoped to get rich by having pop singers to my songs," Hugh confided. "But it didn't happen, although royalties from "Memories" continue to trickle in."

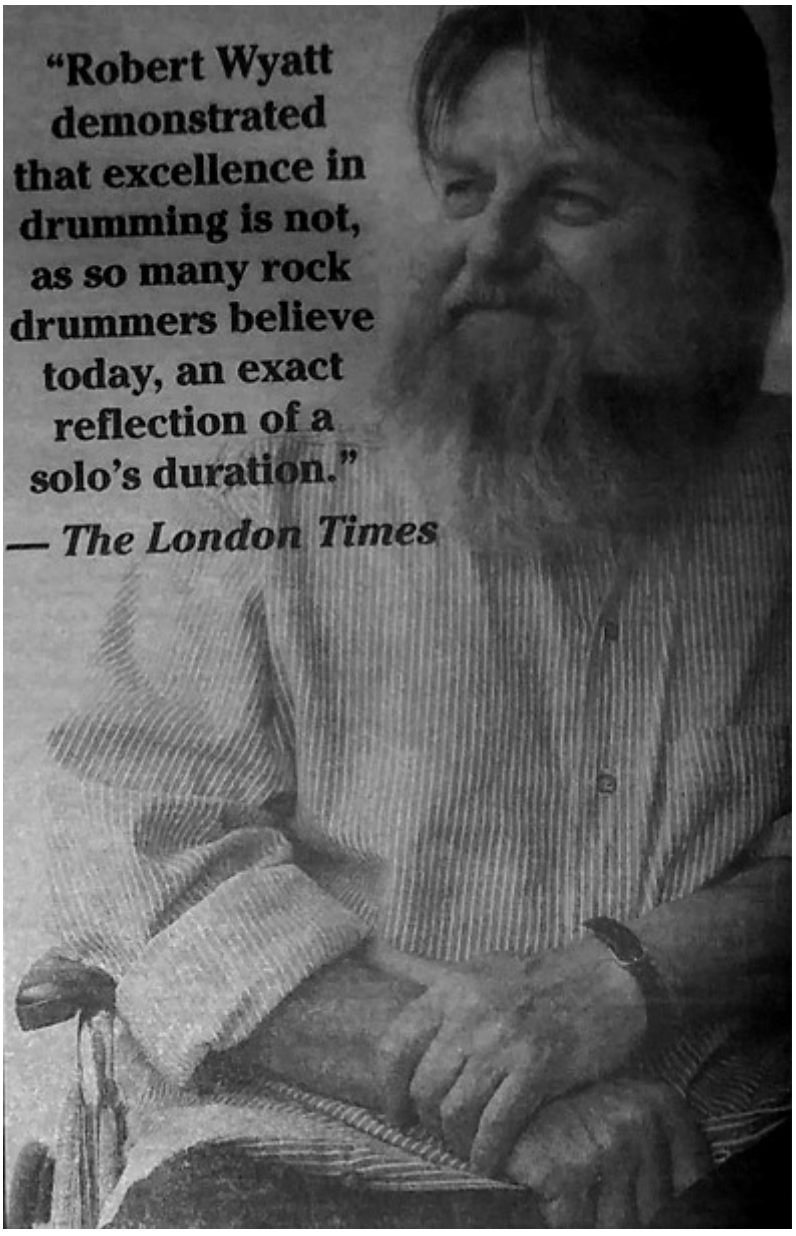
The Soft Machine's *Third* was released in 1970 to great critical acclaim. The double album consists of four side-long tracks, two by Ratledge and one each by Hopper and Wyatt. By taking up an LP side, each piece is allowed space to evolve slowly and build dynamics. This contrasted with versions of the same tracks on *The Peel Sessions*, where the band has less time to explore its musical possibilities; the jazzier side of the Softs is more apparent on the BBC tracks. Robert Wyatt's improvised vocal on the BBC version of Third's "Moon In June," as well as the quotes from "Hope For Happiness" and "We Did It Again" from the first album makes this an essential Soft Machine recording.

The BBC provided an outlet for a Soft Machine dream reunion when the seven-piece Softs lineup was the backing band for Kevin Ayers' February 17, 1970 appearance on *Top Gear* for a rousing unrehearsed ten-minute version of "Why Are We Sleeping," Kevin's tour-de-force from the first Softs album. This performance is available on the recent Ayers release *Singing the Bruise*: *The BBC Sessions 1970-1972* on Band of Joy Records. This disc also features other Ayers material that is more off-the-wall than the original album versions. First Show In The Appearance Business: *The BBC Sessions 1973-1976* makes more Ayers radio archives

available.

Acquaintance with composer Tim Souster got the Soft Machine an appearance on the annual Royal Albert Hall Promenade Concerts on August 16, 1970, released in 1988 as *Live at the Proms 1970*. Although the late arrival of equipment cut into rehearsal time, the performance was critically acclaimed.

The *London Times* raved, "Labels no longer have much meaning in the world of progressive rock or jazz and the four man group moved fluently from savage sheets of sound to delicate phrasing. Robert Wyatt demonstrated that excellence in drumming is not. as so many rock drummers believe today, an exact reflection of a solo's duration." Playing this prestigious event propelled *Third* to #18 on the British album chart.



By this time, The Soft Machine members' camaraderie was waning. Mike Ratledge remarked in 1971 that "although there might be personality conflicts sometimes, it works out for the music. It's because we are different people that it somehow works."

Robert Wyatt was feeling alienated from his bandmates during the recording of the jazzier and vocal-less *Fourth* (the second Soft Machine album to reach the UK album charts, attaining position #32). Where he craved more simplicity in the music, the others preferred more complex arrangements. The other band members also wanted to switch to an all-instrumental format.

Luckily, Robert had plenty of side projects to pursue at this time. He was drummer for former Soft Kevin Ayers' touring band and sang harmony vocals on tracks from the albums *Shooting For the Moon*, *Whatevershebrigswesing*, and *Bananamour*. He drummed for Centipede, Keith Tippett's group featuring fifty members, and Gary Windo's Symbiosis, and sang in the one-off Top Gear Choral Society (also featuring Rod Stewart, Ronnie Lane, Marc Bolan, and Sonja Kristina from Curved Air) for John Peel's Christmas 1970 show.

Another recent Cuneiform archive release. *Virtually*, reissues a March 1971 performance on Radio Bremen in Germany. On this album, the dissension in the Softs' camp does not show, as the band plays some of the loosest, funkiest versions of its repertoire of the day.

After recording a solo album. *End of An Ear,* Wyatt quit the Soft Machine. His replacement was Australian drummer Phil Howard. Mike Ratledge commented to *Melody Maker*, "It's hard to work out exactly what the differences were, but they existed for quite a long time. For instance, Robert has always preferred playing straight 4/4 - he's never really enjoyed or accepted working in complex time signatures. But I never got a specific picture of what he does want to do."

Wyatt's departure created a dividing line between some factions of the Soft Machine's fandom. Many consider the Wyatt years the group's halcyon days, while others prefer the fusion sound of later years. Discussions rage over the Canterbury Internet newsgroup *What's Rattlin'*.

After leaving the Soft Machine, Wyatt formed a new band with former Caravan keyboardist David Sinclair, guitarist Phil Miller, and childhood friend and Quiet Sun bassist Bill MacCormick. He called it Matching Mole, a phonetic pun on the French phrase Machine Molle, or, Soft Machine.

The Soft Machine soon switched drummers again to John Marshall. The band continued the sequential series of album titles with 5 in 1972. Facelift succinctly summed up this album's sound, "plenty of atmospherics, but of a type much cleaner than the psychedelic muddle of *Third*." One Way Records recently released the archival *Live In France* from the days of the 5 line-up.

"The music also grooves like no other Soft Machine line-up," said Howitt, "and if you wanted to introduce someone to Elton Dean's music, this is the era you'd probably turn to. With wonderful off-the-cuff but soulful soloing, never straying from Hugh Hopper's bass lines, Elton Dean is never too far from the heart of the music." After 5, Elton Dean departed the Softs, replaced by Karl Jenkins.

Matching Mole soldiered on as the increasingly more soulful cousin of the Softs. On its self-titled debut, Matching Mole alternated pop songs like "O Caroline" with extended workouts such as "Part of the Dance." While the band was able to play technically complex music, it did in a tuneful and engaging manner.

The Mole had its share of technical problems recording the album. Wyatt relates some war stories in Matching Mole's liner notes.

"We recorded in a studio so cold that Dave Sinclair could hardly bear to take his gloves off to play the Hammond. Astute listeners will detect the merry fizz and tingle of frost melting on rusty electrics throughout, a distinct textural effect I hope you'll all agree: that Rough sound, dead authentic and all that."

Matching Mole's second album, *Little Red Record,* was produced by King Crimson's Robert Fripp and featured Roxy Music member Brian Eno playing synthesizers. It's more of a group effort than the debut, and copious amounts of touring tightened the band considerably. Between albums, David Sinclair, who left Matching Mole to return to Caravan, was replaced by Dave MacRae. Less than a month after completing *Little Red Record*, Wyatt disbanded Matching Mole, tiring of the extramusical responsibilities of leading a band.

Back in the Softs camp, Hugh Hopper left following the live set Six, to be replaced by Roy Babbington. This left Mike Ratledge as the only original member of the band. Hugh embarked on a solo career, releasing albums *1984*, *Hopper Tunity Box*, *Rogue Element*, and *Monster Band*. Those albums, or the recent Mantra compilation, *Best Soft*, drawn from them, demonstrate what a significant contribution Hugh's bass sound and compositional technique was to the Soft Machine.

Critics began to viciously attack the Soft Machine, as during a 1973 *Melody Maker* interview coinciding with the release of Seven. Writer Steve Lake first suggested to Karl Jenkins that the band didn't have the right to the name Soft Machine, then describes the new album in

terms of its "relative dullness" and remarked that "the old crusading spirit has disappeared." Jenkins countered that the rhythm section was "far better now than it has ever been."

New guitarist Alan Holdsworth's brief membership in the Soft Machine in 1975 gave the music a rock-oriented sound for the Bundles album. In 1975, the Soft Machine held a Musician's Union workshop in Newcastle, which participant Sid Smith recalled fondly to *What's Rattlin*'.

"The Softs' Seven was one of my favorite albums of the time, and the opportunity to meet heroes like Roy Babbington was a chance of a lifetime. It was very informal and the band members look players off into separate areas - pianists went off with Mike Ratledge, [and] wind players with Jenkins."

"I went off with Babbington who was courteous, pleasant, and very patient. I had only just started to play the |bass] and was very poor - by far the worst player there. Roy. however, made me feel accepted and valued."

"Looking back, I can honestly say that those two days very formative and important to my understanding of music, improvisation, and my own playing. It also taught me a lot about listening. I am also amazed how open, friendly, and approachable they all were. Does this kind of thing happen today?"

Former Softs timekeeper Robert Wyatt was planning a new line-up of Matching Mole when, during a party on June 1, 1973, he fell five stories from an open window and broke his back, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. When *Rolling Stone* asked which controlled substance caused him to fall, Wyatt dryly remarked, "Good old alcohol, you know, the legal one."

While Robert was at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, Pink Floyd and the Soft Machine held a benefit concert at the Rainbow Theatre in London and raised £10,000 for Wyatt's medical bills.

Upon his release from the hospital. Wyatt's peers involved him in their projects. He performed a vocal cameo on Hatfield and the North, the self-titled debut album of a group comprised of former Wilde Flowers and Caravan bassist and vocalist Richard Sinclair, Phil Miller from Matching Mole, former Gong drummer Pip Pyle, and keyboardist Dave Stewart. Kevin Ayers enlisted Robert for percussion duties on an album he was producing for singer Lady June, Linguistic Leprosy.

His drumming days over, Robert Wyatt turned to keyboards and singing, as well as some percussion. His second solo album *Rock Bottom*, one of the essential albums of the seventies, was composed prior to his accident. Wyatt is assisted by a stellar cast of progressive rockers, including Mike Oldfield, Hugh Hopper, Richard Sinclair, and Pink Floyd's Nick Mason.

In contrast to previous efforts, *Rock Bottom*'s arrangements are given plenty of breathing space, and possess a clarity rarely heard before in his music. The sleeve was illustrated by Robert's new wife, Alfreda Benge. *Rock Bottom* won France's prestigious Grand Prix Charles Cros for album of the year 1974. In addition, the non-album single, a cover of the Monkees' "I'm A Believer" became his first British hit, reaching #29.

A solo piano take of "I'm A Believer" is available on the Robert Wyatt *Peel Sessions* EP. The EP also features a stripped-down version of "Soup Song" from Wyatt's next album *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard*. "Soup Song" is the melody of the Wilde Flowers' "Slow Walkin' Talk" with, typically clever lyrics. Following a single rejected by Virgin, "Yesterday Man," Robert guested on albums by Phil Manzanera, Carla Bley, Brian Eno, and Michael Mantler (The Hapless Child, an album of the poetry of Edward Gorey).

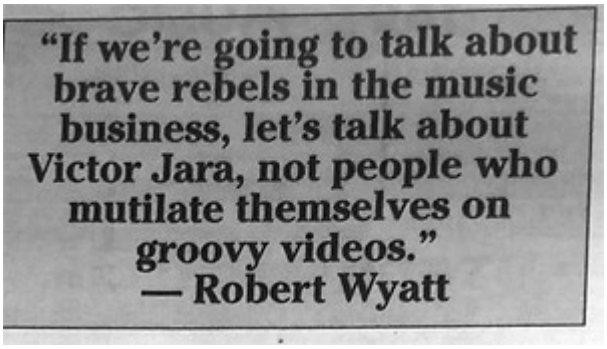
A project Robert contributed to in 1976 was saxophonist Gary Windo's *Steam Radio Tapes* The album was produced by Pink Floyd's Nick Mason to test the Floyd's new Britannia Row Studio. Though unreleased at the time, several tracks are on *His Master's Bones*, a recent collection of unreleased Windo material from 1972-1985. The Cuneiform collection features a who's who of progressive music: Hugh Hopper, Steve Hillage, Carla Bley, Bill MacCormick, and Julie Driscoll-Tippett, among others.

Wyatt became disillusioned by the music industry during the late seventies; he later recollected to *Creem*:

"Well, during the 70s, something happened to my feeling, being in the rock world. There seemed to be this consensus, which was that it was a new and semi-legitimate art form, and

it was a natural vehicle for new and rebellious ideas. And during the 70s, it became quite clear to me that we were, as rock musicians, were in fact members of the establishment. That it was an establishment, and perhaps always had been.

"You were getting to funny stages, where people who deliberately maimed themselves on-stage were selling themselves as brave and courageous, whereas you had someone like Victor Jara in Chile, who, because he sang for democracy in Chile, was tortured to death. If we're going to talk about brave rebels in the music business, let's talk about Victor Jara, not people who mutilate themselves on groovy videos."



Wyatt finished the decade in semi retirement, writing letters to political prisoners, writing guest columns in various publications, and listening to short-wave radio broadcasts from other countries. Wyatt's final concert appearances were made in May and June, 1975 with Henry Cow, the progressive rock group featuring frequent Wyatt contributor Fred Frith. Part of the May 21 performance was released on the Henry Cow album *Concerts*.

Mike Ratledge was also becoming disillusioned by the music industry. Being the last original Soft Machine member became a burden to him, so he left the band in 1976. In an interview reprinted by *Facelift*, Ratledge explained that "music is always more than the persons involved in it: probably that's why it's all right to go on playing the way [The Soft Machine] do... By this time, to be in the Soft Machine was a drudgery, and playing music should never be like that. You see, there never was a leader (if so, everything would be different) totally responsible for the music played by others, and one of the reasons that drove me to stop composing was that I felt trapped in the whole Soft Machine's legendary image...

"To be the only original member is horrible: this is probably the main reason for quitting and losing interest in it."

Ratledge went on to form a production company with Soft Machine member Karl Jenkins, Jenkins-Ratledge. Their company composed commercial music for Pepsi and Delta Airlines among others. The two collaborated on Adiemus' 1995 *Songs of Sanctuary*, performed with the London Symphony Orchestra. The work is very un-Canterburyesque mood piece, at times resembling the score to an epic film with lots of panoramic scenery. *Songs of Sanctuary* has been a big hit throughout Europe, and on the British and American classical charts. Ratledge recently quit the music business; Jenkins is continuing to release Adiemus albums.

In addition to releasing solo albums through the seventies, Hugh Hopper played with the groups Isotope and Gilgamesh before forming Soft Heap. "Soft" identifies the band as a living branch of the Soft Machine, "Heap" is an acronym of the four original members' names: Hugh, Elton Dean, Alan Gowen, former Gilgamesh keyboardist, and Pip Pyle, former Gong and Hatfield and the North drummer. Alan Gowen died on leukemia in 1981, shortly after collaborating with Hugh on the magnificent *Two Rainbows Daily,* recently reissued by Cuneiform. Rainbows is a series of bass and mini-Moog duets that boils down Hopper's unique improvising and playing approach. The reissue features six live bonus tracks with drummer Nigel Morris.

Gowen's replacement in Soft Heap is guitarist Mark Hewins, one of the next generation of Canterbury musicians. His professional career began in 1972 when he began working with Richard Sinclair.

During a *Calyx* interview, he told Aymeric Leroy, "My main goal in my musical life has been to strive not only for personal "expression" but also excellence in technique. The musicians connected with the "Canterbury legend" are, quite simply, the best and most inventive of their generation. I had to work with these guys."

Hewins runs the MusArt label; its website features information, photographs, and amusing anecdotes about many of the Canterbury musicians.

Following Holdsworth's departure from the Soft Machine in 1976, the band, with replacement John Etheridge, recorded tracks for the DeWolfe Production Music Company,

the British equivalent to Muzak. The tracks were collected on the Voiceprint release Rubber Riff. Riff is a surprisingly appealing collection; though not an essential release, and a far cry from the Soft Machine's '60s and early '70s innovative heyday, the music is more engaging than the increasingly technical and virtuosic "real" Soft Machine releases of that period.

In contrast, 1976's *Cruel But Fair,* by Hopper/Dean/[Keith] Tippett/[Joe] Gallivan, reissued by One Way, is a jazzy, at times turbulent collection in the mold of the Softs' Fourth with electronic touches. That year also saw the release of *Yes We Have No Mananas* from Kevin Ayers. Although his most commercial-sounding work to date, the strong songwriting and fluid guitar work of 'Ollie Halsall, as well as Ayers' distinctive baritone voice prevented it from sounding like run-of-the-mill AOR product. Ayers toured Britain with a band that included Halsall, Zoot Money, and former Softs and future Police guitarist Andy Summers. His first American tour in almost a decade prompted stateside release on ABC Records as well.

The original Soft Machine lineup of Kevin Ayers, Mike Ratledge, and Robert Wyatt, along with Hugh Hopper, reunited in 1977, not to play music, but to program a3-LP retrospective of their work to be released on Harvest Records. *The Triple Echo* includes features selections from the band's entire back catalog with the exception of *Third* and *Fourth* which are represented by live BBC tracks. Both sides of the debut single, "Love Makes Sweet Music" and "Feelin' Reelin' Squealin', as well as "She's Gone," the A-side of a the shelved second single, and "Memories" from the De Lane Lea demo sessions are on the set. Neither *Triple Echo* nor the Polydor single have yet been released on CD.

Robert Wyatt returned to the public eye in 1980 with the release of four singles on Rough Trade. All eight sides are cover versions of songs of a personal or political nature, thematically paired. One of the songs was a version of "Strange Fruit," originally recorded by Billie Holiday in 1938. Regarding his choice to record that song, Wyatt told Melody Maker, "Yes, it's a bit inappropriate... Cross cultural references, it's not my song... I thought it was relevant now, but instead of talking about southern America, we're talking about South Africa. And I thought, we're just going to go on doing this - we were doing it before I was born, and. it's going to go on after I die, and there's nothing I can do about it. But you can't help noticing."

Inspired by those singles, Elvis Costello wrote an anti-war song about the Falkland Islands conflict, "Shipbuilding," which he thought would be the perfect vehicle for Wyatt. Costello produced Wyatt, backed by his band the Attractions, and the result was Wyatt's second UK-charting single, this one reaching #35.

Costello was later quoted in *Wrong Movements*, "It's been the happiest experience I've had as a songwriter/producer. The song has been realized perfectly. It sounds completely like the intent of the lyric and melody. I think people have been so overwhelmed by the melancholy of Robert's singing that the political comment in "Shipbuilding" hasn't been immediately spotted. The lyric seems to filter through afterwards; the BBC probably wouldn't like it otherwise."

The four singles, with two extra tracks were compiled on *Nothing Can Stop Us*; the American release omits Peter Blackman's poem "Stalingrad" and adds "Shipbuilding" and the b-sides from its 12" release, the jazz standards "Round About Midnight" and "Memories of You." The album's title refers to a quote from America Conquers Britain by Ludwell Denny in 1930: "We shall not make Britain's mistake. Too wise to try to govern the world, we shall merely own it. Nothing can stop us."

The last Soft Machine record released was *Land of Cockayne*, in 1981. Karl Jenkins, John Marshall, and Allan Holdsworth are joined by Jack Bruce for a collection that sounds like a Third-era inspired production-music band on its off-time. *Land of Cockayne* has its adherents, and is one of the most hotly-debated topics of "What's Rattlin'," the weekly on-line digest of Canterbury-related music.

In 1985, Robert Wyatt participated in a project with the South-West African People's Organization, the SWAPO Singers, and the Repression and Political Prisoners Campaign. "Winds of Change," produced by ex-Specials member Jerry Dammers and sung by Wyatt with the SWAPO Singers, was released to bring attention to the liberation movement of Namibia, which had been illegally occupied by South Africa.

"I want to show you something which is my finger pointing. That's my finger pointing," Wyatt commented about the political nature of his recent work in *Wrong Movements*.

"Now there are two interesting things about a pointing finger. First of all, you can look at the finger, and secondly, you can look at where the finger is pointing. The problem I have as a

musician is that I'm a pointing finger but it's not enough for me if people only look at my pointing finger. I would only be happy if people looked at what I was pointing at, because otherwise it's just a totally subjective game we're playing with the artist and the person looking at the artist."

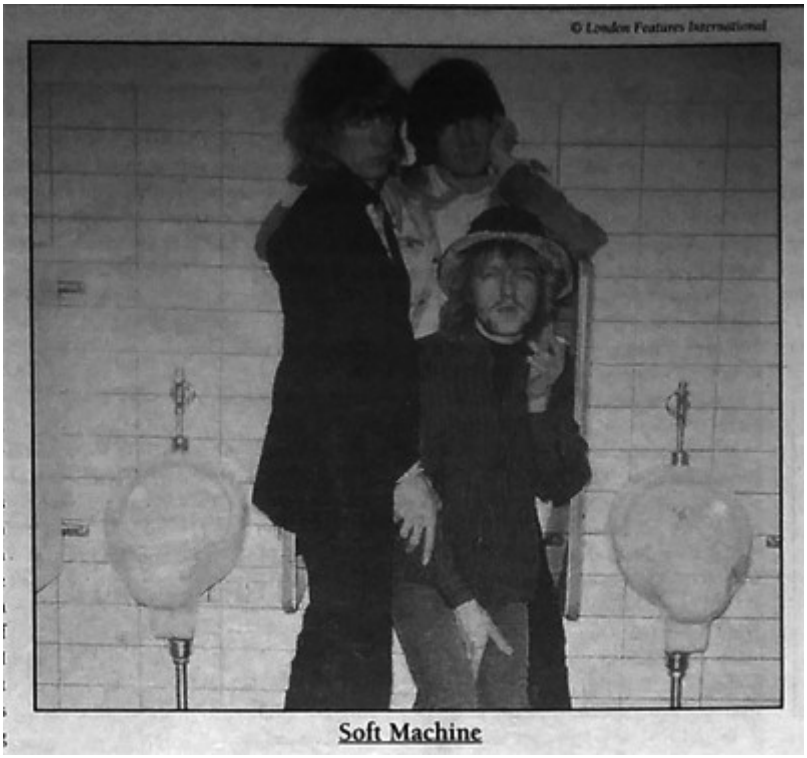
Following his 1991 recording *Dondestan*, Robert Wyatt was largely absent from the music business aside from cameo appearances on numerous releases. Wyatt scatsings on four tracks from Fish Out of Water's debut CD *Lucky Scars* on Stream Records, a label dedicated to the work of disabled artists. Robert takes several vocal turns on former Henry Cow bassist John Greaves's magnificent *Songs*, on Resurgence Records. *Songs* is an exquisitely wrought tapestry of predominantly acoustic pieces that have chamber-music-like qualities. Wyatt also contributed lyrics and vocals to "Free Will and Testament" on Hugh Hopper and Kramer's *A Remark Hugh Made.*

A Remark Hugh Made on Shimmy-Disc is one of numerous recent Hugh Hopper discs released recently. (Remark was, unfortunately, the last album Hugh and Wyatt's friend and collaborator Gary Windo would play on; he died of a heart attack on July 25, 1992.) Shimmy-Disc founder Kramer became familiar with the Soft Machine while studying the work of Jimi Hendrix as a youth. Kramer, a former Gong member who has also recorded two albums with Daevid Allen, *Who's Afraid* and *Hit Men*, discusses his work with both former Softs.

"Daevid and Hugh are artists. Most kids I work with are musicians, and art rarely enters into it," said Kramer. "Hugh and Daevid differ greatly in that Hugh is a musician, or rather an artist who paints with his guitar; although he usually works instrumentally, let us not forget that his lyrics for "Memories" are among the most poignant ever written. Daevid wants people to be moved by his words, Hugh wants people to be moved by his bass guitar and the sounds he emotes from it. Daevid cares about environmental issues and sings about them. Hugh cares about environmental issues and does not sing about them."

"Hugh was familiar only with my collaboration with Daevid before we worked together," said Kramer, describing how he got together with Hugh Hopper. "I wrote [a letter telling him] that I felt *Hopper Tunity Box* was one of the finest works of the era. I told him that if he was at all interested in making a continuation of that idea, I wanted to make a collaborative record. He wrote back saying 'no problem,' and a couple of months later he was at my home recording what turned out to be *A Remark Hugh Made.*"

According to Kramer, the collaboration with Wyatt on "Free Will and Testament" came about when "Hugh suggested that a piano piece I did would sound great with Robert's voice on it. We sent him a tape, and he simply sent back another tape with his voice added to the piano. Somehow, miraculously, I managed to synchronize the two tapes and re-edit back onto 24-track in order to have a decent sounding final product although the flaws are legible if you listen hard."



Soft Machine

Hugh Hopper and Kramer released a second album in early 1997, entitled *Huge*; according to Kramer, "[it] is more strictly from improvisations which I then built upon after Hugh went home to Canterbury." Hugh has also recently collaborated with the Portland, Oregon based group Caveman Shoestore on the *Caveman Hughscore* disc, on Tim/Kerr Records. The collaboration came about when bassist Fred Chalenor called Hugh for the sheet music to his song "Sliding Dogs" for Caveman Shoestore to play. Eventually after enough sheet music and Caveman demo tapes crossed the Atlantic, plans were made to record an album together.

Regarding his influence on and invitations to participate in projects with younger generations of "progressive" musicians, Hugh said he is "happy to have people like Kramer or the Cavemen call me up in awe. Joke is, [Caveman Shoestore bassist] Fred Chalenor tries to leave all the soloing to me, one of his heroes, when in fact he's ten times the bassist I'll ever be!"

Other projects Hugh is involved with include the Hugh Hopper Band, known as the Franglo-Dutch band, a jazz band featuring French and Dutch musicians. This group has released *Hooligan Romantics* on Ponk Records and *Carousel* on Cuneiform. Hugh is also a member of Mashu, a trio of himself, guitarist Mark Hewins, Gong tabla player and percussionist Shyamal Maitra.

Elton Dean frequently makes guest appearances or plays with many of his Soft Machine cohorts. His most recent album is Silent Knowledge, with his current quartet, a jazz band on the free side. He also released an album of duos and trios, *Twos and Threes*, originally released on his tape only ED Tapes label, recently reissued on a Voiceprint CD. Mark Hewins, Keith Tippett, and former Softs guitarist John Etheridge are among the musicians who join him. Dean also played on John Greaves' highly-recommended Songs.

With the help of numerous associates, like Brian Eno, Phil Manzanera, and Paul Weller, Wyatt returned with full force to the music business, releasing one of his finest albums, *Shleep* on the Thirsty Ear label in the United States and Hannibal elsewhere. Wyatt continues to pursue lyrical themes present throughout his thirty-year career in popular music - individualism to the point of alienation from society, the concept of freedom, and a surrealistic sense of humor. The rights to six of his classic albums, from 1975's *Rock Bottom* to 1991's *Dondestan* also reverted to him and will be reissued throughout 1998 by his new record companies.

Former Soft Machine and Wilde Flowers members have mixed feelings about the "Canterbury" label that has been placed on their music over the years. Robert Wyatt remarked in *Ptolemaic Terrascope* that "I didn't even know it meant me until interviewers started asking me about it.

"As I say, because I'd bussed in from outside to go to school there I didn't really consider myself a Canterbury person. I think it really means people like Hugh Hopper and Richard Sinclair, who are generally based in that area."

"I met them there and am eternally graceful that I met someone like Hugh who provided something I dont think anyone else could have provided. My mind doesn't dwell on it as a place though, if I recall a former fantasy world upon which I draw, it was Harlem in the Forties and not Canterbury in the Fifties."

Elton Dean does not consider the Canterbury label useful. "Canterbury scene' is a myth that outsiders like to perpetuate. It puts a convenient, is somewhat meaningless label on very diverse musics."

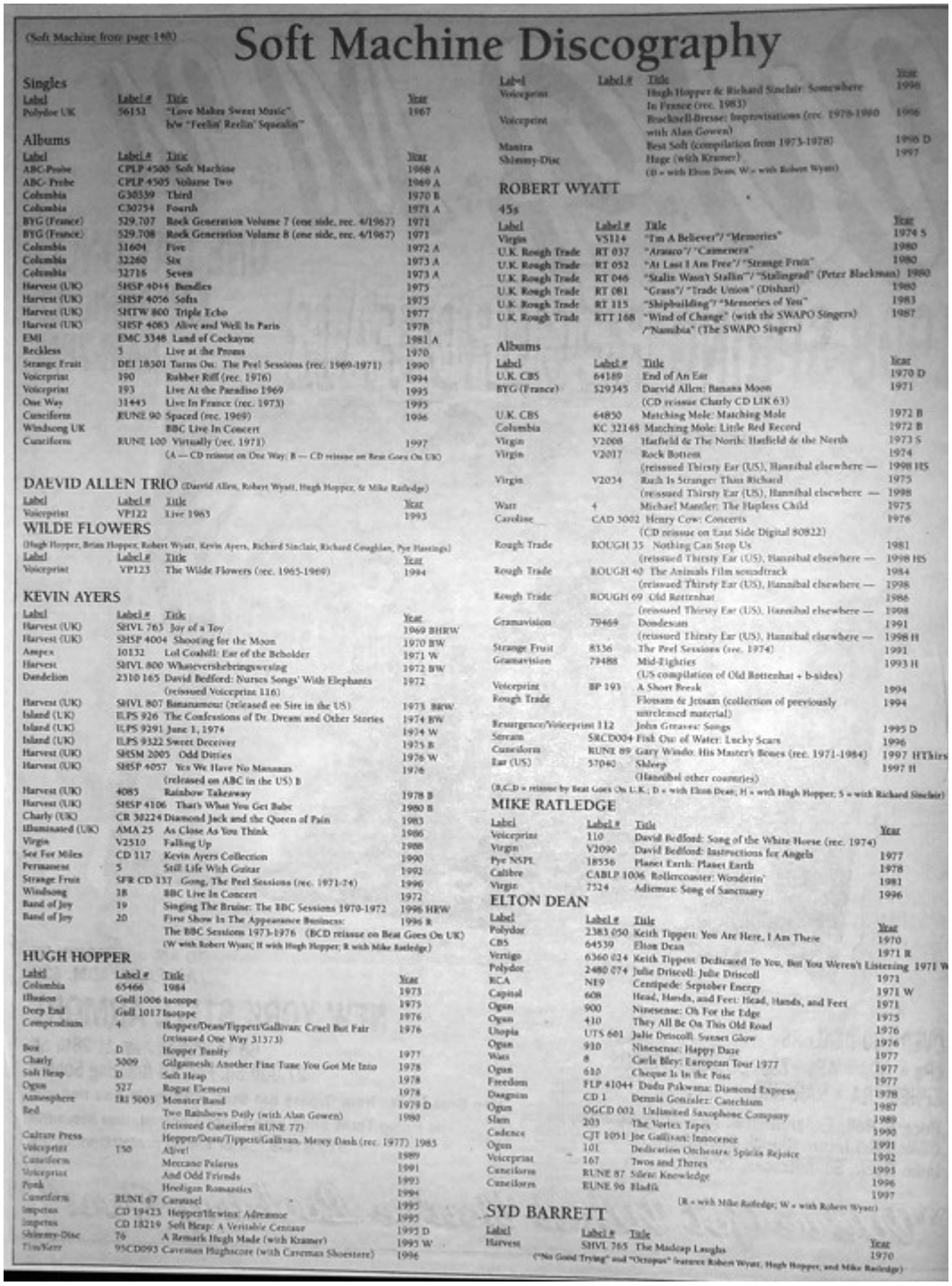
Hugh Hopper and Kevin Ayers, though they don't particularly advocate the Canterbury label, use it to their advantage. Hugh, who once quipped that the only person in Canterbury who recognized him was his mother, "personally [uses] the 'Canterbury Scene' umbrella now that it exists, to foster interest in my current musical projects, but in fact it was a journalistic label given to a very disparate group of musicians (most of whom had never been near Canterbury in their lives), long after the original few Canterbury musicians from the Wilde Flowers had divided into Caravan and the Soft Machine."

Kevin Ayers maintains that "on one side, it has helped me in the sense of being part of a bigger entity. On the other hand, I did some stuff not very related to the Canterbury scene. So?"

Richard Sinclair takes much pride in the town of Canterbury and the music that he had an active role in shaping. He was quoted in *Facelift*: "I think it has got a particular sound, Kent. We've sung it in our schools here, we were all at school in this sort of area. I was part of the C of E choir: up to the age of sixteen I was singing tonalities that are very English. Over the last three hundred years, four hundred years, maybe, and even earlier than that, some of the tonalities go back... A very historical centre of activity is Canterbury for the last hundred years. So it's quite an important sort of stepping stone of whatever this thousand years have covered, I think it's not to be mocked, because it's a centre of communication here and it's a meeting point - many nations come here to visit the cathedral, so you get a very unique situation happening, you know?... People say 'what is the Canterbury scene?' I think you have to come to Canterbury and see and hear it..."

From humble beginnings, a local beat group from the sixties with esoteric tastes in music has blossomed into a grass-roots musical movement whose members have branched out into the realms of psychedelia, jazz, pop, and progressive rock, for a devoted bunch of enthusiasts around the world. Although Hugh Hopper said "so-called progressive music is a dirty word for most promoters - here in the U.K. there were only a few years in the late sixties and early seventies when it wasn't," the Canterbury music fans know better. Like Chaucer's classic novel, a varied group of characters has embarked upon a journey, each bringing his or her own voice."

Jim Powers



(Soft Machine from page 140)

Soft Machine Discography

Singles

Label	Label #	Title	Year
Polydor UK	56151	"Love Makes Sweet Music" b/w "Feelin' Reelin' Squealin'"	1967

Albums

Label	Label #	Title	Year
ABC-Probe	CPLP 4500	Soft Machine	1968 A
ABC- Probe	CPLP 4505	Volume Two	1969 A
Columbia	G30339	Third	1970 B
Columbia	C30734	Fourth	1971 A
BYG (France)	529.707	Rock Generation Volume 7 (one side, rec. 4/1967)	1971
BYG (France)	529.708	Rock Generation Volume 8 (one side, rec. 4/1967)	1971
Columbia	31604	Five	1972 A
Columbia	32260	Six	1973 A
Columbia	32716	Seven	1973 A
Harvest (UK)	SHSP 4014	Bundles	1975
Harvest (UK)	SHSP 4056	Softs	1975
Harvest (UK)	SHTW 800	Triple Echo	1977
Harvest (UK)	SHSP 4083	Alive and Well: In Paris	1978
EMI	EMC 3348	Land of Cockayne	1981 A
Reckless	5	Live at the Proms	1970
Strange Fruit	DEI 18501	Turns On: The Peel Sessions (rec. 1969-1971)	1990
Voiceprint	190	Rubber Riff (rec. 1976)	1994
Voiceprint	193	Live At the Paradiso 1969	1995
One Way	31445	Live In France (rec. 1973)	1995
Cuneiform	RUNE 90	Spaced (rec. 1969)	1996
Windsong UK		BBC Live In Concert	
Cuneiform	RUNE 100	Virtually (rec. 1971)	1997

(A — CD reissue on One Way; B — CD reissue on Beat Goes On UK)

DAEVID ALLEN TRIO (Daevid Allen, Robert Wyatt, Hugh Hopper, & Mike Ratledge)

Label	Label #	Title	Year
Voiceprint	VP122	Live 1963	1993

WILDE FLOWERS

(Hugh Hopper, Brian Hopper, Robert Wyatt, Kevin Ayers, Richard Sinclair, Richard Coughlan, Pye Hastings)

Label	Label #	Title	Year
Voiceprint	VP123	The Wilde Flowers (rec. 1965-1969)	1994

KEVIN AYERS

Label	Label #	Title	Year
Harvest (UK)	SHVL 763	Joy of a Toy	1969 BHRW
Harvest (UK)	SHSP 4004	Shooting for the Moon	1970 BW
Ampex	10132	Lol Coxhill: Ear of the Beholder	1971 W
Harvest	SHVL 800	Whatevershebringswesing	1972 BW
Dandelion	2310 165	David Bedford: Nurses Songs' With Elephants (reissued Voiceprint 116)	1972
Harvest (UK)	SHVL 807	Bananamour: (released on Sire in the US)	1973 BRW
Island (UK)	ILPS 926	The Confessions of Dr. Dream and Other Stories	1974 BW
Island (UK)	ILPS 9291	June 1, 1974	1974 W
Island (UK)	ILPS 9322	Sweet Deceiver	1975 B
Harvest (UK)	SHSM 2005	Odd Ditties	1976 W
Harvest (UK)	SHSP 4057	Yes We Have No Mananas (released on ABC in the US) B	1976
Harvest (UK)	4085	Rainbow Takeaway	1978 B
Harvest (UK)	SHSP 4106	That's What You Get Babe	1980 B
Charly (UK)	CR 30224	Diamond Jack and the Queen of Pain	1983
Illuminated (UK)	AMA 25	As Close As You Think	1986
Virgin	V2510	Falling Up	1988
See For Miles	CD 117	Kevin Ayers Collection	1990
Permanent	5	Still Life With Guitar	1992
Strange Fruit	SFR CD 137	Gong, The Peel Sessions (rec. 1971-74)	1996
Windsong	18	BBC Live In Concert	1972
Band of Joy	19	Singing The Bruise: The BBC Sessions 1970-1972	1996 HRW
Band of Joy	20	First Show In The Appearance Business: The BBC Sessions 1973-1976 (BCD reissue on Beat Goes On UK)	1996 R

(W with Robert Wyatt; H with Hugh Hopper; R with Mike Ratledge)

HUGH HOPPER

Label	Label #	Title	Year
Columbia	65466	1984	1973
Illusion	Gull 1006	Isotope	1975
Deep End	Gull 1017	Isotope	1976
Compendium	4	Hopper/Dean/Tippett/Gallivan: Cruel But Fair (reissued One Way 31373)	1976
Box	D	Hopper Tunity	1977
Charly	5009	Gilgamesh: Another Fine Tune You Got Me Into	1978
Soft Heap	D	Soft Heap	1978
Ogun	527	Rogue Element	1978
Atmosphere	IRI 5003	Monster Band	1978 D
Red		Two Rainbows Daily (with Alan Gowen) (reissued Cuneiform RUNE 77)	1980
Culture Press		Hopper/Dean/Tippett/Gallivan, Mercy Dash (rec. 1977)	1985
Voiceprint	150	Alive!	1989
Cuneiform		Meccano Pelorus	1991
Voiceprint		And Odd Friends	1993
Punk		Hooligan Romantics	1994
Cuneiform	RUNE 67	Carousel	1995
Impetus	CD 19423	Hopper/Hewins: Adrenaline	1995
Impetus	CD 18219	Soft Heap: A Veritable Centaur	1995 D
Shimmy-Disc	76	A Remark Hugh Made (with Kramer)	1995 W
Tim/Kerr	95CD093	Caveman Hughscore (with Caveman Shoestore)	1996
Voiceprint		Hugh Hopper & Richard Sinclair: Somewhere In France (rec. 1983)	1996
Voiceprint		Bracknell-Bresse: Improvisations (rec. 1978-1980 with Alan Gowen)	1996
Mantra		Best Soft (compilation from 1973-1978)	1998 D
Shimmy-Disc		Hage (with Kramer)	1997

(D = with Elton Dean; W = with Robert Wyatt)

ROBERT WYATT

45s

Label	Label #	Title	Year
Virgin	VS114	"I'm A Believer"/ "Memories"	1974 S
U.K. Rough Trade	RT 037	"Arauco"/ "Cumenera"	1980
U.K. Rough Trade	RT 052	"At Last I Am Free"/ "Strange Fruit"	1980
U.K. Rough Trade	RT 046	"Stalin Wasn't Stallin"/ "Stalingrad" (Peter Blackman)	1980
U.K. Rough Trade	RT 081	"Grass"/ "Trade Union" (Dishart)	1983
U.K. Rough Trade	RT 115	"Shipbuilding"/ "Memories of You"	1983
U.K. Rough Trade	RTT 168	"Wind of Change" (with the SWAPO Singers) /"Namibia" (The SWAPO Singers)	1987

Albums

Label	Label #	Title	Year
U.K. CBS	64189	End of An Ear	1970 D
BYG (France)	529345	Daevid Allen: Banana Moon (CD reissue Charly CD LIK 63)	1971
U.K. CBS	64850	Matching Mole: Matching Mole	1972 B
Columbia	KC 32148	Matching Mole: Little Red Record	1972 B
Virgin	V2008	Hatfield & The North: Hatfield & the North	1973 S
Virgin	V2017	Rock Bottom (reissued Thirsty Ear (US), Hannibal elsewhere —	1974 1998 HS
Virgin	V2034	Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard (reissued Thirsty Ear (US), Hannibal elsewhere —	1975 1998
Warr	4	Michael Mantler: The Hapless Child	1975
Caroline	CAD 3002	Henry Cow: Concerts (CD reissue on East Side Digital 80822)	1976
Rough Trade	ROUGH 35	Nothing Can Stop Us (reissued Thirsty Ear (US), Hannibal elsewhere —	1981 1998 HS
Rough Trade	ROUGH 40	The Animals Film soundtrack (reissued Thirsty Ear (US), Hannibal elsewhere —	1984 1998
Rough Trade	ROUGH 69	Old Rottenhat (reissued Thirsty Ear (US), Hannibal elsewhere —	1986 1998
Gramavision	79469	Dondestan (reissued Thirsty Ear (US), Hannibal elsewhere —	1991 1998 H
Strange Fruit	8136	The Peel Sessions (rec. 1974)	1991
Gramavision	79488	Mid-Eighties (US compilation of Old Rottenhat + b-sides)	1993 H
Voiceprint	BP 193	A Short Break	1994
Rough Trade		Flotsam & Jetsam (collection of previously unreleased material)	1994
Resurgence/Voiceprint	112	John Greaves: Songs	1995 D
Stream	SRCD004	Fish Out of Water: Lucky Scars	1996
Cuneiform	RUNE 89	Gary Windo: His Master's Bones (rec. 1971-1984)	1997 HThirs
Ear (US)	57040	Shleep (Hannibal other countries)	1997 H

(B,C,D = reissue by Beat Goes On U.K.; D = with Elton Dean; H = with Hugh Hopper; S = with Richard Sinclair)

MIKE RATLEDGE

Label	Label #	Title	Year
Voiceprint	110	David Bedford: Song of the White Horse (rec. 1974)	
Virgin	V2090	David Bedford: Instructions for Angels	1977
Pye NSPL	18556	Planet Earth: Planet Earth	1978
Calibre	CABLP 1006	Rollercoaster: Wonderin'	1981
Virgin	7324	Adiemus: Song of Sanctuary	1996

ELTON DEAN

Label	Label #	Title	Year
Polydor	2383 050	Keith Tippett: You Are Here, I Am There	1970
CBS	64539	Elton Dean	1971 R
Vertigo	6360 024	Keith Tippett: Dedicated To You, But You Weren't Listening	1971 W
Polydor	2480 074	Julie Driscoll: Julie Driscoll	1971
RCA	NE9	Centipede: Septober Energy	1971 W
Capitol	608	Head, Hands, and Feet: Head, Hands, and Feet	1971
Ogun	900	Ninesense: Oh For the Edge	1975
Ogun	410	They All Be On This Old Road	1976
Utopia	UTS 601	Julie Driscoll: Sunset Glow	1976
Ogun	910	Ninesense: Happy Daze	1977
Watt	8	Carla Bley: European Tour 1977	1977
Ogun	610	Cheque Is In the Post	1977
Freedom	FLP 41044	Dudu Pukwana: Diamond Express	1978
Daagmar	CD 1	Dennis Gonzalez: Catechism	1987
Ogun	OGCD 002	Unlimited Saxophone Company	1989
Slam	203	The Vortex Tapes	1990
Cadence	CJT 1051	Joe Gallivan: Innocence	1991
Ogun	101	Dedication Orchestra: Spirits Rejoice	1992
Voiceprint	167	Twos and Threes	1993
Cuneiform	RUNE 87	Silent Knowledge	1996
Cuneiform	RUNE 96	Bladik	1997

(R = with Mike Ratledge; W = with Robert Wyatt)

SYD BARRETT

Label	Label #	Title	Year
Harvest	SHVL 765	The Madcap Laughs	1970

("No Good Trying" and "Octopus" features Robert Wyatt, Hugh Hopper, and Mike Ratledge)

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Deep Shleep: Robert Wyatt Gets Personal - Boston Phœnix - 20 January 1998

DEEP SHLEEP: ROBERT WYATT GETS PERSONAL

"THE BIG PROBLEM I have with rock and roll is the rock end of it," says Robert Wyatt. "But I love the rolling. I'm into roll music."

Wyatt's been rolling now for more than three decades, along the periphery where pop, jazz, and experimental genres meet, and the music he's made has been both distinctive and enchanting. His latest release, Shleep (Thirsty Ear), is his first in six years, and though it features cameos from various well-known folks, including Brian Eno and Paul Weller, its main virtue is that it marks the return of the unmistakable Wyatt style - droll lyrics, complex melodies, sparse arrangements - and the equally unmistakable Wyatt voice, a fragile, weather-beaten instrument that composer Ryuichi Sakamoto once called "the saddest voice in the world."

A fixture on the London psychedelic underground scene in the '60s, Wyatt hung with legends like Jimi Hendrix and Syd Barrett when he wasn't drumming and singing for his main band, prog-rock pioneers the Soft Machine. But his life changed forever at a fateful party in 1973, when a drunken four-story fall left him paralyzed from the waist down. For the last 25 years, the wheelchair-bound Wyatt has alternated periods of activity - producing classic albums like 1974's Rock Bottom (first on Virgin, reissued by Caroline), 1981's Nothing Can Stop Us, 1985's Old Rottenhat, and 1991's Dondestan (all on Gramavision) - with stretches of complete withdrawal from the music business.

Reached by phone at his home in Louth, a tiny market town in the northeast of England (Lincolnshire), Wyatt matter-of-factly confesses to having had "some severe problems close to home" in the early '90s, including a nervous breakdown. Traces of this experience may lurk in the lyrics to Shleep's 'Was a Friend', which recounts an ominous meeting with a ghost from the past, and 'Heaps of Sheeps', a darkly humorous tale of insomniac desperation. (Although the lyrics to 'Heaps of Sheeps' were written by Wyatt's wife, Alfreda Benge, the CD booklet makes it clear that Wyatt also is familiar with sleepless states.)

The effect of these songs is more inspiring than disturbing: the urgent ride cymbal and close harmonies of 'Was a Friend' burst with energy, and Brian Eno's arrangement and production of 'Heaps of Sheeps', complete with mock-heroic vocal chorus, makes for a bouncy little number.

"Brian loved Alfie's words," Wyatt says. "He just sat laughing as he read them, couldn't get over 'em. I'd thought of the song as a mournful New Orleans shuffle, but he really took it by the whatever-it-is and brightened it up, which was fine by me."

Eno is one of ten guest performers on Shleep, a large number for someone whose last few discs were cut almost completely solo. "The songs seemed to require more people this time," Wyatt explains. "And since we were recording near London, it was easier to have people come out - I can't really invite people up to Lincolnshire for a wasted afternoon."

The most surprising guest is probably Paul Weller, one of only a handful of current pop

artists whom Wyatt professes to admire. Weller contributes guitar and vocals to two selections, a cheeky rewrite of Dylan's 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' titled 'Blues in Bob Minor', and the lovely 'Free Will and Testament', in which Wyatt, backed by Weller's subtle slide work, muses over subjects far from your average pop-song material: "The weight of dust exceeds the weight of settled objects/What can it mean, such gravity without a center?/Is there freedom to un-be?/Is there freedom from will-to-be?"

Philosophical lyrics like these call attention to the biggest stylistic departure on Shleep: the turn away from political discussion. Much of Wyatt's work over the last 20 years has dealt with causes of a left-wing nature. He's sung in his own words about Nelson Mandela and East Timor, the plight of refugees and the Communist Party; he's covered Elvis Costello & Clive Langer's 'Shipbuilding' (which was written especially for him) and the Cuban folksong 'Caimanera'. There's none of that here. Shleep's songs are largely ruminative, in both lyrics and music. In fact, the album reaches its peak with three songs written by Wyatt and Benge – 'September the Ninth', 'Alien', and 'Out of Season' - whose subject matter is drawn from that most nonpolitical of activities, birdwatching.

Wyatt denies that this change of tone was intentional. "I didn't decide to write political songs in the first place. When I'm writing, I function like an animal, just going on instinct. It's hard to know what to say about that - in a way, music starts where words end, doesn't it? I still get very agitated, though, either about unpleasant things in the world or the hypocrisy with which they're reported in the news, and that's liable to come out in future songs.

"I'm easily provoked," he concludes with a laugh. "Somebody better not push their luck."

Mac Randall

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt - Uncut - December 1997

ROBERT WYATT by David Stubbs

ROBERT WYATT'S career has meandered long and strange, like an underground driver. He's played alongside Hendrix, Mike Oldfield and Phil Manzanera, as well as *avant-garde* extremists such as Fred Frith, with whom he hilariously appeared on *Top Of The Pops* in the mid-Seventies, covering The Monkees' 'I'm A Believer'.



His latest album, *Shleep*, features both *avant-jazz* saxophonist Evan Parker and Paul Weller. He's covered songs by artists as diverse as Chic and Ivor Cutler. Working from jazz, through to the relatively mainstream rock of Soft Machine and Matching Mole, he was left permanently wheelchair-bound in the mid-Seventies after drunkenly falling out of a window several storeys high. Since then, he has forged a musical style all his own, one that combines plaintive drones and disingenuous, childlike repeated musical phrases with a vastly sophisticated exploratory sensibility. Wyatt's music reflects his character – mischievous, desolate, self-mocking, indignant, intimate and enigmatic, sensitive and resigned, open and vulnerable.

He was a communist – but that was somehow a manifestation of his extreme niceness rather than any ideological bloody-mindedness. It's genuinely affecting to hear him talk of the depression and nervous breakdowns that have dogged him in the Nineties, since his last album proper, 1991's bleak *Dondestan*.

"Maybe it's a total coincidence, but after Major got back in again in 1992, I didn't make a record under my own name the entire period he was in office," he reflects, sipping tea in a cafe near Great Ormond Street. "I didn't exactly go on strike, but..."

Now, however, he's had the "wind put back in his sails" with *Shleep*, his finest work in years, a genuinely collaborative effort involving, as well as Parker and Weller (a "hero" of Wyatt's who rockets in my estimation for his in-the-spirit contributions here), Eno, Phil Manzanera – who was generous with his studio facilities – and trombonist Annie Whitehead. It's reminiscent of 1975's *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard*, recapturing, in Wyatt's own words, the "recklessness" of

the intriguing underside of the prog-rock era. "I've bounced back now," he assures me. "Though always I have this feeling I'm on borrowed time..."

ROBERT WYATT has good and influential friends, but although his own music eclipses most of their efforts, he's never enjoyed similar levels of commercial success. "I've always fallen between tramlines," he laments. He's perceived as quintessentially English, having arisen from the so-called "Canterbury Scene" and having always sung in an open, unaffected Cockney accent years before Johnny Rotten. That, however, was out of a loathing of fake Seventies American accents. He is, in fact, a stern internationalist, who once said of himself in third person, "his political inclination is to be a traitor".

Is that why he joined the Communist Party?

"Yeah," he says, "go straight for the enemy!"

Was he dismayed by the collapse of the Soviet Union?

"No, not really," he sighs. "I've got used to backing losers, you know what I mean? If you've sat in free jazz gigs where the group outnumbers the audience, you're used to political meetings which are exactly the same. What was more important to me was, for instance, that it called the bluff of the apartheid government in South Africa whose excuse had been, 'We can't have democracy because the ANC are a front for the Russians.' My initial interest in the Communist Party was that it struck me as the only truly non-racist, internationalist organisation and I cannot apologise for having been associated with that."

Indeed, Robert Wyatt was among the first white "prog" artists to break way from the patronising attitudes towards black music.

"I was very shocked in 1968 when we went to Detroit and there was MC5 and I was saying to them how great it must be for them being down the road from all those great black groups and these white kids weren't interested in them because they wore suits and did dance routines. I thought, fucking hell, this is like South Africa."

This was a revelatory moment, but he considers himself to have been truly reborn when he began his relationship with his wife, the artist and sometime collaborator Alfreda Benge.

Contrary to popular misconception, his masterpiece, the truly essential *Rock Bottom* (1974), is not a lament for his accident but a euphoric hymn of praise to the beginnings of their relationship when he became, in his own, later, ironic phrase, a "born-again cretin". The album was mostly written by the time of his accident.

"I CONSIDER THAT the start of my real life. The butterfly. Everything before that was the pupa." A surprising image, under the circumstances, but Wyatt has never regarded his disability as a personal disaster or affliction, nor the source of his bouts of depression.

Maybe it's for that reason that he's never bothered overmuch with campaigning for the rights of disabled people. "It was actually strangely liberating, because it meant I had to go it alone. The things that have brought me down have never been so banal as a physical accident. Being in a wheelchair helped me to concentrate and simplify."

In fact, the source of his anxieties has been lack of funds over the years, preventing him from recording as often as he'd like to. He's had various wrangles regarding ownership of his back catalogue, which have only just now been resolved by Rykodisc. "There are good people in this business – Joe Boyd, Geoff Travis. But they're rare. You do get ripped off and there's no rock'n'roll ombudsman to prevent it. I'm not Sting.

"At my level, you notice when money goes missing. Money I need to record. I'm just so hopeless at everyday living. The only way I can get my pride back is if I function musically." Today, pride thoroughly restored, Wyatt and Alfreda live up in

a shack in Spurn Point on the East Coast, a life of cosy, domestic desolation, fending off for the moment the omnipresent threat of depression, a place whose naturalistic ebb and flow is reflected in some of *Shleep*.

What do you do?

"I've started studying insects. The way flies work when they paralyse a caterpillar and lay their eggs on it, then live off the caterpillar but don't kill it until they're just about to hatch, then they move in and eat the brain, then they're done. I know a lot of people like that!"

David Stubbs

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt Innervisions - Straight No Chaser - Winter 1997

AT THE HEIGHT OF THE SWINGING SIXTIES, FREE JAZZ AND ART-LAB EXPERIMENTALISM COMBINED TO PRODUCE THE SOFT MACHINE. WITH IT CAME A VOICE AND A DRUMMER ROBERT WYATT AND LUCKILY HIS GENIUS REMAINS UNDIMMED BY THREE DIFFICULT DECADES. AFTER NUMEROUS ACCLAIMED COLLABORATIONS WITH LIKE-MINDED FOLKS, JERRY DAMMERS, ELVIS COSTELLO AND ULTRAMARINE, A NEW LP, 'SHLEEP' FINDS HIM SHARING THE HONORS WITH BRIAN ENO, PHIL MANZANERA, ANNIE WHITEHEAD, EVAN PARKER AND PAUL WELLER.



STORY : paul bradshaw
PORTRAIT : peter williams

It's midday as I negociate a route past the British Museum and the combined sound of tenor and trombone ebbs and flows in my headphones. Momentarily it lifts me off to another world where a sage-like musician sits with his lover beneath a towering sky and gazes towards a distant horizon. Their shelter is a wooden dacca on the edge of a windswept estuary and that day, September 9th, has provided them, albeit fleetingly, with a host of visitors whose presence signifies the end of a summer. Surrounded by hundreds of swifts preparing themselves for a flight to another hemisphere the woman wishes for wings.

The same couple are still enjoying the vestiges of summer as I join them outside a cafe in Lambs Conduit St in Bloomsbury. Robert Wyatt sports a beard that is way beyond goatee. He and his combat jacket-clad partner Alfreda Benge aka Alfie are in transit between their modest home in Louth, Lincolnshire and a spell in Italy. Both are regulars at this spot. For Robert, who has been confined to a wheelchair since a fall from a fourth floor window in 1973, it's basically a question of access but it's been the site of many an interview to promote the new album 'Shleep' - his first for six years. The album title 'Shleep' is a nod of respect to London's Yiddish tradition, his own Russian Jewish ancestry and the uniqueness of his old friend the late Ronnie Scott. The club was Robert Wyatt's home from home and he misses him a lot. Out of nowhere, comedian Alexei Sayle suddenly appears and greets them both enthusiastically. They had met during the heyday of the resistance against Thatcherite conservatism at a Communist Party benefit in Lincolnshire. A lively banter ensues that reminds me of a quote from Wyatt where he declares, "If I were Blackpool rock I'd have Marxist-Leninist right through the middle."



> Zoom

"In a sense, the politics came out of the music. Mingus and Max Roach, they were involved in making political records... Sonny Rollins' ‘Freedom Suite' is wonderful. My allegiance to the music gave me an allegiance to what they were saying. I knew which side I was on. "The abstract became concrete when confronted by the paradox of apartheid. "I got to know the South African musicians when they came to London. It was so absurd, it was an outrage. For me it wasn't just a problem for South Africa, as long as apartheid existed and the South African government was dealt with as a serious government and not as a gangster/terrorist tyranny, we were all dirtied by it. That's what got me into politics, defence of my culture!"

A commitment to ending all exploitation led him to join the Communist Party. That same card-carrying commie caused a rumpus on Top Of The Pops with a rendition of the Monkees' I’m A Believer'. He berated the jingoism of the Falklands War with a classic interpretation of Elvis Costello's 'Shipbuilding' and anticipated the new dawn in South Africa by joining with a choir from SWAPO to add his own momentum to the 'Winds Of Change".

It has not been easy for Robert Wyatt. Depression and self doubt has taken it's toll but the man sat across from me seems happy. He's clearly enjoying talking about jazz and the positive critical response to 'Shleep' has given him a justifiable lift. A friend described 'Schleep' as "Not a jazz album but an album that could only have been made by a jazz man" and while overall the sound is totally unique, probably owing as much to the big skies and rhythms of nature as to Miles Davis, there are faint echoes which evoke the ghost of Mingus, ensemble parts that uplift like Carla Bley and spacey rhythmic shuffles that tip a nod to Max Roach.

"People ask what I listen to and often wrongly assume I'm listening to music that they associate me with. When I say I listen to a lot of black music they are very surprised... 'I can't really hear it in what you do'. Don Cherry, Charlie Haden, Billy Higgins where do we go from here? The whole way of doing things, the excitement of making music comes out of that... maybe not the whole... but take 'September the Ninth' - the idea of having the tenor together with the trombone comes from late-Fifties Mingus with Jimmy Knepper and Shafi Hadi. Before I was a musician the film score to John Cassavettes" *Shadows* really influenced me. Classic Mingus. I can play reverse karaoke with Mingus at home so I know those textures can intertwine in that way. The other Mingus thing is the music is obviously structured but there's a looseness where everyone is phrasing together. He brought that to group arrangements and that's gone straight into 'September The Ninth'.

Wyatt's fragile falsetto voice weaves its own spell. It's quirky, often drenched in sadness and distinctively English. He doesn't warm to the idea of it being quintessential and of its

"Englishness" says: "That's just what's left because in the end, as a musician, you can't really copy anybody. So you're left with what you are, it's the only thing that's going to work."

Connecting poetry and music has long featured in Robert Wyatt's ventures. Today it's Alfie's poetry and visuals that provide the inspiration. Brian Eno who arranged the opening track of 'Heaps Of Sheeps' and plays on 'Madrid' was reminded of the Fifties jazz and poetry thing. Robert describes that as a kind of third stream, a failed avenue that was explored but remains interesting. Of someone like Mingus who talked all the way through his performances the singer says it can be done because the spoken word is simply a kind of atonal note but it's set off in a harmonic context.



Inspiration is drawn from other literary sources including Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Belloc and Conan Doyle's pro-Fenian father who, according to Robert, was "quite mad but quite wonderful".

"My favourite book is the Oxford dictionary, but I also like specialist dictionaries... Alfie just picked up a dictionary on Philosophy. I read a lot of books by scientists who write in plain English... Stephen Jones and Richard Dawkins. I still have a thing for children's books. I love books with pictures... my current picture book is on modern astronomy with all the infra-red photography, photos of the cosmos. That feeds back a little into what I do"

"The follow up to 'Shleep' could be a follow up to Charlie Parker's 'Ornithology', could be called 'Etymology' which goes really fast," he says laughing, "we could re-invent be-bop out of my new science books."

Having abandoned the city (which he still loves) and opted for the less socially interactive environment of the countryside I was curious to see how Robert Wyatt, as a drummer who is completely at home with programming, felt about the current tide of junglistic drum ‘n’ bass. Alfie had seen the live TV performance of Reprazent and longed for a few more chords but thought it was fantastic... "so exciting".

"Drum and bass... I'm right in there... Ed Blackwell and Charlie Haden..." says Robert and laughing out loud declares it's futile asking an old man such a thing. "My drums, even when they're jazz influenced, don't have that motorised thing. They move in the opposite direction. It's related to the rhythm section in that I use drums to lift the tune off the ground a bit and get it moving, they're fairly gaseous... smokey... not really solid chunks of rhythm. I've almost taken the bass drum out of my stuff, abandoned that idea of filling up a track with a massive drum sound. I tend more and more to leave it out and fill it up with air."

Referring to drummer Kenny Clark who would float across the cymbals using the kit as accents he declares he enjoys more and more the implied and ambiguous in rhythm. "My tunes still rely on rhythmic tension but it's like Mingus said, 'You get too far from the song and dance and you get lost." When I went to see Coltrane and Eric Dolphy play, they would take their solos but for me the main thing that was going on, that was transcendental was the endless churning of these vamps, these slightly shifting repeated riffs by McCoy Tyner and Elvin Jones. It was astonishing. It seemed so primitive yet it was so advanced in the effect it had on your mind. That's what we're talking about now aren't we (with drum ‘n’ bass)? It is an extension of that."

Robert Wyatt surrounds himself with like-minded people. He compensates for musicians who he loved and misses like the late South African trumpet player Mongezi Fezi and Don Cherry by taking up his own trumpet to create a sound that soars alongside his own voice. His politics are implicit in his associations. Paul Weller, a committed leftist happened to be recording in the same studio and was left a note saying, "What about it then?" by Wyatt. The result is on the CD and it's a striking and innovative take on Bob Dylan's 'Subterranean Homesick Blues'.

"Off the record I've been asked, 'Where's the politics ?'. I mean... Cliff Richard doesn't sing hymns all day 'cause he's a Christian. It's so intrinsic to what I am. Look at who I associate with and play with... Annie Whitehead and Evan Parker, look at their histories... Annie working with Aswad, Jerry Dammers, Evan with Louis Moholo. Whether the politics is not apparent in every song is not an issue... treat people who listen to you with respect and

you're already a step ahead of Philip Larkin. Basically, I love playing. I do play... I improvise a lot at home. But I'm just so incredibly relieved when I get enough coherent material to do an album. I'm always amazed I get that far."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Impressionist - Mojo - N°47 - October 1997

THE IMPRESSIONIST



A venerable artist returns with his most colourful canvas in some time.

By Ben Thomson

Robert Wyatt
Shleep / Rynodisk

Soft Machine and Matching Mole legend makes triumphant return. Sterling work from all-star supporting cast Paul Weller, Brian Eno, Evan Parker, Annie Whitehead and Phil Manzanera.

FAR FROM the old friends benefit it might have been, Robert Wyatt's first album since 1991 's *Dondestan* is a fresh and fully-rounded work. It combines all the best qualities of his earlier recordings - the happy balance of simplicity and complication, frailty and resilience - with a sense of purpose that feels newly minted. A trio of beautiful bird songs (September The 9th, Alien, and Out Of Season), co-written by Wyatt and his wife Alfreda Benge, form the hub of the album, but there are even greater pleasures in the hinterland. Wyatt's voice resonates as eloquently as ever, but on the bewitching Free Will And Testament it takes flight to a higher realm of unhistrionic poignancy. The exquisite Eno-flavoured opener Heaps Of Sheeps must be the most tranquil song ever written about insomnia, and Blues In Bob Minor - a suitably warped mirror-image of Dylan's Subterranean Homesick Blues - gives Paul Weller the cue for his most free-spirited guitar blow out since the heyday of The Style Council.

Robert Wyatt talks to Ben Thompson.

Your feathered friends seem to have been a great source of inspiration.

"Well, they outnumber us 10 to one, and I really love watching them, which isn't always true of people. I'm not like a twitcher, in the sense that a bird doesn't have to be rare for me to be interested in it - I really like the ones that just hang about. I think sparrows, for example, are extremely witty and amusing to watch, though that's very anthropomorphic of me, because I know they're really busy struggling for survival."

Was it that sympathetic attitude that led you to offer Paul Weller a way out of his pub rock impasse?

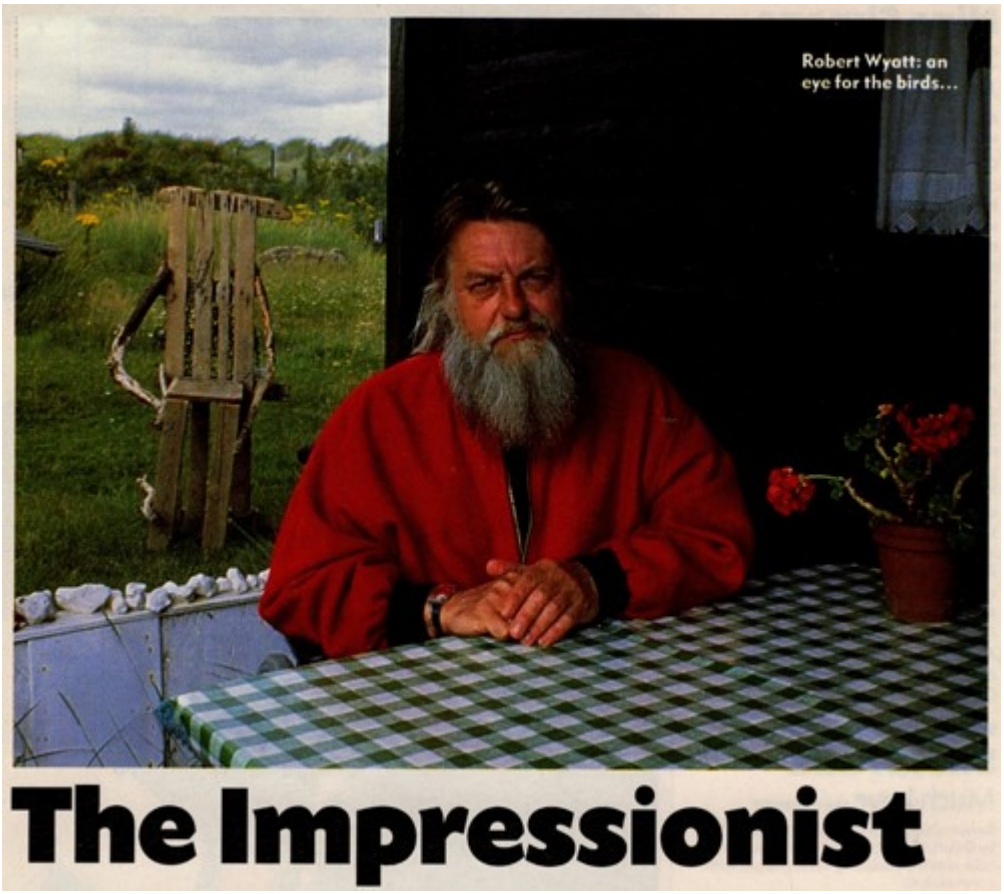
"Haha! With some people I'm just like a normal pop fan - judgement is completely suspended, and Paul is one of those. I've always liked the cut of his jib, and having spent so much time struggling around trying to do different things myself, I really identify with some of the adventures that he's had."

People might be surprised by an avant-garde avatar like yourself teaming up with the arch populist loafer-wearer?

"Someone who knows my track record shouldn't be surprised at me working with anybody, really. In any case, we musicians think differently about these things - inside the brotherhood."

What's Blues In Bob Minor about?

"The original vocal was a bit influenced by those adverts: 'Papa!' 'Nicole!' I was just singing 'Oh Alfie' and I thought it was dead good and minimalist, but when I tried it out on my wife she said I was just being lazy and not bothering to write proper words. So, after I'd slammed the door a few times and smashed a couple of plates, I thought, I'll stuff it with words! I was trying to copy the Dylan original but I couldn't remember the lyrics, which was a good thing because it finished up as Robert Wyatt rather than Bob Dylan. Alfie thinks he might object. If he does we'll just bluff it out and say, 'Borrowing is a vital part of the folk tradition'."



Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Interview: Robert Wyatt The only way is up when you've hit rock bottom - Independent - 30 September 1997



Interview: Robert Wyatt The only way is up when you've hit rock bottom

Phil Johnson • Tuesday 30 September 1997 00:02 •

Robert Wyatt has `had a bad Nineties' but has emerged from his depression with an exquisite new album. He talks to Phil Johnson about nostalgia, coping with disability and why he'll die with `Marxist-Leninist' inscribed on his heart.

Even the sleeve-notes are a work of art, a little miracle of grace and humility wherein the author apportions credit and gives thanks to friends and collaborators, like Brian Eno, Phil Manzanera and Paul Weller, for helping to make his first album in six years possible. The album itself, Shleep (the title is meant to invoke the sardonic Jewish humour of Wyatt's friend Ronnie Scott), is a real work of art too, deepening with every hearing and drawing the listener in to a strange, sometimes dark, often painfully fragile but somehow transcendentally hopeful world that has no compare in contemporary music of any genre. Honestly, it's that good (although it's not always easy listening) and, as one would expect, its creator, Robert Wyatt, aged 52, isn't your usual brand of bland pop self- publicist. "That was a long answer, wasn't it?" he adds as a coda to an impossibly convoluted, heartfelt, response to a pat question. "One word would have sufficed, Robert."

Recorded over a period of months in ex-Roxy Music guitarist Manzanera's Chertsey studio, where Wyatt slept in a camp bed on the floor and was relieved of the normal anxiety of clock-watching by getting a cut-price rate from his mate, Shleep is the response, Wyatt says, to a long spell of serious depression from which he thought he might never emerge. "I've had a rough Nineties really, in which I seemed to spin down a dark hole like Alice in Wonderland. For the first time, I reviewed my past and it seemed so inaccessible, and everything I'd done - even making records - so far from what it now was, that it was the first experience I've ever had in my life of nostalgia. Not for anything in particular, but for the physical routine of playing music with people. So when I came out of that I was trying to exorcise it in some way or define it so I could make my emotional problems into intellectual ones, to cool me down a bit, to cool down the fever in the brain. I can be fairly gloomy at the best of times but this was your actual nervous breakdown, I think."

We're talking in the living-room of Wyatt's home in a comfortable Georgian house in the market-town of Louth, in Lincolnshire, where he lives with his wife Alfie (Alfreda Benge), who is really the co-creator of the album. Her poems provide the lyrics for many of the songs, her drawings and paintings adorn the sleeve, and she clearly plays a part in Wyatt's work that is far greater than artist's muse. They came to Louth, she says, because it was

sufficiently far up the map for them to afford a house with a large- enough ground floor for Wyatt's needs. Since an accident in 1973, when he fell drunkenly from a fourth-floor window at a party in London, Wyatt has been paraplegic and confined to a wheelchair. In the year following the accident, he married Alfie on the same day that his brilliant solo album, the mordantly titled Rock Bottom, was released. Shortly afterwards, his cover version of The Monkees' "I'm a Believer" entered the charts and he appeared on Top of the Pops in his wheelchair.

"It took me a long time to get over the accident," he says, "but it's misunderstood. I wasn't traumatised by it - I found it rather novel actually - and my depression wasn't anything to do with it, or not that I'm conscious of. It was a nostalgia for the Seventies, when Rock Bottom was released. I came out of hospital, got married to Alfie and, suddenly, that was my Spring, when I felt that the world was a welcoming place, an exciting place to be.

"I liked Alfie a lot - how do you say these things? - and we had a couple of years together before I was paraplegic, and then we got married when I came out of hospital, which was kind of her, really. It was a lot of work for her because she had spent all that time trying to avoid having a baby and she ends up with this incontinent giant, this alcoholic thing. But nevertheless I got nostalgic for that period, and when I look back it's got stardust all over it. Suddenly I felt like a dead person looking back on their life, and I thought, `I used to do so many things!', and I might as well carry on doing them while I'm still alive. After all, what's stopping me apart from a serious attitude problem?"

The accident had also impeded his progress with his principal instrument, the drums. "My favourite bit of the drum-kit was the hi-hat and I couldn't play it any more. It's taken me years to realise that you don't have to play hi-hat." Shleep is full of ticking cymbals, a signature sound that dates right back to Wyatt's drumming with the early Soft Machine, the great English psychedelic band of the Sixties, whose music pulsed with jazz rhythms and to which Wyatt's seemingly faux-cockney vocals (pleasingly, he speaks with exactly the same accent as he sings) brought a rare distinction. The group's first album from 1968 featured sleeve-notes by the American jazz musician and writer Mike Zwerin which recalled Wyatt in the South of France (the group were providing the soundtrack for a play by Picasso), riding in a car, his long hair billowing in the wind as he sang a note- for-note vocalise version of Charlie Parker's solo on "Donna Lee".

Despite the collapse of communism, Wyatt's political allegiances haven't really altered. "A lot of us have become bird-watchers, apparently, but I haven't changed at all. I shall die with Marxist-Leninist imprinted on my spine, like the letters in Blackpool rock. It's not a question of what I do or say; it's how the world feels to me. I don't expect other people to go along with it, but I will never recant - or whatever it is you do. I still don't see any other serious analysis of the world, and for me to abandon Marxism would be like the creationists deciding to ignore Darwin. I'm very grateful for it, and for me it was invaluable in the struggle against apartheid, which was one of the reasons I got involved, and Joe Slovo, I just think he was a giant among men really, a successful communist who saw it through."

Wyatt's parents were also important in helping to determine his political beliefs. His father, George Wyatt, was an industrial psychologist, and his mother, Honor Wyatt, was a producer for the BBC, on Woman's Hour among other things. "They were liberals, I suppose," he says, "and they always warned me about washing my hands after I picked up a copy of the Daily Express. For my parents, the Welfare State was the whole point of the century, what everything had been fought for since the dismal 1920s." His commitment to communism, however, came about in the Seventies, as both a response to the anti-apartheid struggle and as a reaction to the breakaway of the SDP from the Labour Party. "David Owen, Shirley Williams and that lot... when they peeled off, they seemed to take the intellectual establishment with them, and they left me with the GLC and Arthur Scargill, who I much preferred."

Though in no way a tract, the new album rings with images that unite the personal with the political, although Wyatt looks back on the hippie politics of the Sixties with disdain. "A mass narcissism that allowed people to forget the whole thing. The personal is political therefore if I'm nice... it just shades off into Barbara Cartland really." Nevertheless, he has begun to limit his own intake of reality, for reasons of self-preservation. "For example, I no longer read Amnesty International reports, I just can't bear to, and I've blinkered myself a bit; I just cannot allow this to happen to me, or to Alfie, again. I try to look on the bright side, and it's a desperate move, but I really like watching comedy on television: Father Ted and Frasier. It's like when Princess Diana died and you see all the flowers and you think, well, there's a nice side to the English, it makes a change from wanting to go out and kill the Argies. It makes you want to savour the moment, whereas 10 years ago I might have thrown it away."

`Shleep' is released on Hannibal Records this week

Robert Wyatt born 1945

The Soft Machine: Vol 1 (1968, re-released with Vol 2 on Big Beat CD). Amazing semi-lost dead sea scroll of English psychedelia

Matching Mole: Matching Mole (CBS, 1972) Wyatt's prog-rock outfit. The album features the love song `O Caroline', recently covered by Gorky's Zygotic Mynci

Rock Bottom (1974, Virgin) `An unqualified masterpiece' according to Mark Ellingham in The Rough Guide to Rock

Nothing Can Stop Us (1982, Rough Trade)

Classic `Red Thames' GLC-era recording

Dondestan (1991, Rough Trade) The last full Wyatt album, featuring arrangements of poems by Alfreda Benge

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Or do you wanna get serious? - The Guardian - October 10, 1997

OR DO YOU WANNA GET SERIOUS?

Jonathan Romney



Robert Wyatt makes music like a painter and can't play the piano like Liberace. Jonathan Romney meets him.

Four months ago, Robert Wyatt became a grandfather at the age of 52, and it's fair to say that the role suits him down to the ground. It's not just that he has the right beard for the part, a long shaggy mop that he sometimes tweaks into two forks, ideal for small children to tug. It's also that he makes the kind of music you'd rather hope a grandfather would make - melancholic, quizzical and fired by a mischief that those greybeards-in-denial the Rolling Stones could only dream of.

Wyatt probably has more stories to tell, too, than the average grandfather. 'There have been so many lives,' he muses, 'that sometimes it's hard to remember the correct one.' He started out in the 1960s, drumming and singing with English psychedelia's radical highbrows, the Soft Machine, followed by his own group Matching Mole. Then, in 1973, he fell from a fourth-floor window, breaking his back, and has been paraplegic ever since. He claims that was the making of him. 'As a drummer, I was dysfunctional. I couldn't be told what to do, and in my own group I couldn't tell other people what to do either. I didn't know how to function until I couldn't play drums any more, and that provided the answer.' Since then, Wyatt has forged a unique, diverse solo career. It began with a bizarre moment as a chart artist, reworking the Monkees' I'm A Believer, and took in a spell in the 1980s as purveyor of radical cover versions - from Cuban revolutionary anthems to Elvis Costello's Falklands memorial Shipbuilding, via Chic and Thelonious Monk. Then there were extraordinary LPs such as 1974's dense, harrowing Rock Bottom, setting Wyatt's racked lamentations amid a soundscape that sounded positively subaquatic.

It's been seven years since Dondestan, his last full-length record. But his new CD, Shleep, is his richest and most affecting in years.

Operating, geographically and temperamentally, far off the music-business superhighway, Wyatt works at his own pace, at least when circumstances allow. 'I've got an ideal picture of an artist's life - just a simple routine, pursuing ideas relentlessly week after week… I'm a bit of a hothouse flower. When there's fuss and bother I stop functioning.' The last few

years have brought more than a usual amount of fuss. He recently fell out of his wheelchair, breaking both legs and losing a year's working time. 'They put me in one of those wheelchairs where your legs stick straight out - and I can't play the piano sideways like Liberace.' A further problem was a psyche too finely tuned to the state of the nation. In the 1980s, Wyatt established himself as one of the more politically vociferous figures in British music, his songs inveighing against apartheid, the CIA and the Tories. He was a member of the Communist Party, until he lost faith with its attempts to repackage itself.

Political and mental burn-out eventually came in the form of a nervous collapse. 'The right-wing triumphalism of the eighties got to me. The propaganda war is designed to demoralise rather than kill, and it works.' He tried Prozac, which left him feeling stupefied but, typically, it was the political animal in him that pulled him through. 'I thought, look at all the good things - Mandela, all the corrupt governments like Zaire falling, and millions of vegetarians. It's very rude to all these people to be depressed.'


So you really, really

As Spice Girl mania begins to take over the world, an army of tribute bands is cashing in. **Alex Bellos** picks the best of the bunch

Or do you wanna get serious?

Robert Wyatt makes music like a painter and can't play the piano like Liberace. **Jonathan Romney** meets him

Throughout his career, Wyatt has been an adventurous collaborator, turning up on records by the unlikeliest range of artists -from agit-brass band the Happy End and folk-technoists Ultramarine, to Ryuichi Sakamoto, who overdubbed him onto the Rolling Stones' We Love You, pitched in improbable harmony with Brian Wilson. But on his own recent records, Wyatt has tended to work entirely solo. 'As a paraplegic, you want to prove you can take care of stuff yourself. Because I don't sell many records, I work as a cottage industry mostly. Sometimes I feel like Samuel Beckett, sometimes I feel like… someone much more garrulous.'

It was in that mood that Wyatt decided to socialise again on Shleep, his most extroverted, not to say tumultuous, record in years. Its cast includes trombonist Annie Whitehead, improv saxophonist Evan Parker, and Wyatt's long-standing kindred spirit Brian Eno: 'Seeing him in a studio is like seeing a dolphin in water. He's nice on land - but you should see him in water.' Wyatt's most consistent collaborator has been his wife Alfreda Benge, aka Alfie, who is also his manager, sleeve artist, beard-trimmer and occasional lyric writer. 'She's at least the other half of the story. It's like Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo - she turned out to be the major figure of the two and I'm sure that's how it'll be with us.' Shleep features several of her poems, including the inscrutable A Sunday In Madrid. 'They seem to have a natural in-built music that comes out when you sing them,' Wyatt says. 'You know those Japanese bits of screwed-up paper which you put in water and they turn to flowers? Well, Alfie's words are like that - the music is already in them, you just have to wet them.' Although he's not one for the work ethic, Wyatt says that living with Alfie does stir him to a 'husband ethic': 'I occasionally have to go out and crack a bison on the head and drag it home for dinner. If it weren't for that discipline, I'd probably be like Jeffrey Bernard - concentrate on getting pissed and dissolute. My heroes are people like Artaud, who absolutely refuse to participate in any way in anything they're meant to do.' If one thread of continuity runs through Wyatt's career, it's the voice, matured but largely unchanged since the 1960s - a sort of distracted conversational whine, the plaintive sound of a costermonger lost in the woods. 'I don't consciously try to sing like me,' Wyatt says. 'When I started, I tried to sing like Steve Marriott and Van Morrison – even… Leonard Cohen, but none of it seemed to work. So I ended up making notes out of the way I talk. In the end the voice is different from other instruments and you listen to it in a different way.' Wyatt honed that voice on the first three Soft Machine LPs. Tradition has it that he was too much the maverick to stay in a band that was heading up an academic fusion path, but he has only recently, he says, begun to admit the real reason. 'I was a piss artist and they were very sober. I think that's why I was kicked out.' Wyatt's confidence never entirely recovered from the split, but he reacted by developed his own distinctive musical language - a style of keyboard playing, drumming and, most recently, trumpet, that somehow comes across as a direct notation of his psyche. 'If I see the tape as a canvas on

which I'm mapping out shapes and textures, I feel totally comfortable. I… just think about Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy and so on. Painting is DIY, because you don't think, 'Who do I know who does blue?' You just get out your tube of blue.'

Maybe it's this painterly approach that makes Wyatt's detractors see him as a figure of whimsy, a hippie dabbler. But in an industry where rhetoric rules, there's something remarkable about an artist who can produce work so traumatically raw and yet maintain a stance of amused distraction. "I don't have a particular thing about self-expression,' Wyatt says, "it's just that I sometimes hear things in my head that nobody else is going to play if I don't. If it weren't for that, I'd be quite happy listening to everyone else. '

Shleep is released on Hannibal/Rykodisc.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

"If I were Blackpool rock, I'd have Marxist-Leninist right through the middle." Robert Wyatt, radical singer and reclusive star, gives rare interview - New Statesman - September 26, 1997

"If I were Blackpool rock, I'd have Marxist-Leninist right through the middle."

Interview by Jonathan Coe

A thin wash of electric organ, voicing dense, minor chords. A shuffling backbeat on the drumkit, keeping perfect time but somehow sounding hesitant, tentative. An extraordinary lyric, part political lament, part nonsense poem ("hibernate in winter of our discotheque"). And over it all an impossibly frail but utterly compelling voice, somewhere between a high-pitched keen and a guttural rap - a voice that the Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto once called "the saddest voice in the world", but which its owner likes to describe, more prosaically, as "Jimmy Somerville on Valium". This, for the benefit of new listeners, is the unmistakable soundworld of Robert Wyatt.

The song in question is called "Blues in Bob Minor" and comes from a new album - his first in six years - called Shleep. For those of us who have been carrying Wyatt's music in our heads since the 1970s, re-entering that soundworld is one of the sheerest pleasures life has to offer: it provides a bedrock of continuity, among other things, that helps to make sense of two decades of bewildering political and musical change.

By the most superficial standards Wyatt might look like a marginal figure; his sales figures in this country have never been big. But at the same time it's astonishing to realise how often he has quietly risen to the occasion, what a diligent musical witness he has been to the key events in our recent history: berating Falklands jingoism with his version of Elvis Costello's "Shipbuilding"; anticipating the mood of the new South Africa with the Swapo Singers and "The Winds of Change"; and, more recently, radicalising the dance scene by cropping up on Ultramarine's wonderful album United Kingdoms to produce the most unlikely but exhilarating fusion of nineties drum patterns with forgotten Victorian protest songs.

Shleep must rank as Wyatt's most diverse, accessible and accomplished album since the far-off days when he recorded for Virgin Records under the benign stewardship of a budding entrepreneur called Richard Branson. Its predecessor, Dondestan, was a bleak and beautiful record which found Wyatt singing and playing entirely alone, with minimalist backing tracks of keyboards and drums. But while the new songs are still about landscapes, states of mind and political processes, and once again take their lyrical view from the supple, expressive poems of Wyatt's wife, Alfreda Benge, there's now an intriguing roll-call of guest musicians: figures from the more experimental end of the rock spectrum, such as Brian Eno and Phil Manzanera, the jazzers Evan Parker and Annie Whitehead, the singer/percussionist Gary Adzukx and - perhaps the starriest contributor of all - Paul Weller, whose guitar work instills a fierceness and dynamism which is a new ingredient in Wyatt's music. How did that particular marriage come about, I wondered?

"Paul happened to be recording at the same studio," says Wyatt, "and I just left him a little scruffy note saying, 'How about it?'"

He senses that Weller felt a little nervous at first about exposing himself in this fragile musical environment, as have Wyatt's other collaborators in the past. "I suppose one

problem is that I tend to avoid a great wall of sound and so people tread more warily, somehow, when they step into my music. Perhaps that's why they find it scary. But then I've never asked them, so I've no idea. It might be the beard."

Wyatt's beard is indeed a prodigious growth: thick, grey, multidirectional and at least a foot long, it makes his resemblance to an Old Testament prophet so striking that to sit for long in his presence would be a fearsome experience if his manner weren't so relaxed and genial.

The surroundings also help: we are in the cloistered tranquillity of his back garden in Louth, Lincolnshire, where he and Alfie relocated in the late 1980s, propelled from the south of England by property prices and a growing sense of alienation. From the outside it's an unimposing terraced house, but inside it opens up, Tardis-like, to accommodate miles of shelving for tapes, books and records, along with Wyatt's sunlit music room and an upstairs studio for Alfie's painting. There are occasional ramps for the wheelchair to which Wyatt, now paraplegic, has been confined since his fall from a fourth-floor window in 1973.

I'm intrigued by this idea of pop musicians sending each other scruffy little notes. Such shyness seems of a piece with the diffident musical environment in which Wyatt's career began, when he first played drums with his Canterbury schoolfriends in a band called The Wilde Flowers, back in the mid-1960s. With a certain icy, hard-won detachment, he refers to his persona from those days as "the drummer biped".

"It was a great surprise, this whole business of singing: not really what I intended at all. Most of the musicians I knew absolutely refused to sing: they used to just sort of stand there in groups and if there was anybody listening we'd' be blushing with shame and shyness, fumbling at our various stringed instruments and so on. But I had the secret ingredient that my more prudish friends never took on, which was drink - I found that if you drank you lost all fear. So I did that and it seemed to do the trick."

Does it still do the trick? Wyatt chuckles. "Oh yes. As the late Keith Moon used to say: I still like a spot of sherry before dinner."

So there was no desire to be a rock'n'roll hero, then? "No it was just what you did at that time: at the end of National Service they suddenly invented beat groups, as far as I can work out, and we all had to troop along and trundle away in desultory fashion. In fact my main singing influences were Peter Pears, Doris Day singing "Once I Had a Secret Love", and Danny Kaye singing almost anything. I just preceded rock'n'roll, really, by a couple of years. I never had this desire - which I think is a bit onanistic - to see my own generation speak back to me. I never wanted other boys shouting at me: I couldn't stand it! I didn't mind Brenda Lee shouting at me, though."

Over the next few years The Wilde Flowers indirectly spawned a number of bands (Soft Machine, Caravan, Matching Mole, Hatfield and the North) whose polite but adventurous music stands up better than most from that dismal era.

For a while Wyatt was at the centre of his movement but in the mid 1970s there came a sea change. The accident cut short Wyatt's drumming career; the death of a close friend, the South African trumpeter Mongezi Feza, concentrated his mind on the horrors of apartheid; his blossoming relationship with Alfie drew him into anew and more highly politicised circle. After recording an intensely personal solo album, Rock Bottom, his political and musical thinking became notably more wide-ranging.

"My parents were what would now be called new Labour, but with Alfie I began to meet these impressively psychotic young Trots who could out-rampage any rock musician. I hadn't ever really come out of my musical dreamworld before then. Records I'd enjoyed in the late 1950s and early 1960s had included Max Roach's Freedom Now suite and Charlie Mingus's anti-racist songs, and so I knew whose side I was on if it came to it. But I hadn't realised it had come to it. I joined the Communist Party simply because it seemed the only really internationalist one, in the sense that it wasn't just about the English identity crisis, and all that garbage."

"Totalitarian Englishness", in fact, is one of Wyatt's pet hates. On his 1982 album Nothing Can Stop Us he recorded versions of "The Red Flag", the Cuban anthem "Caimanera" and the American a cappella number "Stalin Wasn't Stallin'". Shleep still has strong African and Latin American influences.

"I've never liked being told you must be more interested in England than in Cuba, say, just because you're English. Most of the people I knew who were in opposition were

traumatised by the previous Blair - Eric - who told everybody that the pro-Soviet left were just dysfunctional patriots. I think there is such an emotion as patriotism but to displace it demographically like that is quite refreshing, and sort of . . . surrealist. I was into avant-garde art long before I got into this politics lark and so it always seemed rather a good idea to be a patriotic Cuban sitting in Twickenham. I didn't see the problem at all.

"If I'm to have a cultural identity, then in a free society I'd like it to be one over which I have conscious control. It would be hovering somewhere between prewar Polish writers such as Bruno Schulz, Russian Jews such as George Gershwin, Marc Chagall and Ronnie Scott, and black Americans such as Lester Young and Miles Davis, thank you very much, and nothing to do with Surrey or hunting or public schools or football or any of the things I'm told are in my blood."

Nowadays Wyatt belongs to no political party and is as jubilant as anyone about new Labour's success, but he maintains that "if I were a bit of Blackpool rock I would have Marxist-Leninist right the way through the middle, in pink."

At which point I ask the obvious question: is making music an effective form of political intervention? Can music ever bring about political change?

Wyatt gives the question a more thoughtful answer than perhaps it deserves. "I don't act even on that hope, myself," he says, carefully.

"This is always discussed in the context of left-wing politics, isn't it? But there are certainly members of the conservative establishment who've used music as part of their camouflage, as it were. Songs such as the national anthem come to mind here, not to mention 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. But I sing about these things because it's a way of making contact with like-minded people. What I don't like when the cold rightwing winds are blowing is that loneliness, you know. I like to huddle together with other sympathetic souls."

Then the writer of "O Caroline" and "Sea Song" - two of the most beautiful love songs of the past 30 years - ponders and adds: "I don't know . . . It's the same with love songs. I mean if you write a love song, do you really think it's going to get the girl back? I shouldn't think so. But it's still worth a song, isn't it?"

"Shleep" is released on Rykodisc on 29 September; Wyatt's back catalogue will be reissued by Rykodisc in January 1998.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Minimal Robert Wyatt : A Group by Himself - International Herald Tribune - September 11, 1997

THE MINIMAL ROBERT WYATT : A GROUP BY HIMSELF

By Mike Zwerin


INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune Features

iht.com Business Culture Sports Opinion

AMERICAS EUROPE ASIA/PACIFIC AFRICA/MIDDLE EAST TECHMEDIA STYLE HEALTH

TRAVEL PROPERTIES BLOGS SPECIAL REPORTS AUDIO/NEWS

The Minimal Robert Wyatt:A Group by Himself

By Mike Zwerin Published: THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1997

PARIS: Robert Wyatt raised the level of playing his instrument to the point that being described as a rock drummer was no longer pejorative.

He was with a no-nonsense British band called The Soft Machine, named after a book by William Burroughs. They fused instrumental jazz and rock at least two years before Miles Davis. A CBS Records executive said that he couldn't figure out if they were the label's best-selling jazz band or its worst-selling rock group.

Wyatt played the drums and sang lead vocals at the same time. Not many drummers could do that then (or now, for that matter), certainly not in 11/4 time. He was also the first drummer in rock history to play bare-breasted. "EEEEE!" the groupies screamed. "Robert took off his shirt."

PARIS:
Robert Wyatt raised the level of playing his instrument to the point that being described as a rock drummer was no longer pejorative.

He was with a no-nonsense British band called The Soft Machine, named after a book by William Burroughs. They fused instrumental jazz and rock at least two years before Miles Davis. A CBS Records executive said that he couldn't figure out if they were the label's best-selling jazz band or its worst-selling rock group.

Wyatt played the drums and sang lead vocals at the same time. Not many drummers could do that then (or now, for that matter), certainly not in 11/4 time. He was also the first drummer in rock history to play bare-breasted. "EEEEE!" the groupies screamed. "Robert took off his shirt."

However, his crazy caveman Elvis/Elvin persona gave way after he fell out of a window during a party. He has been in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down, for more than 20 years now. His stature is such that you find yourself looking up to him anyway. He is a living legend, a cult hero, a towering figure.

The music he has made since the accident has been described as "wry, plaintive, soulful, humorous, idiosyncratic, melancholic" and "ingenious." There were no other musicians on the albums. He wrote the songs and played all the backing instruments himself. They were, in the best sense of the term, minimal.

His album titles begin to tell the story by themselves — "Rock Bottom," "Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard," "Old Rotten Hat," "The End of an Ear." "Shleep," ("Fat Chance to Dream"), Wyatt's latest, is being released this month.<

"Shleep" is on Hannibal, a label with a serious reputation. There are live musicians on it, and not just anybody at that. If you know anything about the European Community alternate jazz and rock scene, you'll be impressed by the names Brian Eno, Philip

Catherine, Annie Whitehead and Evan Parker. If not, be impressed anyway.

Now that he's a real live leader, he looks back on those rough days when he used to patch all the voices and instruments together all alone.

"It's quite funny being in a group all by yourself," he said. "I had all the same arguments with myself that real groups have. I was listening to the bassist and the drummer and I'd think, 'What are those two up to?' And it was all me. It's funny how many different characters you can find in yourself.

"I'm not even sure what culture I'm in: rock or jazz. My head is full of jazz but that's not quite the whole story. I'm not a rock musician; I can't work off power chords. I start the recording process on my little basic four-track machine. It's quite limited, but then I think that Beethoven could have written his late string quartets on a four-track. So there seems to be room for a lot of information."

Living legends and cult heroes generally involve unlikely name and discipline crossovers.

"My parents were part of a little gang of intellectuals," he says. "I guess you could call them bohemians. They were friends of [the poet and novelist] Robert Graves. I left school illiterate and drifted off to Deya on Majorca where Graves owned a house, and he put me up with his own kids. I think he was relieved that I wasn't one more young academic snob asking him about White Goddesses.

"He had Coltrane records, and we listened together. Graves approved of my wanting to be a drummer. He made me feel all right about liking the things I liked."

The Soft Machine was stranded in Saint Tropez in the summer of 1967 when the club in which they were to work went belly-up. Happener, director and poet Jean-Jacques Lebel hired the Soft for his production of the Pablo Picasso play "Desire Caught by the Tail," along with Gary Goodrow and other members of the Living Theatre. (Wyatt says that the high spot of the summer for him, however, was dining with Paul Desmond.)

Time magazine wrote it up, the French press caught on, the Village Voice covered it. Two years later, the Soft was opening for Jimi Hendrix on a tour of the United States (and opened for Davis the following year).

But then hippies began to overdose, move to Los Angeles, start work on projects they never finished and to write highly paid jingles for commercial TV. Wyatt moved to Twickenham, not far from where Peter Townshend lived on the banks of the Thames.

People would pass by and greet him indulgently as he sat in his wheelchair on Twickenham High Street selling Communist literature. He has a seductive smile, and he said that the party offered the only real choice.

He recorded with rock groups called National Health and Henry Cow, and with Carla Bley. He covered songs by Elvis Costello ("Shipbuilding"), Peter Gabriel ("Biko"), The Monkees ("I'm a Believer") and the Golden Gate Quartet ("Stalin Wasn't Stallin"').

Covering other people's material, he can reveal their hidden sides. His own material and the way he presents it is reminiscent of the French chanson — of Brel or Jacques Debronckart, for example. There are unusual degrees of drama, the arrangements are essential and the delivery often adds to the meaning.

In "Heeps of Sheeps" — written with his wife, Alfreda Benge, a painter, and arranged by Eno — counting sheep does not cure his insomnia: "Still not sleeping / I realized my goose was cooked."

The opening lines of "Blues in Bob Minor" go: "Roger's in the archive looking up casement / Martha's in the government digging up the basement."

The Wyatts live in a market town in Lincolnshire that is "meters deep in pesticide. To call it countryside is stretching the language." He bought a Pakistani pocket trumpet in a pawnshop.

He spends his sometimes long days playing along with records by Don Cherry, Dave Brubeck, Charlie Haden, Lucky Thompson and Slim and Slam.

"Wrong Movements," a scrapbook biography, has been published in Britain. Asked whether he's satisfied with his new record album, he replies with a chuckle: "I don't do reviews."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Local Hero - Wire N° 163 - September 1997

LOCAL HERO



> Zoom

Words: Biba Kopf
Photography: Michele Turriani

.....

"The last record I made under my own name was while there was no elected prime minister," reminisces Robert Wyatt with a slight shudder as he recalls the grey years. "John Major was there by default, as it were, so I quickly made a record. When he actually got voted in, I was so depressed at the thought that another generation of English people were prepared to vote for a Conservative government that I went on strike for five years, and now he's gone I have made another record..."

Pausing long enough for the listener to weigh up the implications of his one man art strike, Wyatt leans forward, his face creasing into regularly exercised laughter lines, as he readies himself to toss a banana skin under the oncoming train of thought.

"At least that's what I would like to say, but that's a load of old bollocks!" he guffaws. "I just had a hard time collecting my thoughts throughout the 90s. They seemed to just dissipate.

But I have to earn a living," Wyatt continues, "so I just collected together scraps of tunes and words, with a lot of help from other people, other people's tunes, Alfie's words, and I found to my surprise that I had enough material for a record."

Fully animated, nothing can stop Robert Wyatt now. He is sitting in the garden of the ramshackle summer dacha he and his wife Alfie (née Alfreda) bought on the mouth of the Humber river near Cleethorpes, along with a house in Louth, Lincolnshire, with the proceeds from selling their Twickenham flat in the late 1980s. They might be far removed from the heart of things, but their thirst for a righteous fight hasn't diminished. On the way from the train station, Alfie, herself an artist and poet, rejoices in their recent victory over the developers by getting the land around their dacha - one of a colony that used to serve as a holiday retreat for Yorkshire miners - declared a conservation area.

If sunshine and a seaside victory were not enough, Robert Wyatt's excellent new album *Shleep* is just cause for celebration. Recorded at former Roxy Music guitarist Phil Manzanera's studio, it

marks Wyatt's return to working with a range of different musicians, rather than trying to do everything himself on what Alfie calls his 50 quid keyboard. You can imagine what a difference a line-up including Brian Eno, Evan Parker, Annie Whitehead, Belgian guitarist Philip Catherine, and, most surprisingly, Paul Weller made, not only to the texture of the music, but also to Wyatt's spirit.

"The people who came in, they really livened me up," enthuses Wyatt, "because when you are on your own, I mean, not in a group, you can get a bit… abstract. You can lose your grip on that physical, visceral thing of making music, that momentum of working with other people. So it wasn't just their contributions that were valuable, it was the psychological effect, for me, of being back among other people."

What with its balance of musical invention and playfulness, song structure and the freedom for players like Parker to extend song form way beyond its usual parameters, and the sharp observation and Lear-like nonsense of its lyrics, Shleep reverses the spiral of despair which Wyatt's latter records seemed locked into. Indeed, at its most buoyantly optimistic it is as exuberant as "Love Makes Sweet Music", the very first single he made with Soft Machine some 30 years ago, especially when Wyatt's voice locks into - in his words - his "girlie chorus act" with Brian Eno (on "Heaps Of Sheeps") That same spirit carries through into the affectionate comedy of "The Duchess", featuring Parker's soprano and Eno's synthesizer. Thereafter, it takes a wistful tumble through a Wyatt/Catherine ballad and a vaguely troubled dream song co-written with former Soft Machine colleague Hugh Hopper. And then Wyatt slays you with the album's masterpiece, a faintly comic, yet heartbreakingly melancholy philosophical meditation called "Free Will And Testament". Over Paul Weller's guitar and slide revamp of the tune (originally written by Mark Kramer), Wyatt opens brilliantly with the lines, "*Given free will but within certain limitations/I cannot will myself to limitless mutations*", and concludes with the devastating plea, *"Had I been tree, I could have chosen not to be me/Demented forces push me madly round a treadmill/... Let me off please, I am so very tired.*"



The piece heads a canon of great Wyatt songs, among them Soft Machine's "Moon In June", Matching Mole's "Oh Caroline", "Signed Curtain" and "The God Song", the exile's lament of "Dondestan" and the whole of the *Rock Bottom* album. His voice threads such songs through successive tapestries of psychedelic, experimental, Rock In Opposition, post-punk, agitpop, jazz fringe and Electronica musics without ever tugging him away from the path he marked out for himself 30 years ago.

"Any consistency comes from the fact that my brain goes round and round similar preoccupations for years on end," Wyatt remarks in his characteristically self deprecatory manner. "I nag away at one or two thoughts like Winnie The Pooh, who was, in fact, my earliest role model. That's where any consistency comes from."

Robert Wyatt talks as he sings, just as you would expect of the man who, 30 years ago and then

some, introduced the once revolutionary notion of singing it like you talk it, while all around him were mimicking American R&B vocalists. In Soft Machine he drummed and sang the 'pataphysical alphabet in the sour-sweet pop countertenor of a defrocked Canterbury choirboy. Well, who's to know whether he ever really sat in a cathedral pew, but as a prime mover of the Canterbury scene, out of which emerged the pre-Softs group Wilde Flowers, Caravan and Kevin Ayers, Wyatt helped set the tone of a very English kind of psychedelia. And just as his voice - high, keening, sometimes deliberately flattened at the edges to vaguely comic effect or to up the melancholy quotient - refused to disguise its origins, it also expressed a range of emotions and concerns that must be the envy of classically trained countertenors who are invariably confined to freakish roles. After rigor mortis set in at Soft Machine, around the time when the thrilling, fuzzed rutting of their lead players started hardening into a bookish cousin to jazz rock, Wyatt was frozen out of the group he founded. All these years later his 'expulsion' still pains him.

"Well, I think it was Tom Waits who said, I slept through the 60s," ponders Wyatt "All I can say is, I certainly didn't do that but I envy him a great deal. I mean, for me, the things that came out of it were quite other. My son was born in 1966 so it wasn't a waste of time. Something came out of it. But I find it hard to imagine that I wouldn't have been happier somewhere else, with someone else, as far as the music went."

Punning on the French for Soft Machine he teased his ex-colleagues by naming his next group Matching Mole. With them he produced two albums - the first an erratic masterpiece of pioneering mellotron mood experiments wrapped around a pair of heartbreaking songs, "O Caroline" and "Signed Curtain"; and its sequel, *Little Red Record*, an occasionally brilliant melange of skits, bizarre song and racing fusion pieces. He was about to record a third when, in June, 1973, he fell out of a fourth floor window at a party and broke his back. The accident rendered him paraplegic. But straightaway during his stay in hospital he began formulating Rock Bottom, the album that launched his solo career proper.

"I don't think I have ever been a group musician really," Wyatt postulates "Now this sounds sarcastic, but I was liberated by paraplegia from having to be in a group. It was only really since being in a wheelchair that I have had to do what I feel most comfortable doing, which is doing what I do first, then finding the people most appropriate to the particular tracks. I mean, there was no way I could go on the road with a group featuring Paul Weller and Evan Parker and Annie Whitehead. I don't have to think like that anymore. There isn't that awful anxiety of having to fit every person to every tune and every tune to every person, because that is your group."

As evidenced by such a statement, humour and pain are never far apart in Wyatt's work. His music is so profoundly affecting because it's very much a direct expression of his feelings at the moment of recording. That's not to say he's the fringe's equivalent of a 70s singer/songwriter opening their veins to a community of damaged souls. On the contrary, the power of Wyatt's art resides in its understatement. So the post-accident *Rock Bottom* registers the shock, the enormity of the life change, the strange, weightless feeling of hospitalisation in submerged, slithering electronic melodies merging with a fuzz of horns over surging currents of percussion. As a drummer the accident forced him to seek more imaginative ways of keeping the music moving than by simply frog-marching it to a hefty bass-drum kick – thereby bringing it in line with most all late 20th century popular music. Besides, rockbeat has always been anathema to Wyatt's freer musical thinking – a statement borne out by the first-time issue of the British free music unit The Amazing Band's solitary recording, *Roar*, on which Wyatt drummed. "I can safely say with, not pride, but with defiance, that I have never in the end made a rock record in my life," Wyatt proclaims. "If you lean on my rhythm tracks you will always sort of get tripped up somewhere. I just love the ducking and diving of the jazz rhythm section too much. Mind you, I haven't checked back to see..."

If *Rock Bottom* was Wyatt's first landmark solo recording, the personal breakthrough happened earlier, on *End Of An Ear*, his first solo album proper, an intriguing experimental drum 'n' voice record produced in 1970 while he was still in Soft Machine. If he felt Soft Machine's hatchet faced response to their earlier slithering psychedelic orientation was forcing him out of his own group, he wasn't looking to cram *End Of An Ear* with stillborn Soft Machine songs. On the contrary, the record came across like Wyatt was out to prove he could easily outflank their avant garde manoeuvres. Pitched somewhere between Oskar Sala's soundtrack for Hitchcock's *The Birds* and Meredith Monk's vocal compositions, it scats swirls of multitracked vocals over slippery drum and piano-led rhythm figures.

"I learned a lot doing that record," recalls Wyatt. "It was the first time I had ever really gone into the studio and just treated the tape as a canvas upon which to paint. If anything, I have always felt more kinship with painters, like Chagall or Picasso, for example, rather than musicians and composers. That is very dangerous, and a lot of people have made the mistake of thinking that they can translate the visual arts into music. You have to test it musically, because if you only test it visually, you can come a bit of a cropper. Even so, in my head I still see music almost as much as

hear it, so just that feeling of treating the tape like a canvas was incredibly exciting and very euphoric, and it also broke my fear and intimidation of keyboard players. There is a sense of discovery which is often the most enjoyable thing in art for me, rather than just the business of manufacturing perfectly constructed objects."

The experience proved invaluable when the time came to record *Rock Bottom*. Even before the accident he found the notion of recording as a simulation of real-time live performance problematic. "As soon as I started singing the drummer would stop playing," quips Wyatt with mock bafflement. "It used to happen all the time. Never could work out why." On *Rock Bottom*, multitracking resolved that problem.

From early Soft Machine through Slapp Happy and on to Steve Beresford's various projects, humour has always been a strong feature of the British avant garde. Often as not it grates horribly, because it comes on like a typically British apology for getting serious. But in Wyatt's case, humour is integral to his being and therefore to his work. It emerges from somewhere deep inside the music, adds a wholly other dimension to it. Besides, who can resist opening Wyatt lines as divertingly daft, yet spot on, theologically speaking, as "*What on earth are you doing, God?*" from Matching Mole's "God Song"?

"I mean, I am a muddle-up, like lots of people," says Wyatt, getting serious for a moment. "I know I joke that deep down I am shallow, and I think that is right. In fact, one of the funniest things about recording *Shleep* was that though some of the songs had been written in the depths of despair, to coin a cliche, when I was recording them I never felt happier. So I felt a bit of a fraud by the time I had finished doing it, and in fact it is the most nursery rhyme-y things that most accurately reflect my feeling at the time I was recording.

"What I don't like about Anglophone culture is the relentless pressure to be anti-serious," he continues. "The idea that seriousness is suspect, that if anybody is serious, well, they haven't got laid recently, you know, lighten up, man, and all that stuff… My dad used to say there is nothing more ponderously suety than light music. And there is nothing that can make you more miserable than a series of bright major chords and so on, and that, quite apart from anything else, the desperate attempt to be liked has a very leadening effect.

"Well," Wyatt says, "it's not that I believe in seriousness or believe in silliness, I just think you have to not be scared to be true to how you feel, because there is a constant pressure to be cowardly in what you do, which knows no boundaries."



In terms of Wyatt's music, humour is his way of bringing to the bulk of the song the same fluidity and swing of his rhythm tracks. His shifting balance of weight and nonsense recalls the French surrealists' love affair with jazz, embodied in the writings of Jacques Prevert and Boris Vian. Wyatt's courageous commitment to silliness when applicable, in defiance of the more po-faced avant garde ordinances, is shared by one of *Shleep*'s unlikeliest guest musicians, Evan Parker. Other than *Shleep*, Parker's extremely rare song sessions pretty much amount to his appearances with Scott Walker and... Vic Reeves.

"I think Evan was Steve Beresford's idea," Wyatt smiles, Beresford being Reeves's musical arranger "Vic hadn't been told how venerable a character Evan Parker was, and in the middle of one of his long solos, he shouted out, 'Shut it, Parker! and Evan really broke up."

Wyatt knew Parker well enough to feel comfortable asking him to record on *Shleep* "I mean, if you are lucky enough to know Evan Parker, and think you can embarrass him into playing on your record, you do, don't you? Can you think of a better saxophone player? I can't." But he did have misgivings about what Parker's

sterner followers might feel about him playing on the wonderful nonsense track "The Duchess".

"I know that Evan, like a lot of musicians, is a fairly open-minded listener," explains Wyatt. "I mean, it was Evan who stocked me up on the gaps in my Dionne Warwick collection, for example. But people who follow Evan's music follow the philosophy of what he is doing very closely, because it is a very important part of the appreciation of it, and him playing along with me scraping away on Alfie's old Polish fiddle I don't think figures in any of these schemes. So I was a bit worried that they would think I had somehow blackmailed him into doing something, which wasn't quite the point. I wasn't worried about Evan himself; all he asks is that you are trying to do something and you're not following a formula."

Though Wyatt commands respect from so many corners, he himself is modest to a fault about his own pulling power. But in terms of the music he makes and who he chooses to make it with, it is not so much diffidence as a balance of his own tastes and desires with his ability to get along with the people he asks in to help realise them.

"This may be apocryphal, this story," begins Wyatt, by way of illustrating the point, "but I think I heard it from Evan, so I don't think it is too like gossip. It's about Derek Bailey, whom I admire very much. I think it was that bass guitarist, Jaco Pastorius, he said to Derek, 'Oh, that was a nice little bit of playing there', to which Derek said, 'Aw, that chord's been dealt with'.

"Well," he laughs, "I wouldn't really have the confidence to know which chords have and have not been dealt with. I had conversations like that with Mike Mantler [Wyatt has sung on a number of Mantler recordings, among them 1976's *The Hapless Child*]. He'd say, 'How can people go on using the common chord of a major arpeggio?', and I just blushed deeply, because I think that there is at least two and a half hours of my recordings that are just sustained major arpeggios. I love major chords, I could just go on and on, play C-E-G on an organ and just hold it. I do like the basic alphabet of the common musical language, as much as I like what has been done with it, which is why I have never abandoned it to just become an explorer of new music. So there are a lot of people I would never ask to play on my records, because I know that they would feel uncomfortable with chords that have been dealt with."

It's difficult to think of any other musician who has touched so many bases that are so far apart as Robert Wyatt. Normally you'd need special dispensation from the Pope or some other such higher authority to negotiate the difficult passage from The Monkees – Wyatt had a chart hit in the early 70s with a cover of "I'm A Believer" – to Ultramarine, via Michael Mantler. Even allowing for the diplomatic immunity that protects Wyatt from the usual inane accusations fired at anybody who moves so freely between genres, the mention of Paul Weller's presence on *Shleep* produces the biggest shock among Wyatt's more leftfield admirers. For his part, Wyatt is a longtime fan of both Weller's cussedness and his music, explaining that he got to meet one of his "handful of rock heroes" when Weller was demoing at Phil Manzanera's studio.

"I left him a note saying if you need that kind of old man sound on any old hum vocals, a bit of the old gravitas, I am available," Wyatt explains, "and I got a quite a witty note back saying, no, I don't really think I need that, but if you need a bit of strumming on anything, I'll come along and have a go. He was extremely courteous and helpful and he wasn't going to presume to put the Weller stamp on anything.

"The thing is," he goes on, "people think I want to write Robert Wyatt records, you know, here we go, Jimmy Somerville on valium. When he came in, I was a bit nervous, because I normally work with people I know, and I was also a bit nervous on his behalf, because he might feel that some of the things that I do are a bit on the whimsical side."

As it happens, Weller contributes to two of *Shleep*'s most stunning pieces - the aforementioned "Free Will And Testament" and "Blues In Bob Minor". The latter is a lengthy, linguistic tour de force modelled on Bob Dylan's tongue twisting "Subterranean Homesick Blues", except it's almost three times as long. Lyrically, it's an extremely witty, phantasmagorical dusting down of the foulness of British politics though, in keeping with the best post-surrealist traditions, anyone would be hard put to pin down the real point of the song.

Incidentally, it is also Wyatt's first blues. "A bit po-faced, I always thought that as long as apartheid actually existed I didn't really have a right to play the blues, but now Mandela has sorted that one out I thought I would have a go at this old blues business. Never too late to learn. I always thought the blues was an unbeatable chord sequence. I just think it is quite extraordinary how it is endlessly regeneratable. And I had the lyrics, which went a bit like that Capri ad, you

know, 'Papa?' 'Nicole' Well, mine went, "*Ah, Alfie, ah Alfie, ah Alfie...*". But when Alfie heard it, she said, you can't sing that, and I said I can, look, it's dead minimalist, it's really far out, and she said, no, you're being fucking lazy, write some words, people want something to listen to. So I said, OK, you want some fucking words, I'll give you some fucking words. So I just wrote a stream of words. I really like that tumbling, relentless rhythm [on "Subterranean Homesick Blues"] and I also like [Longfellow's poem] "Hiawatha", and the whole thing comes out of that. The reason I referred to myself in the title as Bob Minor is because to be any kind of Bob in that context is an honour, sir."

The six year silence that preceded *Shleep* was not the first to so punctuate Robert Wyatt's recording career. His first period in the wilderness occurred in the mid-70s after his two albums for Virgin, *Rock Bottom* and its sequel, *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard*, which featured his outstanding version of Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra anthem "Song For Chen". Through an invitation from Rough Trade's Geoff Travis, Wyatt began his second great set of recordings - the series of singles now collected together on *Nothing Can Stop Us*. They include a superlative reinterpretation of Chic's "At Last I'm Free", a heartbreaking reading of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit", and a reclamation of the Cuban folk song "Guantanamera" from its Radio 2 void. In their original single form, they were intended as journalism, quickfire bulletins broadcast from Wyatt central to the increasingly ragged broad left alliance.

"Because I don't do gigs, everything I do has to be on record," says Wyatt. "It has this sort of posterity hanging over it, this dreadful weight. By doing them as singles, I wanted them to be almost like journalism, do them fast and then they should disappear. Old records are like old tattoos, you know, 'I love Martha true' and, like, oh no, I've been going out with Carol for two weeks, how can I get this fucking tattoo off? It wasn't my idea to compile them as an album, it was Geoff Travis's, so if it does hang together as a record, he can take credit for that."

The singles began a new phase of Wyatt songs and music. He composed the soundtrack for *The Animals Film*, a harrowing documentary examining the abuses of factory farming. More and more the melancholy and the wistfulness of Wyatt's music was being combined with a tough lyrical stance. The news that Robert Wyatt had joined the Communist Party hardly came as a surprise.

"I do like a kind of integrity of the song, that the words are true to the way that it is done, the tune that is true to the lyrics and all that kind of thing," he explains. "I do like that sort of consistency, although I play perverse games with it, but that is me being deeply shallow for you. In the mid-80s I was writing what sounded like mournful love songs whereas in actual fact they were vehicles to express my deep hatred of David Owen. Some people consider this a deceitful exercise, typical party hack behaviour, undercover work, but I don't think I have done that on this new record [Shleep]. I think there is a consistency between the tunes and the words, they come from the same source.





"But my lyrics, as far as I am concerned, have always been fairly unplanned, they always end up as being what happened when I started writing I have never made a deliberate attempt to either be political or not be political. In any case, politically I am a reactionary - if there is too much of one thing going on I try and tip the balance the other way If there is a lot of acid I need a lot of alkali, and so on. The fact that a lot of the songs ended up with political references is simply a reflection of the preoccupations and pressures which came out or were exorcised when I started to write them. Besides, I never in my own mind distinguish between the use of an utterly private image and a very public one. To me they are all in a way utterly private and then, as with all music, you just have to hope that they resonate somewhere beyond. To those people who say that image or phrase is contentious, I can only say, well, I don't have to fall in love with the same girl as Stevie Wonder when he is singing "You Are The Sunshine Of My Life" to actually enjoy the

song."

As the 80s wore on, with the Conservative government systematically dismantling all the social gains of the post-war period, Wyatt became more and more worn down. His music, not unnaturally, reflected his spiritual downward spiral.

"I felt there were assumptions being made on my behalf, which if they included me, I would feel very invaded and interfered with, like after a prime minister described to foreigners the British way of life, I would like to write to every foreigner I knew to say, she doesn't mean me, she is not speaking on my behalf, and so, via songs, I can do that, I can exorcise that viscosity of being stuck to things which made my skin crawl, wash them off via a song...

"I really was depressed to a point of serious disorientation by the Conservative revival, not on principle, but because it was like... Having been born in 1945 I was constructed psychologically simultaneously with what they call the welfare state. My parents thought at last, after the chaos and misery of the past, the basis of a kind of human civilisation was being built in our time; nothing grand, you know, just the basic framework that makes civilised life possible, and the idea that that was being pulled from under our feet just made me very, very queasy.

"Depression," Wyatt asserts, "was a biological response to conditioning... It was just too ghastly, it was nightmarish, there was something hellish going on, and it entered my dreamworld. I mean, I do live in a dreamworld and I never haven't done. I wake up just long enough in the daytime to eat lots of food and then try to go back to sleep. I mean, I am not by nature rebellious or activist or anything like that, I am really self indulgent, but this business was stopping me enjoying myself, it totally invaded and disrupted my world and I had to exorcise it as best I could. And I desperately looked around for sympathisers.

"People say, you only preach to the converted. Well, that's good enough for me. The reassurance of likeminded souls keeps me going."

The funny thing is, the deeper Robert Wyatt trawls the depths of his memory of a painfully difficult decade that left him as depressed as the Left was demoralised, the faster and funnier flows his analysis of the Right's political impact on a very human condition.

"I mean, I hope I am wrong, I don't wanna be right," he concludes. "What pessimist wants to be right? I am not a fucking pervert! Jesus Christ, if anyone wants to persuade me that I am wrong, please do. Take this weight off my mind, set me free. Blondes just wanna have fun."

Shleep is released by Hannibal (through Rykodisc/Vital) on 29 september. The Amazing Band's *Roar* is available nox on FMR (through Harmonia Mundi). Thebulk of Robert Wyatt's back catalogue is due to be reissued by Hannibal early next year.

.....



The unedited transcript of Biba Kopfs interview with Robert Wyatt. A feature based on this interview appeared in issue #163 of The Wire

BK: You have just released Shleep, your first album for six years. Why has it taken so long?

RW: It might look as if. . . the last record I made under me own name was while there was no elected prime minister, and John Major was there by default as it were, I quickly made a record. When he actually got voted in, I was so depressed at the thought that another generation of English people were going to vote for a Conservative government that I went on strike for five years and now he's gone I have made another record. That's what I would like to say, but probably that's a load of old bollocks. I think, I just had a hard time collecting my thoughts throughout the 90s. They seemed to just dissipate. But I have to earn a living, so I just collected together scraps of tunes and words, with a lot of help from other people, other people's tunes, Alfie's words, and I found to my surprise that I had enough material for a record. And we remembered that Phil Manzanera said years ago to come down and try out his studio any time I liked. I gave him a ring, went down and did them.

WORK PRACTICES

RW: Some of my things are just sort of jokes, like, 'my wife is fat and thin', I mean, that was a kind of mood, that was the kind of feeling I was getting when I was recording, I was getting merrier and merrier instead of downer and downer ,and the merrier I get, the kind of sillier, more infantile, lightweight and childish I get, and the more I like silly games, and it is only when things are really going wrong that I dig deeper to find out what the problem is. And because the tunes are written over quite a few years, it is probably a bit more varied because of that. It wasn't written in one state of mind.

ENO IN THE STUDIO

RW: No, but when Brian came in, we did some stuff together, because he sort of turned it upside down, that particular tune, "Heaps Of Sheeps", and reworked it, and we did a bit of singing together on that, because we haven't done our girlie chorus act since Taking Tiger Mountain By Strategy. It was great. The people who came in, they really livened me up, because when you are on your own, and not in a group, not on the road, you can get a bit. . . abstract, you can lose your grip on that visceral thing of music, that physical thing of making music, the momentum of working with other people. So it wasn't just their contributions that were valuable, it was the psychological effect, for me, of being back amongst other people.

PAUL WELLER

RW: Well he had been doing some demos and a bit of recording, in fact, at Phil's studio, he lives fairly near there, I believe. When I first tried to book it, Weller was there, so I left a note saying if you need that kind of old man sound on any old hum vocals, a bit of the old gravitas, I am available, and I got a quite a witty note back saying, no I don't really think I need that, but if you need a bit of strumming on anything, I'll come along and have a go. He was extremely courteous and helpful and he wasn't going to presume to put on anything. The thing is people think I want to write Robert Wyatt records, you know, here we go, Jimmy Somerville on valium.

When he came in, I was a bit nervous, because I normally work with people I know, and I was also a bit nervous on his behalf, because he might feel that some of the things that I do are a bit on the whimsical side. But where I thought he might not necessarily go along with the words, but at least he could acknowledge that there was an attempt at making some kind of serious point along the way, then I would ask him.

THE ENGLISH AND SERIOUSNESS

RW: I mean, I am a muddle up, like lots of people. I know I joke that deep down I am shallow, and I think that is right, in fact one of the funniest things about recording was that though some of the songs had been written in the depths of despair, to coin a cliche, when I was recording them I never felt happier, so I felt a bit of a fraud by the time I had finished doing it, and in fact it is the most nursery rhyme-y things that most accurately reflect my feeling at the time I was recording. . .

What I don't like about anglophone culture is the relentless pressure to be anti-serious, in a way, the idea that seriousness is suspect, that anybody is serious, well they haven't got laid recently, you know, lighten up, man, and all that stuff. My dad used to say there is nothing more ponderously suety than light music. And there is nothing that can make you more miserable than a series of bright major chords and so on, and that, quite apart from any thing else, the desperate attempt to be liked has a very leadening effect. It's not that I believe in seriousness or believe in silliness, I just think you have to not be scared to be true to how you feel, because there is a constant pressure to be cowardly in what you do, which knows no boundaries.

EVAN PARKER

RW: I don't know, I mean, if you are lucky enough to know Evan Parker, and think you can embarrass him into playing on your record, you do, don't you? Can you think of a better saxophone player? I can't. I know that Evan, like a lot of musicians, is a fairly open-minded listener. Evan Parker stocked me up on the gaps in my Dionne Warwick collection, for example. But other musicians are more like the Jesuits or Sufis of their particular train of thought, you know, who will not transgress the unwritten laws that they have written for themselves. People who follow Evan's music follow the philosophy of what Evan is doing very closely, because it is a very important part of the appreciation of it, and him playing along with me scraping away on Alfie's old Polish fiddle I don't think figures in any of these schemes. So I was a bit worried that they would think I had somehow blackmailed him into doing something, which wasn't quite the point. I wasn't worried about Evan himself, all he asks is that you are trying to do something and you're not following a formula.

BK: You are famous for being able to sing Charlie Parker solos note perfect, could you also sing Evan Parker solos?

RW: [Laughs] No fucking way! What I can't do, I don't now any fucking singer who can circular breathe, he'd die of asphyxiation. That's absolutely right, he takes thing beyond what I know the

voice can do. Well, Coltrane also already did that, but particularly the point with Evan is, he really starts beyond somewhere even where you could get to and takes it from there, that's the great thing about him. He is a giant, Evan, there is a consistent trajectory, that he has been carving year in, year out, it is a monumental thing, you know, I think he will be seen as one of these figures.

PARKER'S TRACK RECORD WITH WYATT AND VIC REEVES

RW: Yeah, well, he played on the Vic Reeves thing, I think, because, I think it was Steve Beresford's idea. Vic Reeves hadn't been told how venerable a character Evan Parker was, and in the middle of one of his long solos, he shouted out, shut it, Parker! and Evan really broke up.

DEREK BAILEY AND CHORDS THAT HAVE BEEN DEALT WITH

RW: This may be apocryphal, this story, but I think I heard it from Evan, I don't think it is too like gossip, about Derek Bailey, whom I admire very much. I think it was that bass guitarist, Jaco Pastorius, he said to Derek, oh that was a nice little bit of playing there, to which Derek said, aw, that chord's been dealt with. Well, I wouldn't really have the confidence to know which chords have and have not been dealt with. I had conversations with Mike Mantler like that. He'd say, how can people go on using the common chord of a major arpeggio, and I just blushed deeply, because I think that there is at least two and a half hours of my recordings that are just sustained major arpeggios. I love major chords, I could just go on and on, play CEG on an organ and just hold it. I do like the basic alphabet of the common musical language, as much as I like what has been done with it, which is why I have never abandoned it to just become an explorer of new music. So there are a lot of people I would never ask because I know that they would feel uncomfortable with chords that have been dealt with.

UNCOMFORTABLE HYBRIDS

RW: I can safely say with, not pride, but with defiance, that I have never in the end made a rock record in my life. If you lean on my rhythm tracks you will always sort of get tripped up somewhere. I just love the ducking and diving of the jazz rhythm section too much, I haven't checked back to see. . .

PICASSO, CHAGALL ETC

RW: If anything I have always felt more kinship with painters, like Chagall or Picasso, for example, rather than musicians and composers. That is very dangerous, and a lot of people have made the mistake of thinking that they can translate the visual arts into music. Even so, in my head I still see music almost as much as hear it. But you have to test it musically, because when I have only tested it visually, I have come a bit of a cropper, as on End Of An Ear, for example, where I treated the tape as a canvas to paint patterns on, well, you can't really do that, because music and painting are different senses towards the same thing, so you have to be really respectful of the uniqueness of music.

END OF AN EAR

RW: I learned a lot doing it, it was the first time I had ever really gone into the studio and just treated the tape as a canvas upon which to paint, so just that feeling was incredibly exciting and very euphoric, and it also broke my fear and intimidation of keyboard players. I had to play so much piano for example and that broke the ice in terms of playing me own piano bits. There is a sense of discovery which is often the most enjoyable thing in art for me, rather than just the business of manufacturing perfectly constructed objects. Some things are more important than that. I never had the courage of my convictions, which you need if you are doing things that have never been done before, my nerve would come in fits and starts, so End Of An Ear was a break through in terms of nerve, just the courage to take the tape and not feel constricted by all the rules and regulations of what music should and should not be, and I have been using that experience ever since.

THE SOFT MACHINE EXPERIENCE

RW: Well I think it was Tom Waits who said, I slept through the 60s. All I can say is, I certainly didn't do that but I envy him a great deal. I mean, for me, the things that came out of it were quite other. My son was born in 1966 so it wasn't a waste of time. something came out of it. I think, I find it hard to imagine that I wouldn't have been happier somewhere else, with someone else, as far as the music went.

SOLO

RW: I don't think I have ever been a group musician really. Now this sounds sarcastic, but I was liberated by paraplegia from having to be in a group. It was only really since being in a wheelchair that I have had to do what I feel most comfortable doing, which is doing what I do then finding the people most appropriate to the particular tracks, I mean, there was no way I could go on the road with a group featuring Paul Weller and Evan Parker and Annie Whitehead. I don't have to think like that anymore. there isn't that awful anxiety of having to fit every person to every tune and every tune to every person, because that is your group.

MATCHING MOLE

RW: Well, I have to say that, although the first one is called a Matching Mole record, people like Phil Miller are bit bemused, he wasn't disgruntled about it, but he said, well it was very much Robert Wyatt's group, that's the way he put it, or, he called it a group, he talks democracy. . . But the fact is that is I created a skeleton framework upon which I constructed a sequence of events around the wondrous mellotron and so on. Maybe it was a group recording, but the production was where I took the opportunity to take over, and there was nothing the group could really do about it. So, feeling a bit sheepish about that, on the second Matching Mole record I very consciously gave them their head, you know, but even by the way I said that, you can tell, he gave them their head, you know, we were actually an equal group of equal people in every possible way...

Live it is either/or, you know, I start singing and the drummer stops playing, I mean, fuck, whenever I start singing, the drummer gives up. This was no good, I wanted a drummer who could stick by me in thick and thin, and recording was the only way.

Then again I didn't know what to do with that group, but spending 1973 in hospital resolved that one. I had other things to think about. How I kept myself together I just really kept working on the record in the hospital. But then there was no way I could ask the others to hang on. People had livings to earn. Matching Mole had no money, the other lot got that. So there was no slack, I couldn't keep them hanging around. Remembering how I worked on End Of An Ear, it was like I found the right way to work for when I came out. It was not so much a solo thing, because I depended heavily on other people's ideas and input, it was more that you could take appropriate measures for each tune, rather than think, oh god, it's 20 minutes since we had an alto solo, we better give him another one kind of thing.

As it happened after that, I did start to lose contact with other musicians and became more and more hermetically sealed in my own preoccupations. I had got to the point where I thought, I can't communicate with other musicians, you know. I had actually got to the point where I thought that I had chosen the wrong idiom, I shouldn't have been a musician, that I should have learned to draw, become a painter, like I had got stuck in the wrong world. At least until I got to loosen up in the last year, and start working again with other people. Just, like, ventilate the music a bit with these other people. Recording Shleep actually took me by surprise. I felt quite happy, it felt perfectly natural, a great relief.

WHITE MAN'S SUBTERRANEAN HOMESICK BLUES

RW: A bit po-faced, I always thought that as long as apartheid actually existed I didn't really have a right to play the blues, but now Mandela has sorted that one out I thought I would have a go at this old blues business. Never too late to learn. I always thought the blues was an unbeatable chord sequence. I just think it is quite extraordinary how it is endlessly regeneratable. And I had the lyrics, which went a bit like that Capri ad, Papa Nicole, Papa Nicole, Papa Nicole, well it went ah Alfie, ah Alfie, ah Alfie. . . But when Alfie heard it, she said you can't sing that, and I said I can, look, it's dead minimalist, it's really far out, and she said, no you're being fucking lazy, write some words, people want something to listen to, so I said, OK, you want some fucking words, I'll give you some fucking words, so I just wrote a stream of words, and I really like that tumbling relentless rhythm and I also like Hiawatha, and the whole thing comes out of that. The reason I referred to myself in the title as Bob Minor because to be any kind of Bob in that context is an

honour, sir.

ALFIE'S WORDS

RW: In those cases, it is always me leafing through either her poetry books or scrap notebooks and just picking out images or phrases that she happens to write - it is a nice coincidence with what she writes is that the images are often very familiar to me, because we've sat side by side and seen these things together. Also her words have a happy knack of sounding very good. They're very out-loudable, very singable, and they really help me to find a thread to tunes that are swimming around in my head. They are actually what got this record off the ground, really.

THE SINGER, NOT THE SONG

RW: I do like a kind of integrity of the song, that the words are true to the way that it is done, the tune that is true to the lyrics and all that kind of thing, I do like that sort of consistency, although I play perverse games with it, but that is me being deeply shallow for you! In the mid 80s I was writing what sounded like mournful love songs whereas in actual fact they were vehicles to express my deep hatred of David Owen. Some people consider this a deceitful exercise, typical party hack behaviour, undercover work, but I don't think I have done that on this new record I think there is a consistency between the tunes and the words, they come from the same source.

PERVERSE IS POLITICAL

RW: My lyrics, as far as I am concerned, have always been fairly unplanned, they always end up as being what happened when I started writing. I have never made a deliberate attempt to either be political or not be political. In any case, politically I am a reactionary — if there is too much of one thing going on I try and tip the balance the other way. If there is a lot of acid I need a lot of alkali, and so on. The fact that that turned into quite a lot of songs with political references is simply a reflection of the preoccupations and pressures which came out or were exercised when I started to write them. Besides, I never in my own mind distinguish between the use of an utterly private image and a very public one. To me they are all in a way utterly private and then, as with all music, you just have to hope that they resonate somewhere beyond. To those people who say that image or phrase is contentious, I can only say, well, I don't have to fall in love with the same girl as Stevie Wonder when he is singing "You Are The Sunshine Of My Life" to actually enjoy the song.

Personally, I am quite capable of enjoying things where the intention is quite alien to me, like for example, I love mosques and synagogues, I think they are wonderful. . . One English composer I can easily admire is John Tavener, even though philosophically speaking it is hard to imagine anybody who I would feel more alienated from, but the fact of the matter remains that it seems to stimulate him into a way of making music that I find utterly empathetic. And I hope that people would go along with me in that same way. I am not a recruiting officer, so if people object or take offence, then, in the immortal words of Paul Weller, they can fuck off.

DOWNWARD SPIRAL INTO DEPRESSION CHARTED BY SONGS

RW: Certainly I felt there were assumptions being made on my behalf, which if they included me, I would feel very invaded and interfered with, like after a prime minister described to foreigners the British way of life, I would like to write to every foreigner I knew to say, she doesn't mean me, she is not speaking on my behalf, and so, via songs, I can do that, I can exorcise that viscosity of being stuck to things which made my skin crawl, wash them off via a song...

CHARLIE HADEN

RW: If I were to nominate a prize for the musician of my lifetime, it would be Charlie Haden. Certainly his Liberation Orchestra, the things he did with Carla Bley. Now Carla is nothing like Charlie Haden, he is a very serious, solemn sort of chap, and she is so utterly mischievous and playful, now her arranging with his gravitas is a knockout combination. He is very rigorous musically. He started out playing in the best there was, in the original Ornette Coleman Quartet, so when he started to participate in the Cold War and not go along with his official country line, he did so very rigorously. But there again it is always music first, and I don't think you have to be

interested in what the subject matter originally was to enjoy those records. So if anything was an inspiration or a sort of guide of how to approach things it would be Charlie Haden, more than any singer of songs.

NOTHING CAN STOP US

RW: The singles were done very quickly, one on the heels of another, the consistency only comes from the fact that my brain goes round and round similar preoccupations for years on end. Like Winnie The Pooh — in fact he was my earliest role model really — I nag away at one or two thoughts. That would be where any consistency comes from. Because I don't do gigs, everything I do has to be on record and it has this sort of posterity hanging over it, this dreadful weight. By doing them as singles, I wanted them to be almost like journalism, do them fast and then they should disappear. Old records are like old tattoos, you know, I love Martha, true and, like, oh no, I've been going out with Carol for two weeks, how can I get this fucking tattoo off. It wasn't my idea to compile them as an album, it was Geoff Travis's, so if it does hang together as a record, he can take credit for that.

BESIEGED

RW: I really was depressed to a point of serious disorientation by the conservative revival, not on principle, but because, it was like. . . well, I still feel queasy by the idea of students having to go into debt before they even start working, or the fact that I don't even have the choice of a public dentist in my town anymore. Having been born in 1945 I was constructed psychologically simultaneously with what they call the welfare state. My parents thought at last after the chaos and misery of the past the basis of a kind of human civilisation was being built in our time, nothing grand, you know, just the basic framework that makes civilised life possible, and the idea that that was being pulled from under our feet just made me very very queasy. Depression was a biological response to conditioning. . . It was just too ghastly, it was nightmarish, there was something hellish going on, and it entered my dreamworld. I mean, I do live in a dreamworld and I never haven't done. I wake up just long enough in the daytime to eat lots of food and then try to go back to sleep. I mean, I am not by nature rebellious or activist or anything like that, I am really self-indulgent, but this business was stopping me enjoying myself, it totally invaded and disrupted my world and I had to exorcise it as best I could. And I desperately looked around for sympathisers.

People say, you only preach to the converted. Well, that's good enough for me. The reassurance of likeminded souls keeps me going.

POLITICS OF PESSIMISM

RW: The reason I had to sign up with a political party most identified with the enemy was only because it was a pathetically lost cause, and I wanted to at least give it a better funeral than it was going to get, because I still think it was the noblest experiment in human history, the Soviet thing, and its failure is nothing to be pleased about. Yet there are now people in what were once staunchly right papers saying that the free hand of market forces cannot be reliably benevolent in all cases everywhere. For this blazing insight I am deeply grateful. I don't feel so alienated just for that simple fact being acknowledged. . .

What pessimist wants to be right? I mean, I hope I am wrong, I don't wanna be right. I am not a fucking pervert! Jesus Christ, if anyone wants to persuade me that I am wrong, please do. Take this weight of my mind, set me free. Blondes just wanna have fun.

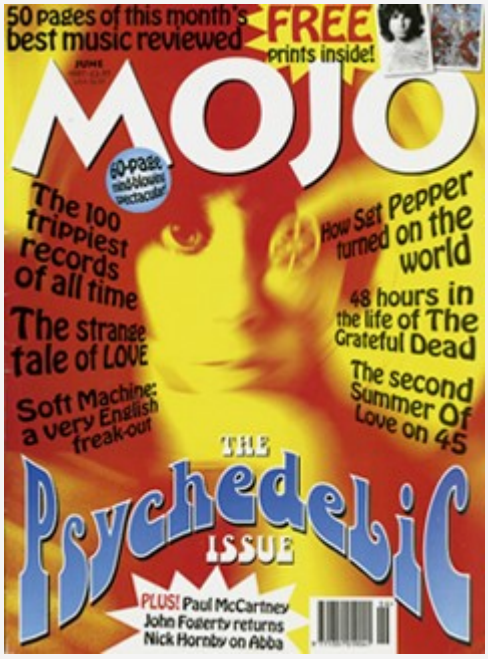
>> L'interview sur le site de Wire

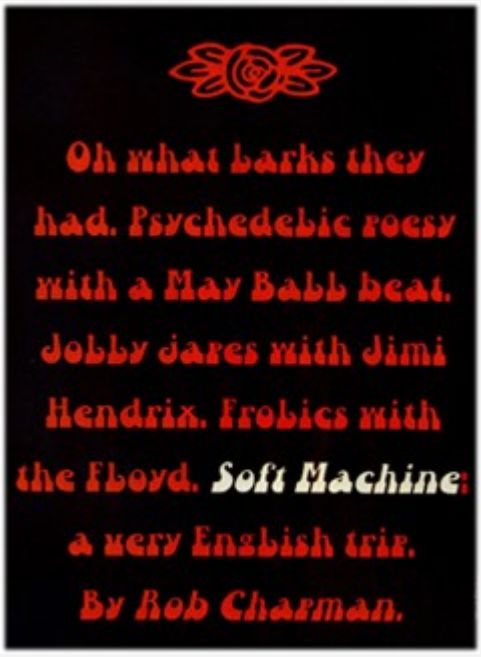
Previous article Next article

Back to the list

Pot-Head revisited - Mojo - N°43 - June 1997

SOFT MACHINE : POT-HEAD REVISITED







"ALL I REMEMBER WAS the sound of change hitting the floor as I passed out. These centimes had fallen out of my pocket as I fell flat on my back. I saw a map of a dark island but it was lit from underneath by luminous colours. I'd never seen anything like it."

Some flower child describing his psychedelic rite of passage in '67? A tourist who'd stumbled inadvertently into the UFO Club, perhaps? No, this was the summer of '63. Frank Ifield was Number 1 in the hit parade, but this particular Aussie, Daevid Allen, was in Paris acting as guinea pig for one of Bill Burroughs's fiendish experiments. "They'd tested the dream machine on me, you see. It was a light bulb suspended in the middle of a piece of cardboard. Tiny holes had been punched in the card, because it had been calculated that if you closed your eyes, these perforations turning at the exact circumference of a 78 rpm record would match your brain rhythms. When they coincided you went into incredible colour hallucinations."

Buried beneath Allen's more publicised associations with cosmic tomfoolery and pot-headed pixies is a richer legacy. The softly spoken, eccentrically attired, gangly old hipster who sits telling me

tales in his Glastonbury pad is in fact one of the great lost links between the beats and the hippies. And the band he co-founded, the Soft Machine, named after a Burroughs novel, was the underground before there *was* an underground.



Previous page, Soft Machine in Dulwich Park, South London, 1967. Above: wowing St Aygulf, France. Opposite, the Softs at home, Dulwich, 1966: from top, Mike Ratledge, Robert Wyatt, Daevid Allen, Kevin Ayers.

IN THE EARLY '60S, A TIME WHEN Britpop still meant Bert Weedon, Allen was holed up in the Beat Hotel, a six-storey block on the Left Bank run by the redoubtable Madame Rachou, a former employee of French intelligence, now adept at diplomatically keeping the gendarmes at bay while her clientele of exiled poets, painters, and dope dealers did their stuff. The residents included Kerouac, Gysin, Orlovsky, and Ginsberg. "A scene in every room," as Allen puts it. His first collaboration with Burroughs came in 1962 when he provided the music for a dramatisation of The Ticket That Exploded. "I was the friendly straight with those guys," he grins. "Acid used to arrive direct from the Sandoz factory in those days. You took about 18 of these little tablets. There was another one called Romilar that we took in Ibiza, which had some unknown psychedelic agent in it, and put you in the weirdest states. The locals used to call us the Romilar army."

But it wasn't all kaleidoscopic colours and dream machines. Slow dissolve to teenage stowaway on the first ship out of Melbourne harbour... Allen had left his homeland in 1960 vowing never to return. "They were still killing aborigines like kangaroos," he winces. "Those red-neck dudes from the deep north could hardly tell the difference. It was a horrific atmosphere and it's still not much spoken about. I arrive in Paris and next thing I'm sitting at the end of the piano with Bud Powell playing." Allen namechecks the jazz idols he saw in Paris: Mingus, Monk, Dolphy, Rollins. Then he hitched to England and ended up lodging at Wellington House in Canterbury. This haven of creativity was owned by broadcaster Honor Wyatt and her second husband, psychologist George Ellidge. Bohemians of the old school, they had connections with poet Robert Graves and his artistic colony in Deya, Majorca. Allen immediately bonded with their precociously talented 15-year-old son Robert. "We had the same record collection, so instantaneously we were speaking the same language," says Allen of the future Softs drummer. "He was a prodigy then, with his painting, piano playing and everything. Robert was the same intellectual age as me – which doesn't say much for me, of course – but he was in a very advanced headspace for his years."

While others dreamed of skiffle, Wyatt and his schoolchums Hugh and Brian Hopper and

Mike Ratledge lived in full experimental mode. Hugh Hopper tentatively learning Charlie Haden bass lines off Ornette Coleman records, recalls a Wyatt household full of eclectic noise, ranging from Bartok to bebop, Stravinsky to Varese. "Let's just say that there was no way that Robert was going to be a bank clerk," he adds. Hugh, Brian and Mike spent the early 1960s making rudimentary tape loops and surfing the ether for obscure jazz on American Forces Network and the BBC Third Programme (since renamed Radio 3), "which carried a much more avant garde output than it does today," he remarks pointedly. "But jazz was made much more accessible by the arrival of Daevid Allen, who turned up with about 500 significant records – Monk, Mingus, Miles, Cecil Taylor, etc – which then circulated to everyone's house."



Already no cultural slouches themselves, all of his future co-collaborators cite Allen as the galvanising force. Tape loops? This man had made tape loops with the loop guru himself, Terry Riley. "They were all 16/17," Allen reflects. "I was already the seasoned traveller, their big brother beatnik, so they saw me as a role model. Of course," he adds ruefully, "that worked against me later on. You always have to kill your role models."

Nights of atonal excess round at Wellington House and at the Hoppers' equally tolerant parents eventually blossomed into a distinctive local sound. A whole mythology has subsequently sprung up around the fact that future Soft Machine and Caravan members once shared the same postal district. "An accident of geography," Mike Ratledge pooh-poohs. "I get these German journalists asking me about the 'Canterbury music school'," says Hugh Hopper, "and with hindsight I'm sure it sounds like a great place. In fact it was a small, quite conservative market town where nothing happened. There wasn't even a university until the late '60s."

What their social milieu did allow was for the future Softs to pursue their own unique musical agenda with impunity. Isolated without being isolationist, indulgent without being insular, eclecticism was the natural order of things. It's like that Tom Wolfe remark," Ratledge says. "In seeking a personal style you plagiarise so widely from everybody that you end up with an individual style." I then get a very informative treatise on modality and process, thoroughly befitting a man who spent the Merseybeat years reading music at Oxford.

During this period, Allen, Hugh Hopper, Wyatt



and Ratledge had a go at being a jazz group. They secured a residency at Pete and Dud's Establishment Club in Soho but, being slightly to the left of Oscar Peterson, they got rumbled as imposters by the supper club clientele and were slung out after four nights. They also played an ICA gig with Burroughs and Gysin, and a jazz and poetry night at the Marquee, the largely unflattering results of which, complete with Allen's delightfully self-deprecating sleevenotes, are available on a Voiceprint CD *Live 1963*.

Figuring that, despite his hep credentials, he wasn't going to be the next Charlie Christian or Wes Montgomery, Allen decided to become a full-time poet and headed for Robert Graves's place in Deya. He fondly recalls nights spent busking and reciting under the stars and free accommodation courtesy of Graves. It was on one of these frequent sojourns in the islands that some unlikely pop dreams began to formulate. "Kevin Ayers had some Beatles records and 'Still I'm Sad' by The Yardbirds. We did an acid trip and I thought, Bugger it, maybe I can make a living out of what I was doing before and call it pop. But first I had to adapt my guitar playing to the language of rock'n'roll."

One slight inconvenience – Allen hated rock'n'roll. To this day he wears a T-shirt on-stage with a picture of Elvis captioned "Dead Redneck". "Buddy Holly, *Rock Around The Clock*, all that stuff– I loathed it," he says matter of factly. Ratledge shared this sentiment. "We began to get interested in it as a cultural excitement rather than a musical one," he notes. "Forming a band was a licence to do whatever you wanted to do and call it something saleable – pop music. Kevin was the only one with a real perspective on pop music when we started."



Brought up in the Far East, the 17-year-old Ayers had moved to Canterbury in 1961. "I'd been sent from London on a drugs bust. A policeman put his hand in my pocket and pulled out a lump of hash which I could never have afforded and said, 'Ello 'ello, what's this then?'. I was sent to the Ashford Remand Centre for two weeks. When the case came to court they threw it out for lack of evidence, and the magistrate said I should leave London because it was obviously a bad influence." So how did the teenage pot fiend fall in with the Canterbury avant garde? "I was a musical ignoramus, still am actually. All I'd ever heard was The Sound Of Music and Chinese pop in Malaya.

"I was drawn to Daevid and Robert and Mike Ratledge and the Hoppers because they had wider interests than anyone else around. Daevid was a complete shock to the system. He had what were for that time outrageous alternative views. He was one of the originals. At that time, though, he was more into poetry readings than songs, and I hated poetry readings."

Already adept at drinking wine and having a good time, Ayers's first serious musical

collaboration with the Canterbury set was playing bass and guitar with the semi-legendary Wilde Flowers. "The name had nothing to do with flower power," Robert Wyatt told Jonathon Green for his book Days In The Life: Voices From The English Underground 1961-1971; "We lived in the country and Hugh copper had a book called Wild Flowers, and I think he thought it up." As usual there was no grand design. Future Caravan and Softs members came and went on a whim. Ayers, Wyatt and Hugh Hopper would go off and join Allen in Paris or Majorca or Morocco at the drop of a busker's hat. Ratledge stayed put in Oxford, getting his BA. Brian Hopper's compilation of Wilde Flowers rehearsals and demos, released in 1994, reveal an eclectic blend of soul, jazz, and avant garde pop, the sound of several bands in search of an identity. But early Softs motifs were evident even then: the Hopper brothers' quirky lyrics and angular arrangements, Ayers's own uncluttered songwriting skills, Wyatt's idiosyncratically soulful vocals.



The Wilde Flowers in Canterbury, 1965: an eclectic blend of soul, jazz, and avant garde pop, the sound of several bands in search of an identity.

> Zoom

"When I listen to those Wilde Flowers tracks now I can hear the Zombies influence," Hopper recalls. "And the English Birds too, with Ron Wood: three raucous guitars, lots of shifting chords. One of the great forgotten bands of all time." From Daevid Allen's detached viewpoint, though, it was all a bit too proper. "The Wilde Flowers suffered from the fraternal approval syndrome – it was *de rigueur* for any band at that time, in order to be taken seriously, to be able to play 'Papa's Got A Brand New Bag' with the right guitar sound and the right feel. But they could never get it right," he laughs.

By the summer of '66 Allen's own plans for a beat combo, honed in the Romilar haze of the Balearics, were turning into something tangible. Three days of acid-fuelled mayhem with a night club owner from Tulsa called Wes Brunson led to Brunson pledging a considerable portion of his worldy goods to Ayers and Allen in return for them spreading the Aquarian love vibe. "Sure," they said. "We'll need musical instruments, amplifiers and somewhere to rehearse." The result was a four-piece called Mr Head, consisting of Ayers, Allen, Wyatt, and guitarist Larry Nolan. The most appropriately named group since The Small Faces entered beat competitions organised by Melody Maker and the pirate Radio London, and got the music biz agents buzzing. Mr Head toyed with the idea of changing their name to Nova Express, before settling for a slightly better known Burroughs novel. Nolan disappeared, Ratledge came down from Oxford, and Soft Machine was born.

"THE NAME SOFT MACHINE CAME through Mike. He had books like V, that kind of thing. I knew the name was taken from Burroughs but I don't think it intrigued me enough to get a copy," Wyatt recalled. "Wilde Flowers more or less became Soft Machine. We trickled up to London and then regrouped, one by one. When we came up to London there were two connections: Daevid Allen had the connection with people like Hoppy [John Hopkins, underground impresario and co-founder of the magazine IT and UFO Club]. The other connection was Kevin Ayers, who played bass guitar and wrote songs. He was the only other bloke in Kent with long hair. Kevin Ayers knew The Animals' office, where Hilton Valentine and Chas Chandler were already starting to manage, and they signed us up on

the basis of Kevin's songs. They were looking for something commercial. Chas was always looking for Slade, and eventually he found them; meanwhile he had to put up with people like us and Jimi Hendrix. Kevin actually got us a deal and turned us into a group that had a manager and so on. He liked bossa nova and calypso. Ray Davies and The Kinks, who started using stuff like that quite early on, were a big influence on him."

Signed to Chas Chandler's management company, the Softs spent the latter half of 1966 demoing material. Along with Pink Floyd they played seminal London Underground gigs at Notting Hill Free School and the IT launch at the Roundhouse. Like the Floyd, the Softs live favoured free-form innovation, Unlike the Floyd, they lacked a quirky little song about a transvestite to propel them into the pop charts.

"In the first Soft Machine single ['Love Makes Sweet Music'] you could hear all the peer pressures of the time," Allen says of a debut that could have passed itself off as Simon Dupree And The Big Sound if it hadn't been for Wyatt's imploring high register voice. Apart from a brief visit to the payola-ridden charts of the pirates, the single did nothing.


Pink Floyd, 1967: "Our rivals at that time."

"I wrote it in a squalid little hotel in Hamburg," remembers Ayers. It was after we'd been fired from the Star Club – I think we lasted a day. I liked and still do like really good pop songs, and I thought I'd hit on that with 'Love Makes Sweet Music'. Had we had a good producer, and brought in a backing band, and got somebody else to sing it too... (*he dissolves into laughter*) it might have been a hit.

"The Pink Floyd were our rivals at that time," he admits, "and when 'Arnold Layne' came out I thought, Fuck, that's so good, and although I was quite partisan and competitive with our record, I thought there was a lot more fairy dust on theirs. There was a mania with their early stuff, and we were never manic apart from brief bursts when we played live. I think we were all too logical and clever. We could never be spontaneous enough and abandon ourselves."'

"KEVIN TURNED UP WITH A BUNCH OF BEATLES AND YARDBIRDS RECORDS. WE DID ACID AND I THOUGHT, BUGGER IT, I CAN MAKE A LIVING OUT OF THIS."

"Everyone in the media was so surprised at how intelligent we were," says Allen. "There was this interview with a BBC guy who was astonished that Mike would come down from Oxford to play in a 'pop group'."

"It was like a game at first," admits Ratledge. "It was something tangential to my life. It certainly wasn't a consuming passion." So what did he make of the underground cognoscenti? "It all seemed incredibly normal. I certainly didn't feel any disruption or change. I felt I'd been around people like that for most of my teens."

The Softs were soon introduced to another of Chandler's management proteges, Jimi Hendrix. "Kevin came back from Mike Jeffrey's office in Wardour Street," remembers Daevid

Allen, "and said, 'Hey, come and catch this amazing guitar player. He's better than Jeff Beck.' Now Jeff Beck was my favourite guitarist, the most unpredictable, the most exciting, and when it really happened he could fly, but at least half the time he kicked up. When we got there Hendrix was playing with no amp yet the room was full of music. Really strong hands." ("Actually," Allen adds with a twinkle. "Jeff Beck was still more exciting than Hendrix precisely because Hendrix didn't fuck up.")

Wyatt: "Hendrix was tremendously important (or lots of people. For me too, if for nothing else than that what he let Mitch Mitchell do on drums gave me space for what I wanted to do on drums. We were using a lot of jazz ideas on drum kits that there hadn't been room for in the constricted time-keeping stuff I'd been doing before. This was the opposite of what Nick Mason was doing with the Floyd: he was kind of a ticking clock there, which is just what they needed. For electronic rock his approach was more suitable – uncluttered. People like me and Mitch were probably too busy, but at the time it seemed exciting."



Wyatt goes kerplunk. Above, with Ratledge and Jimi Hendrix: "Really strong hands."

By the spring of '67 the Soft Machine had a mid-week residency at the Speakeasy. Allen recounts fond memories of unlimited drinking on Giorgio Gomelsky's expense account and Hendrix dropping by regularly to jam the night away. "I heard Purple Haze for the first time down there," he marvels, "and it sounded like classical music to me but I couldn't see it being in the charts. I mean, how would the charts accommodate something like this?"

While the Top 10 proved itself capable of accommodating the "wild man of rock" (© Daily Mirror 1967), the UK took less of a shine to the Softs. Like Pink Floyd, they found that when they ventured outside London or the university circuit their ambience was not exactly in accord with the provincial *Zeitgeist*. Particularly irksome was the Kevin Ayers-penned 'We Did It Again' with its two-note bass figure nestling somewhere between The Kinks' 'You Really Got Me' and Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme'. "I had got into Sufism," Ayers explains, "and I liked the whirling dervish thing, the repetition. I always wanted to do it as a pure drone but the band always got bored with that, and kept adding things. We tried doing it

like that at Chelmsford and people threw things. In fact people threw thing all the time when we did that number."

"It only happened in England," confirms Ratledge. "If you appeared with, say, the equivalent of Status Quo in England you would get booed off the stage, whereas in America, even in tiny little clubs in Indiana or wherever, they would listen to both of you. In England the expectation was that you would be a pop band and perform chart material."

"We were pelted with stuff by Move fans at the Cambridge Corn Exchange," remembers Allen. "There was certainly an uneasy truce a lot of the time."

Always impeccably well connected whether jamming at Robert Graves's place or getting mad Okies to buy them equipment, Soft Machine now fell in with the Riviera jet set. In the summer of 1967 they played a series of happenings in the South of France culminating in a gig in St Tropez's town square organised by Eddie Barclay of Barclay Records and attended by the cream of Parisian glitterati – Bardot, Delon, Godard, etc. Soft Machine's entire set consisted of an hour-ion performance of 'We Did It Again'. "It was the moment that elevated Soft Machine to the heights in the Parisians' view and put us next to The Beatles and Rolling Stones for the next couple of years," maintains Allen. For Ayers the St Tropez gig was an unrepeatable moment of musical sartori. "That was the only time 'We Did It Again' really worked," he contends. "Your best ideas happen when you're naïve. There was something magical about that early band and I would challenge Robert or Mike to disagree with that. Later on you become more sophisticated and competent but the content is rarely better." The euphoria of the St Tropez gig was short-lived. On returning to England, Allen was refused re-entry at Dover. The official reason was an expired visa, but Customs knew an undesirable Allen when they saw one. The Aussie pothead was exiled back to France. Suspicions still linger in Allen's mind as to whether he fell or was pushed out of the band. Always more assured as a catalyst than as a musician (his playing on the early Softs demos that have surfaced on record is a little unfocused, to put it charitably), he was in those days a tad self-conscious about his technical limitations. Allen recalls in his book Gong Dreaming that after a particularly fraught gig Wyatt once told him that he was ashamed to be on-stage with him.



In the studio, 1967, manager Chas Chandler sports collar and tie: "He was looking for something commercial."

"When somebody tells you something that you already feel, it doubles the effect," reflects Allen now, and although he claims that "being thrown out of the country was exhilarating, liberating, the best thing that could have happened to me," and talks excitedly of being in Paris during May 1968, he leaves you in no doubt that he feels the Customs incident was convenient for the rest of the band.

Ratledge sees things differently. "I was quite shocked to hear that Daevid had indicated that we had kicked him out of the band, which is not my recollection at all. He was deported and was therefore no longer available to us. I don't remember any feeling of 'Daevid must go' at the time." Saying goodbye to their big brother beatnik marked the end of Soft Machine phase one. "I only really started taking it seriously when Daevid left and we were down to a trio," Ratledge admits. "It was then that I started writing for the band."

Still languishing behind Pink Floyd in terms of UK appeal, Soft Machine found audiences more receptive in Europe and America. Live, the three-piece was a *tour de force*. Wyatt's vocals, all Eastern modality and hop approximations, merged with Ayers's Sufi drone over layers of fuzz from Ratledge's trusty organ. "We couldn't afford a Hammond, which was the authentic article," Ratledge explains, "so I was playing this weedy Lowrey and I wanted to approximate the power that Hendrix had. I got sick of guitarists having all the balls."

It was during a break in their first major US tour in April 1968, a full year after *Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*, that the three-piece Softs finally got to record their first album. Producer Tom Wilson had worked with Dylan and on the Velvet Underground's debut. "Which is

presumably why he was hired," says Ayers. Despite Wilson's pedigree, and some great material, the resulting mix was clinical and lacking in dynamics. "We started out with some very good ideas," contends Ayers, "but that album was amateurish, sloppy, badly produced – a nightmare, now I look back on it. All he did was phone his girlfriends. I think he thought we were a bunch of little white shits playing this unfunky cerebral caterwauling."

The album, with its distinctive 'pin-wheel' cover pre-dating *Led Zeppelin III* by two years, finally came out in November 1968 on Probe. Shamefully, to this day it has never received a full UK release. Sleevenotes of colossal ineptitude written in period "hey cats, dig their scene"-style were provided by Arnold Shaw, better known for his showbiz hagiographies. Certain tracks on *Soft Machine* – Brian Hopper's 'Hope For Happiness', Wyatt's 'Save Yourself' – were adaptations of material from the Wellington House days. The "head is a nightclub" line on Ayers's seminal 'Why Are We Sleeping' was taken from a Daevid Allen jazz poem. Very little from those early days was ever wasted. Perhaps the most beautiful moment on the Softs' inauspicious debut was Ayers's instrumental 'Joy Of A Toy' (the title taken from a Ornette Coleman track), later reactivated for Ayers's solo debut. "I used a Gibson bass with nylon strings on that," he remembers. "Good for playing lead lines but not so good for a traditional bass sound. It sounds so elastic-bandy and plunky on that first album."



Soft Machine had been recorded in one four-day session while on tour with The Jimi Hendrix Experience. In contrast Hendrix recorded his indulgent masterpiece *Electric Ladyland* over a leisurely six-month period during the same marathon stint. "On the first part of that tour with Hendrix there were moments of sheer magic," says Ayers. "I found Hendrix a very gentle, very sad guy. He was being ripped off emotionally, financially, and he had to strap on an enormous amount of chemical armour before he could become Jimi Hendrix on-stage."

The tour, which took up most of 1968, almost split the Softs for good. "I got heavily into macrobiotics on the second part of the tour," remembers Ayers. "I stopped drinking, stopped smoking, which was totally incompatible with the routine of touring. My energy level went right down and I was falling about all over the place. You can't do a two-hour gig on a green apple, a glass of water and a bowl of rice."

Hugh Hopper was a roadie with the band at this point. "When I look back now I think, Great, I was on tour with Hendrix," he laughs, "but I never not to see much of the music, and even when I did I couldn't appreciate it because I was so knackered. It wasn't 16 articulated lorries like you have now. It was me and Hendrix's roadie with one van praying that we would get to the venue on time. Hendrix was becoming really big during that period, so as soon as there was a gap in the schedule it got filled, and we ended up touring for months without a break. It did Hendrix's roadie's head in completely. He abandoned the van in the streets of New York at the end of it."



It did Ayers's head in too; he fled to Ibiza to regain equilibrium. "Mike and Robert were far more musically literate than I was, and I think my simplicity bored them," he says of his departure. "I met Terry Riley and Gil Evans in New York and I liked all those jazz pieces Daevid and Robert introduced me to, but it was all way beyond my musical comprehension, and I didn't have the interest in playing things in 19/7 just for the sake of it. I never really liked 'fusion music' or whatever it was called, even the slick American stuff. I much preferred the jazz as it was to start with, and rock as it was to start with. Fusion all seemed more fun for the players than the listener. People with virtuoso techniques blasting at each other to see how difficult they could be." He dissolves again into mirthful disdain. "So I took my simplicity elsewhere, and lost this family. Being in a pure spiritual state at that time, clean of body and mind, I wasn't terribly worried. It only hit me later on that I was no longer close to these people."

Ayers gave his bass to Mitch Mitchell ("I still do that, actually: 'Take my house, my car, my wife.' I burn bridges."), and trainspotters might like to note the similarities in plunkiness between Ayers's aforementioned 'Joy Of A Toy' and Noel Redding's playing on '1983 (A Merman I Should Turn To Be) on *Electric Ladyland*'.

SOFT MACHINE EFFECTIVELY DISBANDED. RATLEDGE, LIKE Ayers, was burned out by the American tour. Wyatt hung out with Hendrix in LA and nurtured vague plans to pursue a solo career. Forced to record a second album as an obligation to Probe records, and with Ayers disinclined to budge from his sunny retreat, Ratledge and Wyatt brought in Hugh Hopper as a permanent replacement.

Kicking off with Wyatt's introduction to "the official orchestra of the college of pataphysics" and a scholarly rendition of the British alphabet, the resulting contract-fulfiller turned into a Canterbury classic. Full of self-mythologising little touches like Ratledge and Wyatt's warm referential nod to Kevin's macrobiotics, 'As Long As He Lies Perfectly Still', *Soft Machine Volume 2* takes us back to a time when Pere Ubu was still an Alfred Jarry character and not

a group from Cleveland. Daevid Allen described Jarry's notion of pataphysics to me as "creating a spiritual manifesto in an absurd form, casting a serious topic into an absurdist structure," something he turned into a fine art with Gong. Ayers also applied the principle to his post-Soft Machine work, probably to the detriment of his career. When asked to elaborate on the mechanics of pataphysics, Ratledge talks vaguely of "the science of the impossible" and "perverting the premises of scientific certainties." And how did you apply that to music? "We didn't. Not in the least. Are you kidding?" He rocks with suitably absurdist laughter. "*Soft Machine 2* was people celebrating enthusiasms for things outside the music, be it French literature or whatever. Often song titles were just adverts for things we liked: Read this, listen to that." Indeed. Like many people my age, I first picked up Burroughs's book The Soft Machine thinking it was a biography of the band. "See, it worked," he says with evident satisfaction.

Aside from the toe-tapping tributes to Pierrot Lunaire, and Dada and Jarry it's Hugh Hopper that really comes into his own on *Soft Machine Volume 2*. How could this bookish-looking bloke with curly receding hair, hornrims and 'tache write such exquisitely English songs? He still looks like he would have been more suitably employed in a professorial capacity at the college of advanced pataphysics rather than playing his debut Softs gig with Hendrix at the Albert Hall. One of the most magnificent moments on *Soft Machine Volume 2* is when Wyatt sings Hopper's 'Dedicated To You But You Weren't Listening'. "Don't use magnets geophysics/carry you back/autumn health-food homepride satisfied," he enunciates in tones of utter conviction. "I had a terrible migraine when I wrote that," Hopper offers a tad obliquely.

As Wyatt ruefully recalled, "One record company bloke told us, `I don't know whether you're our worst-selling rock group or our best-selling jazz group'."



From the Zebra Club in 1966, to the Albert Hall (inset), August 12, 1970: (from left) Ratledge, Hugh Hopper, Wyatt, Elton Dean.

MOST OF THE TRACKS ON *SOFT MACHINE VOLUME 2* SEGUE into each other, a common enough jazz device at the time, although Robert Wyatt later justified the Softs' use of continuity as a defence mechanism against hostile audiences – it's harder to boo when there aren't any pauses. By 1970 such defensiveness was becoming increasingly unnecessary. In the summer of that year, and arguably at the height of their critical acclaim, Soft Machine were invited to perform at the Proms. No longer a bunch of cerebral

hairies playing with their backs to the audience, they now had prestige. Radio 3 respectability beckoned. Again Ratledge was characteristically unfazed. "We'd played the Albert Hall twice before. It was just another gig. One was never surprised by anything during that period. I'm much less blase and more surprised by life now than I was then. The organisation though was a nightmare. The equipment was held up in Spain, there was no proper soundcheck." Even worse, the Softs were restricted to a 45-minutc set. "And because it was televised," adds Hopper, "they needed lots of light so we were all blinded on-stage. By our standards, it was a fairly duff gig."



More ominously, the Proms performance masked severe internal divisions within the band. The release of their double album Third, just prior to the Albert Hall gig, revealed a more overtly jazz-influenced direction. Feeling increasingly limited by writing for a trio, the band was now augmented by stalwarts of the burgeoning English jazz-rock scene like Elton Dean, Lyn Dobson, and Nick Evans. The album, in many ways the culmination of many of the Soft Machine's defining impulses, was largely instrumental, featuring lengthy solo and ensemble work-outs.

The exception was Wyatt's classic montage of life as seen from a New York hotel room, 'Moon In June', with which the others refused to have anything other than minimal involvement. The evident hurt this caused Wyatt was a major factor in his eventual departure from the band. Always the most extrovert member of the Softs – on-stage his long hair flailing and exuberant drumming contrasted sharply with Hopper and Ratledge sitting hunched over their instruments – Wyatt found himself increasingly cut adrift in a sea of cerebral noodling. To break out of the confines, Wyatt's extra-curricular musical activity at this time included stints with Keith Tippett's Centipede, Kevin Ayers And The Whole World and the Spontaneous Music Ensemble.

I remind Hugh Hopper of a story where a purist prog fan went backstage circa 1970 to congratulate the Softs on a great gig and to sneer that they'd had to endure Geno Washington And The Ram Jam Band a week earlier. "We'd play like that if we could," Wyatt had allegedly commented. "Oh absolutely," confirms Hopper. "I remember Robert meeting Phil Chen, the bass player with Jimmy James And The Vagabonds, and being knocked out by all these Temptations bass lines he was playing. But Robert always took stances: if everybody in the band was being freaky and avant garde, he'd have a month of championing Steeleye Span just for the effect it would have."

Shortly after the Proms gig Wyatt recorded his own solo album, End Of An Ear. According to the liner notes Wyatt penned for the album's 1992 CD reissue, this venture hastened his own departure from the Softs. "Perhaps – I was never told why – I was expelled soon afterwards from my original group by the very people I had invited to join it," he observed ungrammatically but, it would appear, accurately. "It was much more tricky than Kevin's departure, which was entirely amicable," Ratledge acknowledges. (Indeed, all of the Softs had subsequently reconvened to play on Ayers's first solo album.) "But after that tour with Hendrix things had polarised between Robert and everybody else. Hugh, myself and Elton were pursuing a vaguely jazz related direction. Robert was violently opposed to this, which is strange, looking back on it, because he was passionate about jazz. But he had defined ideas about what pop music was and what jazz was. I think, like Kevin, he'd made conceptual decisions that pop should remain pop and jazz should remain jazz. And although the so-called conspiracy between Hugh, myself and Elton covered a lot of actual differences between us, we had sufficient similarity to define ourselves against Robert.



"The whole situation in the USA got very complicated. Robert used to walk off the stand because he didn't like what we were playing or writing; you can't sustain a situation where your drummer is walking off the stand maybe one in four nights." "There were nights when we would make fun of him behind his back, admits Hopper. "It really had got that bad. Mike and I couldn't stand Robert and he couldn't stand us. We were very cool and calculated whereas Robert was very open and impulsive. During one evening of drunkenness at Ronnie Scott's he said to someone, 'I wish I could find another band'. The rest of us leapt on it and said, 'Right, go on then'. Robert was definitely pushed out of what he felt was his own group. He'd been one of the instigators, after all. And he seems as bitter about that now as he ever has been."

This much is brought home to me when I contact Wyatt for a contribution to this feature. Back comes a postcard with that familiar childlike scrawl and skewed diction. "I still have nightmares or rather daymares," it reads. "I dream my rejection was a temporary blip and I'm welcomed back into the fold. Then I wake up. How bad was I affected by my being deported from SM? Well breaking my back was easier to deal with. That's how bad." Further qualified enquiries to the man whose music I admire more than that of any other living Englishman get a similarly unyielding response. It would seem that even after all this time there is still too much pain.

"We handled it clumsily," concedes Ratledge with considerable understatement. What is so sad is that the Wyatt-Softs split seems to be indicative of the way the whole musical family gradually fell apart. The Canterbury forefathers have minimal, if any contact with each other these days. Some haven't seen each other for 20 years.

"Nobody in the band was trying to do the same thing at all, which is why it was quite original and why, after a couple of years, it fell part," Wyatt recalled 10 years ago. "It was a constant process of disintegration really, getting in new people to fill the gaps. Which in the '60s was rare, because most bands were quite stable. I talked to Nick Mason of Pink Floyd about that once. I said, 'How come you lot have stayed together so long?' and he said, 'We haven't finished with each other yet.' But it kept changing, we kept on tinkering with it and tinkering with it and throwing each other out of it and leaving it until eventually all the kinks were ironed out, and in the end it became a standard British jazz-rock band. I don't know what happened in the end. I stopped listening after a while – I stopped listening before I even left."

The whole sorry situation elicits a cautious summarising from Ratledge. "The very reason

why the band was so good – with everyone pulling in different directions – became unsustainable. It reached a point where everyone wanted to do what they wanted to do so strongly that you couldn't have any sort of compromise. Nobody in that band was going to do anyone else's thing any more. It's the price you pay for being committed. You can sustain a band on compromise for years if there's no passion there."

EVEN THE ALLEGIANCE TO THE ENGLISH JAZZ ROCK scene was, it would now appear, something of a mismatch. "I never felt part of that English jazz scene," says Ratledge surprisingly, "and the more we included those kind of players in the band the more difference I felt between me and them, mainly because writing was very important to me and jazz at the time was very improvised and anti-writing. Hugh was much more at ease with that kind of departure than I was."


The last line-up with an original member, 1974: (from left) John Marshall, Roy Babbington, Mike Ratledge, Allan Holdsworth, Karl Jenkins.

But Hopper has equal misgivings about the jazz-prog detour taken the band after the early 1970s: "I was very influenced by *Uncle Meat* and *Hot Rats*-period Zappa, but that whole jazz rock territory subsequently became very devalued. For me the best stuff was a mixture of real weirdness and good writing. Zappa was a great writer. But what you ended up with was lots of good technical players who didn't have that weirdness that could lift it." Hopper left after the Softs' sixth album strayed down the creative cul de sac of English jazz-rock. "I've enjoyed playing music much more since leaving Soft Machine," he concludes.

Ratledge was the last of the originals to leave. Conceding that he delayed his departure about a year too long, he left at the end of 1975, after album number eight, by which time Soft Machine had become just another finishing school for English fusionists. "It had stayed static for some time," he admits. "It had become a gig,"

For Ratledge a whole new successful career in TV ad music opened up, far removed from jazz-rock improv in tricky time signatures. "In a curious sort of way, everybody discovered their individuality by being in the band," he concludes. "We all tried to do something cohesive to work out what we had in common but everyone was acting out some idea of what they thought pop music was, and the longer it existed everybody wanted to pull in different directions. That was both the reason for its success and the reason for it falling apart."

Rob Chapman
Photos : Mark Ellidge, Pictorial Press, LFI, Hulton Getti, T. Russell/Redferns

Previous article

Next article

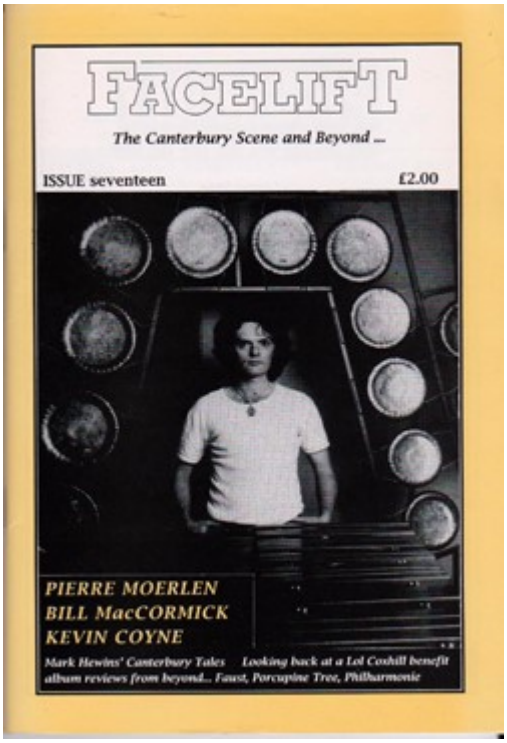
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Mole on Hold, an interview with Bill MacCormick - Facelift - N° 17 - January 1997



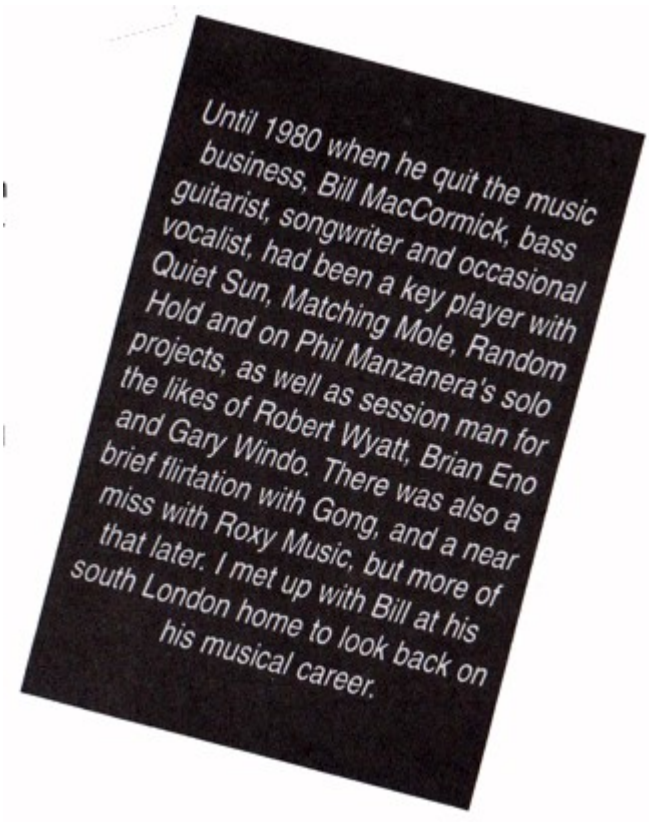


Mole on Hold

an interview with

Bill Maccormick

by Stephen Yarwood



"I was born in London in 1951, my father had been a fighter pilot during the war and worked for a variety of airlines afterwards. My mother, who was also in the RAF, took a more academic path and moved into teaching. While I was at Dulwich College, she worked for a while at the Preparatory School across the road, as did Honor Wyatt, Robert's mother, with whom she got on very well. I soon discovered that Honor had a son who was a musician, which immediately aroused my interest. Eventually my brother Ian and I were invited to a party at some exotic and arty place in Kingston to see Robert's group perform."

This was August 1966 and was the Soft Machine's first live appearance - Daevid Allen, (guitar), Kevin Ayers (bass/vocals), Mike Ratledge (organ) and Robert Wyatt (drums/vocals).

"After that we thought we'd better keep in with these guys as it all seemed very cool. Some time later they all moved into Honor's house in Dalmore Road, West Dulwich, and as this was on the way back from school we started calling in. They had all their equipment, including the ubiquitous 100w Marshall stacks, in the front room. Basically we used to hang out there and drink copious cups of tea whilst listening them rehearse or alternatively to the records that Robert would play. It was a real education, and we started picking up on music well outside of the mainstream like Miles Davis or even Cecil Taylor, whom we actually went to see on one memorable occasion, unbelievably impenetrable stuff! Even so it really opened our ears to what was possible. Ian and myself would supplement this education with frequent visits to West Norwood Library where there was a good music section. By our mid teens the standard stuff on the turntable, apart from the Beatles, would be Pharaoh Sanders, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane plus orchestral pieces by modern classical composers such as Stravinsky."

Elder brother Ian later became a well known and influential music journalist with the NME under the name of Ian MacDonald. As an author he received much acclaim for his Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the 60s, a detailed analysis of the entire Beatles catalogue song by song.

"Around early '68, we decided to get a band together at school, the key figures being myself, Phil Manzanera and Charlie Hayward. Others members were part of a floating complement that came and went. I was the vocalist, I didn't actually take up bass guitar until I left school. Our influences were very much the psychedelic groups of the time, so we started out playing covers of songs by Cream, Jefferson Airplane and those sort of people. We played the school annual arts festival on a couple of occasions, pretty much taking it over in the end. We also played at Dulwich Swimming Baths during the winter when the pool was boarded over. It was a good venue, quite a large hall with a stage. We'd send out invitations to other public schools in the area and end up playing 1½ hour sets to four or five hundred people. By now we'd

written some of our own stuff and had a couple of guys who did the lights, one of whom had been with me in the States in the Winter of 1968 and seen all the top San Francisco light shows at places like the Fillmore. On our return the physics lab was raided for slides and projectors to create some pretty impressive visuals. The school were amazingly tolerant of our activities, we had a great time."

Charles Hayward was something of a musical maverick. In later years he served time with a diverse number of groups such as High Tide, Radar Favourites, Gong and This Heat. The latter had a degree of critical acclaim and produced a number of well received albums in the late 70s and early 80s. Since the demise of This Heat he seems to have ploughed his own furrow with various releases under his own name or in collaboration with a miscellany of artists on the experimental fringes.

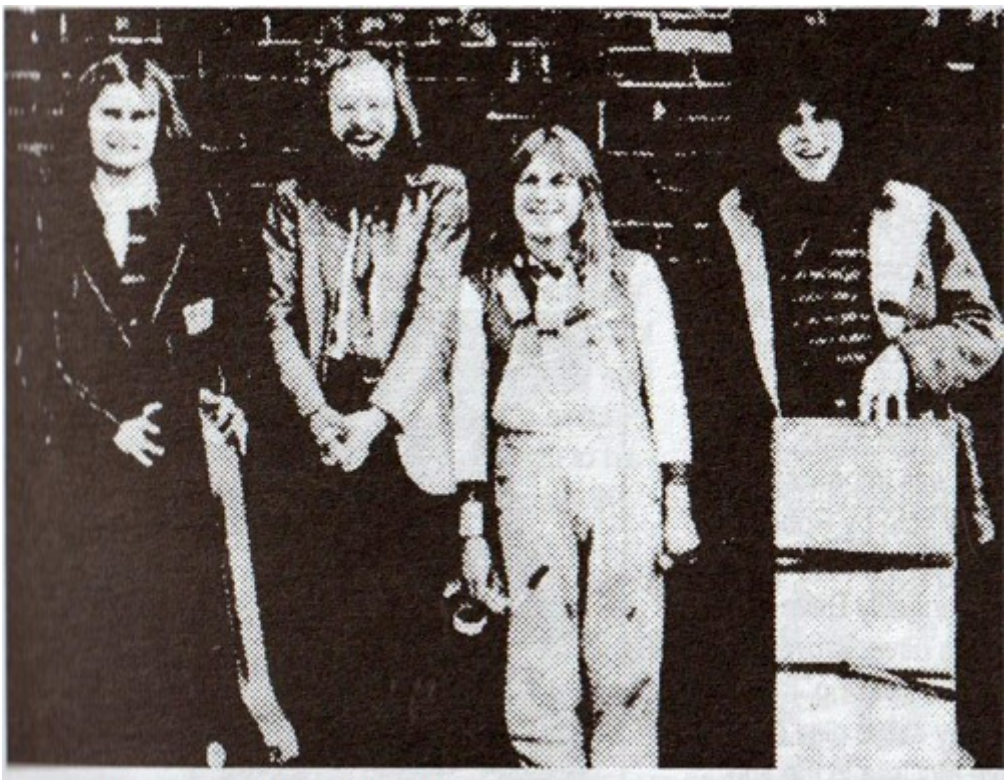


Quiet Sun, 1970: MacCormick, Manzanera, Hayward, Jarrett

"Charlie had originally been asked to join the group because he had a magnificent red Premier Keith Moon style kit, with the two bass drums, extra toms etc. The fact that he could play was a bonus, his parents had paid for lessons over a number of years and he was technically brilliant. After a while he said we could rehearse at his house, a huge Victorian place across the road from Camberwell School of art. This became a regular thing two or three times a week and went on through the final year at school and beyond. Eventually we felt we needed a change of direction, we were writing more instrumental stuff for which we needed keyboards and sax, plus a new bass player. We soon found a sax player, and then Dave Jarrett came in on keyboards. He had also been at Dulwich College and was very much a Mike Ratledge clone. Still we couldn't find a suitable bass player, we had the instrument but nobody to play it. In order to rehearse I said I'd learn the parts and fill in until we found a permanent replacement. We carried on this way until I realised I quite enjoyed it, and the others thought I was doing a good job, so quite by accident I filled Hie vacancy. The sax player had left by this time and we were down to the basic four piece which became Quiet Sun.".

Quiet Sun were very much a musicians band, unusual chord sequences and time signatures, with vocals playing a diminishing role in the increasingly sophisticated music. Bill MacCormick is modest about his own musical abilities, to pick up the bass guitar from scratch and within a few months be playing such complex arrangements is impressive indeed. The name Quiet Sun had come into being sometime in 1970 after Ian MacCormick had come across a magazine article about sunspot activity entitled The Years of the Quiet Sun.

"Warner Brothers had a small studio somewhere in Dorset where we spent a few days recording demos. We organised a few gigs around West Norwood for a fairly loyal following mostly of people who had known us from school, and occasionally played other places. I particularly remember a shambolic appearance on Worthing Pier supporting Steamhammer, but live dates were pretty few and far between. In the end Warner Brothers decided not to sign us. We were probably a bit too obscure to have any real chance of getting a recording deal."



Matching Mole: MacCormick, MacRae, Wyatt, Miller

As the momentum within Quiet Sun began to fade other avenues began to open for individual members. Guitarist Phil Manzanera successfully auditioned for Roxy Music and Bill MacCormick joined up with Robert Wyatt's first post Soft Machine project, Matching Mole. His bass playing abilities had been noted when Quiet Sun and Gary Windo's Symbiosis shared a stage during a gig in Portsmouth.

"Quiet Sun were supporting Symbiosis, with Robert on drums that particular night. Their line up tended to be very fluid and depended on who was available. Towards the end of their set we were asked to go up and jam, it was the first time Robert had actually seen me play. Life for him in Soft Machine had become pretty awful, he was very depressed. They treated him very badly, he gave that band some humanity. Mike Ratledge in particular wrote technically fantastic stuff that I enjoyed listening to, but Robert wrote the good songs."

The inevitable Wyatt / Soft Machine split finally occurred during the Summer of 1971. Ian MacDonald (nee MacCormick) summed it up nicely in a 1975 NME retrospective, "With him he took most of the group's humour and a large slab of their profundity too." In late 1971 Robert began to sound out musicians for what would become Matching Mole. Bill MacCormick was first to be approached, Dave Sinclair (keyboards) had recently split from Caravan, and Phil Miller (guitar) was available after the demise of the short lived DC and the MBs, which had included his brother Steve, Lol Coxhill and Laurie Allan.

"In September 1971 Robert asked me if I would be interested in getting a band together. A couple of months later, with Dave Sinclair and Phil Miller on board, rehearsals began at a house in Notting Hill. We tried out Moon in June, some of Dave's longer Caravan pieces and few new ideas. As it turned out much of the album was improvised and some of it recorded completely solo by Robert. It was rather thrown together really, certainly not what CBS were expecting. Eventually Dave Sinclair was eased out, he was never entirely happy with the way we were progressing. It was a bit too free for him. We did play some gigs with both Dave Sinclair and Dave McCrae in the line up, mainly in Belgium and Holland, but it wasn't really working with two keyboard players. Money was one of our main problems though. I'd had a job for a while the previous year and at one point I actually ended up paying the other members of the band."

Recorded under difficult circumstances due to power cuts (miners' strike) and bargain basement technology, the first Matching Mole album is a bit of an acquired taste, but on repeated listening many of the less immediate parts reveal hidden depths. Unwary listeners can be lulled into a false sense of security by the opening track Oh Caroline, a poignant song with a beautiful melody, apparently about a recently ended relationship with journalist Caroline Coon, and probably Robert Wyatt's best known song. After the wordless multi tracked vocals of Instant Pussy and the tongue in cheek Signed Curtain the rest of the album

is mainly group improvisations over a few basic chord structures, plus a couple of solo Wyatt mellotron pieces. How would this translate to the live situation? Quite successfully in some quarters it would seem. Soft Machine had always been more popular in mainland Europe, and so it was with Matching Mole.

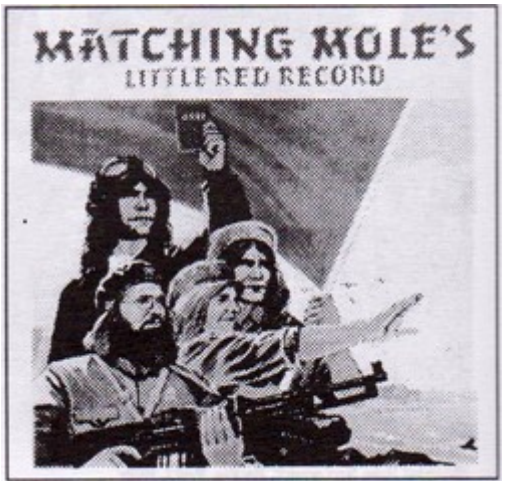


"In the UK we were paid very poorly for our live performances, whereas in Holland, Belgium or France it was far better. In those countries it was a different sort of audience, particularly in France, much more arty. We always went down well in Amsterdam, especially the Paradiso Club where we played on a number of occasions. Our set at that time included bits and pieces from Soft Machine numbers, borrowing Hugh Hopper chord sequences and various other things. It was a very enjoyable period."

Around this time, with the ever improving Phil Manzanera in their ranks, Roxy Music were beginning to attract attention, but their lifelong problems with bass players were about to begin.

"One of the first breaks Roxy got, apart from a rather over the top review of their demos by Richard Williams in the Melody Maker, was at a big festival somewhere in Lincolnshire in May 72. They'd recorded the first album and this was to be their first high profile live appearance after the sessions, but with about a week to go bass player Graham Simpson had a nervous breakdown. Apparently they phoned me but I was in Paris with Matching Mole. That was that, I was in wrong place at the wrong time, but who knows? With their track record with bass players I might have only lasted a couple of weeks." Meanwhile back in the real world, Matching Mole were writing and recording. Studio time for the second Matching Mole album was booked for August 1972.

"At my suggestion we hired Robert Fripp to produce what became the Little Red Record. A very nice man, but as it turned out totally wrong for the job. Unfortunately he terrified Phil Miller, to whom Fripp was the ultimate guitar player. Phil would try to do his parts with Fripp watching from the control room and find it most intimidating. It has to be said that Fripp wasn't terribly helpful under the circumstances. He had a very dictatorial approach to his production duties, he insisted on the final say in everything. I also suggested we get Eno in to do some of the synthesiser parts on Gloria Gloom and other things. Dave McCrae took this as a grave aspersion on his keyboard abilities, which I couldn't understand because he was a brilliant electric piano player but hadn't as far as I knew used synthesisers."



Matching Mole's Little Red Record came out in September 1972 to good reviews, helped along by Ian MacDonald who was by now assistant editor at the NME. Live reviews had also been favourable.

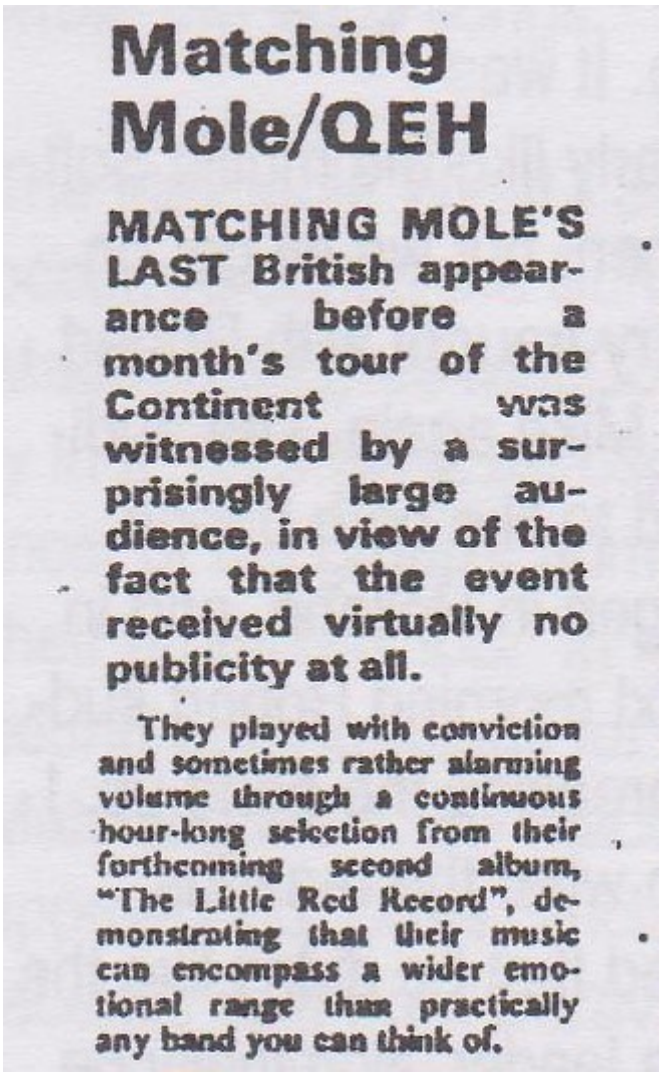
"After the album sessions finished we toured Belgium and Holland with Soft Machine, the Jenkins / Marshall / Hopper / Ratledge line up. It was a nice tour, I didn't particularly like the music Soft Machine were producing then, but we all got on well. It could have been very fraught with Robert meeting up with Hugh and Mike again. The audiences listened and seemed to like both bands. The last gig was in Groningen in Holland, and in the hotel restaurant the next morning Robert suddenly announced he was breaking the band up. I was never really sure as to what the reasons were. It has been suggested that he didn't like the responsibilities of being the leader. Nominally he was the leader, but if you look at the credits for the music it was actually spreading out amongst the rest of us. We were all writing and it seemed to me that we were developing a sound. Whereas the first album had been very

much improvised around some very simple riffs, the second album had a greater structure to it. We were also beginning to make some headway in mainland Europe. We were playing festivals and getting good billing with money up front, we could play any major French/Dutch /Belgian city or town and pull a decent sized audience. I couldn't quite see what Robert's problem was, perhaps he just didn't like the music and was too polite to say. The rest of us were absolutely flabbergasted, it really didn't seem to us to be a reasonable or sensible thing to do."

In the Autumn of 1972 a phone call from Robert Wyatt began a little known chapter in the history of the Planet Gong.

"Robert phoned me to say that Gong were looking for a new bass player and were auditioning at the Manor, Richard Branson's studio. I wasn't too sure about it but went along anyway, and a few days later I got a call asking me if I wanted to join them in France. So I picked up my guitar, flew off to Paris and was taken to this hunting lodge somewhere in the countryside. This would be around November and it was bloody cold. At the time the line up included Daevid .Allen, Didier Malherbe (sax), another Frenchman on guitar (probably Christian Tritsch, recently switched from bass), and a drummer whose identity escapes me (probably Laurie Allan). The band were essentially French, Daevid Allen and Gilli Smyth were both fluent in French, so that was the common language. The only opportunity for me to communicate effectively was through the music. I began to resent the fact that I was there, I had nothing with me apart from the clothes I stood up in, I couldn't sleep because it was too cold, I spoke very little French, and nobody seemed to be going out of their way to communicate with me. Some of the sessions got a bit weird, Daevid seemed to go out of his way to give some sort of competitive edge to the situation. We'd be on opposite sides of the rehearsal room sort of eyeing each other, perhaps this was part of his creative process. It was very strange, I don't know why it happened that way at all. It might have worked if I could have sustained it because there were definitely sparks flying, Didier was enjoying himself tremendously. After four or five days though I told them I just couldn't handle it. So that was that, and they drove me back to Paris."

Since the break up of Matching Mole Mk1 Robert Wyatt's musical activities had been restricted to a few guest appearances, but early 1973 found Bill MacCormick cajoling



Matching Mole/QEH

MATCHING MOLE'S LAST British appearance before a month's tour of the Continent was witnessed by a surprisingly large audience, in view of the fact that the event received virtually no publicity at all.

They played with conviction and sometimes rather alarming volume through a continuous hour-long selection from their forthcoming second album, "The Little Red Record", demonstrating that their music can encompass a wider emotional range than practically any band you can think of.

him to reboot his own musical direction.

"Robert had gone off to Venice with Alfie (Alfreda Benge, whom he later married), she was working in some sort of editorial capacity on the Nick Roeg movie Don't Look Now. While he was there we communicated on a fairly regular basis and I suggested various musical projects. Through his connections I met up with Francis Monkman and Gary Windo, and eventually Robert agreed to Matching Mole Mk2. Whilst he'd been away in Venice he'd been writing some stuff on a portable keyboard, quite a lot of which ended up on Rock Bottom."

Francis Monkman (keyboards) had been a founder member of Curved Air playing on their first three albums, finally quitting in 1972. Since then he has worked mainly as a session man, although he did spend a number of years as a member of Sky with classical guitarist John Williams. Gary Windo was a larger than life character who had his roots in jazz, but who would frequently cross musical boundaries if the spirit and attitude were right. His rasping tenor sax tones added that extra ingredient on countless recordings, particularly Robert Wyatt's Rock Bottom and Ruth is Stranger than Richard. His sudden death in 1992 was a great loss.

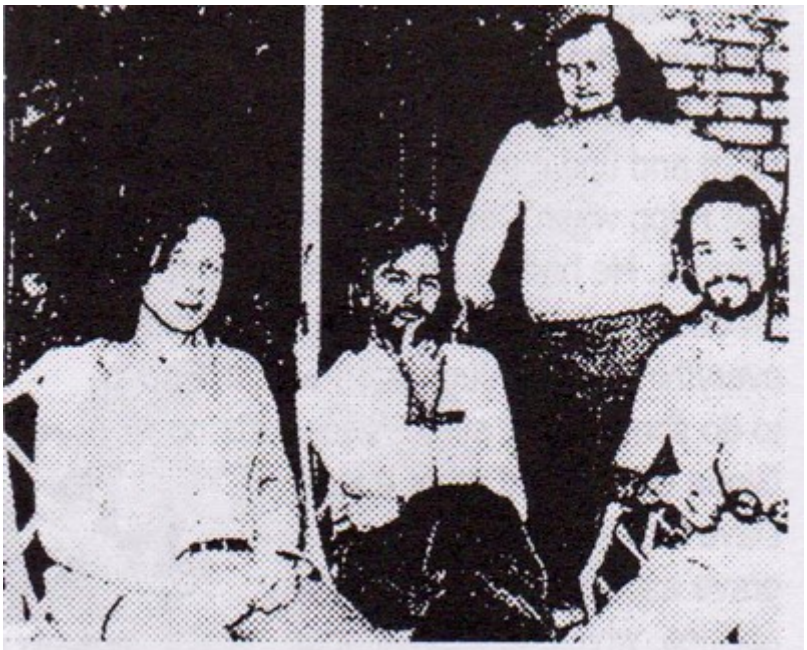
"We started rehearsing, although I use the term very loosely, it was in fact a couple of afternoons up at Alfie's flat. I do remember one day Robert and I went across the road to a pub where they had a band, and we ended up playing rock 'n roll songs. Given my background these were things I'd never played before, so it was quite interesting trying to work out the bass parts that every bass player in the world knew as standards. I'd just never got round to it. My bass playing had all come from playing written parts for Quiet Sun songs. Then Gary and I did a couple of pubs gigs with a pick up band including John Halsey and Ollie Halsall from Patto. We were stopped by the landlord at one of the gigs, it wasn't what he was expecting."



Instrumental high-spots included some delicate impressionism on Dave McRae's "Smoke Signal" and an impassioned "Lithing and Gracing" with a wound-up Phil Miller guitar break liberating itself finally in free atonality. However, the best performances were of a batch of songs full of serpentine melodies and minor changes and all vehicles for Robert Wyatt's firework-display of a voice, reaching into the stratosphere on Bill MacCormick's "Gloria Gloom" and turning on a mock-operatic tenor for McRae's "Drinking My Politics Away". Perversely, the best moment came right at the beginning with a tragically beautiful Miller-Wyatt collaboration, "God Song"; it'll be the stand-out track on "The Little Red Record" as "O Caroline" was on the first album — but only just, because everything Matching Mole are playing these days is of world class.

Silver medal of the evening went to a new singer-songwriter, Paul Wheeler, who proves one of the finds of the year. Melodically, and lyrically, he has already achieved a mature sensitivity which solo artists from both sides of the Atlantic have been struggling to find for a very long time. "Julie Was Saying Goodbye" and "Easy Time" both set South Bank records in their class, and the first record company to reach him must be in with a chance at Montreal.

IAN MacDONALD



Quiet Sun, 1975 : Jarrett, Hayward, MacCormick, Manzanera

The thought of an unsuspecting publican being confronted by the uncompromising blowing of Gary Windo is one to savour. Jumping ahead a year or two, Bill MacCormick was also involved in the sessions for Gary's Steam Radio Tapes.

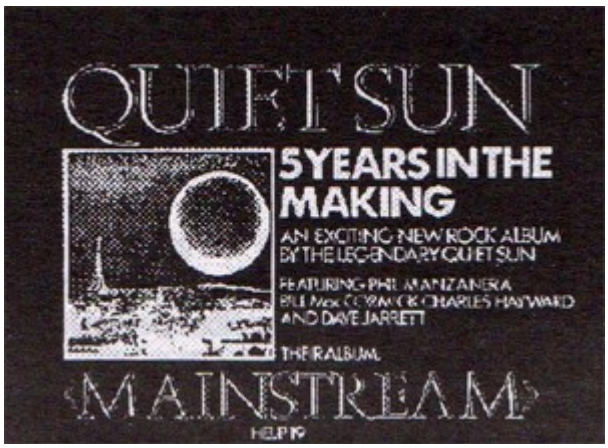
"He certainly was the wild man of the sax, a great player, lots of enthusiasm, when I heard he'd died it was a great shock. In April 1976 I played on the sessions for his Steam Radio Tapes. It started at his flat in Hampstead, quite a lot of it was working on songs that Pam his wife had written. We actually put a band together which played one gig, at Maidstone College of Art. We had Nick Mason on drums, a guitarist whose name escapes me (possibly Richard Brunton), and Pam playing piano and singing. From that it evolved into the Steam Radio Tapes down at Britannia Row studios. Myself and Hugh Hopper played bass, often both of us on the same number, it's virtually impossible to tell who is playing what."

Meanwhile back in 1973 the Matching Mole revival gathered pace, but ended abruptly when an intoxicated Robert Wyatt fell out of a window at a party and sustained severe spinal injuries, resulting in permanent confinement to a wheelchair.

"I think the announcement had gone out in Melody Maker saying that Matching Mole Mk2 were ready to go and were currently rehearsing. Then it all came to an end with the accident. Robert had seemed enthusiastic about the new line up, admittedly I'd badgered him into it. It was a great shame because quite a lot of Rock Bottom had already been written, and when I heard the album I thought if things had been different it could have been us. The accident happened on a Saturday night and I found out on the Sunday, by the evening I was in hospital with appendicitis. The doctor said it could be brought on by stress, or a sudden shock. After the operation I did very little for several months apart from regular visits to Robert at Stoke Mandeville Hospital. He was fortunate in that people rallied round after the accident, Pink Floyd arranged a benefit. When he came out of hospital I was a frequent visitor at his and Alfie's flat, I was amazed how cheerful he was. I did a few sessions for Eno's Here Come the Warm Jets album in September 73, appearing on a couple of tracks, but basically I stopped playing for about 18 months."

This musically inactive period was very active in other areas and set the tone for a future career.

"I joined the Liberal Party in December 73 and became heavily involved in the General Elections of February 74, and in May that year I stood in the Council Elections. I had also wanted to go to university to read politics, but having obtained the necessary qualifications I



Quiet Sun Ad

turned down offers from the London School of Economics and Warwick University in favour of reviving my musical career. Phil Manzanera had come up with the idea for the Quiet Sun album in late 74 and in the end there was no contest."

Phil Manzanera released four excellent song based albums during periods of Roxy Music inactivity in the mid 70s. They were Diamond Head (1975), 801 Live (1976), Listen Now (1977) and K-Scope (1978). Bill MacCormick was bass player on most of the sessions and a major contributor to the writing. The two later albums also contained a significant input from Ian MacCormick. Late 1974 saw the beginning of the sessions for Diamond Head, and running parallel was the recording of Mainstream by the temporarily reformed Quiet Sun. Was Quiet Sun's one and only appearance on vinyl a true representation of their sound?

"Yes, there wasn't time for anything fancy as it was entirely recorded during Phil's sessions. He'd book the studio for say 12 hours, then do 8 hours of his stuff and then 4 hours of Quiet Sun, usually after midnight. There was a certain amount of overlap between the two projects, a number of tracks on Diamond Head were fragments of songs that didn't make it on to the Quiet Sun album. It was all done very quickly. Having got Dave Jarrett away from teaching mathematics or whatever it was, we'd managed to get a few days rehearsal. The production on the album was pretty minimal, apart from a few treatments by Eno. Phil knew him from Roxy of course, and I knew him from the second Matching Mole album and my sessions on his first solo album. The Quiet Sun sessions were really good, I think it probably sounds a bit off the wall because that's the way it had to be recorded, we weren't trying to make it sound pretty or anything. Phil just wanted to put it out because it made sense of the couple of years we'd spent writing the material and getting a sound together. It was a cheap album to make and I'm still getting royalties from it."

Robert Wyatt's post accident career had started well with his highly acclaimed Rock Bottom in 1974, and Ruth is Stranger than Richard the following year. The sessions took place during May 1975 at the Manor in Oxfordshire and featured an interesting mix of musicians.

The Manor was a very nice place to record, the guys in the studio were great, the food was good. It wasn't technically outstanding, but the engineers got an excellent sound and were prepared to try anything. It was nice to work with Robert again. I suspect he felt a bit taken over at times on those sessions, there were some very forceful personalities around, but it was a great two or three weeks. It was quite funny really, there was an underlying tension between the jazzers like George Khan and Gary Windo, and some of the rockers. Basically Brian Eno thought jazz was crap, whereas they couldn't quite understand what this rather bizarre looking character was doing in the studio. But it worked really well and I really enjoyed it. There are a few things on that album where I felt I played particularly well, Team Spirit was one, Five Black Notes and One White Note was another."

The next Manzanera project culminated in the 801 Live album. A varied selection of original material was complemented by carefully chosen covers, in particular an outstanding version of Lennon and McCartney's Tomorrow Never Knows.

"801 came together during 1976, and sprang out of sessions that eventually ended up as the Listen Now album. The sessions had been going on for a long time because of Phil's commitments with Roxy. Eventually he decided he wanted to do something in the summer, and suggested getting a band together and playing some festivals."

In addition to Manzanera and MacCormick the short lived 801 Mk1 also included Brian



Wyatt's Rough cuts

ROBERT Wyatt returns from his self-imposed musical exile with a series of singles to be released by Rough Trade.

The first, Wyatt's interpretation of "Caimenera", the Spanish original of "Guantanamera", is released in a fortnight, with Bill MacCormick on bass and Harry Beckett on flugelhorn. The B-side is Violetta Para's "Arracuoa", sung and played by Wyatt with MacCormick on bass.

The other singles are being lined up, although a final decision on release hasn't yet been made. One of the singles will be Wyatt's versions of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and Chic's "At Last I'm Free", and another features his acapella cover of the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet's "Stalin Wasn't Stallin'".

All the singles' tracks were recorded over the last few weekends, and an album, again through Rough Trade, is being considered, although there has been no discussion yet about Wyatt playing live.

left: NME album review 1980; above: press announcement, 1981

Eno (synth/vocals), Simon Phillips (drums), Francis Monkman (keyboards) and Lloyd Watson (slide guitar/vocals).

"Lloyd Watson was a singer songwriter who had been support on one of the early Roxy Music tours. It was an interesting combination, a slide guitar player and Brian Eno. As we all had a free summer we were able to get it together in the country. We had the use of a house near Ludlow in Herefordshire so we spent a few days down there examining the possibilities. We looked at songs from Phil's albums, Eno's albums, some Quiet Sun stuff plus a few cover versions. I'm sure the others will claim otherwise but it was my idea to do Tomorrow Never Knows, but I think the idea of doing the Kinks' You Really Got Me just came out of jamming around. We had further rehearsals and were then supposed to go off and do a series of festivals in France, for which we would be pretty well paid. About two weeks before the first event at Orange in the south of France, there was a riot at another festival which resulted in Giscard D'Estaing cancelling all similar events in France that summer. As you can imagine this was a bit of a blow, we could see all this money we'd been expecting to earn going down the tubes. To compensate Phil suggested we make a record, so our final gig at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London was recorded by the Island Mobile and this became the imaginatively titled 801 Live. The album was incredibly cheap to produce, it still sells and the royalty cheques still come in. We had previously played the Reading Festival and on the day it had been raining so hard that the audience area had become a sea of mud, you could see the steam rising off the crowd. As we hit the stage the sun came out. It was a wonderful moment, and more steam rose from the bedraggled masses. It was a great set, we really played well and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves."

About a year later there was a British tour under the 801 banner to promote the new studio album Listen Now.

"It was a lively tour, along with Phil and myself, we had Paul Thompson (drums), Dave Skinner (keyboards) and Simon Ainley (guitar/vocals). The whole 801 project was a good outlet for songs that Phil, Ian (MacCormick) and myself had put together. We would go over to Phil's house and spend days working on various new ideas. Listen Now came out of a lot of half finished things that Phil had, to which Ian and I added lyrics and melodies. It took a long time to record, December 75 through to July 77, and featured a cast of thousands. Simon Ainley did all the lead vocals, amongst the other musicians were Simon Phillips, Dave Mattacks, Mel Collins, Eno, Francis Monkman and Eddie Jobson. Around this time I also had a brief foray into journalism. I did a few things for the NME, the first one about football hooliganism, then an interview with Julie Christie about her anti nuclear stance, and finally a look at the unwelcome rise of the National Front. The latter piece caused a few problems when I received a death threat, which had Special Branch crawling all over the place for a while. These sort of issues were reflected in the lyrics on Listen Now, it was an

unpleasant and threatening time in this country, it seemed like we were moving towards a totalitarian state. I did a couple of things from America for Streetlife magazine, interviewing Warren Beatty about his political activities, and covering the 1976 Presidential Elections."

K-Scope, the last in the quartet of Manzanera albums, was recorded and released in 1978. Writing credits once again, apart from lyrics by John Wetton on one track, were all Manzanera / W.MacCormick / I.MacCormick in various combinations.

" K-Scope had no political concept and was musically a much less coherent piece of work than Listen Now, although recorded in a shorter period of time at Chris Squire's studio. Tim Finn did most the lead vocals, with his brother Neil helping out on keyboards. Their band Split Enz, whom Phil had been instrumental in bringing over from New Zealand, had just split up. Neil and Tim of course later found fame and fortune as Crowded House. It was very co-operative throughout the sessions and overdubs, then Phil rushed off and mixed the whole thing very quickly. I had nothing to do with the final mix at all, and when the album was released it didn't really come up to my expectations. The reason for the haste, it later emerged, was that Roxy were reforming so Phil was keen to get everything else out of the way."



RANDOM HOLD
The View From Here
(Polydor)

RANDOM HOLD, you might say, are red-blooded artisans where Magazines are anaemic artists. Practitioners of a sturdily dramatic music that pulses in fine robust fashion even while the lyrics make an ineffectual nod towards the same bleak todays and oblique tomorrows that trouble Devoto's devotions.

The vocals — wrenching white soulful — impress too, but the strengths of this album are primarily instrumental. Through the ornate crescendos of 'Silver Spoons, Golden Tongues' and moody atmospherics of 'With People (Out Of Love)' to the title track's swiftly shifting rhythmic floor, the music retains its ominous edge.

The final chapter in the Bill MacCormick musical career began in late 1978. Random Hold were formed by David Ferguson (keyboards) and David Rhodes (guitar). The sound they evolved was dark and occasionally austere yet always capable of moments of high drama and excitement, sometimes bringing to mind the aggressive metallic sound of mid 70s King Crimson, but in a more song orientated format.

"I'd watched them play and thought they were quite interesting, so I put some money in and was later invited to join, along with Simon Ainley (guitar / vocals) and Dave Leach (drums). We struggled for some time to get any interest, but eventually I was able to exploit some of my contacts in the music business, in particular Alan Jones at the Melody Maker. After seeing us rehearse for about half an hour he was convinced we were the next big thing, and gave us a spread in Melody Maker which certainly had a dramatic effect on the record companies. Having been in a situation where nobody was interested, we suddenly found ourselves in an auction between three record labels. We successfully played them off against each other and ended up with a substantial advance of 80000 from Polydor, which we immediately blew on expensive guitars and other such luxuries."

So far so good, but there were storm clouds gathering.

"Simon Ainley wanted to be a rock 'n roll star, lots of chicks, lots of guitars on the wall and as big a bank balance as possible. But Rhodes and Ferguson were artists, serious

people with serious objectives in life, they wanted to do something deep and meaningful. Without any reference to me they decided to fire him. This was an error of judgement because they lost a good front man, without him the whole image became one of too much shade and not enough light. Simon was a fairly easy going individual and it reflected in his contribution to the band, it lightened what at times was rather gloomy music. His singing was good, but his guitar playing was too lightweight for Ferguson and Rhodes. Personally I felt it gave counterpoint to the rather dour Rhodes approach, a brilliant technician but rather introverted. Around the same time drummer Dave Leach's medical problems were used as an excuse to oust him in favour of Peter Phipps whose claim to fame was that he used to be in the Glitterband! Polydor were unhappy about Simon's departure and they were never too keen after that."

Despite the personnel upheavals there was interest from an unexpected quarter.

"We discovered Peter Gabriel was something of a fan. I don't know how he found out about us but he came along to the Rock Garden to see us. He persuaded his manager Gail Colson to sign us up for a management deal, and she had us go down to Gabriel's place and work with him on his new material. We spent a couple of weeks down in Bath working on the songs and structures that became his third album. We didn't actually play on the album itself, in the end he decided to use American supersessioners. Gabriel had wanted to produce our records, but his own heavy schedule at the time got in the way of that.

Instead we ended up with Peter Hammil who was part of the same management stable, a very nice guy but not right for us. After three rather undisciplined weeks in the studio the tapes were ready for mixing, it was then that we realised just how dictatorial Mr.Hammil was. We had no say in the mix at all, we used to sit there and get more and more pissed off, eventually I stopped going. When The View From Here album came out I found the sound a bit thin in places, but aside from the production I don't think we performed well in the studio. The demos we did for Polydor with the original line up and produced ourselves were infinitely superior."

I caught them live in a one off gig at Oxford Polytechnic in February 79 with the original five piece line up, and they were brilliant.

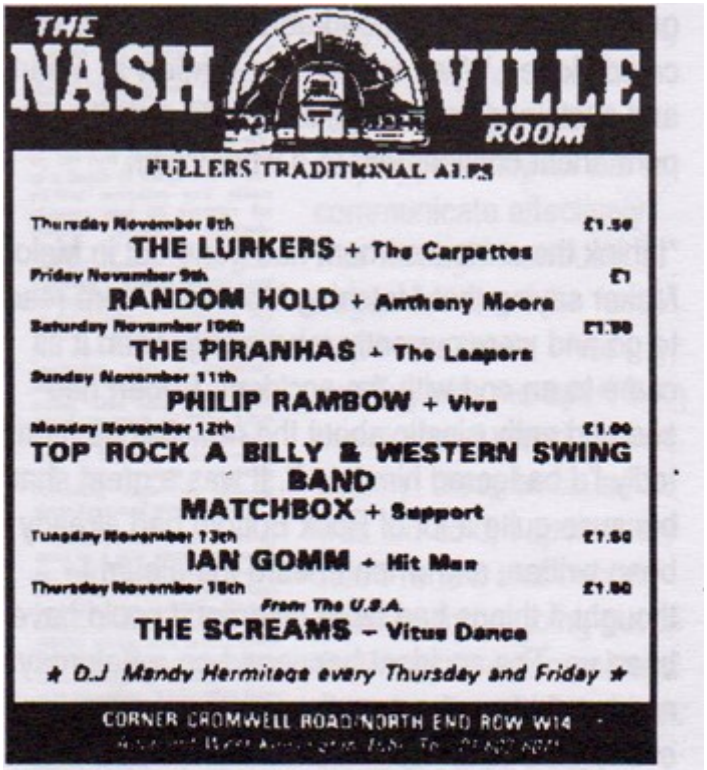


The staunch basis for this authority comes from Peter Phipps (ex-Glitter Band — sussed you Pete!), flaying the drums like a manic carpet-beater, and ex-Matching Mole and 801-er Bill MacCormick, whose bass growls and prowls with customary aplomb. Complementing them are David Rhodes, whose dark chunky guitar occasionally flares with aggression, and David Ferguson, on keyboards that flit and swoop, coax and grumble. And knitting all together with consummate skill is the subtle hand of producer Peter Hammill.

Random Hold do falter at times. 'What Happened' builds well only to sag at the weak chorus, a fault that also afflicts the generally inane 'Etceteraville'.

The odd lapse aside, 'The View From Here' attacks with force and vitality. No new visions, but it runs full-pelt through that grey area where rock traditionally gets bogged down in orchestration or ersatz jazziness, and emerges with most flags flying.

Graham Lock



Random Hold gig ad, 1980

"We toured England with XTC, and then again supporting Peter Gabriel. The Gabriel tour then moved on to the States where our album had been released. We were doing well, sufficiently well for our American label to set up a number of club gigs at the end of the tour. But then everything all fell apart. It had been a bit fraught for some time, with Dave Ferguson and I having major political disagreements. Towards the end of the American tour we had a few more serious clashes, and when we got back the two Daves decided they wanted to carry on without me. They had unfortunately forgotten that the band owed me rather a lot of money, so when I called in the debt it effectively killed the band. By this time I was fed up with the whole business so I just dropped out completely, the end of my music career. Been there, done that!"

What of Rhodes and Ferguson?

"Dave Rhodes was a great songwriter, and despite all the animosity I helped him produce some demos immediately after the band broke up, but eventually he seemed more comfortable as a backing musician on Gabriel's projects. Dave Ferguson went onto a successful career in TV theme and incidental music. I haven't seen either of them for some years. Random Hold hardly sold any records, and I've long stopped receiving royalty statements, which were laughable anyway."

Despite Bill MacCormick's misgivings about the production I can highly recommend all the Random Hold recordings. The essential items are the eponymous debut 12" EP and the album The View from Here. For completists a rerecorded version of Etceteraville from the album was released as a single, with the previously unavailable Precarious Timbers on the flip side. At the end of the day personality clashes and record company indifference ensured that Random Hold never fulfilled their undoubted potential.

The Bill MacCormick playing technique seemed unorthodox in its development, starting with the complicated time signature stuff in the early days, and ending up as a more orthodox rhythm section style.

"In Matching Mole you were effectively soloing a large part of the time, my playing was all about trying things out and taking risks. Working with Robert was always a challenge, you never knew what was going to happen next. Post Matching Mole my playing became simpler and I began to feel more relaxed as part of a rock rhythm section, as long as the material was interesting."

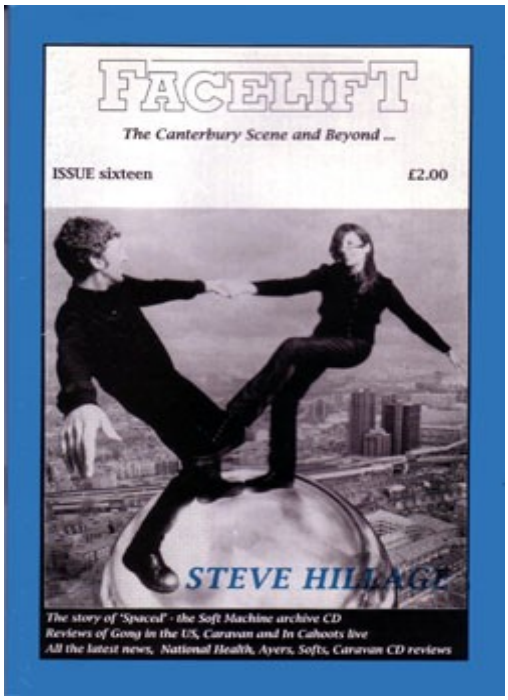
Bill worked for the MP Simon Hughes for a while, and then went on to become London Organiser for the Liberals, working at Party HQ until 1989. By this time he had become involved with the market research company of which he is now a director. He is currently a Liberal Democrat Councillor in South London.

Sincere thanks to Bill for being such an interesting and co-operative interviewee, especially after I arrived 2 hours late after a horrendous journey through the sort of traffic only London can produce.

Stephen Yarwood

>> Digital version of the interview on the Facelift website (slightly different from the original paper version)

A space for - Facelift - Issue sixteen - January 1997



a space for

the story behind Soft Machine's archive release

by Mike King



Without question the most significant historical addition to our understanding, appreciation and enjoyment for the music of Soft Machine has been the recent discovery, and release, of the long lost recording session for the 1969 London multi-media event, Spaced. Here is the most extreme music committed to tape from a band crowned and renowned for breaking idiomatic rock with those twin pillars of the avant garde: minimalism (played/tape looped) and improvisation (tonal/atonal). By now you've heard the CD, and read the notes by Hugh Hopper and engineer Bob Woodford regarding the relevant whys and hows. Forgive my presumption in feeling duty bound to share with fellow Facelift travellers my own part in this discovery, and detail the editing decisions that reduced the original 103 minute recording to the 67 minute CD 'Spaced'. That the music is so utterly strange, as so many have remarked, seems to me fitting in light of the strange sequence of accidents that ultimately led to its CD release.

The story (as briefly as possible) begins backstage after a performance of transcendent soundscapes from AMM here in Toronto June 1992. Drummer Eddie Provost was very approachable and spoke fondly of a 1966/67 period when the work of early AMM and Soft Machine often colluded (ArtsLab, UFO), adding that one Bob Woolford would on occasion

professionally record concerts by both groups. The name sounded familiar - wasn't he credited on 'Third' for concert recordings? By the way, it was here also that guitarist Keith Rowe stood cross-armed in the corner adding quietly: "I know of a session Robert Wyatt did that no-one else knows about', leading in time to the inclusion of 'Nowt Doin' from Laurie Scott-Baker's General Strike on the CD 'Flotsam Jetsam'. That evening I left with Bob Woolford's current address in Rocky Hill, Connecticut, but without a phone number and was frustrated to learn that no phone listing existed for Woolford nor any spelling and vicinity variation. Letters went unanswered and periodic checks with long distance directory were futile - eventuallyI gave up trying.



Two full years after the AMM encounter, during an annual self-induced stupor, I mysteriously was seized by an irrational impulse to plea with a long distance operator again. 'Not in Rocky Hill', she replied, but I've a R Woolford in nearby North Canton'. We finally connected when a soft British voice answered the ringing phone, and I felt worthy of the Royal Canadian Mounties and their motto, 'we always get our man'! Bob was kind, apologetic, and regretted that a recent divorce prevented him responding. But now on his own he had a phone under his name. I soon learned the good news that not only did he record the Softs at Middle Earth (Sept 16, 1967) and in following years, but that he also saw fit to preserve all of his recordings (this in light of Mike Ratledge once urging him to burn all the Softs reels!) Yes, those crappy cassettes marked 'Middle Earth', fall 67 making the tape swap sounds are a travesty of Bob's masters, and forget the impossible notion of a CD release - for one all vocals are horribly distorted thanks to bad vocal mikes and second ... but I digress. The bad news now was that all tape boxes and recorder remained with his ex-wife and had to be tactfully retrieved. It was too late to benefit 'Wrong Movements', which had then just been published, but this was something else altogether, and I was now prepared to wait.

A few months later, October 1994, while in London for the great Gong 25 celebration, and hanging with Hopper I let it slip that I'd contacted Bob Woolford. Without blinking Hugh replied, "Oh, he's got `Spaced"'. I became quickly confused upon being told that `Spaced' was at the Roundhouse, but it wasn't a gig, it was a week long event, but didn't receive public notice... etc until eventually sorting this perfect mystery (one that escaped everyone's memory during antagonistic probes for `Wrong Movements'). In the end learning about `Spaced' would prove one small step, for hearing it would take a giant leap.

Fast forward to May 1995 and and a day off from visiting the Windo family in New York City to take a 3 hour bus trip to the neighbouring state of Connecticut. Bob and I rendezvoued at the bus terminal then wound our way through the mountain to his wilderness hideaway, all the while exchanging stories and laughter. He'd just reacquired his tape collection and reel to reel, and had bought a new cassette deck that day. Tea and tapes were served, in that order, and I'll never forget the sight upon entering a spare bedroom lined with countless waist high stacks of master reels. Of course I obliged an invitation to sort them through, and was gobsmacked (as you say there In England) upon discovering late 60s/early 70s concert recordings of Stockhausen, Amalgam, Portsmouth Sinfonia, Comelius Cardew, Scratch Orchestra, AMM, MEV, Alex Harvey, Pentangle, Love... then a box labelled `Waves', which was just that! All In all a veritable goldmine of British experimental and avant garde music professionally recorded at 15 IPS with stage hung stereo microphones. It took awhile to finally say 'there you go Bob, this corner is jazz, this corner classical, this corner blank tapes (numerous), etc. Then we settled in together and listened to Soft Machine's `Spaced'.

'Spaced' was recorded by Bob at his home in mid 1969, with Hugh and Mike working with him on tape loops and mixing. His reel to reel machines were self designed and homemade - one of which folded neatly in a bicycle saddle

bag for easy transportation to gigs! A more elaborate setup for Bob Woolford Sound was found in his adapted VW mini-bus. Three pancake reels (single sided spools) comprise `Spaced' and what follows in a succinct summary of the editing decisions that distinguish the CD selection from the original tapes. For the record it was unanimously agreed by band members, Steve, Bob and myself that thoughtful edits would benefit the listening sequence.



'One', bass and organ over half speed rhythm track, is complete. `Two' is the opening 7.36 of a 38 minute long tape composition by Ratledge, as so clearly inspired by the pioneering work of Terry Riley. 'Three' is an excerpt from the the middle point of the same piece, which ends with the legendary five fade that's referred to in Bob's notes. `Four' remained in its over-the-top, drugged out, demonic entity at 32.10. The buzzing sounds that open and close `Four' is a tape loop of bees as recorded by Brian Hopper and recalls the tape experiments of Brian and Mike from the very early 60s. Other tapes during this long mixing collage are played at half speed (ie, Robert's vocal) and at various points a concert recording of the Softs by Bob in `69 makes an entrance (ie, check the 13.54 mark). `Five', 'Six' and 'Seven' are taken from a continuous 22 minute piece that comprised the 3rd pancake reel of 'Spaced', with `Five' and `Seven' being the opening and closing sections respectively. What follows 'Five' on the reel is an 8-minute hi-hat solo from Robert, inventive but still ricky-ticky. When a great drum pattern finally breaks out further atonal swellings from Hugh and Mike begin to rise. The recording is soon subjected to randomly abrupt and crude sounding mixing effects. Switching would be a more accurate, description as one channel drops out, reappears, then the other, then both, then sound blips. I remember suggesting to Bob that his speaker wire or interconnect cable was malfunctioning, but, no, that was in the music he insisted. In the end this primitivism was off-putting and easily edited out. Besides which Steve at Cuneiform Records thought that including this section may provoke a flurry of faulty CD returns! Out of this section another concert recording (with Brian) is introduced and this is where the fantastic 'Six' begins. Edited out between `Six' and `Seven' is `Box 25/4 Lid' as lifted from the record album. Blame copyright restrictions.



So there you have it - `Spaced' as it was recorded, and as is now available. Don't worry - you're not missing that much. Here`s some trivia for trainspotters. The photo inside the red circle on the CD cover is a still that Bob took of his projector screen while playing the silent 8mm film footage he shot during a by-chance holidav encounter with the Softs at their St Tropez beach building. There wasn't enough light to film any performance, but just enough to capture the back of Mike's organ. That red square is a stage pass sticker for the 14 Hour Technicolour Dream. To these ears 'Spaced' has become a great CD, just as Bob and myself felt so strongly it would be upon fikrst hearing it ft. The effort was ours, now the pleasure is yours.

original photographs, which appear in the CD booklet, were takenby Mark Ellidge and are reproduced here by kind permission of Cuneiform records

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Interview by Richie Unterberger on November 18, 1996

Al Spicer from Rough Guides charactarized Robert Wyatt as being 'the one performer in England that EVERYONE there respects and loves- the punks, the art rockers, everyone.' The legendary singer/drummer was a founding member of Soft Machine and has continued through his career with an impressive collection of solo albums and collaborations (Syd Barrett, Scritti Politti). Wyatt's solo work is characterized by his beautiful, quavery voice and his earnest commitment to socialism. I mean, how many Marxists have a hit record covering a Monkees song?

Richie Unterberger (contributing editor for All Music Guide and Rough Guide to Music, former editor of Option Magazine and editor of music and travel sections of the Whole Earth Catalog) interviewed Robert Wyatt on November 18, 1996 for his book UNKNOWN LEGENDS OF ROCK'N ROLL, which profiles 60 of the most interesting cult acts of rock history, from the 1950's through the 1980's. The book is published by Miller Freeman.
Special Thanks to Malcolm Humes

Richie Unterberger : *What sort of recording are you doing next week?*

Robert Wyatt : I'm just taking some songs...CDs are too long! I learned my craft on LPs, which is basically two chunks of 20 minutes. CDs somehow, you need more than that. I've reduced the amount I do, rather than increase it. So I'm just trying a 20-minute bunch of songs now. The same old thing, just older (laughs). Then I'll try and do another 20-minute chunk. Then, maybe when I've got two or three, I'll have a presentable CD. I'll just have to see.

I'm recording at Phil Manzanera's studio. A really nice bloke. We have mutual friends like Bill McCormick and Brian Eno. He once said to me, you can use my studio if you ever need to. So I'm going down there, and seeing how it goes. I never know in advance. The last time I went in the studio, I spent a few days in the studio, and there wasn't a single thing I came out with that I could use. This can happen.

The last thing I did that came out that sort of worked--it's not even on record here. But there's a composer called Mike Mantler who now lives in Denmark. He wrote an opera funded by a Danish culture minister for their year of culture or something. I sang a song on that called "Understanding," and made a video for that. Most everyone else was doing a live opera thing. I just had a video insert, 'cause I don't do live things. He sent me a tape of that, and he said he might put the record out next year. I enjoyed that. The actual bit of music I worked on was arranged--the actual organization of the singing--was done by Don Preston. He's apparently a friend of Mike's, and helped him on things, doing programming and so on. So I've never met him, but I've worked with Don Preston, which is nice.

Before then, the last thing that came out was I did three songs on an LP by John Greaves on a label called Resurgence based in Newcastle, I think--somewhere up north, anyway. That was with some French musicians, 'cause John now lives in France. He used to be with Henry Cow. It's nice to keep in touch with those people. I did three songs with him. The words were by Peter Blegvad. He doesn't go out of his way to do stuff that's easy to consume (laughs). None of us do, really. That's not really what we're about. I like those people, so it was nice to be asked. That's the last thing that came out that I was on.

R.U. : *What was it like to hear the Wilde Flowers stuff, when that finally came out on Voiceprint?*

R.W. : I think I prefer the mystic clouds of nostalgia to the real thing, to be honest (laughs heartily). What I would have done, I would have taken about four tracks out maybe, and put 'em on a sort of limited distribution thing for sort of fanzine-type audience only. I feel quite cold-blooded about it. It's impressive to hear how prolific Hugh (Hopper) was already, writing songs, before he was working on more instrumental things. I'd forgotten that. The only excuse I have for the feebleness of the record is that, it was an attempt to do nearly all-original material at a time when our friends were doing covers of one thing or another, whether it was pop or jazz. It's sort of harder to do originals when you can't even play properly. 'Cause there's nobody to sort of get your guitar riffs from (chuckles). That's all I can say about that, really. I wouldn't have put it out in that whole sort of "everything and the dirty socks as well." But it wasn't up to me. Hugh stands to earn from that--they're his songs. And I have no right to stop him earning that, so I didn't veto it. Although there's quite a lot of those things I would veto, if it was up to me. But other people want them out and it's not my business to stop them.

R.U. : *The first ten years or so of your recording career, you were usually playing in groups. Since then, you've usually worked as a soloist, or adding stuff to other people's records. I was wondering if you had any preference for working in group or solo contexts.*

R.W. : In theory, I'd like to work in a group. But the group I'd like to work in, all the musicians in them are long since dead. The classic Charlie Mingus quintets, I wouldn't have minded working with! (laughs) In practice, I would divide it into when I was basically a drummer. Then, when I lost the use of my hi-hat and bass drum legs, I became basically a singer. I was a drummer who did a bit of singing, and then I became a singer who did a bit of percussion. Certainly I would say that I would like to think that the singer is the butterfly, and the drummer was just the little grub in the ground, working to become a caterpillar.

R.U. : *The Soft Machine went through quite a few lineup changes while you were in the group. Was there any phase of that group's development that you felt better about than others?*

R.W. : That's difficult, because it's like talking about a marriage after a bad divorce. If it's a bad divorce, then it kind of spoils the whole thing in your memory. So in fact I have no happy memories of that band at all now, because of the humiliation of being thrown out at the end of it. I never quite got my confidence back from that. I enjoyed the opportunity to record "Moon In June," and to get that onto tape. The first ten minutes of that I played myself. I had a chance to sort of double-track instruments that I didn't actually own at the time--they were in the studio--like Hammond organ and so on. I really enjoyed that. It probably helped me for later on, when I came to do things with my own keyboard playing.

I just had a letter a week ago from somebody in Chile saying, "Please, Robert, send me the words of 'Moon In June,'" and I absolutely have no idea what they are. I wrote them in New York, actually, I know that. But that wasn't about anything.

I'm happy that, if people enjoy it (the Soft Machine), that's good. Because that means it wasn't a waste of time. But for me, the overall experience--I came out of it without much self-respect, without any money, without anything, really. So I haven't dwelt on it too much.

R.U. : *When you starting doing solo albums in the '70s, you did some originals, especially at the beginning. Then there was more of an emphasis on covering other people's songs. For someone who's affiliated with the progressive rock movement, that's kind of an unusual move. Do you feel more comfortable interpreting than writing, or is that even an issue?*

R.W. : That's a very interesting question. I'd say, as you would expect, that when I feel I've done my thing right--most essentially--it's been my own material. Even like, for example, when I did a bunch of singles later on which went onto a compilation (on Rough Trade). There was a track there called "Born Again Cretin," which musically was in my own words. That was really the most me of everything on that.

I was very influenced by painters and artists, more than musicians, when I was a teenager. I don't think it's necessary for a painter to invent the things that he paints, if you see what I mean. If you paint a tree, it's your painting of the tree, it's your choice of color, what you put in and leave it. If you really work it through--interpreting something--it's you. People are quite shocked when you remind them that Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra never wrote a song that they recorded in their lives, as far as I know. Because

people associate those songs by (Otis) Blackwell and Big Mama Thornton with Presley. They don't say, well, he just did cover versions (laughs). They think of them as his songs, and quite rightly so, because they're no better than the originals, but they worked as Elvis Presley songs. So they're his songs, because of his voice.

R.U. : *When you did songs which were pretty unexpected coming from someone from underground rock, like "I'm a Believer" or "At Last I Am Free," was there any consternation or puzzlement?*

R.W. : Well, I was puzzled (laughs). They're quite specific differences. "I'm a Believer," I was sort of pushed into that by Simon Draper, who was A&R for Virgin. It led, in the end, to the breakdown of the relationship with Virgin. It was a bit perverse. I actually only liked Virgin when I thought it was a kind of small-scale, cottage industry-type record company. I didn't realize that they were just using that as a way in. They wanted to be a big posh record company with pop acts just like everybody else. So I was a bit disappointed at this pressure to do singles.

I didn't really mean to do that one. I thought, well, what should I do that's just like the most unhip thing you can possibly think of? But, that's really nice (laughs)? And I thought of the Monkees doing "Last Train to Clarksville" or something like that. But then, I couldn't remember the title, and I did "I'm a Believer." I'm not full of malice, but I do dislike Neil Diamond a lot, and I'm sorry that I've done a Neil Diamond song. If I lived my life over again, I would leave them to the master (laughs).

But I've always liked pop music. There was a bit of a misunderstanding with the avant-garde rock scene, because I think I was sort of swimming the wrong way, really. A lot of the rock thing came out of people who'd started out doing covers of versions of the English scene and the American scene, the Beatles and Dylan and so on, and then got more and more involved in instrumental virtuosity and esoteric ideas. I was really going the other way. I was brought up with esoteric ideas and modern European music and Stockhausen, Webern, avant-garde poets, and all the kind of avant-garde thing in the '50s, before pop music--the beat poets, the avant-garde painters at the time, and so on. To me, the amazing thing was to discover the absolute beauty of Ray Charles singing a country and western song or something like that. So my actual journey of discovery was I discovered the beauty of simple, popular music. And it was much more elusive, really, than people who put it down realize. Anybody who thinks pop music's easy should try to make a pop single and find out that it isn't.

So that always interested me very much. I have a fantastic admiration for really good pop musicians, just straight commercial pop musicians with no hip associations of rock at all. I'm quite happy with that.

R.U. : *Your material encompasses concerns which are pretty personal, and also social/political. Is there a preference there, or do you just cover all of them?*

R.W. : It comes out like that. In fact, they're all the former. Everything I do is totally personal. I don't really have a lot of control over what I write when I'm writing it. I think it's a misunderstanding. I think artists can be overestimated in the amount of control they have over what you do. You sort of do something, and what you do, what you are, comes out. I wouldn't write about anything because I thought, gosh, I ought to write about this, or I ought to write about that. Those times when it comes out as politics for example, or whatever, it's because that's really something buzzing in my gut at that time. And it's just as strong and personal, as emotional, as being in love or anything else. They're not arguable things.

I'm open to the criticism of that, which is, you know, love is blind. My politics has been too. I think you can fall in love with ideas, and you can fall in love with people. It's a very subjective experience. And I'm loyal to that experience.

R.U. : *There have been very few people who started in the underground rock scene in the '60s who have spanned the eras from psychedelia to progressive rock to punk and post-punk, and are still very active in the 1990s. How have you been able to fit in with all the various movements? And, why do you think there have been so few musicians from 20, 30 years ago who've maintained that sort of level of participation?*

R.W. : In my case, what keeps me going is a constant sense of disappointment with what I've already done (laughs). One of the things that might be a problem would be, if you were really happy about something you'd done--you'd really thought you'd done it at a certain time in your life. It may be, for people who really got on top of what they were

trying to do, and articulated it well in a certain era, then they're just trying to cling onto that, and make it harder and harder, and more and more difficult. But if you've never ever felt that you quite got a hold of it, you just feel that before you die, you've got to try and get it right once (laughs). And hope that the experience you have makes up for the some of the diminishing energy.

The corollary of that is, maybe people really feel they had their moment, and it can happen. I don't think they're any the worse for that. Going back to pop music, as far as I know, Sam the Sham & the Pharoahs only ever did "Wooly Bully." But, you know, how wonderful that they just did that! (laughs) And if they went on to become used car salesmen after that, that's fine. They had their one moment, and I think that's fine.

There are some people I know who soldier on. Because I've never really been in the commercial world, it's a funny. Because although I say, I like pop music and I love rock and roll, I've never been in the commercial world, never swam in the business end of it, really. I think that pop, and to some extent rock, are like sport and fashion industry in that they're about the exuberance of youth. That's the sort of subliminal ideology, really. Whereas the things that I draw on, and the world that I feel part of, aren't particularly youth culture.

My heroes are--not people that I hope to emulate--people like Picasso and Miro and people who at last really reach something in their old age, which they absolutely couldn't ever have done in their youth. I feel I'm more like in one of those kind of art forms, than in a youth-orientated art form. I think the people who did well, or are happy, in a youth industry, where their youthfulness was part of the act, obviously, by definition, they define themselves out of the business after a decade or so.

I don't feel that I'm very adaptable, that I particularly go with the flow of new ideas or something. I just don't feel I've mined my own scene properly and fully yet. It doesn't really matter what era I'm in. Because I haven't ever really felt quite =in= an era, I don't feel out of one. There was a certain amount of resentment, for example, in the early '80s of the new kids on the block at that time, the punks and so on. But since I hadn't acquired any particular loyalty to the previous generation, to my own generation even, I had no paranoia about anybody else's. I had no what you might call era patriotism--"that's my era, right or wrong" kind of thing. I've never been any kind of patriot, including not a cultural patriot. So I have no problem with new immigrants bringing new ideas. I'm happy about that.

R.U. : *You've collaborated with a really wide assortment of musicians. Are there certain kinds of collaborations that you seek out?*

R.W. : Absolutely not, actually. To be honest, nearly everything I've been on, I've been asked to be on. And I'm quite surprised at them. I mean, they do surprise me on the whole. I would say that the ones that have perhaps meant most to me have been the most recent ones, Mike Mantler. And things I've done with him before. But no, I wouldn't have dreamt of asking these people. I don't ask people. When I'm recording, I'm very shy of asking people, in case they don't want to do it, or in case they don't get the idea that I had in my head, and I'm too embarrassed to not use it. Also, it's expensive. If you're going to use other people, you have to pay them. People don't (get paid), a lot of the time...

Things I do myself, I often imagine friends on things, and there are people I would like to work with. It's a bit harder, because I live out in the sticks anyway, and plus being in a wheelchair means that I can't really circulate. So I tend to stick to my own thing. I'm not, by nature, a collaborator. I think, there again, going back to the fact that my biggest influences were people like painters and poets. These are solitary workers. It's been very good for me to have been asked on various things, but in the end it surprises me. I just try and do the things that people ask me to do. It's nice, in a way. I don't have the responsibility for the final thing. I'm quite limited in what I can do, so sometimes I just have to say no, not because I don't like it, but because I just don't think I can do justice to the idea of the song.

But on the whole, that's rather misleading, this thing about all the people I work with. Although it's a fact, it's not a career decision on my part at all.

R.U. : *You seem pretty comfortable working in a variety of styles, whether rock, pop, jazz, or avant-garde.*

R.W. : In the end, there are notes and intervals and chords and rhythms. Some I like,

some I don't. But they are actually very often, in all these different kinds of musics, all these musicians from different styles are actually picking and choosing from the same tiny little bunch of notes, and the same little bunches of possible rhythms, and so on. Underneath the kind of superficial differences of style, the kind of music's haircut, if you like, or the current clothes the music is wearing, when you're actually working on a piece of music with at least one good idea in it, that good idea is not really fixed or tied to a style or an idiom. It's a good idea. There's no field of music which doesn't have good ideas. So anybody who has a good idea and I can deal with it suits me fine.

R.U. : *With the music that you're making now, are there any directions that you're eager to stake out?*

R.W. : No, I'm still trying to do the same thing, only get it right! (laughs) The appearance of variety is a complete illusion. It's like somebody who's got a dartboard in his room, a large dartboard, and there's darts all over it. And you think, wow, you've got a lot of different directions you throw your darts. And you say, well yeah, but all I was trying to do was hit the board. That's all I've ever tried to do.

But I don't find the business easy. The moment you start talking about the business, you start sounding like someone in Spinal Tap. But the fact is, I have a great difficulty in communicating with the record business. There are some very honorable and nice record people. In fact, the people who distribute my stuff in the States through Gramavision (Rykodisc), they're very nice people. But on the whole, I've found that there's always that problem that I had with Virgin. I've never seen the need for this great split between success and failure that the pop industry is like. A bit like Hollywood--something's either a smash or it's a complete failure. The world of culture in my head that I come from isn't anything to do with that. It's to do with just people pegging away for a lifetime at their craft.

I mean, if you go to a shop down the road and buy something from the shop, it doesn't have to be the most successful shop in the universe. As long as he makes enough money selling his stuff that he can eat too, he's happy. And I'm like that with my music. I don't want to have to do the things you have to do. I don't want to live the life. It just doesn't mean anything to me, very much, the high-profile, big money side of things. I just want enough to live on, and to be able to get on with what I do, and hang around my friends. This constant pressure from record companies to come up with a hit single or something like that, I find completely tiresome. I just find that there's no understanding, really, of what the industry is.

And I find the same problem in the studio, even with engineers who don't like scruffy noises. They like to clean it up and get everything sounding really pristine clear because this is going to go in their CV, and they don't want another engineer to hear them on a record which doesn't sound all clean and tidy. And my music isn't clean and tidy. That's always been a difficult to me--just not being in tune with the industry.

If I say I'm disappointed in what I've done--and I can think of more wrong with it than right with it--maybe the good side of that is, it sort of keeps me hungry, you might say. It gives me a motive. People say, oh it's a shame, you're not nostalgic about the '60s. Well actually, it's quite good, when you think of it. Wouldn't it be sad if I was sitting here wishing it back? And I don't. So at least you can turn those things around. It's quite healthy, I think.

R.U. : *I wanted to ask a question about someone else in the book who I won't be able to interview. You drummed on some of Syd Barrett's solo records.*

R.W. : I didn't see them (the Pink Floyd) perform very much. I liked him. He was shy, he was thoughtful, and he was definitely onto something.

R.U. : *Did you find him difficult to work with?*

R.W. : Absolutely not, no. Very easy. Almost too easy. He was very, very easygoing. So easygoing that you didn't necessarily know what he wanted, or whether he was pleased with it or not, because he seemed quite pleased with what you did. I think possibly he may have suffered as well from moving into the world of commercial culture, as they did. I think it might have been very confusing for him. Being an artist, working in an attic, to us--this may be a silly illusion, it's just a silly romantic dream, just like being a pop star. But I don't his romantic dreams were anything to do with the responsibilities of commercial pop stardom.

It's not a snobbishness, this thing about commercial stuff. It's just the fact that it seems to have a momentum all its own, and there seems to be demands made on it. You know how it is with, for example, Hollywood films--they're really accountant-led. Being big and famous doesn't get you more freedom, it gets you less, you know what I mean? It happens in the music itself as well. All the machinery that starts to come into gear, from management and touring and the whole way it's done, the musician becomes a fairly small cog in a machine where all these sort of semi-comatose people in the industry certainly come alive, and they certainly know how to act. And suddenly, your whole life is being run by lawyers and accountants. And you're meant to be very pleased, because you've made it and so on. But in fact, you're just getting carried along in a flow where your own personal thing can get completely lost.

As I say, it's not a question of snobbery. Some wonderful stuff comes out of that. But if you did have your own little thing, maybe it can't survive being put through that kind of process. I have no idea, but I imagine that could easily have been what happened to Syd. That the actual success of the band just completely threw him off-balance, I can imagine.

R.U. : *Is there truth to the stories that the musicians on his solo albums weren't told what key the song was in, or that they just had to settle on whatever takes were completed?*

R.W. : That's true, but I mean, that's not very...I was brought up, musically, in the '50s. If you want eccentricity, and that kind of non-verbal world and those kind of weird signals that you have to pick up, you can't beat jazz musicians, you know (laughs). I'm just reading the stories, as I say, about working with Mingus and all those people. Working with Syd Barrett's a piece of cake, I think. I found him courteous and friendly. I can't think of anything wrong with him. I really liked his songs. I liked them musically, I liked them lyrically, and I liked the way he sang them. I can't fault him, really. I don't think he did anything wrong that I know of. I just think that not everybody fits into the business. I know from personal experience, it's not that easy.

The one that I actually got on best with--he was very very kind and generous to me, and good company--was the bass player, Roger. I know they all fell out later. But I liked him and the others so much. I was very sorry that they fell apart. I know how all these things happen. But I really liked them, not just Syd, but all of them. Roger was very important, I thought, his contribution. And so was Rick's organ playing. It was a good band, and then it became another kind of good band. It became something else completely, obviously. Gilmour, as far as I can see--I don't know much about guitarists, really, I haven't worked much with them--but he seems like as good as a rock guitarist can be in that field. But he's very much a man of the world, you know. He's very at home in the world of power and money and so on, and he can deal with it. That had to happen. Syd Barrett fans shouldn't resent him, I don't think. I don't see how anything else could have happened.

>> The original page of this interview is here.

Previous article

Next article

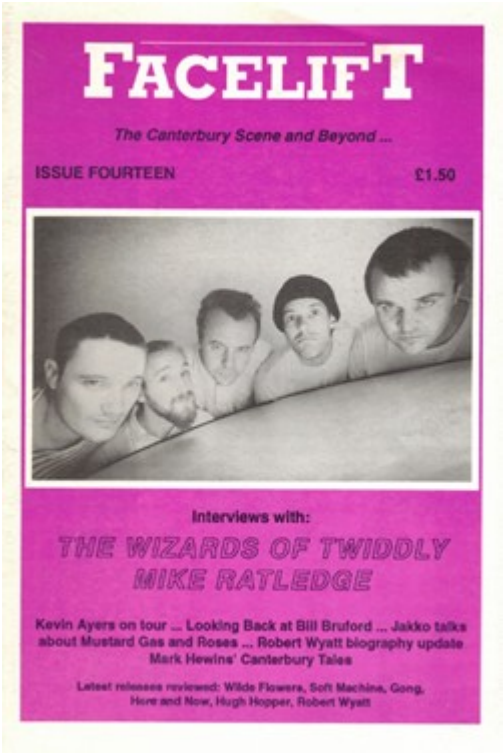
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

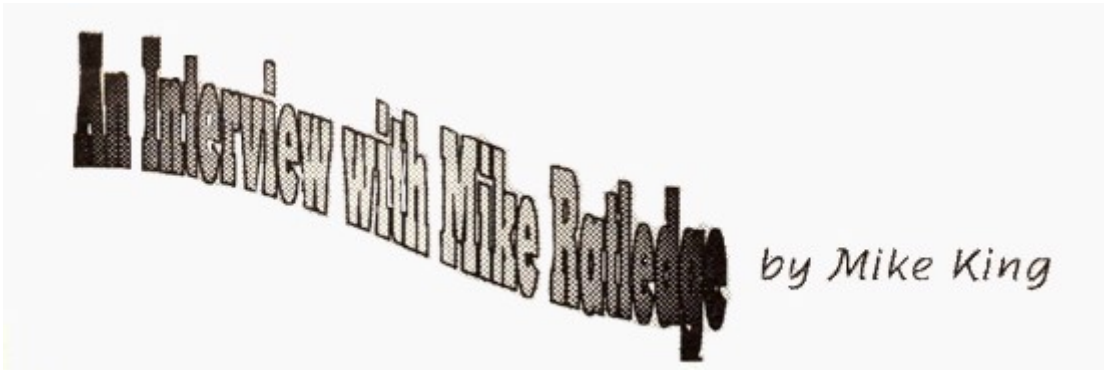
Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

An interview with Mike Ratledge - Facelift - N° 14 - June 1995



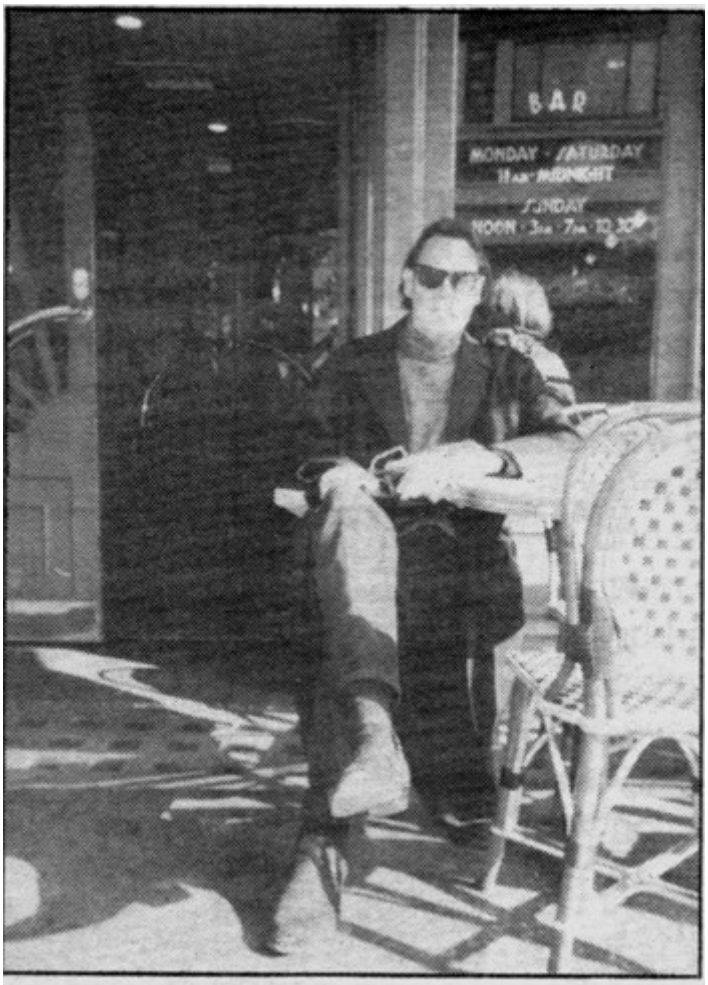
Spending a week in London to attend the Gong 25 orgy and meet long distance friends provided a plethora of memorable encounters, but the one I thought may be of most interest to fellow Facelift readers was my fifty minute meeting, with, of all people, Michael Ratledge.



A quick background. I think it was Hugh Hopper who passed along Mike's phone number back in 1990. It certainly wasn't old Softs manager Sean Murphy, who met my request for Mike's contact bluntly with 'He won't have more than four words for you'. The irony wasn't lost as I later learnt that it would be for Sean that Mike won't have more than four words for. With Hugh's help then I left a message on Mike's answering machine informing him of the 'Wrong Movements' project and requesting specific information for 66/67 era Soft Machine only, as this was proving so very difficult to research. Mike quickly returned the call and cordially conversed about twenty-five years old events. His memory was in solid state and confirmed that the original quintet (with guitarist Larry Nolan) played only four gigs, even identifying venues. Asked if he could share any mementoes, photos, etc, Mike replied 'Nothing... I've

burned my past'.

Fast forward four years to October 11, 1994. Another answering machine message is left saying that I was in London and would like to pass along the book as I didn't have a postal address. We connected and Mike set a time and place (12.30pm at the Pelican in Leicester Square). Look for a lost-looking Canadian, I advised.



Mike Ratledge 1995. Photo: Mike King

With great anticipation I arrived at the upscale coffee shop and found what could only be described as 'Mike Ratledge twenty years later, sunglasses and all'. We shook hands, smiled and immediately felt at ease with one another. Coffee was offered. Now, although I'd brought along the trusty Walkman I dared not ask to record an interview. To betray the intention and personal spirit enveloping our one-on-one would have been not only duplicitous but downright rude.

Instead what follows here are recollections of a conversation easily recalled, for which I'd like to think Mike wouldn't mind my sharing.

Compulsively I began by saying something like 'I'd just like to get one thing out of the

"I've burned my past..."

way. I know it was a long time ago for you and I know your general feelings on the matter, but I've listened to many hours of live recordings of Soft Machine and I've always been absolutely amazed by your playing. It was always so inventive and deeply rewarding". Mike graciously accepted the compliment and we proceeded to openly discuss matters musical and personal, both past and present.

I spoke of the new found interest in Canterbury scene by a new generation as all the old recordings have been given second life as CDs. - and further that his self ejection from recording and gigging in 1976 begets the all too common question 'What ever happened to Mike Ratledge?'. To belabour the point I went on to mention Pip's lyric for Richard Sinclair's recent record 'What's Rattlin', taking the piss out of rear-view navel gazing of bygone days. Mike laughed, and logically explained that he'd simply moved on; a process of growth.

Acknowledged also was the bleak 'behind the scenes' fact that after being monetarily taken from for ten years, ones desire to continue as a cash cow diminishes. It seems everyone lost.

'I understand you're now producing music for television adverts?', prompted Mike to talk about his agency with Karl Jenkins (Jenkins Ratledge), the various adverts they'd scored (Pepsi/ Jaguar/British Airways), and the awards acquired.

Next came a question and answer for which I can retell verbatim. "Yes, but can working with TV commercials actually offer musical challenges and satisfaction?" Came the comeback, "Well, for one you can change your style and not have the band hate you for it", adding that he could find himself arranging for strings in the morning and programming computers in the afternoon. He was pleased that a typical scoring and recording session is completed within three days and

seemed genuinely happy with his work.



classic Son Machine photo from 1966/7:
(from left: Daevid Allen, Mike Ratledge, Robert Wyatt, Kevin Ayers)

Remembering why we were together I reached into my bag to offer a copy of 'Wrong Movements'. As he flipped through he flipped out over the old photos, 'God, everyone looks so young!' He stopped to read the 1967 BBC audition panel comments and was amused, and in agreement also. Pointing to the adjacent photo of Jimi Hendrix I commented that everyone had said that he was such a nice person, and Mike concurred with kind words of his own. I now recall that during our initial long distance phone conversation Mike relayed how Jimi would sit with him and ask about music theory in efforts to explore new musical territory. We continued to discuss 1967 as I asked about the college dance circuit the Soft Machine were put on. "It was the Star Club experience writ large', referring to the debacle at the famous Hamburg club where their music quickly started fights and cut short the set. Mike suggested that mostly the kids just wanted to dance to pop covers such as 'Knock On Wood', that there was between thirty and forty such

"Everyone looks so young! "

gigs across England, and indeed they were best forgotten.

Naturally talk turned to Robert Wyatt and Mike asked about his well-being and activities. To answer I reached for the book, turned to 1990 and showed Robert's quote defining himself as a true minimalist as he doesn't do anything. Smiles turned sober though when health was discussed. Yes, he knew of John Stevens' death three weeks earlier, and of Gary Windo's passing as well. And he spoke of sax veteran Dick Morrissey's battle with spinal cancer, saying "It always happens to the nicest guys." We lamented together for finding ourselves sharing such terrible news.



flyer from the early days : Soft Machine '67

Mike asked about the Gong Festival which led to reports about the great music, positivity and the long list of participating musicians - "all that was missing was you!", and we laughed. Then like a boxer coming out at the strike of the bell I confronted Mike's disdain: "but problems and all aside you played and recorded with Soft Machine for years, and to have been amidst that incredible energy must have been a fantastic experience for you". "Oh yes, it was", he conceded, "but one moves on". As has everyone else I suggested. "So we can't expect to see you playing keyboards with fuzz in a band soon!" I joked. "God, no! But having said that, I do have some ideas and it's possible that something may appear in a few years. Maybe a record, I don't want to say any more than that."
Certainly we spoke about much more but what more can I say? The fifty minutes flew by quickly. Mike had to leave for an appointment at his Soho offices, so we got our coats and bags and headed for the streets. Handshakes and mutual thanks were exchanged and I'm compelled to convey the appreciation he expressed for 'Wrong Movements' carried a sincere, personal currency - after all Michael Ratledge is an original, albeit divorced family member'. Then just before departing I summoned the nerve for a final request to take a photo. "Sure. There's plenty of pictures of me in your book. What's one more!"

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Invisible jukebox - The Wire N° 142 - December 1995

INVISIBLE JUKEBOX



invisible jukebox

Every month we play a musician a series of records which they're asked to identify and comment on — with no prior knowledge of what they're about to hear. This month it's the turn of. . .

Robert Wyatt

Tested by Mike Barnes

In 1973 Robert Wyatt fell out of a window at a party and suffered an injury which left him paralysed from the waist down. Although it effectively ended his spell as one of the UK's most inventive drummers, his musical career continued - he happened to be one of the UK's most inventive singers, songwriters and arrangers, too. Beginning as a drummer and singer in The Wilde Flowers in mid-60s Canterbury, Wyatt went on to a famous five year stint with Soft Machine. In 1972 he formed the more spontaneous, and equally acclaimed, Matching Mole. Post-accident, Wyatt found his true voice and recorded his best work, starting with *Rock Bottom* in 1974. The same year, his version of The Monkees' "I'm A Believer" made the charts - a feat repeated eight years later with the Elvis Costello song "Shipbuilding". In between his own releases, his collaborations have been many and various, from Brian Eno to Mike Mantler, Working Week to Ultramarine. Wyatt joined the Communist party in the mid-70s and his work became increasingly political throughout the 80s. After a five year hiatus, he re-emerged in 1991 with *Dondestan*, his best work for 15 years. An instrumental mini-album *A Short Break* followed. He is currently negotiating a new record deal. The interview took place in Wyatt's home in Louth, Lincolnshire.

CHARLES MINGUS
"Haitian Fight Song" from *The Clown* (Atlantic)

I never saw this band. I do think he's underestimated in importance as a bass player: it's good that you've got one here where he starts on his own. I think he's probably my favourite ever bass player. Apparently he used more fingers than other bass players. He used three fingers of his right hand, which is

why you get rather uneven walking lines, using the middle finger and the first finger. What I like about his solos is that they're the most like speech patterns of any bass player, so that makes him the most remarkable.

This has got a strong melody and even though it's just a quintet, it's like a whole group feeling - not just soloists and a rhythm section, a real group [Looks at CD] It's from The Clown! My God, that is going back.

In your biography you mention a lot of bass players as major musical influences.
It's what drummers work with - we're both in the engine room so they're the ones you get to know and that can be the crucial thing. Also when I'm making a record, it's the one thing that I can't do myself, so I have to get in a bass player.

One of the things that influenced me about Mingus is the compositional thing. There's a tendency in jazz, and it can be allright, for each composition to be a vehicle for the soloists to do their stuff - that's the only reason that tune is chosen. Whereas with Mingus, each piece has got its own character and it's very particular. And even with a small group, an informal set-up like that, they're playing that piece, not some other piece - that's what I like. Because he came from the West Coast and not the East Coast, he got involved in a lot of his early workshops with a mixture of all sorts of strange people that he might not mix with in some other context. But the first groups he had were extremely academic sort of intellectual exercises, the Mingus Workshops. He gradually got bluesier, but his bluesiness had a terrific intellectual authority because he'd done all this technical homework beforehand. So he was in total mastery of time signatures and harmonic complexities and so on.

THE RAINCOATS
"Fairytale In The Supermarket" from *The Raincoats* (Rough Trade)

It's English anyway. Could it be The Slits? Is it Palm Olive? I really think she's good - let me get in a plug for Palm Olive as a fellow drummer. I once said [to The Slits], 'If you ever want me to drum on your records I'd be happy to come', but they never asked me. I was very hurt by that, but never mind, I got to play with The Raincoats instead. It's not The Slits? Blimey, I'm pleased I recognised the drumming. It's Palm Olive and somebody Yeah Go! Go!

It's from The Raincoats' first album, with Palm Olive on drums.
I did the last gig in my life [in 81] with The Raincoats. We did "Born Again Cretin", which they did very well. I really enjoyed it... I didn't know [this] was The Raincoats because I didn't hear their first record. To be fair, that definitely wasn't Ari Up singing. What threw me was distinctive drumming style that I associate with The Slits - that's my excuse. Very nice. I liked that.

How did you come to play with The Raincoats?
I think they were an Rough Trade and we met around Rough Trade. It was a fairly loose set-up where people were listening to each other's stuff and clocking what each other were doing.

You played with other post-punk groups and musicians - Scritti Politti, and Epic Soundtracks from Swell Maps. Few other musicians from your generation got so

directly involved in that area.
Well it surprised me, to be honest. If I was asked and I could do it, on the whole I would. I liked the attitude round then. There were a lot of people I got on with better from that eruption than from that early period in the 70s, that I might have been expected to identify with. I liked the rough and ready approach. It's like somebody said about me: I'm like Jimmy Sommerville an valium, and I haven't got his get-up-and go, I've got a lot of get-down-and-stay. But apart from that I really liked all the people I heard from that period.

I didn't think rock'n'roll was so precious that it had to be played in tune. It never struck me as the essential ingredient in the first place. In fact by having that strange detuning that they all seemed to do - that slightly untuned desafinato that they had - it gave a bit of harmonic interest to a music that normally doesn't have any at all. The music I'd been involved in listening to before, the jazz, had gone into a tailspin of rejection of organisation anyway. So quite a lot of pop groups at that time were a sort of electrified version of a free jazz revival - which to those of us who were accustomed to these things was quite nostalgic really.

VARIOUS ARTISTS
"Smash The Social Contract" from *Cornelius Cardew Memorial Concert* (Impetus)

Oh it's Communist Party, brackets, Marxist-Leninist, close brackets. Could it be Laurie Baker, the composer? I think I recognise that pianist. Oh, that's very interesting that, because Cornelius Cardew used to write a lot of pieces, but I don't think that is Cornelius Cardew. Although he did take on the attempt to write popular songs, that would have been in the era when I don't think he specifically dealt with things like the Social Contract. The things I remember by him at the time were more Internationalist, but it may be.

It is composed by Cardew, a performance from his memorial concert in 82.
Is it really? Oh, that's interesting. It could have been Laurie Baker on drums [Looks at sleeve] Laurie Baker, there you are.

One thing to say about Cornelius Cardew, before anybody says 'what a load of crap' or anything like that, is he was the most stunningly knowledgeable musician. One of the few in this country that had that really encyclopaedic knowledge of music, that we associate with non-English figures like Pierre Boulez and people like that. And had he lived he would have been recognised as one of the giants of music, just because of the breadth and depth of his knowledge. What people object to, of course, is the way that he channelled that vast knowledge into certain disciplines, but I think that's very heroic myself, and it was very interesting to hear it.

Cardew was obviously keen to get his message across to the greatest number of people by putting it in an accessible 'popular song' form. But do you think the rather knockabout knees-up style of this particular song actually works?
Well the thing is, they set themselves more problems than they tried to solve, because by seeing what you could do without really using Transatlantic popular culture at all, your departure point into the new age comes from somewhere around Gilbert & Sullivan in the end. So you end up becoming Marxist-Leninist-Gilbert & Sullivan-ist! Nobody in England should object to that - we're all very proud of Gilbert & Sullivan. I would

suspect anyone's political motives of disapproving of Cornelius Cardew on those grounds. It's the great thing, innit, Britpop, this year? You can't get more Britpop than Gilbert & Sullivan. So he was right in there, Cornelius, ahead of the pack as usual.

I'm not saying he got everything right, but I like his attitude with all this knowledge, trying to focus it instead of bathing in it in a sort of narcissistic glory of talent. He never tried to do that and I think it's very unusual.

HATFIELD AND THE NORTH
"Fitter Stocke Has A Bath" from *The Rotters Club* (Virgin)

Oh, that's Richard [Sinclair]. What a lovely voice, it's so true. On *Rock Bottom* he and Hugh Hopper really held it together [on bass]. In the mid-60s - he actually came from a musical background, his dad was a musician - although he was younger than us, he always used to sing in tune which I thought was pretty avant garde at the time, and actually I learnt to do the same. It took me a few years. A musician that he liked even when he was a teenager was Nat King Cole, who nobody listened to in the 60s. Nat King Cole people don't realise why singers like him so much. It's because he's so in tune, so accurate. That's half the battle really - and Richard always was.

Hatfield And The North were one of the most fêted groups from that whole Canterbury Scene of the 60s and 70s. Was there any sense of a 'scene' at the time, or has it just become labelled thus with hindsight?
The first time I heard of the Canterbury Scene was in an article. It was invented by that bloke who does family trees [Pete Frame] and in order to do family
trees, you have to have families. If I hadn't been told I was in a thing called the Canterbury Scene it wouldn't have occurred to me. It surprised me that such a thing came to pass and it was interesting how these history books eventually get written. It makes you wonder about them [Laughs]

I had a very, very unhappy and unsuccessful time at school in Canterbury, during which time I actually lived nearer Dover. I think in the long run, despite some very nice and to me now seemingly essential associations like Hugh Hopper, I was unhappy in Canterbury. I know Dave Sinclair [Ex-Caravan and Matching Mole] is very affectionate about it. I never had that kind of ruralist affection. I was taken to the country at about the age of ten, simply because my Dad had a terminal illness and retired early, somewhere where he could take it easy for a few years. As far as I was concerned, my life was shut up in my room doing little paintings and listening to records - so what I really remember is the records I listened to and the paintings I tried to do. Highlights were saving up enough money to go to London to concerts, or buy an Ornette Coleman record.

I wasn't primarily interested in music for a start, and secondly, I certainly couldn't play. People have put out demos and tapes from that period from the 60s which I'm on, and I just find them so ridiculous I can't believe anybody wants to listen to them.

KING CRIMSON
"Cat Food" from *In The Wake Of Poseidon* (Island)

I'm trying to work out where that bassline comes from. Oh, what is that? People do that, use a classic bassline and it throws you. You spend the whole time trying to remember what it is. Oh, John Lennon. It's from a Beatles... that one they did on the roof. It's very interesting indeed. They can all really play [Wyatt later identifies the bassline as coming from The Beatles' "Come Together".]

It's King Crimson from 1970 with Keith Tippett on piano.
I was going to say, the pianist was particularly good. [Laughs] Michael Giles on drums? He's a terrific drummer, I should have guessed it from that. To be honest a lot of bands came up around 68, and in 68 we [Soft Machine] were in America. What I heard of the other bands at that time were Big Brother & The Holding Company, Sly & The Family Stone and The Buddy Miles Express, and Larry Coryell playing in the smaller clubs. American groups, basically, and of course we were with Hendrix. I didn't really know much at all about English bands who would have been considered our contemporaries. I don't remember ever actually going to a rock concert that I didn't have to play at.

One of the reasons that we played this track is that it's an example of the meeting ground of Progressive rock with experimental jazz of the era. Both King Crimson and Soft Machine used Keith Tippett's horn section [Marc Charig and Nick Evans]. King Crimson also collaborated with South African exiles like bass player Harry Miller, while you collaborated with brass players Mongezi Feza and Gary Windo.
The connection is very simple - Keith Tippett's personality. A West Country bloke with a great big heart and completely unlike the Old Boy Network jazz mafia that was the London scene at the time. He had all barriers down, listened to everybody, open-minded, never put anybody down, and one of his things was to get all these different musicians from different genres together - particularly the South African exiles. He would get together these bands and get us into them and then we'd meet each other. So really you could put a lot of that down to one man.

I think Mongs [Feza] and the South Africans we knew anyway, because we used to go down to Ronnie's old place and see The Blue Notes when they came to London. Although I didn't know them personally then, it would certainly have helped getting acquainted with Keith Tippett and Gary Windo and all those people. Alfie [Wyatt's wife] knew Johnny Dyani and Chris McGregor, and when we got together in 70- 71, I also got to know her friends as well, so that would be another connection. It was Alfie, Evan Parker pointed out, who introduced him to John Stevens, for example Chris McGregor was another one with a big heart.

NINA SIMONE
"I Put A Spell On You" from *I Put A Spell On You* (Mercury)



[Immediately] Ah yes, this is nice to hear [Sings along]. There's a fantastic saxophone solo on this but I don't know who it is. It's so great [Sings along to solo] Yeah! Then she picks it up and he keeps on going, he keeps pushing it. *Now* he's finished. Cor, that's the stuff. The saxophone solo is like some of the players who played with James Brown: Maceo Parker.

Now, there's a thing that pissed me off a few months ago. Everybody's favourite parliamentary candidate, Screaming Lord

Sutch, was on [the radio] and boasting, quite rightly, that he's the one who eventually got rid of David Owen by beating him in an election - which is a great contribution to British politics. But then he was on about how he did everything before everybody, long hair and all that, and then he talked about all his coffin stuff and he was way ahead there; but he got all that coffin stuff and that whole act from the bloke who wrote this song, Screaming Jay Hawkins. For him [Hawkins] the "*spell on you*" was the big thing. He was into all that necromancy and I don't know what else.

Didn't you used to sing this with The Wilde Flowers in the mid-60s?
I think I used to sing it but I have a hard time remembering more than about 20 years ago to be honest. But certainly Nina Simone was very important. In fact most of the singers that I was influenced by were women, funnily enough. I seem to have more affinity with women's voices than with men's. That's because my voice never broke really.

I think she's a great singer, not just a good one I'd put her up with Ray Charles. The thing is, she doesn't quite belong anywhere. Really she belongs in the continental tradition of chanson singers, Jacques Brel and all that sort of thing, Edith Piaf - that dramatic presentation of songs. It partly came out of a folk tradition of music hall but not the jokey side of it. Oscar Brown Junior was that as well. It's not pop and it's not jazz, it's not any of the categories that now exist. It's more intimate, more nightclubby. Amazing presence. When she's in Ronnie [Scott]'s she makes the place look really small. It's like having a real queen in a room, the real nature's aristocracy. By the time I saw her, she was no longer hitting the notes. She just sort of intimated them, sketched them in the air. And it was all you needed if you knew the songs.

PUBLIC ENEMY
"Party For Your Right To Fight" from *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* (Def Jam)



Sounds like they're sampling Sly Stone NWA or something like that?

It's someone equally well known.
Not by me, evidently. It's not Public Enemy? I'm trying to work out what they're sampling. Oh well, I know this one. I think that's one of the great lines *"It takes a nation of millions to hold us back"*. It completely inverts the whole notion of dissidence. It's very close on from The Last Poets, the first people who did this kind of thing, without a rhythm section, just a cappella.

What I like about [rap's] kind of talking - in posh music it's called *Sprechgesange* - is that for some reason it liberated words. There's been a problem, I think, in black pop music since Motown. Even in some of the stuff I really love, the lyrics are a bit like rhyming soap operas. What's nice about all this black *Sprechgesange* is that it actually liberated the language that you could use on a pop record. It was a shame because in all this time, the black Americans were reinventing the English language every five years and made a massive contribution throughout the century, probably even before, to revitalising the language, then you get the Motown pop songs that sound great but they all just go *"Ooh Baby"*. It was a waste of all that fantastic vocabulary that's been cooking in the streets - so it was very nice that it broke through [with rap].

Although Public Enemy get their message over without any compromise, there's some witty interplay going on between Chuck D and Flavor Flav.
I used to listen a lot to Peter Tong's rap sessions on Radio 1 and there is some very funny, very witty stuff going on. And as for the stuff that people think is terminally defensive in attitude, I don't think that anyone who hasn't been to America and been around on the streets... I don't feel you can talk about it unless you've been there. It's a long time since I've been, 25 years, but I found white American racism made me feel ill and I wasn't even particularly interested in the subject at the time. But if I lived there, I think I wouldn't really be answerable for what it would do to my brain - and that's just me. So what it must be for someone who's in the firing line, I can't imagine.

SLY & THE FAMILY STONE
"Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey" from *Stand!* (CBS)

[Immediately] Oh, that is Sly Stone [Drums on table] Yeah, there's one thing about Sly Stone that I really like. First of all it's like Mingus, there are lots of dimensions in it - a foreground, a middle ground and a background, and there's something happening in all of them. It's very beautifully spaced. Also that Mingus thing of each piece is a whole world of its own. [During wah-wah harmonica break] Another thing is, I was very influenced by him in this business of the wordless'vocal guitar solos' [Wyatt's trademark scat style].

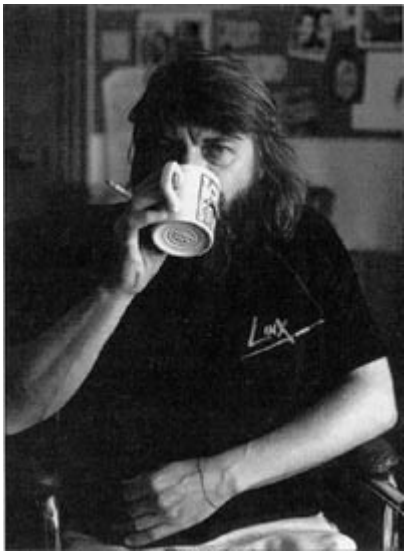
Funnily enough, I was listening to this track this morning and it suddenly became apparent that it's like your own vocal style.
That's it. Almost like harmonica solos with your mouth right up to the mic [cups hand over mouth to give wah-wah effect] and you take a breath. Wonderful. And I thought, 'Yeah, I can play solos now!'

I went to see Sly Stone when I was in the States, but the record that most knocked us out when we [Soft Machine] were in the States was *Stand!*. That was as good as rock music got at the time - absolutely amazing. And the singers he gets in - that woman's a fantastic singer. He got ever such good players.

I read somewhere that you're a big fan of [Sly's bassist] Larry Graham.
Yeah, absolutely. One of the great bass players of all time and a great singer, deep voice, when he had his own band after he left Sly Stone. Very weird, strange person - they all were, but fantastic musicians. There's so much going on, you can't quite tell... Nowadays you can get effects with vocoders and stuff, you can sing through synthesizers and get instrumental effects and so on, but this is before them and better than all that really. It could be a vocoder thing [Sly] had been a disc jockey and knew a lot about studio technology. It's very good, led onto Bootsy and all that sort of stuff.

On some of the singles - specifically "Dance To The Music" - the bass is massively loud.
They had very eccentric mixes. They'd make aesthetic decisions on each track; where to put things, who to have doing what, things coming in and out of each tune. They're great art, Sly Stone's records. And having been a jazz fan, it's nice hearing rhythm sections as good as the first one you played. If you're brought up on rhythm sections like Mingus and Dannie Richmond then rock can seem a bit pedestrian by comparison. A rhythm section like that has got the dimensions of the ins

and outs that make it more interesting, more organic.



> Zoom

PINK FLOYD
"Apples And Oranges" from *Masters Of Rock* (EMI)

Is it Barrett? Is it Jerry Shirley on drums?

It's Pink Floyd, one of the last things Barrett did with them.
I thought it was the second [Barrett] solo LP. That bassline's just a major scale going downwards. It is one of the great tunes, the major scale! [At line *"thought you might like to know"*] See, that's another Beatles influence, it's exactly *Sergeant Pepper* - or it's just as likely to be other way round. Paul McCartney used to listen to them [Pink Floyd].
That's lovely, it's really good. As you can gather, sometimes with English musicians, I know the people without necessarily knowing the music. I didn't collect records or go to the concerts. I was never a consumer. I really like them and there again liked them individually as people. I'm biased because they were very kind to us and to me. In the early days, they got us out of some horrendous tight spots when our equipment blew up, and they would lend us some - and groups don't do things like that. And then to me, they were very generous when I had my accident [Pink Floyd organised and headlined a benefit concert for Wyatt in the same year].

Musically, it's very refreshing to hear that. I'm ashamed to say I didn't know it, but I'm ashamed to say I didn't know
The Raincoats, but there you are. But I don't actually have rock records to listen to particularly. I see rock music as a boy-next-door activity. Rock doesn't have any romantic associations for me. It's what people like us used to do [laughs], the kind of things we got up to. That's all I feel about it, but having said that, I thought it was very inventive. I enjoyed it very much.

The Canterbury Scene we mentioned before has acquired a sort of mythic status over time, but not as much as the 67 UFO Club scene. Was it really as exciting as it's been made out to be?
Well, you have to forgive people involved if they're subjective. The subjective facts are I couldn't play in the 60s. It took me a

long time. So I associate the entire decade - if there is such a thing as a decade - with excruciating embarrassment on my own part. And it's bound to colour what you think about a place or a time.
Objectively, I'd say it was good, yeah. It was good in the sense that the groups weren't the only thing, just part of what was going on.

It was almost like having a big indoor market, really. We [Soft Machine] used to go down there and play, and sometimes they'd have Monteverdi playing, and the atmosphere would already be perfect. All you'd need was Monteverdi playing and people wandering about, or lying on the floor and things like that, and Mark Boyle's and various other people's film projections all over the walls, and already that was it, the atmosphere. And then there would be the groups. It didn't rely on the groups, it was a place to be anyway. As a stage, the audience were all in the play. And except for a few stars in the old style like Arthur Brown, who was wonderful, most people were fairly anonymous. They would just be there as part of making the scene.

I think at that time, I was still too much of a jazz and blues fan to quite be able to tune into what they [Pink Floyd] were doing. The bands I knew in London before them were Zoot Money and Georgie Fame. I was more used to the Ornette Colemans and the Sun Ras, and compared with what was going on [in jazz] by the mid-60s, even the most non-poppy pop groups seemed fairly tame to me, and fairly commercial.
That's not a criticism, it's just a fact.

TONY WILLIAMS WITH MILES DAVIS "Agitation" from *ESP* (Columbia)

[During Williams's long drum solo introduction] Sounds like Elvin Jones. It's not? Good Lord! He was very influenced by Elvin Jones - School of Elvin Jones. [Trumpet comes in] Well. Oh, in that case it's Jack DeJohnette.

It's not actually.
Hang on. OK. It's Tony Williams. Stupid, I am! Oh God, shoot that man. What a funny mistake to make. But that's a really interesting mistake, because I'd never thought of Tony Williams as being anything like Elvin Jones. But that early section and the business of stumbling over where you expect the bar-line to be, is such an Elvin Jones-y thing. And it's a much deeper sound than I associate with Tony Williams: he usually has a much lighter, crisper sound.
It was a very important time for Miles Davis. He never really recovered from the loss of Coltrane and he nearly went under then, I get the impression. But it was finding Tony Williams and doing a whole new thing that put him back on track. I don't know this one, I have to say. This is terrific, I really like this.

It's from ESP from 1965.
I should have this, let alone know it. Miles Davis started recording when I was born and he's been there all my life. And if someone asked me what was my very favourite voice sound ever, I'd have to say Miles Davis. There's a jazz writer, lives in Paris, called Mike Zwerin, who I've been in touch with again recently. He reminded me that one of [Miles's] bon mots - he lives in France so he can say things like that - was 'play half'. And that's exactly right. It's got a Zen appeal to it. The first time you hear it you think, 'Oh, that's easy, I've only got to play half', and then you think, 'Which half?' [Laughs] Miles Davis is one of the great jazz philosophers. It pisses me off

when people list great philosophers and only list great philosophical writers, because to me some of the great philosophers weren't writers, they were people who did other things. Thelonious Monk or Miles Davis.

BRIAN ENO
"My Squelchy Life" from *Nerve Net* (Opal/Warner Bros)

I was going to play you another piece [ie Eno's "My Squelchy Life"] but it seems I've recorded over the tape by mistake.
You'll have to hum it! [After about 20 seconds of me humming] Ah, hang on, that could be Johnny Rotten. Don't tell me, because I know who that is. That's stupid - I just remember him saying something about sex once that that reminds me of. Of course it's Brian. I think Brian would be very amused, first of all that you sang "My Squelchy Life" and I said 'Johnny Rotten'. And secondly, I would think this is only acceptable if you point out that we've broken new ground here, in that you've not actually played the record and I commented on it. I think it's appropriate, Brian would really appreciate that.

I have no objective opinion of Brian at all. I just consider him a great friend and an utterly good bloke. What else can I say? Brian and I used to spend a lot of time together in the 70s just talking and hanging about. Which, despite this thing about various scenes I may have been on, I don't remember doing with musicians on the whole. We used to have such fun. That's why it's so appropriate you didn't play the record, because we used to have fun imagining things that there could be. One of the things was in the 70s there wasn't the word World Music. We thought wouldn't it be great to get all these records that we were listening to from all around the world, totally nothing to do with pop or rock 'n' roll or jazz or American music, anything like that, anything to do with Europe at all, and you could find tracks that would appeal to people and just package it like pop music. It's difficult to explain now that kind of idea has become commonplace, in fact hackneyed, how exciting it was at that time to draw up these sort of thoughts. He was a very enjoyable person to think with. I find that thinking out loud with Brian is incredibly good exercise for the brain.

You performed on Music For Airports in the late 70s, which is now regarded as a landmark in Ambient music. The idea that it was equally valid to listen to or ignore the music seemed very radical at the time.
That's perhaps why we got on well, because I do like that thing that he does and we both do, which is, 'What if you turn the situation upside down, whatever the assumption or premise might be?' You're banging your head on the wall to try and do something to grab people's attention - what if you do the opposite? [Laughs] Ideas circulate and I'm very loath to attribute ideas solely to one person or anything. This question of authorship wouldn't really be a battleground [for Eno]. Although he is a fountain of ideas, he wouldn't promote himself necessarily as such, because he's interested in the circulation of them, and they go through various processes.

I remember a thing that I'd mentioned that I'd came across from Miles Davis. He [Miles] was talking about how to arrange things in a piece of music. And Miles Davis basically wouldn't tell anybody what to do - his arrangement was the choice of musicians you had in the first place. And Brian thought that was terrific and went on to do some things like that, where you wouldn't tell anybody what to do - the arrangement was choosing the musicians. And so that idea you can't attribute

either to him, or to me, I think you'd have to attribute it to Miles Davis, but the point is, the idea was very illuminating.

Eno always used to describe himself as a 'non-musician'.
I don't know what it means in rock 'n' roll, frankly. [Laughs] As opposed to who? Dave Clarke? What are we talking about here? But that's good. It's the great saving thing about pop music. There's a lot of pop music you only have to be able to hear in your head to be able to do it. But that only makes it like conversation. There's nothing wrong with that - doesn't mean it's crap.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Wilde Flowers - Record Collector N° 186 - February 1995

THE WILDE FLOWERS



SHORT TAKES

THE WILDE FLOWERS

MARK PAYTRESS LISTENS TO A SET OF FASCINATING ARCHIVE RECORDINGS FROM THE MOTHER OF ALL CANTERBURY BANDS

For years, the Wilde Flowers have been hailed as the founding fathers of the Canterbury Scene, which gave rise to groups like the Soft Machine, Caravan and Hatfield And The North, but there was never any recorded proof. A few ex-Garden of England groovers held fond memories of their shows in places like Whitstable and Margate, while ex-members like Robert Wyatt smiled vaguely about their pre-history. But one man, bassist, songwriter and future Soft Machine member Brian Hopper, had instant recall: he still had the tapes.

Now, almost exactly thirty years after the band's debut performance, those tapes are appearing on CD for the first time. Originally transferred onto tape by Hopper from a pile of well-preserved acetates, these recordings may sound a little scratchy, and are at least as primitively-recorded as you'd expect. They offer performances forged in the white heat of the beat revolution, if somewhat distanced from its epicentre. While the beat boom was fashioned primarily by a mix of rock'n'roll residue, R&B enthusiasts and opportunist light entertainers, the Wilde Flowers entered into pop sporting beatnik beards, spouting poetry and professing a love for modern jazz. In time, these factors underpinned the whole 'underground' ethic which swept the country during 1967, while three decades on, the arrival of their recordings on Voiceprint's "The Wilde Flowers" CD (VP 123 CD) adds an important piece to the British rock jigsaw.

So the Wilde Flowers have a lot to live up to. Some of them went on to become important figures in the Soft Machine and Caravan. The mere mention of their name — carrying with it a whiff of Edwardian scandal and pre-psychedelic promise — emphasised their reputation as mavericks, quite possibly out of their heads and very probably ahead of their time. 'Tales Of Canterbury', Brian Hopper's accompanying 28-page account of the band's life, reveals that the truth wasn't always a match for hand-me-down legend — the band were no less

opportunist than most, playing soul and Motown covers to meet the demand, and entering (and winning!) Battle Of The Bands-style contests. But as the music on the CD suggests (and Hopper's reminiscences confirm), the Canterbury dreamers were indeed a far cry from Freddie & the Dreamers.



BEATLEMANIA

Founder member Hopper recalls that, as Beatlemania broke, he hated pop. He'd grown up with classical music, before discovering modern jazz and poetry as a teenager. And in the photos, the tell-tale signs are there — dark clothing, even darker shades, a beret worn half-cock, *that* jazz beard — the embryonic Wilde Flowers were card-carrying Beat boys.

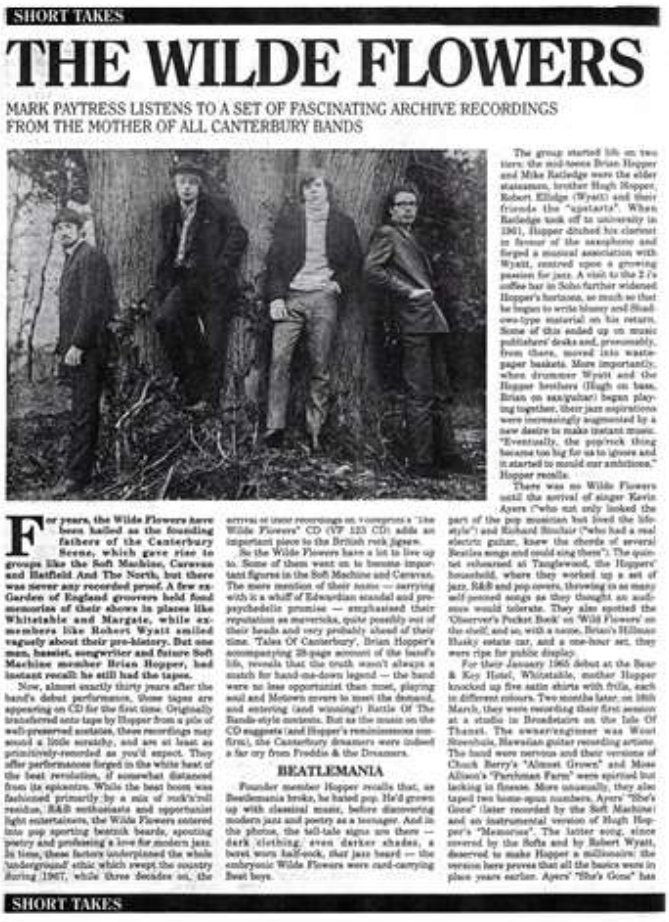
The group started life on two tiers: the mid-teens Brian Hopper and Mike Ratledge were the elder statesmen, brother Hugh Hopper, Robert Ellidge (Wyatt) and their friends the "upstarts". When Ratledge took off to university in 1961, Hopper ditched his clarinet in favour of the saxophone and forged a musical association with Wyatt, centred upon a growing passion for jazz. A visit to the 2 i's coffee bar in Soho further widened Hopper's horizons, so much so that he began to write bluesy and Shadows-type material on his return. Some of this ended up on music publishers' desks and, presumably, from there, moved into waste-paper baskets. More importantly, when drummer Wyatt and the Hopper brothers (Hugh on bass, Brian on sax/guitar) began playing together, their jazz aspirations were increasingly augmented by a new desire to make instant music. "Eventually, the pop/rock thing became too big for us to ignore and it started to mould our ambitions," Hopper recalls.

There was no Wilde Flowers until the arrival of singer Kevin Ayers ("who not only looked the part of the pop musician but lived the lifestyle") and Richard Sinclair ("who had a real electric guitar, knew the chords of several Beatles songs and could sing them"). The quintet rehearsed at Tanglewood, the Hoppers' household, where they worked up a set of jazz, R&B and pop covers, throwing in as many self-penned songs as they thought an audience would tolerate. They also spotted the 'Observer's Pocket Book' on Wild Flowers' on the shelf, and so, with a name, Brian's Hillman Husky estate car, and a one-hour set, they were ripe for public display.

For their January 1965 debut at the Bear & Key Hotel, Whitstable, mother Hopper knocked up five satin shirts with frills, each in different colours. Two months later, on 16th March, they were recording their first session at a studio in Broadstairs on the Isle Of Thanet. The owner/engineer was Wout Steenhuis, Hawaiian guitar recording artiste. The band were nervous and their versions of Chuck Berry's "Almost Grown" and Mose Allison's "Parchman Farm" were spirited but lacking in finesse. More unusually, they also taped two home-spun numbers, Ayers' "She's Gone" (later recorded by the Soft Machine) and an instrumental version of Hugh Hopper's "Memories". The latter song, since covered by the Softs and by Robert Wyatt, deserved to make Hopper a millionaire: the version here proves that all the basics were in place years earlier. Ayers' "She's Gone" has something of the Velvet Underground's "Live 1969" about the sound, though the voice is unmistakeably his. But any promise in that direction was thwarted when he quit some time later, leaving only an added

'E' (as in Oscar) to the Wild Flowers' name.

All four songs have survived on acetate and appear on the new CD. So do a further four, taped at a late summer session in Sellinge, a village just outside Canterbury. This time, the dubious vocal talents of one Graham Flight were on show, his slightly hysterical lines softly tempered by some reverb. He takes lead on the Bo Diddley-like "Don't Try To Change Me" and Brian Hopper's "Slow Walkin' Talk", and shares the spotlight with Wyatt (who's obviously written more words than he can sensibly cram into the song!) on the latter's moody jazz piece, "He's Bad For You". One final number, "It's What I Feel (A Certain Kind)", is familiar from the debut Soft Machine album, where it provides a tender climax to the first side. Again penned by gifted balladeer Hugh, it's not shown in its best light here, where Richard Sinclair takes his vocal bow with an hilarious wooden reading.



SHORT TAKES

THE WILDE FLOWERS

MARK PAYTRESS LISTENS TO A SET OF FASCINATING ARCHIVE RECORDINGS FROM THE MOTHER OF ALL CANTERBURY BANDS

For years, the Wilde Flowers have been hailed as the founding fathers of the Canterbury Scene, which gave rise to groups like the Soft Machine, Caravan and Hatfield And The North, but there was never any recorded proof. A few ex-Garden of England grocers held fond memories of their shows in places like Whitstable and Margate, while ex-members like Robert Wyatt smiled vaguely about their pre-history. But one man, bassist, songwriter and future Soft Machine member Brian Hopper, had instant recall: he still had the tapes.

Now, almost exactly thirty years after the band's debut performances, these tapes are appearing on CD for the first time. Originally transferred onto tape by Hopper from a pile of well-preserved acetates, these recordings may sound a little scratchy, and are at least as primitively-recorded as you'd expect. They offer performances forged in the white heat of the beat revolution, if somewhat distanced from its epicentre. While the beat boom was fashioned primarily by a mix of rock'n'roll revivalists, R&B enthusiasts and opportunist light entertainers, the Wilde Flowers entered into pop sporting beatnik beards, spouting poetry and professing a love for modern jazz. In time, these factors underpinned the whole 'underground' ethic which swept the country during 1967, while three decades on, the arrival of these recordings on Voiceprint's 'The Wilde Flowers' CD (VP 123 CD) adds an important piece to the British rock jigsaw.

So the Wilde Flowers have a lot to live up to. Some of them went on to become important figures in the Soft Machine and Caravan. The mere mention of their name — carrying with it a whiff of Edwardian scandal and pre-psychedelic promise — emphasised their reputation as mavericks, quite possibly out of their heads and very probably ahead of their time. 'Tales Of Canterbury', Brian Hopper's accompanying 28-page account of the band's life, reveals that the truth wasn't always a match for hand-me-down legend — the band were no less opportunist than most, playing soul and Motown covers to meet the demand, and entering (and winning!) Battle Of The Bands-style contests. But as the music on the CD suggests (and Hopper's reminiscences confirm), the Canterbury dreamers were indeed a far cry from Freddie & the Dreamers.

BEATLEMANIA

Founder member Hopper recalls that, as Beatlemania broke, he hated pop. He'd grown up with classical music, before discovering modern jazz and poetry as a teenager. And in the photos, the tell-tale signs are there — dark clothing, even darker shades, a beret, worn half-mock, that jazz beard — the embryonic Wilde Flowers were card-carrying Beat boys.

The group started life on two tiers: the mid-teens Brian Hopper and Mike Ratledge were the elder statesmen, brother Hugh Hopper, Robert Ellidge (Wyatt) and their friends the "upstarts". When Ratledge took off to university in 1961, Hopper ditched his clarinet in favour of the saxophone and forged a musical association with Wyatt, centred upon a growing passion for jazz. A visit to the 2 i's coffee bar in Soho further widened Hopper's horizons, so much so that he began to write bluesy and Shadows-type material on his return. Some of this ended up on music publishers' desks and, presumably, from there, moved into waste-paper baskets. More importantly, when drummer Wyatt and the Hopper brothers (Hugh on bass, Brian on sax/guitar) began playing together, their jazz aspirations were increasingly augmented by a new desire to make instant music. "Eventually, the pop/rock thing became too big for us to ignore and it started to mould our ambitions," Hopper recalls.

There was no Wilde Flowers until the arrival of singer Kevin Ayers ("who not only looked the part of the pop musician but lived the life-style") and Richard Sinclair ("who had a real electric guitar, knew the chords of several Beatles songs and could sing them"). The quintet rehearsed at Tanglewood, the Hoppers' household, where they worked up a set of jazz, R&B and pop covers, throwing in as many self-penned songs as they thought an audience would tolerate. They also spotted the 'Observer's Pocket Book' on 'Wild Flowers' on the shelf, and so, with a name, Brian's Hillman Husky estate car, and a one-hour set, they were ripe for public display.

For their January 1965 debut at the Bear & Key Hotel, Whitstable, mother Hopper knocked up five satin shirts with frills, each in different colours. Two months later, on 18th March, they were recording their first session at a studio in Broadstairs on the Isle Of Thanet. The owner/engineer was Wout Steenhuis, Hawaiian guitar recording artiste. The band were nervous and their versions of Chuck Berry's "Almost Grown" and Mose Allison's "Parchman Farm" were spirited but lacking in finesse. More unusually, they also taped two home-spun numbers, Ayers' "She's Gone" (later recorded by the Soft Machine) and an instrumental version of Hugh Hopper's "Memories". The latter song, since covered by the Softs and by Robert Wyatt, deserved to make Hopper a millionaire: the version here proves that all the basics were in place years earlier. Ayers' "She's Gone" has

SHORT TAKES

STEENHUIS

The Wilde Flowers Mk. II came to an end when Sinclair quit for art college, Graham Flight left because he didn't fit in, and Wyatt vacated the drum-stool to concentrate on his singing. With Richard Coughlan, a full-time dental technician, manning the sticks, the Wilde Flowers returned to Steenhuis's studio in spring 1966 with a more refined idea of what they wanted to do.

Brian Hopper's "Those Words They Say" wasn't a far cry from the ambitious kind of pop being tried out by groups like the Great Society in San Franciscan clubs — all choppy rhythms, interesting chords and 'interesting' (!) guitar solo. It was brother Hugh who was fast emerging as the group's leading songwriter, and while his "Time After Time" is clearly modelled on the Yardbirds, and the bluesy "No Game When You Lose" unsuited to Wyatt's voice, songs like "Never Leave Me", "Just Where I Want" and "Impotence" are not a million miles away from the Soft Machine's early demos. (Most of the songs on side one of Soft Machine's second album were written by Hugh during this period.)

In the meantime, the Wilde Flowers built up their live reputation, travelling to gigs in far-off locations and enjoying modest success. But towards the end of 1966, a certain restlessness was further ruffled by the return of Ayers and co-opted Canterbury scene stalwart Daevid Allen. And Wyatt, who'd been playing furious rock'n'roll covers with pianist Norman Hale, was wildly distracted. Brian Hopper: "He became more and more drawn to their experimentations until one day, during a Wilde Flowers rehearsal, he announced that he was going to quit to become a founder-member of what was to become the Soft Machine."

Despite the writing on the wall, this still came as a shock to the remaining Wilde Flowers. "It was more than the music," says Hopper. "It had become a family affair and one of the key family members was suddenly leaving home."

Into his place stepped Julian 'Pye' Hastings, a young, shy guitarist who'd already sat in with the band on several occasions. Revealing his talent for singing, he joined the group in time for the Radio London Rock Music Contest, held at the Dreamland Ballroom in Margate. The

Wilde Flowers, with Wyatt deputising for the absent Richard Coughlan on drums, won the contest.



SHORT TAKES

something of the Velvet Underground's "Live 1969" about the sound, though the voice is unmistakably his. But any promise in that direction was thwarted when he quit some time later, leaving only an added 'E' (as in Oscar) to the Wild Flowers' name.

All four songs have survived on acetate and appear on the new CD. So do a further four, taped at a late summer session in Sellings, a village just outside Canterbury. This time, the dubious vocal talents of one Graham Flight were on show, his slightly hysterical lines softly tempered by some reverb. He takes lead on the Bo Diddley-like "Don't Try To Change Me" and Brian Hopper's "Slow Walkin' Talk", and shares the spotlight with Wyatt (who's obviously written more words than he can sensibly cram into the song!) on the latter's moody jazz piece, "She's Bad For You". One final number, "It's What I Feel (A Certain Kind)", is familiar from the debut Soft Machine album, where it provides a lesser climax to the first side. Again penned by gifted balladeer Hugh, it's not shown in its best light here, where Richard Sinclair takes his vocal laws with an hilarious wooden reading.

STEENHUIS

The Wilde Flowers Mk. II came to an end when Sinclair quit for art college. Graham Flight left because he didn't fit in, and Wyatt vacated the drum stool to concentrate on his singing. With Richard Coughlan, a full-time dental technician, manning the sticks, the Wilde Flowers returned to Steenhuis's studio in spring 1996 with a more refined idea of what they wanted to do.

Brian Hopper's "Those Words They Say" wasn't a far cry from the ambitious kind of pop being tried out by groups like the Great Society in San Francisco clubs — all choppy rhythms, interesting chords and 'interesting' (!) guitar solo. It was brother Hugh who was fast emerging as the group's leading song-writer, and while his "Time After Time" is closely modelled on the Yardbirds, and the bluesy "No Game When You Lose" smacked to Wyatt's voice, songs like "Never Leave Me", "Just Where I Want" and "Impotence" are not a million miles away from the Soft Machine's early demos. (Most of the songs on side one of Soft Machine's second album were written by Hugh during this period.)

The Wilde Flowers", Voiceprint's rugged but still intriguing set of Canterbury archive recordings.

In the meantime, the Wilde Flowers built up their live reputation, travelling to gigs in far-off locations and enjoying modest success. But towards the end of 1966, a certain restlessness was further ruffled by the return of Ayers and co-opted Canterbury scene stalwart Daevid Allen. And Wyatt, who'd been playing furious rock'n'roll covers with pianist Norman Hale, was wildly distracted. Brian Hopper: "He became more and more drawn to their experimentations until one day, during a Wilde Flowers rehearsal, he announced that he was going to quit to become a founder-member of what was to become the Soft Machine."

Despite the writing on the wall, this still came as a shock to the remaining Wilde Flowers. "It was more than the music," says Hopper. "It had become a family affair and one of the key family members was suddenly leaving home."

Into his place stepped Julian 'Pye' Hastings, a young, shy guitarist who'd already sat in with the band on several occasions. Revealing his talent for singing, he joined the group in time for the Radio London Rock Music Contest, held at the Dreamland Ballroom in Margate. The Wilde Flowers, with Wyatt deputising for the absent Richard Coughlan on drums, won the contest.

One of the songs performed that day was James Brown's "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag", indicative of the band's new emphasis, which was tailored towards a more commercial sound, including a steady diet of soul and Tamla covers. Brian Hopper switched from bass to saxes, Richard's cousin Dave Sinclair was recruited to fulfil the bass duties, but he turned up with a Vox organ, so Dave Lawrence (from local act Chaos), who was well versed with the soul repertoire, filled that post. This version of the Wilde Flowers was by far the most prolific in terms of playing live, working three or four nights a week during the first half of '67, but that increased workload meant there was little time for recording or experimentation and so there's nothing from this line-up on the CD.

Brian Hopper: "The group was like a diversion in the continuum between the early experimental music of Mike, Robert, Daevid, myself and others, and the later work with the Soft Machine and other bands. It was a diversion that conformed to fashionable trends and to satisfy our egos!" By June 1967, Hugh Hopper upped and quit. The following year, he replaced Kevin Ayers on bass in the Soft Machine. Pye Hastings and the Sinclair cousins began jamming together, and when Richard Coughlan joined them, that project became Caravan. Brian Hopper was left in Canterbury while his young pals helped shape British psychedelia and progressive rock.

That wasn't quite the end of the story. Some time in 1968, Brian took his first post-Wilde Flowers band, known alternatively as Globe or Zobe, into a studio in Whitstable, Kent. As we've already seen, the Wild Flowers weren't, averse to idiosyncrasy in their choice of singers, and Globe/Zobe's Dave Lawrence unhappily joins that line. The three Brian Hopper-penned tracks on the CD betray some familiar WF traits (edgy time changes, nice chords), couched in a looser, jazzier style, like a pre-pubescent Quintessence.

More interestingly, on 6th August 1969, Hugh Hopper booked into Regent Sound Studios, London, to record some of his early songs as publishing demos. With Brian Hopper, Wyatt, Hastings, and the affiliated Mike Ratledge in attendance, the material was basically a Soft Machine set masquerading as a Wilde Flowers reunion, enacted with better sound, technical abilities and a relaxed air of confidence. The songs taped were "Impotence", "She Loves To Hurt" (that's apparently Pye doing the incredibly Wyatt-like lead vocal), "Memories" (with Ratledge's "Soft 3"-style keyboard touches) and "The Big Show", and all reveal just how far the Wilde Flowers — and rock in general — had progressed in such a short space of time.

For further details of the CD and the 'Tales Of Canterbury' booklet, which comes with the first 2,000 copies, write with SAE/IRC to Voiceprint, P.O. Box 5, Derwentside, Co. Durham DH9 7HR.

EXPORT! EXPORT! EXPORT!

ATTENTION - FOREIGN DEALERS!

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN UK PRODUCTS?

- We are one of the UK's leading export companies specialising in all UK new releases including Limited Editions and Special Formats.
- We offer weekly, comprehensive details of new UK releases and/or Limited Editions and Special Formats. This service is free of charge.
- We welcome smaller businesses and shops and are able to hold stock for you until you have a quantity that is economical to ship.

PLEASE 'PHONE OR FAX FOR FULL DETAILS.
Fax Paul on (44) 403 211140 or 'phone on (44) 403 272819

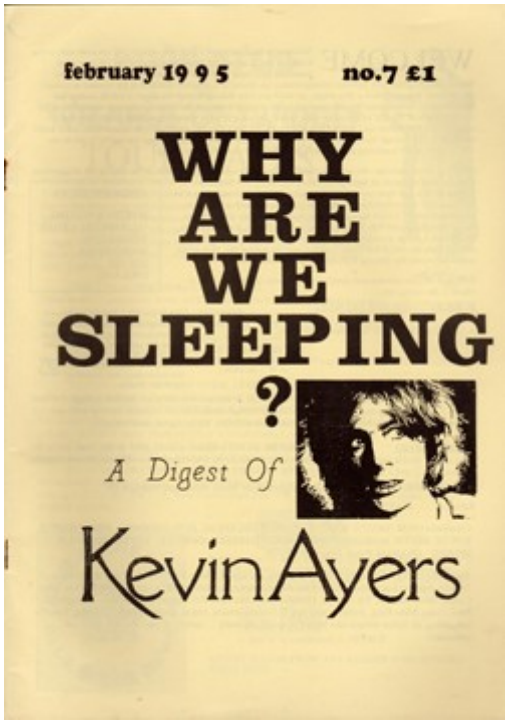
EXPORT! EXPORT! EXPORT!

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

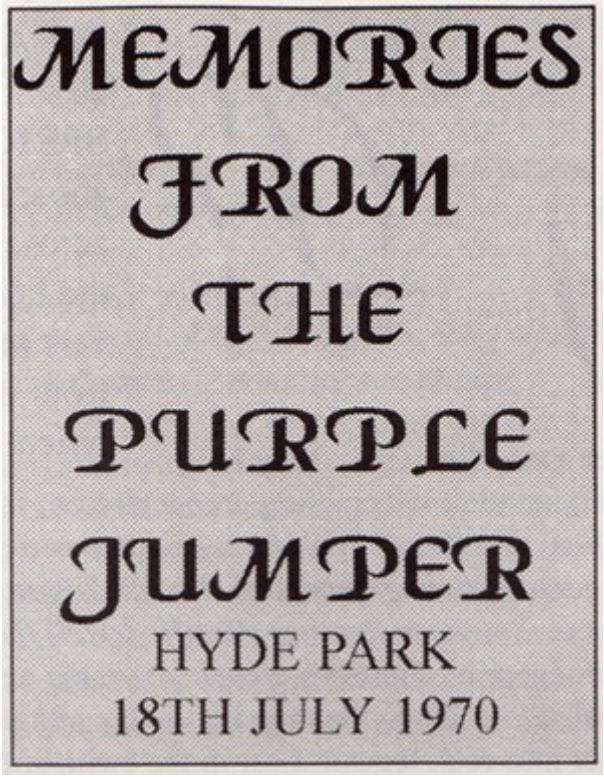
Memories from The Purple Jumper - Hyde Park 18 July 1970 - Why Are We Sleeping ? - N° 7 - February 1995



What an excellent article the David Bedford interview was in WAWS 6. In it David recalled the gig supporting Pink Floyd as one of the most enjoyable ones he played with "the Whole World". As a member of the audience I have fond memories of that concert too. It was the second time I saw Ayers live; though I use the word "saw" loosely.

I was" actually in a fairly pissed off frame of mind when I arrived at Hyde Park. I had had a bad week. I had been due to see Pink Floyd play a BBC "In Concert" the previous Thursday. It was with high expectations I had turned up with my precious ticket, queued patiently, and then had the door slammed in my face by a BBC jobsworth. I had then watched while various middle-aged men and women were allowed into the gig whilst me and a small group of disgruntled punters forlomly waved our tickets outside. It turned out later that the BBC had a policy (and for all I know still does) of issuing more tickets than there were seats in the theatre to ensure a full house. Thus if you were one of the poor sods at the back of the queue the chances were good you wouldn't get in. And of course being the BBC the last thing they were going to do was explain what was going on to a bunch of no good hippies. We later learned that the people being let in after the doors were shut were the brass section for "Atom Heart Mother". If only I had learnt the French Horn or something I could have gatecrashed. One woman did get into the theatre briefly by convincing the commissionaire she was Pink Floyd's wife.

Things had gone wrong the morning of the Hyde Park gig too. By a judicious series of cock-ups I managed to miss meeting all my friends and so I was sitting on my own. I had also arrived late and so the only way I could get anywhere near the stage was by sitting to the side of it, so though I could hear pretty well I couldn't actually see any of the bands.



Early in the proceedings Lol Coxhill performed a solo set. DJ Jeff Dexter introduced him as "Lowell Coxhill" and you can hear Dexter apologising for this on the record. NB. Part of the Whole World's set at Hyde Park can be heard on Lol Coxhill's 1971 'Ear of the Beholder as A Collective Improvisation".To me, the first number he played sounded like he used the riff from "Set the controls for the heart of the sun" as a launch pad for his manaical playing. It was good to hear Lol playing to such a large audience and, considering the extreme nature of his music, going down so well.

He was on good form too when he came back with the band later. Kevin had Robert Wyatt on drums for this gig as well (it was Wyatt's debut with the Whole World - see Melody Maker news item from 18.7.70) as the usual stalwarts of Mike Oldfield, David Bedford and Lol. They played a most entertaining set. Coxhill and Bedford acted out their play Murder In The Air' over the riffing of 'We Did It Again'. The band also played 'Lady Rachel'. It surprises me in retrospect how little of Kevin's set at that time was culled from "Joy of a Toy". Presumably the band was put together to promote the then current Ayers album yet this was the only "Joy of a Toy" song I ever heard them play live. I think we can put this down to an admirable disregard for commercial concerns.

Kevin and Robert did a duet of "Hat Song". It culminated with Kevin singing "So you say you like any hat. you can have my hat" and flinging it into the audience. The only visual impact I received from the whole concert was seeing Kevin's hat sailing out of the stage into the crowd. It looked remarkably like the wide brimmed velvet hat that he wore on the sleeve of "Shooting at the Moon". Who knows it's probably a momento of some Ayers fan to this day.

The rest of the set included much of the material later to surface on "Shooting at the Moon". They played "May I", 'Clarence In Wonderland' and a great 'Rheinhardt / Colores para Dolores". Excellent music for a warm day in the great outdoors; lying on your back you could indeed verify that "Blue is the colour of sky".

Kevin and the Whole World finished with the usual finale of "Why are we Sleeping". Always a great number.

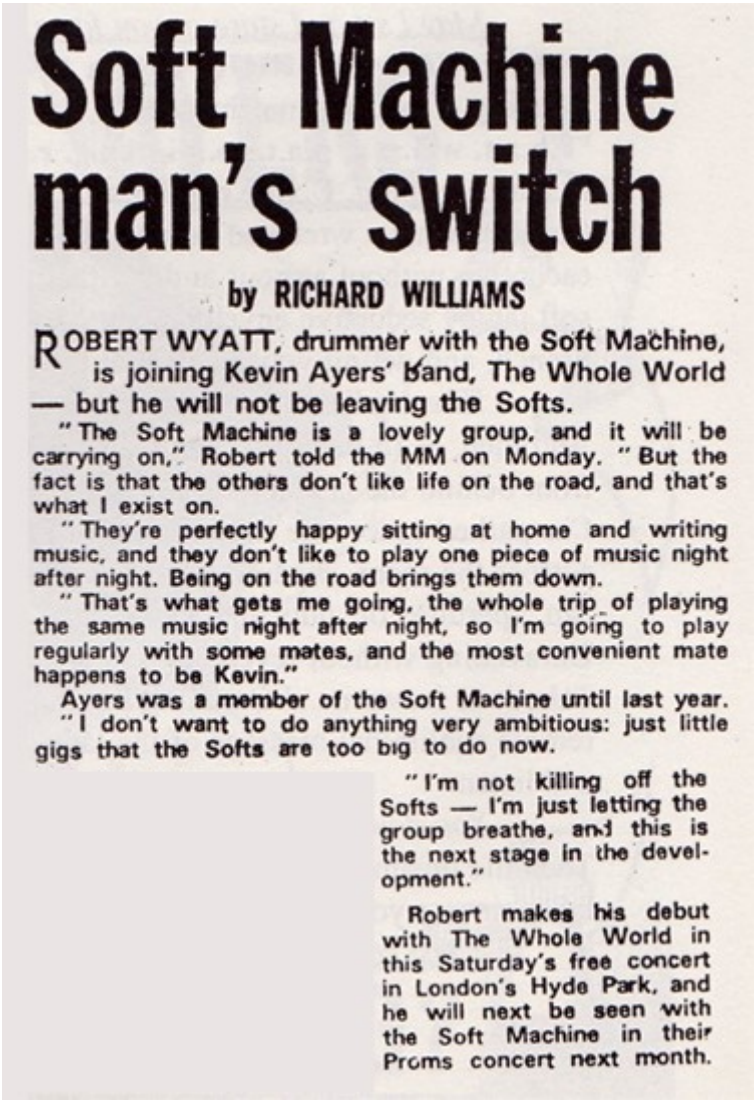
I would have to confess that though their music was suited to the occasion it was not the best time I saw the band; still, bearing in mind the next time I saw them play it was the best gig I ever saw, that is not surprising. The fact it was an outdoor gig meant there was a lack of the intimacy which I think Kevin's music really needs to thrive. Most of the crowd were just out for a day in the sun and couldn't have cared less who was playing. They were too indifferent to even sing along with "Out Demons Out" when the Edgar Broughton

Band came on later.

However largely due to Kevin Ayers (though I had enjoyed Roy Harper's surprise set - despite someone lobbing a beer can at him during "I Hate the White Man" and was much relieved to eventually hear the Floyd do "Atom Heart Mother") I was much cheered up by the end of the day.

I still hate the BBC mind you!

Graham Weston



Soft Machine man's switch

by RICHARD WILLIAMS

ROBERT WYATT, drummer with the Soft Machine, is joining Kevin Ayers' band, The Whole World — but he will not be leaving the Softs.

"The Soft Machine is a lovely group, and it will be carrying on," Robert told the MM on Monday. "But the fact is that the others don't like life on the road, and that's what I exist on.

"They're perfectly happy sitting at home and writing music, and they don't like to play one piece of music night after night. Being on the road brings them down.

"That's what gets me going, the whole trip of playing the same music night after night, so I'm going to play regularly with some mates, and the most convenient mate happens to be Kevin."

Ayers was a member of the Soft Machine until last year.

"I don't want to do anything very ambitious: just little gigs that the Softs are too big to do now.

"I'm not killing off the Softs — I'm just letting the group breathe, and this is the next stage in the development."

Robert makes his debut with The Whole World in this Saturday's free concert in London's Hyde Park, and he will next be seen with the Soft Machine in their Proms concert next month.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

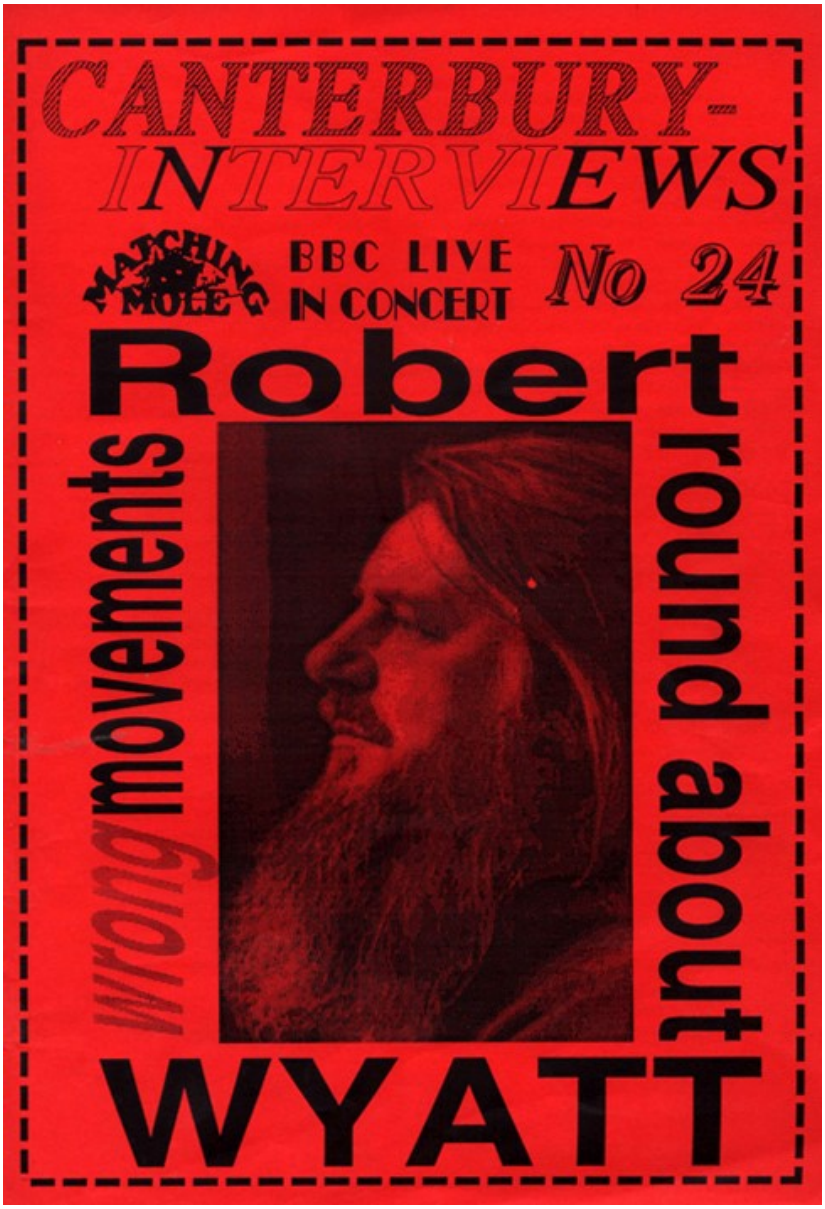
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

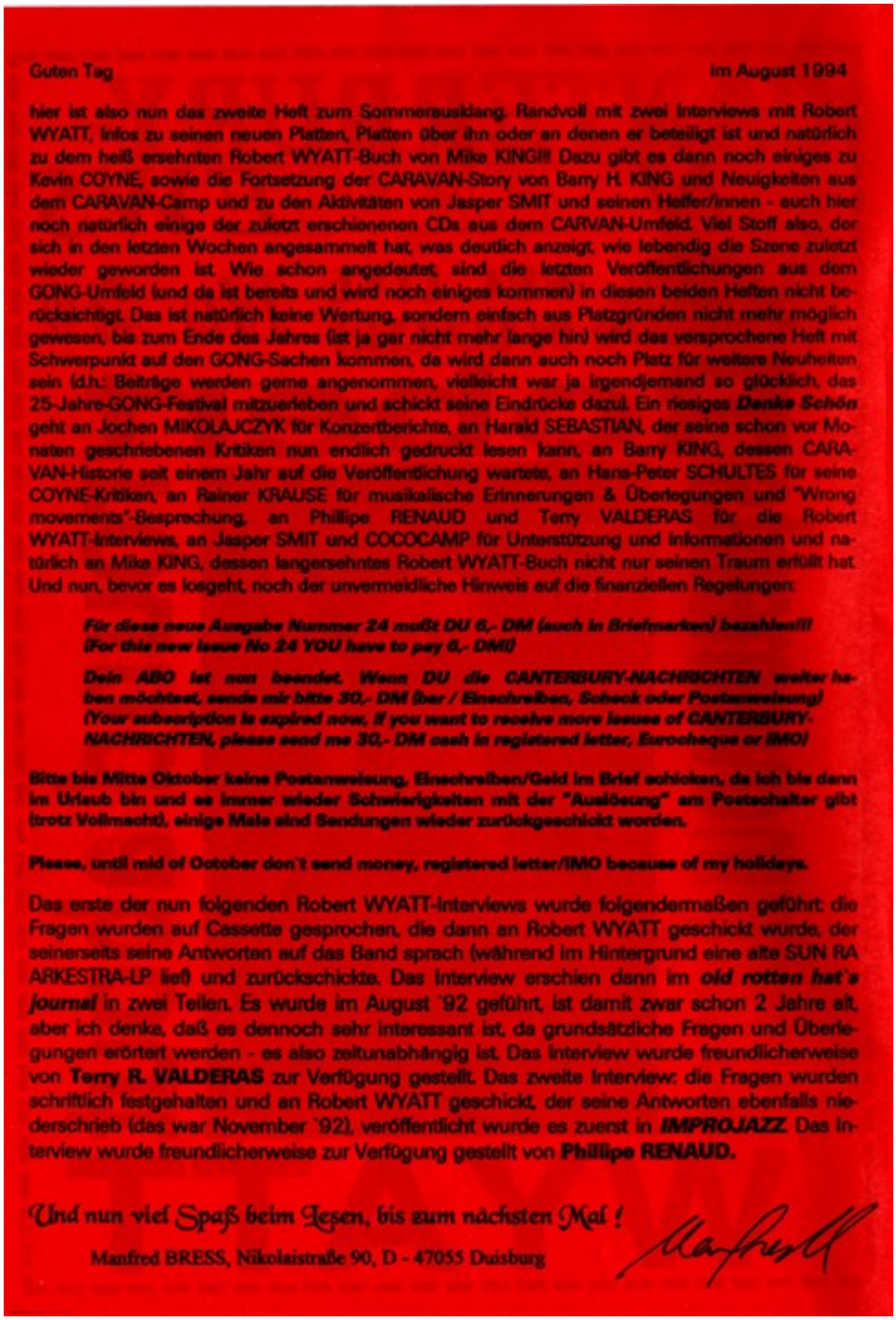
HOME

Robert Wyatt speaks - Canterbury Nachrichten N° 24 - August 1994

ROBERT WYATT SPEAKS



> Zoom



Guten Tag

im August 1994

hier ist also nun das zweite Heft zum Sommerausklang. Randvoll mit zwei Interviews mit Robert WYATT, Infos zu seinen neuen Platten, Platten über ihn oder an denen er beteiligt ist und natürlich zu dem heiß ersehnten Robert WYATT-Buch von Mike KING!!! Dazu gibt es dann noch einiges zu Kevin COYNE, sowie die Fortsetzung der CARAVAN-Story von Barry H. KING und Neuigkeiten aus dem CARAVAN-Camp und zu den Aktivitäten von Jasper SMIT und seinen Helfer/innen - auch hier noch natürlich einige der zuletzt erschienenen CDs aus dem CARVAN-Umfeld. Viel Stoff also, der sich in den letzten Wochen angesammelt hat, was deutlich anzeigt, wie lebendig die Szene zuletzt wieder geworden ist. Wie schon angedeutet, sind die letzten Veröffentlichungen aus dem GONG-Umfeld (und da ist bereits und wird noch einiges kommen) in diesen beiden Heften nicht berücksichtigt. Das ist natürlich keine Wertung, sondern einfach aus Platzgründen nicht mehr möglich gewesen, bis zum Ende des Jahres (ist ja gar nicht mehr lange hin) wird das versprochene Heft mit Schwerpunkt auf den GONG-Sachen kommen, da wird dann auch noch Platz für weitere Neuheiten sein (d.h.: Beiträge werden gerne angenommen, vielleicht war ja irgendjemand so glücklich, das 25-Jahre-GONG-Festival mitzuerleben und schickt seine Eindrücke dazu). Ein riesiges ***Danke Schön*** geht an Jochen MIKOLAJCZYK für Konzertberichte, an Harald SEBASTIAN, der seine schon vor Monaten geschriebenen Kritiken nun endlich gedruckt lesen kann, an Barry KING, dessen CARAVAN-Historie seit einem Jahr auf die Veröffentlichung wartete, an Hans-Peter SCHULTES für seine COYNE-Kritiken, an Rainer KRAUSE für musikalische Erinnerungen & Überlegungen und "Wrong movements"-Besprechung, an Phillipe RENAUD und Terry VALDERAS für die Robert WYATT-Interviews, an Jasper SMIT und COCOCAMP für Unterstützung und Informationen und natürlich an Mike KING, dessen langersehntes Robert WYATT-Buch nicht nur seinen Traum erfüllt hat. Und nun, bevor es losgeht, noch der unvermeidliche Hinweis auf die finanziellen Regelungen:

Für diese neue Ausgabe Nummer 24 mußt DU 6,- DM (auch in Briefmarken) bezahlen!!!
(For this new issue No 24 YOU have to pay 6,- DM!)

Dein ABO ist nun beendet. Wenn DU die CANTERBURY-NACHRICHTEN weiter haben möchtest, sende mir bitte 30,- DM (bar / Einschreiben, Scheck oder Postanweisung)
(Your subscription is expired now, if you want to receive more issues of CANTERBURY-NACHRICHTEN, please send me 30,- DM cash in registered letter, Eurocheque or IMO)

Bitte bis Mitte Oktober keine Postanweisung, Einschreiben/Geld im Brief schicken, da ich bis dann im Urlaub bin und es immer wieder Schwierigkeiten mit der "Auslösung" am Postschalter gibt (trotz Vollmacht), einige Male sind Sendungen wieder zurückgeschickt worden.

Please, until mid of October don't send money, registered letter/IMO because of my holidays.

Das erste der nun folgenden Robert WYATT-Interviews wurde folgendermaßen geführt: die Fragen wurden auf Cassette gesprochen, die dann an Robert WYATT geschickt wurde, der seinerseits seine Antworten auf das Band sprach (während im Hintergrund eine alte SUN RA ARKESTRA-LP lief) und zurückschickte. Das Interview erschien dann im ***old rotten hat's journal*** in zwei Teilen. Es wurde im August '92 geführt, ist damit zwar schon 2 Jahre alt, aber ich denke, daß es dennoch sehr interessant ist, da grundsätzliche Fragen und Überlegungen erörtert werden - es also zeitunabhängig ist. Das Interview wurde freundlicherweise von **Terry R. VALDERAS** zur Verfügung gestellt. Das zweite Interview: die Fragen wurden schriftlich festgehalten und an Robert WYATT geschickt, der seine Antworten ebenfalls niederschrieb (das war November '92), veröffentlicht wurde es zuerst in ***IMPROJAZZ***. Das Interview wurde freundlicherweise zur Verfügung gestellt von **Phillipe RENAUD.**

Und nun viel Spaß beim Lesen, bis zum nächsten Mal !

Manfred BRESS, Nikolaistraße 90, D - 47055 Duisburg

> Zoom

Robert Wyatt speaks:

Terry R. VALDERAS:
If you have any message, or any greetings to our readers, please feel free to make it!

Robert WYATT: I thought I might say something that would lift peoples' spirits in these neo-depression times. And so ... I'm gonna talk about a problem that smokers have ... which is, you always think, "Oh, I can throw a cigarette butt down the toilet I mean it will flush!" And they don't, they bounce back ... bob ... bob ... bouncing back. You think "Oh, God!" (mock surprise). They tell you you're not to put cigarette butts down there, and you think, "it's gotta go down there!" It's gravity. Well, I've got wonderful news; the thingis:

don't panic, don't think, "(mock anger) Oh God, no, now I've gotta fish it out! How can I do that?! What kind of implement ... do they make an implement for fishing cigarettes out?" I don't know of one that you could subsequently use for anything else. Who needs more equipment!! I'm here to tell you, just don't panic! Leave it there!! One day you'll look and it'll be gone. Now, don't ask me where. The people without any soul ... the prosaic, ground-bound people will tell you it's gotten water-logged and flushed. But who's to know? Nobody ever really sees it happen. I think there's a big political implication as well, but I won't get into that yet ... let's get onto the light stuff now, because I don't wanna be heavy the whole time with this stuff!! The spiritualism of butts and so on!! And so I just want to say: Hello!

Tell us about "Nan true's hole" and MATCHING MOLE ?

RW: Well … there's a song called "Nan true's hole", that's got nothing to do with Nan True's Hole. That's how it is with songs … with these sort of subtle song writers. It is the name of a house, that a friend of mine owns, in Sussex. And the origin of the name, I imagine, is that it was the home or ho¬vel of a woman with special powers, perhaps, who lived on her own, called Nan True, who was perhaps a fortune-teller … a witch of sorts who lived in this house. I imagine her regarded with fear, and awe in the supersticious-peasanty british village, in which she lived. My friend had inherited this house, and I just thought, "This name is too good to wasten a house". Phil MILLER agreed, the guitarist (in MOLE) and it turned into a piece of music.

Well … I know I've said that I can't talk about … BA : before the accident. Well, sometimes I can; sometimes I can't! At the moment I feel a kind of wave of affection for ourselves as we were, even for myself so long ago, because it seems like someone else. I listen to those tapes now, and I think "Go! Go! Go!" (laughs very hard). I don't know where, just go somewhere … ya' know!!

We had Phil MILLER on guitar, who would rather play a wrong note than a note that somebody else had ever played. I admired his spirit … and he continues to work and compose in very … rarified forms and atmospheres of … advanced musical knowledge, beyond my technical understanding. I'm glad he was with us when he was in his … you know, younger … early enthusiasm days!

Bill MacCORMICK now works for the Liberal Party, I think. He was the bass player in our band … a very inventive, bouncy bass player. And what a nice man! He was then, and is now.

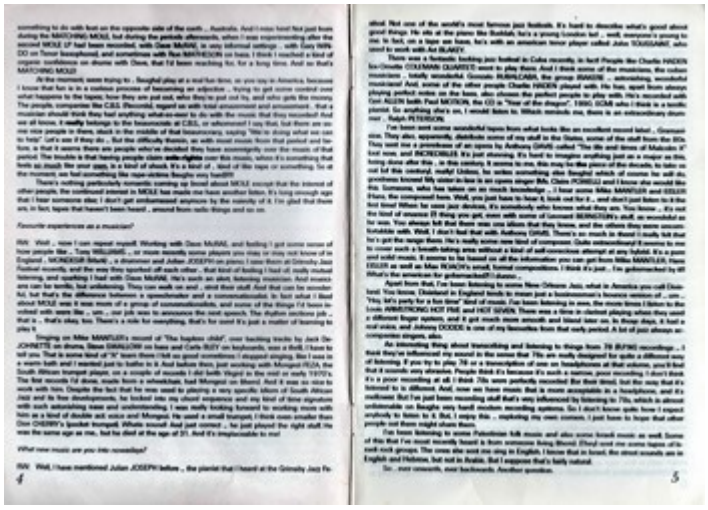
The two Daves … Dave SINCLAIR used to play Hammond (organ), and people still try and persuade him to play it with CARAVAN. He doesn't understand that; he now owns a keyboard shop, and doesn't understand why people want him to go back to the Hammond! But, those of us who were brought up upon Jimmy SMITH and BOOKER T., we just can't get enough of that Hammond sound. I like it when he bothers to carry it around; it's a big heavy thing, as anyone who plays one or bothers to carry around would know.

Dave McRAE is perhaps the best musician I've ever worked with. A keyboard player at that time, playing mostly electric piano, he's now gone back to, what I think is japanese piano, wich is to say the acoustic type that classical music is played on. He's gone back to the antipides, which has something to do with feet on the opposite side of the earth … Australia. And I miss him! Not just from during the MATCHING MOLE, but during the periods afterwards, when I was experimenting after the second MOLE LP had been recorded, with Dave McRAE, in very informal settings … with Gary WINDO on Tenor (saxophone), and sometimes with Ron MATHESON on bass. I think I reached a kind of organic confidence on drums with Dave, that I'd been reaching for, for a long time. And so that's MATCHING MOLE!

At the moment, were trying to … (laughs) play at a real fun time, as you say in America, because I know that fun is in a curious process of becoming an adjective … trying to get some control over what happens to the tapes; how they are put out, who they're put out by, and who gets the money. The people, companies like C.B.S. (Records), regard us with total amazement and amusement … that a musician should think they had anything what-so-ever to do with the music that they recordind! And we all know, it **really** belongs to the beaurocrats at C.B.S., or whomever I say, that, but there are some nice people in there, stuck in the middle of that beaurocracy, saying "We're doing what we can to help". Let's see if they do … But the difficulty therein, as with most music from that period and before, is that it seems there are people who've decided they have sovereignity over the music of that period. The trouble is that having people claim **sole-rights** over this music, when it

something that feels so much like your own, is a kind of shock. It's a kind of … kind of like rape or something. So at the moment, we feel something like rape-victims (laughs very hard)!!!

There's nothing particularly romantic coming up (now) about MOLE except that the interest of other people, the continued interest in MOLE has made me have another listen. It n long enough ago that I hear someone else; I don't get embarrassed anymore by the naievity of it. I'm glad that there are, in fact, tapes that haven't been heard … around from radio things and so on.



Favourite experiences as a musician?

RW: Well … now I can repeat myself. Working with Dave McRAE, and feeling I got some sense of how people like - Tony WILLIAMS … or more recently some players you may or may not know of in England … MONDESIR (Mark) … a drummer and Julian JOSEPH on piano; I saw them at Grimsby Jazz Festival recently, and the way they sparked off each other … that kind of feeling I had of, really mutual listening, and sparking I had with Dave McRAE. He's such an alert, listening musician. And musicians can be terrific, but unlistening. They can walk on and … strut their stuff. And that can be wonderful, but that's the difference between a speechmaker and a conversationalist. In fact what I liked about MOLE was it was more of a group of conversationalists, and some of the things I'd been involved with were like … um … our job was to announce the next speech. The rhythm sections job … that is … that's okay, too. There's a role for everything, that's for sur! It's just a matter of learning to play it.

Singing on Mike MANTLER's record of "The hapless child", over backing tracks by Jack DeJOHNETTE on drums, Steve SWALLOW on bass and Carla BLET on keyboards, was a thrill, I have to tell you. That is some kind of "A" team there I felt so good sometimes I stopped singing, like I was in a warm bath and I wanted just to bathe in it. And before then, just working with Mongezi FEZA, the South African trumpet player, on a couple of records I did (with Virgin) in the mid of early 1970's. The first records I'd done, mado from a wheelchair, had Mongezi on (them). And it was so nice to work with him. Despite the fact that he was used to playing a very specific idiom of South African Jazz and its free developments, he locked into my chord sequence and my kind of time signature with such astonishing ease and understanding. I was really looking forward to working more with him as a kind of double act: voice and Mongezi. He used a small trumpet I think even smaller than Don CHERRY's (pocket trumpet). Whata sound! And just correct … he just played the right stuff. He was the same age as me … but he died at the age of 31. And it's irreplaceable to me!

What new music are you into nowadays? RW: Well, I have mentioned Julian JOSEPH before … the pianist that I heard at the Grimsby Jazz Festival. Not one of the world's most famous jazz festivals. It's hard to describe what's good about good things. He sits at the piano like Buddah; he's a young London lad … well, everyone's young to me. In fact on a tape we have, he's with an american tenor player called John TOUSSAINT, who used to work with Art BLAKEY.

There was a fantastic looking jazz festival in Cuba recently, in fact! People like Charlie HADEN (ex-Omette COLEMAN QUARTET) went to play there. And I think some of the musicians, the cuban musicians … totally wonderful. Gonzalo RUBALCABA, the group IRAKERE … astonishing, wonderful musicians! And, some of the other people Charlie HADEN played with. He has, apart from always playing perfect notes on the bass, also chosen the perfect people to play with. He's recorded with Geri ALLEN (with Paul MOTION, the CD is "Year of the dragon". 1990, ECM) who I think is a terrific pianist. So anything she's on, I would listen to. Which reminds me, there is an extraordinary drummer … Ralph PETERSON.

I've been sent some wonderful tapes from what looks like an excellent record label … Gramavision. They also, apparently, distribute some of my stuff in the States, some of the stuff from the 80s. They sent me a prerelease of an opera by Anthony DAVIS called "The life and times of Malcolm X" (out now. and INCREDIBLE!). It's just stunning. It's hard to imagine anything just as a major as this, being done after this in this … century. It seems to me, this may be **the** piece of the decade, to take us out (of this century), really! Unless, he writes something else (laughs) which of course he will do, goodness knows! My sister-in-law is an opera singer (Ms. Claire POWELL) and I know she would like this. Someone, who has taken on so much knowledge … I hear some Mike MANTLER and EISLER (Hans, the composer) here. Well, you just have to hear it look out for it … and don't just listen to it the first time! When he uses jazz devices, it's somebody who knows what they are. You know … it's not Ihe kind of ersance (?) thing you get, even with some of Leonard BERNSTEIN'S stuff, as wondeful as he was. You always felt that there was one idiom that they knew, and the others they were uncomfortabble with. Well, I don't feel that with Anthony DAVIS. There's so much in there! I really felt that he's got the range there. He's really some new kind of composer. Quite extraordinary! It seems to me to cover such a breath-taking area without a kind of self-conscious attempt at any hybrid. It's a pure and solid music. It seems to be based on all the information you can get from Mike MANTLER, Hans EISLER as well as Max ROACH'S small, formal compositions. I think it's just … I'm gobsmacked by it!! What's the american for gobsmacked?! I dunno…

Apart from that,I've been listening to some New Orleans Jazz, what in America you call Dixieland. You know, Dixieland in England tends to mean just a businessman's bounce version of … um … "Hey, let's party for a fun time" kind of music. I've been listening in awe, the more times I listen to the Louis ARMSTRONG HOT FIVE and HOT SEVEN. There was a time in clarinet playing when they used a different finger system, and it got much more smooth and bland later on. In those days, it had a real voice, and Johnny DODDS is one of my favourites from that early period. A lot of jazz always accompanies singers, also.

An interesting thing about transcribing and listening to things from 78 (R.P.M.) recordings … I think they've influenced my sound in the sense that 78s are really designed for quite a different way of listening. If you try to play 78 or a transcription of one on headphones at that volume, you'll find that it sounds very abrasive. People think it's because it's such a narrow, poor recording. I don't think it's a poor recording at all. I think 78s were perfectly recorded (for their time), but the way that it's listened to is different. And, now we have music that is more acceptable in a headphone, and it's mellower. But I've just been recording stuff that's very influenced by listening to 78s, which is almost unlistenable on (laughs very hard) modern recording systems. So I don't know quite how I expect anybody to listen to it. But I enjoy this … exploring my own comers. I just have to hope that other people out there might share them.

I've been listening to some Palestinian folk music and also some Israeli music as well. Some of this that I've most recently heard is from someone living (there). (They) sent me some tapes of Israeli rock groups. The ones she sent me sing in English. I know that in Israel, the street sounds are in English and Hebrew, but not in Arabic. But I suppose that's fairly natural.

So … ever onwards, ever backwards. Another question.

Life and what do you dig about it…

RW: dig!? That's an american expression. Well … the thing about life is, I don't know anything else, yet. I haven't got anything to compare it to. And so it's a kind of one horse race. I'm not sure that it's … worth it yet … not mine. I have yet to find out (laughs)! I think it's odd, really. You know (if you) saw a man walking down the street … with a large pair of antlers on his head, and a glass bowl in his hand, saying _ "I've got to get to Wisconsin in 10 minutes" - You'd think, "What a strange man! What a strange thing to say. And why is he saying it here? And why is he telling me?!" Well I think life's a bit like that to me. I just think, "What on earth set this thing off?" I can't think of the motivation. I've read various religious texts on the subject and they all seem to be totally all kitsch on the subject. Just the kind of things people would say, just … Self serving romanticism. I find some of the oldest religions more intelligent that the latest ones. I think religions just become stupider as the centuries roll on! The most ancient ones, like worshipping the sun, the water, and the rocks seem to me to have a basis in understandable reality. But the later (recent) ones … just seem like intellectual suicide to me. Any ways … I've lost a few friends there! Hi … bye … (laughs). Oh well … who wants millions of friends. Just a few will do me fine.

Everything about life is biased because the people who talk about it are alive; we don't really get a rounded bunch of opinions on this subject since everybody who talks about it are in the alive camp! Ummm … I haven't got any comparative (laughs); I can't remember being anything else. I suppose I should try and think about what life is. I mean, that interests me, as opposed to something else. I look … at the things that are nearly alive; having some of the characteristics in common with life, but yet not lifelike. For example, crystal formations. The only thing I can really identify … I mean crystal formations has in common with life … it's own charcteristics of wanting to reproduce itself … hummmn… reconstitute it's immediate environment, to rearrange its chemicals. It's difficult to see where that process becomes a desperate desire to celebrate oneself that charcaterizes the living object … I think it's extremely odd. I mean, if there wasn't any life … I wouldn't have predicted it. It seems to me extremely unlikely. I can imagine planets and chemicals and dust and wind and explosions. There are curious sorts of reversed parodies of life, like fire, which soom to travel … and want to take things on, consume things. Wether life is some last echo of what was once … a different kind of fire. I don't know.

There are specific things that I find unsatisfactory about what is called advanced life. It's the terrible trick that is part of our equipment … we're sent in (as) feeling human beings, which means we can surfer. (Laughs) My god, lots of living things just do that (laughs). Of course, I'm not a Puritan or a killjoy in any sense … I'm glad at every amount of happiness there is!! I'm very happy, instantly, for example, for conservatives. Because you know they've made it clear they don't need me! And that's a responsibility off my back! I didn't want it anyway; you know … that's great! So go ahead, you conservatives, and don't bother me, and I won't bother you (laughs hard)! But … don't bother me, and then I won't bother you. Life? Humm … I don't know yet. It all seems, faintly daft to me, to be honest.

Influences of political, musical and literary?



RW: (Laughs quite loudly) You gotta be joking!!! I've been alive for 47 years and an influence enters my brain … probably … several hundred a second, just like everyone else's. (Laughs again) How long have you got? Uhh …

However, we are also filter systems! I mean, you can feed a duck dog-food, but it'll never turn into a dog. We're not kind of empty vehicles for whatever we absorb. I think that we kind select, even when we think we're being open. We can't help it. We're, each of us, a search and selectmachine, and why we find things suit us or don't, I don't think any of us can really say. That's why it's very, you know, difficult territory, if you start putting down other people's tastes, in a way. Because nobody knows what other people really need. I don't find that it works for me to try and guess what other people want to hear from me, and what other people want. Because I just can't imagine anything worth being satisfactory like that, and I don't like it as an audience when I think somebody's trying to gear something to me that doesn't come natural to them, and therefore doesn't sound natural for me, either.

Musical influences … at any given moment you ask me … a day later it will be a different answer. I mean there's this whole thing turning around and you just have to pick out what … surfaces. Rather than dive underneath and risk drowning in … memories … I'm not going to be deliberately obscure; God knows … we'll have difficulty communicating without that (laughs)! And so if some of the names I mention are, say, kind of obvious, well that's fine by me! That means that people are as famous as they should be.

Elvin JONES … the fact that he's alive and playing is some kind of miracle. I don't mean by that it s a terrible surprise. There is no reason he shouldn't be, but he is a miraculous man. He's sort of taken the drums to a level, on a road perhaps started out by, I dunno … Baby DODDS and Chick WEBB … through Kenny CLARKE and so on. He's made this breathing

living wind machine out of a drum kit. You've got to remember that the drum kit is a 20th century invention, and it's as modern as any synthesizer … and even more significant. I think the most foolish that a lovely Tenor (saxophone) player over here, Courtney PINE, did was not accept Elvin's offer to go on the road, with the Elvin JONES BAND. Branford MARSEILLES, said, "Ya shoulda done it", anybody like that Blakey or Elvin asks you to play a gig, you take it! Because, these are the masters, and you've got plenty of time later. It's such a privilege to be asked by these people. So anyways … Elvin JONES, as a drummer.

I'm influenced by a lot of musicians who sing, rather than jazz singers; I've just realized that really. Very often when musicians kind of … (laughs) … grunt out a tune, I've always liked that (now amused). Dizzy GILLESPIE is a lovely singer, in his schooldays. If you hear GILLESPIE … I had a record of GILLESPIE at Newport, Big Band, and he sings that sort of R & B stuff. Like Jimmy SMITH singing "I got my mojo working". Wonderful! And there are, of course, various musicians who sort of play and sing like Mose ALLSION, of course … Nina SIMONE; versatile pianist. (Long pause in thought) And in terms of piano playing, I also like … the playing of … influenced by … practically I have to be, by the people who don't reckon to be pianists or players. But, Gil EVANS once said he played a "rangists" piano, I mean, I know what he meant! If you're gonna be a solo pianist still now, I ought to throw by Bud POWELL, you see … the bebop player, who kind of defected East A lot of musicians did that went to live in Paris and places like that … Bud POWELL is one of these people like Billie HOLIDAY … the people say, "Oh, they went off towards the end of their lives!". But there is something moving about what they did. I don't think they went off towards the end of their lives, it's like saying … alot of people's music goes through various processes and there can come a time in an artist's life when they're no longer displaying their technical virtuosity or their knowledge. They're simply making, kind of iconic marks. And I really identify strongly with people who have the confidence to do that, however. And Bud POWELL used to play piano when he was older. He was … he'd been very badly … damaged. He'd had electro … what's-his-name done there; he'd been brutally treated by psychiatric nurses, or something. It's not dislike you're typical tragic story, I'm not talking about him as a tragic figure: I think he played wonderfully, late in his life, even though he's stumbling. Because there's that sound of searching going on. So, late Bud POWELL … late Billie HOLIDAY … the sounds of people when they're meant to have been past their peak, and cracking up inside. I think it's … ugh … seemed to move me a lot.

Okay … literary … no political … Literary? Literary! Well I suppose I'd have to say the English Comics and comedians. I like our comics. I don't like our serious actors very much, you know, the theater tradition that's very much admired. I mean it just reminds me of the tourist industry and the "World family". Our great theatrical tradition, and our royal family, to me, their entirely … for … um … like those tourist things where everything is decided for you by the touring company, and you file past whatever it is. You go to one country and you file past the Mona Lisa, you go to … what is it … the leaning tower of Lisa, or moaning Pisa or whatever her name is … anyway. To me, our great theatrical tradition is just that, I can't stand that (adapts mock Tudor-styled voice) "Careful ennunciation and r-r-resonant voices." I don't need it. If I want a resonant voice, I'll listen to Billy ECKSTINE. So, our comedians I love.

It's almost immedious to pick out some people; you probably wouldn't know them anyway. I'm not sure they'd translate. They very often came from that musical circuit that used to be in England towards the end of the last century. I suppose, the thing that in America developed into a Vaudeville thing. And related to that there was a kind of … sort of … I suppose … 19th century, turn-of-the-century English funny writers and children's writers. People like Edward LEAR … I really like. I mean, in the same way, America, I really like James THURBER. I mean where do I stop?! That just comes out the Rotten Hat at that particular moment thinking about that question.

Political influences? This is a kind of overwhelming question. It s almost like the same answer, in a way, to the musical ones. You gravitate to what seems to capture your imagination. I'm not even sure you chose to. (Matter-of-factly) England is run by a very conservative establishment, which as Christopher HITCHINGS has pointed out, there's an attempt to sort of copy it in the United States, almost a kind of reaction of aristocracy of leadership. In both cases anyway, you'd have to say they were aligarties (ein Schreibfehler?, ich nehme an, gemeint ist Oligarchie: Herrschaft einer kleinen Gruppe, ursprünglich der Reichen, über das Volk) rather than democracies. Well, obviously if you had to spend any money at all, to become a candidate, that disqualifies most of the people who should do it (laughs). Let's think …

Communism and Socialism as your influence … well, I sort of realized I was one by accusation. I mean, in the sense that … in South Africa, the description of the laws to

prevent the move towards democracy, and away from fascist dictatorship, were called "the Laws Against Communism". I've simply just allowed to be named by my enemies. I mean, when you say all the things I say, or think the things I think, you get called a communist. So I figure, well … if it's useful for people to have a way of identifying me, then I'll live with that because … ummm … "You must be a Commie! Oh, alright if YOU say so!" All these names are labels; they've got nothing to do with what we are as a kind of living, breathing bits of … ecoplasm, or something. Names are just attempts at identifying this one particular lump of ectoplasm from another, by the group at large. And so it just sort of became aparent that I was one, because people like me get called one and I'm not gonna argue with … conservatives. If they say that people like me must be Communists … They're very well educated, they are the standard bearers of civilization … they should know!! I'm certainly neither of those things, so I must accept their word for it. I'm a Communist because I just found that the kind of things I think, I'm told, are communistic. Okay. People say, "Well why in America do you have these other words like Liberal?" Well, that's one of these words that doesn't mean the same in England as it does in America. Because we have political parties, for example, a sort of Liberal (Labour) and Conservative party. In England, the Liberals, if they are here, are sort of like twins with the conservatives in a sense that … like if you're being questioned by a policeman and one's the heavy one who might push you around, the other one says, "Never mind him. Look, I'm your friend. Have a cup of tea. Look let's talk about this." Police work in pairs and so do political parties with their people. And in England, the Liberals and Conservatives are just kind of … "Nice guy / Tough guy". But they're both defending and protecting and talking in behalf of the same interests. So I have to avoid use of the word Liberal. It also suggests a certain kind of moderation, and I have no understanding or conception of what possible use political moderation could have. I can't imagine the kind of moderate, balanced response to any particular situation. Like, for example, the right wing extremist says, "Kill 6 million jews"; the left wing extremist says, "Don't kill any jews". So I suppose the moderate, "Well, maybe we should kill about 3 million … then everybody'd be very happy." (Laughs hard) I don't understand the moderate position, you know what I mean?

*Soweit das Interview, daß **Terry R. VALDERAS vom old rottonhats Journal** per Cassettenzusen-dung mit Robert WYATT hielt Als Ergänzung zu den schon recht ausführlichen Antworten von Robert WYATT folgen jetzt noch einige Fragen, die Phillippe RENAUD von IMPROJAZZ an Robert WYATT stellte und die teilweise Bezug auf das Vorhergegangene nehmen.*

Phillipe RENAUD: It seems to us that your music has always mixed 'beauty' with "messages" (political + social), by using the vehicle of music to communicate a point of view in a more sophisticated way than, for example, the popular agit-prop songs of Cornelius CARDEW. Are you doing, in a certain way folk music ?

Robert WYATT: Do I make folk music ? Of a type? If only by default, yes, in that my methods cannot have the authority of conservatory discipline, nor are they geared to an analysis of markets, in other words, my music is neither classical nor pop. What else is there? If 'Blues' is Folk, and flamenco - me too, please. As for the relationship between 'beauty' and 'message', well the poet Laura JACKSON abandoned poetry when she came to the conclusion that the pursuit of beauty and the pursuit of truth were irreconcilable disciplines (who has the key to an escape route from this dilemma? the humourist).

It occurs to me, translation can never be exact because, for example, if I talk about 'meaning' - well, the dictionary says 'vouloir dire' - 'to mean'. I like that – 'to want to say' - it is a compassionate compound but in English 'what something wants to say' is not inherently 'what it means (take for example words like 'Apartheid' or 'Swastika'.)

Another french term I like is your words for 'that doesn't matter - 'Ca ne fait rien'. It describes better my 'meaning', my 'purpose'. Not 'that doesn't matter' (everything 'matters') but precisely: 'it doesn't do anything'. My lyrics are for the comfort of sympathetic souls. I am not a recruiting sergeant for 'the cause'. I simply define my position, like any other artist.

Do you think that the social and political point of view of your music is changing? (for instance, the propaganda from "Gloria Gloom" / "Stalin wasn't stallin" towards the political songs from "Old rottenhat" or "Dondestan"?) Going further, how this can conciliate with the pure and tough line that you love, facing CASTRO's Cuba?

RW: True to the avant-garde tradition (you like that? 'avant-garde tradition?') I search for beauty where others see only ugliness. So, true to this tradition, I am a reactionary: I react against the assumptions of the liberal / conservative establishment (Irresponsible? No. Ca ne fait rien.)

Why am I doing this? To balance myself. For example, the conservative / liberal elites are determined to humiliate and destroy any one who challenges the master / servant relationship between … oh … the North and the South. This makes my heart feel ill: and I say so, "Ca ne fait rien". It does nothing. So don't let it worry you!

But is your social and political position changing ?

RW: I cannot recall any song I've written, of those revealing a Marxist / Leninist influence, which no longer reflects my inclinations. The camouflaged racism of international capitalism still revolts me. I never try to be subtle about this! On the contrary, I try to eliminate the evasive camouflage of decorative art. Autopsy will reveal the words 'dirty communist' engraved on my spine. Of course, my spine has an interesting break. I am a broken machine, a nice metapher for those who like a little symbolism with their soup.

The most widely accepted form of 'engaged art' is the prayer. (Others? the hymn, the national anthem, and the ritual song / dance for rugby / football teams.) The christian prayer, before eating, thanks god for his bounty. Native american 'Indians', by contrast, would thank the buffalo. Would offer a prayer to the spirit of the buffalo. Of course, I prefer the Native American art.

By extension, while Zionists thank god for Israel, I would be rather more impressed if they thanked the native Palestinians. If colonialism is to continue to be the basis of our civilisations, we could at least say thank you to the appropriate victims, otherwise words like 'repentance' are just verbiage - yes camouflage again. When it comes to agit / prop, some of us can compete with the hardline extremism of the religious establishments. They are tho masters of the genre.

Looking at your actual work, do you think about a normal evolution, non-criticable, or do you have other feelings, looking back ?

RW: Aha ! A question about my actual work Safer ground? No, however, I do not feel it followed a normal evolution, non criticable. I feel crippled not by paraplegia, but by my own terminally frustrating inadequacies and limitations, I sell my songs because I need the money, otherwise I would not have the nerve. It is not a luxurious question of evolution, it is a more basic problem I still have, I don't even know how to begin. I remain, naturally gratefully surprised by people who listen to the results. What can I say ? Thanks.

Gary WINDO is dead in July 1992, Ollie HALSALL in April 1993, Mongezi FEZA, Chris McGREGOR, Dudu PUKWANA … all people, you have known. What are your feelings about all these dead friends?

RW: What are my feelings about all my dead friends? It's true, my most sympathetic musical companions have already achieved perfect peace, I envy them but feel a bit lost without their warmth. Many of our luckiest moments together are not yet publicly available, but exist on a few tapes still. These tapes are my friendly ghosts. Tapes with Gary WINDO and Mongezi FEZA in their group SYMBIOSIS, tapes of Gary WINDO with me and Dave McRAE, the wonderful pianist etc. Incidentally, there are other happy moments on private tapes with musicians, like Dave McRAE, are still, as I speak, very much alive.

For example, I did some 'duets* with the brilliant keyboard player Francis MONKMAN. And perhaps my proudest moment when saxophonist Evan PARKER contributes a solo to complete a song written with Paul HAINES, 'Curtsy. (Some good memories after all).

old rottenhat's journal

the newsletter / fanzine aimed at the fans of robert wyatt

**ARCHIVAL ARTICLES, UP-TO-DATE NEWS,
CD REVIEWS, INSIDE INTERVIEWS, ARTICLES**

THE ONLY FANBASE INTERNATIONALLY DEDICATED TO THE MUSIC, WORDS, AND ACTIVITIES OF THAT BEARED MAN OF MYSTERY !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

FOR SUBSCRIPTION/CLUB INFORMATION, PLEASE SEND AN I.R.C., OR POSTAGE TO THE BELOW ADDRESS. ONE YEARS SUBSCRIPTION WILL GET YOU A RECENT INTERVIEW CASSETTE, THREE ISSUES, AND OUR NUMEROUS N.I.O. UPDATES. SAMPLE COPY OF NEWSLETTER IS AVAIL FOR 4 I.R.C.'S. JOIN THE CLUB, AND ALIGN YOURSELF WITH OTHERS WHO LOVE THE MUSIC OF THE MAN OF SOFT MOLES SOLO.

INFO:

**terry r. valderas
avant god publishing
1407 north bryant street
portland, oregon 97217
united states of amnesia**

IMPROJAZZ

Dieses neue französische Magazin gibt es seit Januar 1994 (in diesem ersten Heft gab es das Robert WYATT-Interview) und widmet sich in erster Linie dem improvisierten Jazz, darüber hinaus aber allen Sparten des Jazz und der neuen Musik. Neben vielen Plattenbesprechungen gibt es Informatio-

nen zu Labels, Konzerten, Festivals und Berichte darüber. IMPROJAZZ erscheint 10 mal pro Jahr und kostet im Jahresabo 100,- Francs. Es wird herausgegeben von und ist erhältlich bei:

Philippe RENAUD
14, Allee des Myosotis
F - 41000 BLOIS

Patrick GENTET
22, La Vallee Mismy
F - 44260 SAVENAY

Robert WYATT CDs:

05 a)	The animals film	(94) UK	Rough Trade R 3172
05 b)	[w BKL & Wind of change / Namibia - 7"/12" vers]	(93) J	Rough Trade TDCN 5025
10)	Going back a bit (A little history of Robert WYATT) [2CDs, cont unrel material & 7" No 01 & 02, rec '69 - '92, w HATFIELD & THE NORTH, HENRY COW, a.o.]	(94) UK	Virgin CDVM 9031
11)	Flotsam and jetsam [cont unrel material, rec '68 - '90, w HENRY, COW, Dave McRAE QUARTET, SLAPP HAPPY, Jimi HENDRIX, a.o.]	(94) UK	Rough Trade R 3112

Sampler-CD:

04)	Mid eighties [incl. 12" No: 3 & LP No: 07, w lyrics]	(93) D	Rough Trade RTD 101.1512.2

Der Soundtrack **"Animals film"** ist auf CD bereits erhältlich, in England erschien sie in unveränderter Form zur LP, das heißt: sie läuft gerade mal 20 Minuten (ist aber deshalb auch für unter 25,- DM zu haben). Die japanische Version wurde durch die 12" und 7"-Versionen der Titel "Wind of change" und "Namibia" verlängert.

Die Doppel-CD **"Going back a bit (A little history of Robert WYATT) "** (zuweilen heißt es auch, es sei nur eine CD?!) sollte ursprünglich schon im April dieses Jahres erscheinen, bisher gab es sie aber noch nicht. Aber es steht natürlich schon fest, was drauf ist (bzw. sein soll): eine "The moon in june" Version der BBC von 1969, natürlich Ausschniitte aus seinen Solo-Platten bei CBS und Virgin: "The end of an ear", "Rock bottom" und "Ruth is stranger than Richard", dann seine Hitsingles "I'm a believer / Memories" und "Yesterday man / Sonia". Weiterhin Ausschnitte aus beiden MATCHING MOLE-Alben, sowie einige ausgewählte Titel von verschiedenen Bands, an denen Robert WYATT beteiligt ist: "Calyx" (bei: HATFIELD AND THE NORTH), "Little red riding hood hits the road" (bei: HENRY COW), "Hapless child" (bei: Michael MANTLER) und "I'm a mineralist" (bei: Nick MASON), dazu ein absolut seltener Titel von einer Virgin-Single: "All she wanted was Marlon Brando (from: Man to woman)" aus dem Musical von Marsha HUNT. Zuletzt sind noch Teile seines letzten Albums "Dondestan" zu hören.

Die nächste CD **"Flotsam and jetsam"** war von Rough Trade eigentlich auch schon für Mai diesen Jahres angkündigt, aber sie wird wohl nicht vor Herbst / Winter kommen. Sie enthält sehr viele unveröffentlichte und den meisten bisher wohl vollkommen unbekannte Titel, was wir insbesondere Mike KING zu verdanken haben, der bei seinen weltweiten Recherchen für das Buch "Wrong movements" diese Titel ausgegraben und diese CD mit ihrer höchst interessanten Zusammenstellung so erst ermöglicht hat. Die CD wird enthalten: "Slow walkin` talk" mit Jimi HENDRIX (diesen Titel gab es bisher nur auf der für Abonennten erhältlichen HENDRIX-CD von Univibes) und "Moon in june", beide aufgenommen in Hollywood, Oktober 1968. "Sandfast" mit SYMBIOSIS (feat Gary WINDO), Januar 1971, "No `alf measures" mit dem Dave McRAE QUARTET, März 1972, "Apricot Jam" mit Lol COXHILL, Herbst 1973, "A little something" mit SLAPP HAPPY, Juni 1974, "We did it again" mit HENRY COW, im Olympia, Paris, Mai 1975, Solo: "God song / Fol de rol", Dezember 1975, "Now is the time" mit Gary WINDO, 1976, "N`out doin`" mit GENERAL STRIKE, zu Hause aufgenommen im Mai 1976, "Speechless / Billie`s bounce" bei der RAI Rom, aus Februar 1981, "Jelly babies" mit EPIC SOUNDTRACKS (Mai 1981), "Oban tancat" solo in den Catalan TV3 Studios, Januar 1987,

"Tutraicon" mit CLAUSTROPHOBIA, Barcelona 1986 und zuletzt "Turn things upside down" mit HAPPY END von April 1990. Was für eine Liste! Hochkarätige Songs aus einem Zeitraum von 22 Jahren, zum größten Teil noch nie gehört. Das macht einem schon jetzt den Mund wässrig. Zu vielen der Gruppen weiß man wenig, einige waren vollkommen unbekannt. Bisher! - muß man nun allerdings sagen, denn mit Hilfe des Buches von Mike KING kann man nun mühelos nachverfolgen, was wann war und wer da mitgemischt hat. Wer also auch Hintergrundinformationen zu den Titeln und Robert WYATT's Musik wissen will, dem ist mit "Wrong movements" bestens gedient. Hier werden die Geheimnisse gelüftet!

Schon länger erhältlich ist **"Mid eighties"**, ein reiner Sampler, was heißt, daß hier nur bisher schon veröffentlichtes zu hören ist: Als Fortsetzung des japanischen Samplers "Late 70's, early 80's" bringt "Mid eighties" folgerichtig die komplette "Old rotten hat" von 1984/1985 und die Maxi-Single "Work in progress" (mit Hugh HOPPER) von 1984 zusammen. Dazwischen gestreut sind "Pigs _ (in there)" vom "Artist for Animals"-Sampler und "Chairman Mao" vom "ReR Quaterly", außerdem noch die Rückseite der 12" "Shipbuilding" = "Memories of you" und "Round midnight" (1982), beide mit Dave McRAE an den Keyboards. Nichts wirklich neues also, aber immerhin ein paar bisher verstreute und schwerer erhältliche Titel.

Am erfreulichsten ist natürlich die Nachricht, daß zum Ende des Jahres mit einer neuen Solo-CD von Robert WYATT gerechnet werden kann. Wahrscheinlich noch davor wird es die CD von Hugh HOPPER und Mark KRAMER geben, bei der Robert WYATT einen Titel singt.

MATCHING MOLE

03) BBC Radio 1 Live in concert, Paris Theatre, 27.07.1972 (94) UK Windsong WINCD 063

Lange, lange mußten wir auf die dritte MATCHING MOLE-CD warten, angekündigt war sie schon Ende '92, aber immer wieder wurde sie verschoben. Nun bin ich denn doch etwas enttäuscht über diese erste offizielle Live-Veröffentlichung der MOLES. Nicht, was die Musik angeht, die ist bar jeden Zweifels erhaben. "Instant pussy", damit fängt es an, mit wunderbarer, vokaler Begleitung (Gesang kann man das ja nicht nennen) von Robert WYATT, parallel entwickelt sich langsam das Thema, die Gitarre und das Keyboard steigen behutsam ein, bis der Song richtiggehend losbricht. Sicher ist die Musik von MATCHING MOLE kein leichter Tobak, sie verlangt einiges ab, gängige Hörstrukturen bieten hier kaum einen Zugang. Die Band hat bei manchen Auftrittten so wild improvisiert, daß es bald die Schmerzgrenze berührte. Dagegen spielen sie hier recht gesittet. Für ungeübte Ohren ist die verschlungene Vielschichtigkeit, das dramatische Tempo und manche Dissonanz sicher nicht leicht zu ertragen (wie mir schon oft versichert wurde). Aber wie gesagt, an der Musik ist gar nichts auszusetzen, die löst bei mir immer noch diesen wohligen Schauer auf dem Rücken aus. Aber, daß diese CD noch nicht mal 26 Minuten läuft, das ist schon ziemlich unverschämt. Und das, wo es, schauen wir mal eben in "Wrong movements" nach: am 17. Januar '72 eine *BBC Top Gear*-Aufnahme im Playhouse Theatre gab (gesendet am 25.01), am 06. März *BBC Sounds of the 70s* im Kensington House gab (gesendet am 24.03), dann nochmal am 21. Juni *BBC Sounds of the 70s* in Maida Vale stattfand (gesendet am 06.07.) usw. Wo sind denn die Aufnahmen alle abgeblieben, die können doch nicht alle verschüttet sein. Da auch bei jeder Aufnahme unterschiedliche Titel gespielt wurden, hätte man hier eine fantastische CD mit verschiedenen Sets zusammenstellen können. Wenn man nur daran denkt!!! Daß noch nicht mal die Besetzung angegeben ist, sind wir ja (nicht nur bei Windsong) gewohnt. Auch wenn es keine Überraschungen gibt (Robert WYATT - dr, v / Phil MILLER - g / Bill McCORMICK - b / Dave McRAE - ep), es soll ja Leute geben, die nicht jede Besetzung im Kopf haben. Auch ein paar Begleitworte - Infos über die Band damals und dergleichen - wären nett gewesen. Bin ich froh, daß es "Wrong movements" mittlerweile gibt, da kann ich einiges über MATCHING MOLE nachlesen. Wer demnächst noch mal irgendwann Platten von und mit Robert WYATT herausgibt, ohne wenigstens ein paar vernünftige Informationen dazu zu liefern, hat keine Entschuldigung mehr dafür.

Robert WYATT on CD with:

HAINES, Paul

01) Darn it! [2CDs, w BKLs & lyrics, rec 1986 - 1993] (93) A American Clave AMCL 1014 2

Das ist die Platte, die Robert WYATT im Interview erwähnt hat: hier ist das fantastische Stück endlich zu hören, daß er bereits im August 1986 mit Evan PARKER aufgenommen hat: "Curtsy". WYATT spielt keyboards, percussion und singt, Evan PARKER spielt sein Sopransax auf eine unglaubliche fesselnde, faszinierende Art. Die Stimmung des Songs erinnert an die MANTLER-Platte "Hapless child", aber so ein Saxophon gibt es sonst nirgends zu hören. Aber auch der Rest der Doppel-CD ist Güteklasse A, über einen Zeitraum von 7 Jahren wurden die Stücke aufgenommen mit ungefähr 60 verschiedenen Musikern, dabei Jack BRUCE, Steve SWALLOW, Paul BLEY, Carla BLEY, Kip HANRAHAN, undsoweiter. Absolut empfehlenswert!

MASON, Nick

01) Nick MASON'S fictitious sports (94) US CBS CSP 37307

Eigentlich ist dieses ja eine Solo-Platte von Carla BLEY, sie hat alle Titel komponiert und die Texte geschrieben. Aber dann hätte man nicht den schönen, verkaufsfördernden Aufkleber "Drummer ber of PINK FLOYD" darauf kleben können. Natürlich haben sich die meisten FLOYD-Fans die Platte gekauft, aber die wenigsten konnten damit etwas anfangen - die deutliche Jazzrichtung, die humorvollen, oft zynischen (Nonsense)Texte, der Gesang von Robert WYATT, das alles war denn doch zu weit vom FLOYD-Stil entfernt. Aufgenommen wurde die LP im Oktober 1979 mit u.a. Mike MANTLER, Chris SPEDDING, Gary WINDO. Ob diese CD über die LP-Version hinaus geht, kann ich nicht sagen, da ich sie nach monatelanger Wartezeit dann doch nicht bekommen habe. Mittlerweile soll sie aber auch als japanische Ausführung erhältlich sein.

MORE EXTENDED VERSIONS

02) Round about WYATT [w BKL & lyrics, first half of CD by "CPT. KIRK &." second half by MORE EXTENDED VERSIONS] 94 D What's so funny WSFA SF 142

Hier spielt Robert WYATT **nicht** mit, aber trotzdem: was für eine Platte! Hat schon die erste CD von MORE EXTENDED VERSIONS "Dedicated to you, but you weren't listening" vollends begeistert, so wird die Begeisterung mit diesem neuen Werk noch verlängert. Die deutsche Band CPT. KIRK &. spielt drei "echte" WYATT-cover (Round midnight / Alliance / Age of self), dazu zwei Titel, die mit WYATT direkt nichts zu tun haben (How he could just kill a man / Racist friend), die aber durchaus von ihm sein könnten und voll in seinem Stil und seiner musikalische Sprache - und auch der inhaltlichen Stellungnahme, z.B. als kompromißlose Haltung Rassisten gegenüber - präsentiert werden. Absolut gelungen, sind sie mit viel Gefühl für die typische WYATTsche Stimmung in seiner Musik umgesetzt! Die österreichischen MEV bringen 6 Titel, dabei ein alter MATCHING MOLE-Song "Gloria gloom", "Venti latir" von WYATT's "A short break" und sein "Born again, cretin". Aber auch aus dem weiteren Umfeld sind hier drei Titel zu hören: das weniger bekannte "Moments of delight" von der 12" der LAST NIGHTINGALES, eine Neu-Interpretation des 7"-Titels von EPIC SOUNDTRACKS von 1981, bei dem WYATT mitsang, "Jelly, babies" (das Original wird auf der Rough Trade-CD "Flotsam and jetsam" zu hören sein, s.o.) und der neuere Titel "Kingdom" von ULTRAMARINEs zweiter CD "United Kingdoms". Auch wenn die Titelauswahl sehr gemischt ist und diesmal sogar zwei Bands beteiligt sind, ist dies doch wieder eine CD wie aus einem Guß, mit eigenständigen, intelligenten Co-

verversionen, die die WYATT-Titel in einem neuen und ungewöhnlichen Licht erscheinen lassen. Für alle, die gerne Robert WYATT hören, werden diese beiden CDs einfach zum unverzichtbaren Repertoire gehören, das ist gar keine Frage!

RAINCOATS

01) Odyshape [w BKL & lyrics] (93) UK Rough Trade R 3042

Mit den RAINCOATS verbunden ist der erste Konzertauftritt von Robert WYATT seit seiner Tour mit HENRY COW 1975, am 19. Dezember 1981 in der Albany Theatre sang er "Born again, cretin", der Schlagzeuger für die RAINCOATS war bei diesem Konzert Charles HAYWARD. (Woher weiß ich das wohl?) Bereits im Juni 1980 spielte Robert WYATT für den Titel "And then it's o.k." den Schlagzeugpart ein, die LP erschien dann 1981. Bei einigen anderen Titel dieser Platte, die jetzt auch auf CD erhältlich ist, ist wiederum Charles HAYWARD (dr, perc) zu hören.

ULTRAMARINE

01) Every man and woman is a star (92) UK Rough Trade R 2892
02) United Kingdoms [w BKL & lyrics] 93 UK Blanco Y Negro 4509-93425-2

Single-CD:

01) Kingdom, Coldcrest, Kingdom (ext mix) [w lyrics, 2 & 3: non-CD] 93 UK Blanco Y Negro NEG 65 CD

Schon an der ersten Platte, die nicht, wie ich mal irrtümlich angegeben hatte, eine Doppel-CD ist, war Robert WYATT beteiligt (auch Kevin AYERS, der den Song "Weird gear" mitkomponierte). Auch bei der neuen CD ist WYATT wieder als Sänger und bei den Titeln "Kingdom" und "Happy Land" als Co-Komponist in Erscheinung getreten. Außerdem gibt es hier eine Version des alten MATCHING MOLE-Titels "Instant kitten". Noch dazu ist Jimmy HASTINGS (cl, fl, pic, ss) an der Musik beteiligt. Wenn das nicht reicht? Die Maxi-CD bietet dann noch einen *extended mix* und den Extra-Titel "Goldcrest", auf dem WYATT auch singt. Die Techno-Rocker Ian COOPER & Paul HAMMOND (das ist der Kern von ULTRAMARINE) sind im Moment, so scheint's, die Lieblinge der englischen Musikpresse, es wird viel über sie geschrieben. Eigentlich mag ich Techno (oder wie immer man diese Richtung nennt) nicht besonders, aber die Musik der ULTRAMARINE ist gar nicht so kompromißloser Techno-Sound, wie es zuerst scheint. Die erste Platte hat mich noch nicht so begeistert, aber bei der zweiten verstehen sie es, wunderbar-träumerische Stimmungen zu zaubern. Verschiedene Gastmusiker sorgen für vielfältigen Klang, der den typischen, etwas gleichförmigen Techno-Rhythmus und eine allzugoße Rolle der Keyboards und des Programmings überdeckt. Und natürlich nicht zuletzt durch Robert WYATT's Gesang (nicht nur auf den erwähnten zwei Stücken) hat die CD dann einige schöne Höhepunkte. Und auch die nächste Platte der ULTRAMARINE wird die Canterbury-Freunde wieder besonders erfreuen: im Sommer haben ULTRAMARINE mit Kevin AYERS vier Titel eingespielt, die im Spätherbst / Winter auf Maxi-CD erscheinen sollen.

WILDE FLOWERS

01) The WILDE FLOWERS [rec at Wout Steehuis Studios, Spring 65] (94) A Voiceprint VP 123 CD

Schon lange sehnsüchtigst erwartet wird diese älteste Aufnahme der Kern- und Urgruppe der Canterbury-scene. Wie es bei Voiecprint heißt, soll die CD in etwa 2 - 3 Monaten nun endlich erscheinen, also: Augen auf! Was denn nun wirklich alles drauf sein wird, darüber gab's in der vergangenen Zeit unterschiedliche Angaben, also spekulieren wir nicht, sondern lassen wir uns überraschen!

wrong movements

a robert wyatt history
by Michael KING

S.A.F. Publishing Ltd. 1994, 160 Seiten, DIN A4-Format, englisch

Wow, welch ein liebevolles, für jeden Fan unumgängliches Werk! Nicht nur, daß es WYATT's Musik - und zum größten Teil seine Lebensgeschichte - mit einer minutiösen Detailtreue behandelt, sondern auch für SOFTMACHINE-Fans eine Menge Leckerbissen bereit hält! Die ultra-raren Fotos sind für Nostalgiker (wie ich es immer noch bin) die reinsten visuellen Highlights. Endlich bekommt der Fan auch mal Einblicke in die internen Probleme von Bands, die man oftmals nur von ihrer Musik her kennt. Nach der Lektüre dieses Buches mußte ich viele bisherigen Ansichten, Meinungen und Falschmeldungen über WYATT, SOFTMACHINE, Kevin AYERS, MATCHING MOLE etc. revidieren. Wenn man die gesamte Informationsfülle in Rechnung stellt, so ist die Entstehungszeit von 4 Jahren absolut gerechtfertigt. Was für grandiose Detektivarbeit hat der Michael KING hier geleistet! Man darf nicht vergessen, daß hier ein Zeitraum von 30 Jahren behandelt wird, der sich mit einer Musiksparte beschäftigt, die nie besonders (massen-)populär war. Selbst die beteiligten Musiker haben offenbar Schwierigkeiten, klare Erinnerungen zu äußern. Umso mehr ein Lob für die am Ende gelungene, chronologisch genaue Auflistung der Konzertdaten, Studio-dates,Sessions etc. Auch mein Bild von Robert WYATT hat sich im nachhinein geändert: Ehrlich gesagt, haben mich seine letzten zwei, drei Alben nicht mehr so sehr vom Hocker gehauen, wie z.B. seinerzeit die Werke "Rock bottom" oder "Ruth is stranger than Richard" und trotzdem, Robert WYATT (dem wohl immer noch die rührendste Stimme in der Rockmusik gegeben ist ...) besticht hier mit seiner weisen Aufrichtigkeit: *"You take things in and you make them your own, and then it's hard to know what is an influence and what is now you. I think my biggest influence in a way is constantly thinking that I still haven't got it right, and listening to what I've done that I didn't like and trying to get it right next time. In practical terms that is the thing that influences what I do, trying not to make the mistakes I made last time"* (1993).

Hart auf die 50 zugehend, resümiert hier einer sein ohne Zweifel außergewöhnliches Leben, wie jemand, der im Kopf auch schon 80 sein könnte.

Nach so viel Lob nun noch die (geringen) Schwachpunkte des Buches:

a) Warum wurden die obligatorischen Seitenzahlen weggelassen ?
b) Die vielen Superfotos sind zwar den Jahren zugeordnet, aber nicht genau datiert (im Gegensatz zum "Triple echo"-Booklet, wo einiges von dem Fotomaterial schon mal auftauchte!)
c) Warum wurde das Buch im Offset-Verfahren gedruckt? Ein Hochglanzdruck hätte die Qualität der Fotos um einiges aufgewertet!

Von diesen Punkten abgesehen, ist der Preis von 45,- DM inkl. Versandkosten angesichts des Arbeits- und Zeitaufwandes absolut gerechtfertigt! Wer hier nicht zuschlägt, hat selber schuld!

Nun denn: ***Congratulations to Michael KING, Hello and thanks to Robert WYATT!***

(Rainer KRAUSE, August 1994)

PS: Wer beginnt nun mit der Kevin AYERS, GONG, CARAVAN ... Biographie???

Sowas kann also dabei herauskommen, wenn man einen Beitrag schreiben will, um ein Freiabo von FACELIFT zu bekommen, damit fing nämlich Mike KINGs Mammutarbeit an. Und wuchs und wuchs und wuchs. Obigem braucht wohl nicht mehr viel hinzugefügt werden. "Wrong movements" ist eine spannende Zeitreise durch 30 Jahre Musik, voller interessanter und überraschender Fakten, ihr werdet das Buch häufig in die Hand nehmen und darin nachlesen und dabei viel bisher unbekanntes entdecken. Biographie und Nachschlagewerk in einem, wird man es immer wieder nutzen und ausgiebig darin schmökern können. Die Arbeit von tausenden von Briefen in die ganze Welt, Kontakte mit einigen hunderten Leuten (Musikern, Journalisten, Veranstaltern usw), Besuche und Gespräche mit vielen Musikern in USA und Europa (natürlich auch mit Robert WYATT, der das ganze Unternehmen während seiner Entstehung nach besten Kräften unterstützte - trotz seines außerordentlich schlechten Gedächtnisses, auf das er immer wieder hinwies) ist hier zusammengetragen.

Doch wie kommt man an das Buch? Ich habe einige Exemplare bestellt (und auch noch ein paar zu Hause): mit Zoll und Porto (als Päckchen verschickt) kostet das Buch 45,- DM (nur in D). Wer sich bis 14.10.94 mit V-Scheck bei mir meldet (aber wirklich spätestens bis dahin), bekommt "Wrong movemnts" gleich zugeschickt (solange noch Exemplare vorhanden sind). Danach dauert es wegen meines Urlaubes etwas länger. Wenn sich genügend Interessenten melden, würde ich auch noch mal eine Großbestellung aufgeben.

In England kostet das Buch £ 14.95 und ist auch per Versand erhältlich bei:
S.A.F. Publishing Ltd. - Mick FISH - 12 Conway Gardens, Wembley, Middx. HA9 8TR, UK (Tel/Fax: 081 - 904 6263), bezahlt werden kann mit Euroscheck (in Pfund Sterling auf englische Bank ausgestellt) oder mit Visa- oder Mastercard (Kartennummer, Gültigkeitsdatum der Karte, Name, Adresse und Unterschrift erforderlich).

Dritte Möglichkeit: im Buchladen bestellen, das Buch wird in UK & Europe durch Airlift Book Company vertrieben, die **ISBN-Nummer: 0 946719 101,** das sollte dann eigentlich reichen.

Und zuletzt: größere Buchläden in Großstädten (nicht nur die mit Musikabteilung) führen auch so das Angebot englischer Verlage. S.A.F. führt da zum Beispiel den Laden "Marissals corner" in Hamburg an.

übrigens hat sich Mike KING nach dieser Riesenaufgabe nicht zur Ruhe gesetzt, um wieder ein normales Arbeits- und Familienleben zu führen, wie er es wohl wahrlich verdient hätte. Während der Arbeit zum Buch war er häufig und in freundschaftlichem Kontakt mit Gary WINDO. Nach Gary WINDOs frühen und überraschenden Tod, hat sich Mike KING daran begeben, an einer CD mit seltenen und auch unveröffentlichten Titel von Gary WINDO zu arbeiten, um dessen musikalisches Werk gehörig zu würdigen: "Gary WINDO `His master's bones` - 1970's archival CD" wird (nicht vor) 1995 bei Cuneiform erscheinen, alle Erlöse aus der CD werden Hazel MILLER's "Blue Notes Trust Fund" für südafrikanische Musiker zufließen.

Soweit zu Robert WYATT und Mike KING, gehen wir nun zum nächsten Thema über:

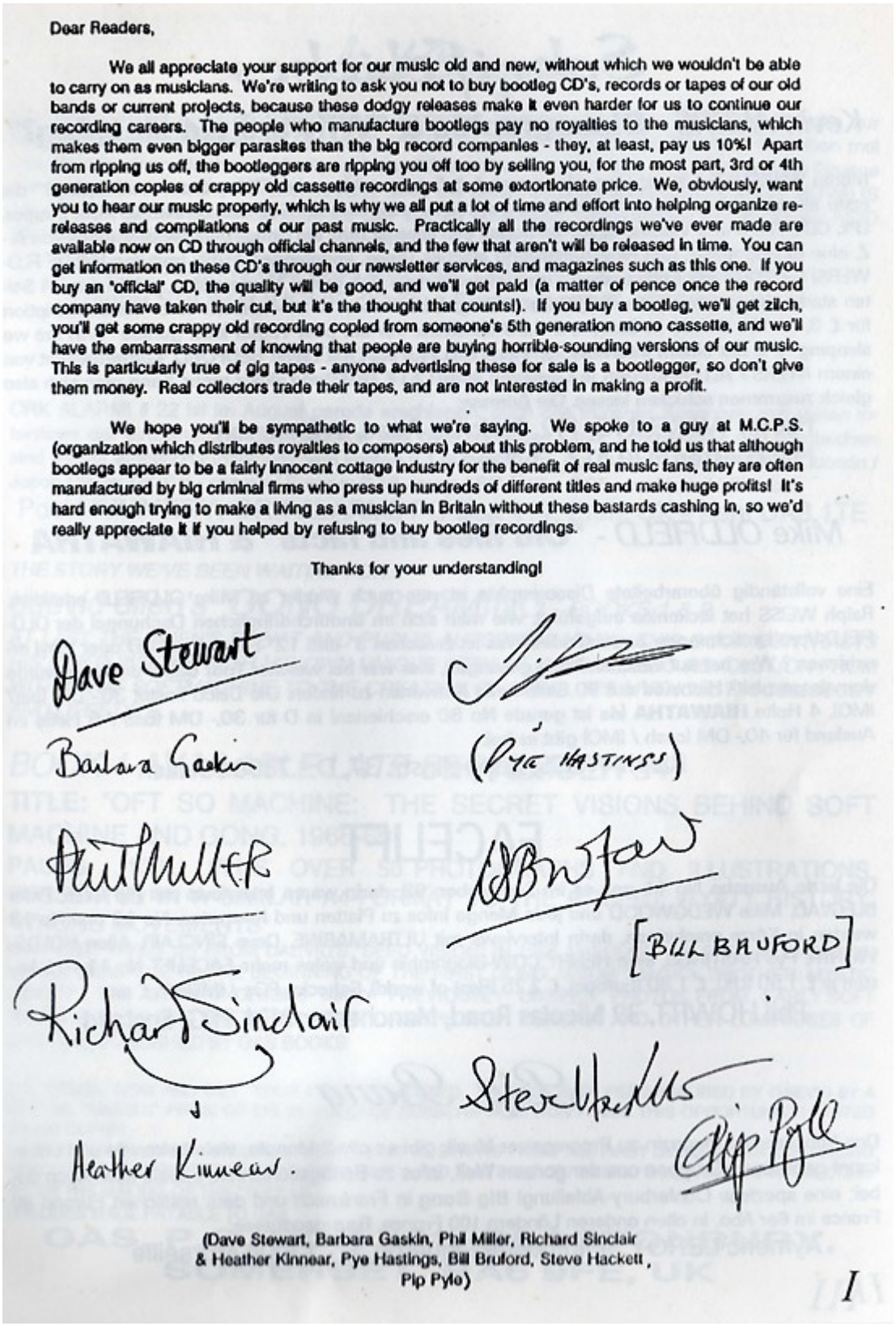
Kevin COYNE

& The PARADISE BAND

am 02.10.1993 in Salzwedel

Ein Konzert mit Kevin COYNE ist immer ein Erlebnis. Egal, ob er allein mit einer Gitarre vor 10 Leuten singt, oder ob er mit einer vierköpfigen Band im Rücken auf der Bühne die Sau rausläßt. Am 02.10.93 konnte ich in Salzwedel gleich beides erleben - Ausstellungseröffnung und Konzert.

Wer COYNE kennt als Musiker und Texter, wird ihn in seinen Bildern wiedererkennen. Die vermeintliche Naivität, der skurrile Humor, resignierende Ernsthaftigkeit oder kraftvolle Trotzigkeit - alles zeichnet Musik, Bild und Wort gleichermaßen aus.



Dear Readers,

We all appreciate your support for our music old and new, without which we wouldn't be able to carry on as musicians. We're writing to ask you not to buy bootleg CD's, records or tapes of our old bands or current projects, because these dodgy releases make it even harder for us to continue our recording careers. The people who manufacture bootlegs pay no royalties to the musicians, which makes them even bigger parasites than the big record companies - they, at least, pay us 10%! Apart from ripping us off, the bootleggers are ripping you off too by selling you, for the most part, 3rd or 4th generation copies of crappy old cassette recordings at some extortionate price. We, obviously, want you to hear our music properly, which is why we all put a lot of time and effort into helping organize re-releases and compilations of our past music. Practically all the recordings we've ever made are available now on CD through official channels, and the few that aren't will be released in time. You can get information on these CD's through our newsletter services, and magazines such as this one. If you buy an 'official' CD, the quality will be good, and we'll get paid (a matter of pence once the record company have taken their cut, but it's the thought that counts!). If you buy a bootleg, we'll get zilch, you'll get some crappy old recording copied from someone's 5th generation mono cassette, and we'll have the embarrassment of knowing that people are buying horrible-sounding versions of our music. This is particularly true of gig tapes - anyone advertising these for sale is a bootlegger, so don't give them money. Real collectors trade their tapes, and are not interested in making a profit.

We hope you'll be sympathetic to what we're saying. We spoke to a guy at M.C.P.S. (organization which distributes royalties to composers) about this problem, and he told us that although bootlegs appear to be a fairly innocent cottage industry for the benefit of real music fans, they are often manufactured by big criminal firms who press up hundreds of different titles and make huge profits! It's hard enough trying to make a living as a musician in Britain without these bastards cashing in, so we'd really appreciate it if you helped by refusing to buy bootleg recordings.

Thanks for your understanding!

Dave Stewart

Barbara Gaskin

(Pye Hastings)

Phil Miller

[Bill Bruford]

Richard Sinclair

Heather Kinnear.

Steve Hackett

Pip Pyle

(Dave Stewart, Barbara Gaskin, Phil Miller, Richard Sinclair & Heather Kinnear, Pye Hastings, Bill Bruford, Steve Hackett, Pip Pyle)

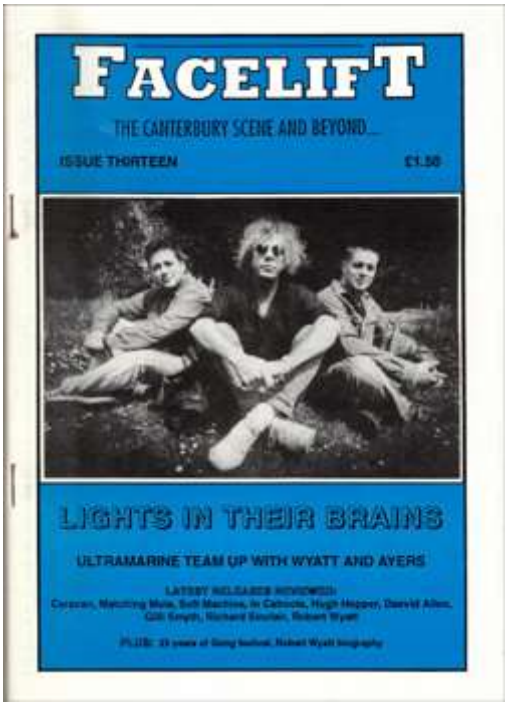
I

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Wrong Movements, a Robert Wyatt history - Facelift - N° 13 - August 1994



BOOK REVIEW

WRONG MOVEMENTS
A ROBERT WYATT HISTORY

Michael King
SAF Publishing
ISBN 09467 19 10-1

It's taken four years to complete this book and I'm sure I won't be alone in saying that the wait has been worth every moment. 'Wrong Movements' is a revelation.

Mike King, the Canadian writer (whose name will be familiar to Facelift readers as a regular contributor), had promised us a factual book, chronicling every gig, every recording session, every relevant minutae of Robert Wyatt's recording career. And indeed that's what we get. It's meticulously researched, an unsurpassable reference guide to Robert Wyatt. But that's only half of the story.

The real revelation is how 'Wrong Movements' is illustrated. That's not just to say that the book is garnished with previously unseen photos, drawings, archive articles and flyers, which indeed it is. But it also features large slices of spoken text from every key player in Robert Wyatt's career. Some are from contemporary magazines/radio interviews; others taken from more recent conversations Mike King has conducted with the likes of Daevid Allen and Gilli Smyth; Softs, Wilde Flowers and Caravan members; family; sidemen (Andy Summers, Fred Frith, Gary Windo for starters); and many interesting figures associated with Robert right through to the present day. The musicians' comments accompany factual details - there's no attempt by the author to provide a definitive critique or commentary on any element of Robert Wyatt's career. To some extent the interviews do that just as well: there's little over-eulogising or mythologising on any aspect of Robert's career by his fellow musicians - it's an honest account of how each musicians saw events at the time. But a great deal of warmth towards Robert comes over as well.

We also get an insight into Robert's character. Complex, self-deprecating, but overwhelmingly warm and human, it's his own words which give the book much of its character. And because the Robert Wyatt story is not without its tragedies, it's also a very moving tale too. One interesting slant is the mix between contemporary and archive commentary. Notoriously dismissive now of much of his own work before the accident that paralysed him in 1973, here we get both sides of the coin - how Robert Wyatt feels about his music, his work environment and himself, both now and then.

Whilst all areas of his career are well dealt with, the sheer level of activity before his accident mean that much of the book is devoted to the early Robert Wyatt years. There's heavy emphasis on the days before Soft Machine formed, and this is probably the most exciting aspect of the whole book, since it's an era that has never been satisfactorily chronicled up to now. You'll learn much that's new here in a detailed series of reminiscences from key players who were moving between Canterbury, London, Mallorca and Paris with various degrees of interaction. It adds to a certain bohemian mystery which has attached itself to the Canterbury scene, whilst also blowing the cover on other myths: the story is a remarkable one, but does little to disguise the fact that bands such as the Wilde Flowers were as little-known in the early Sixties as they are to many now.



Given its coverage of events in the early Sixties the book could be regarded as the most definitive history of the genesis of the Canterbury scene we're likely to get - a bonus is that the book covers in some detail the early histories of musicians like Daevid Allen, Kevin Ayers and Hugh Hopper.

Equally as interesting are early Soft Machine days, the evolving psychedelic scene of London in 1966/7, the Softs/Hendrix tour, and the period around the start of the Seventies when an unsettled Robert was guesting with many musicians and embarking on ad hoc jazz projects. There's also some insight into Robert's political motivations, which have increasingly permeated his attitude and outlook towards his music.

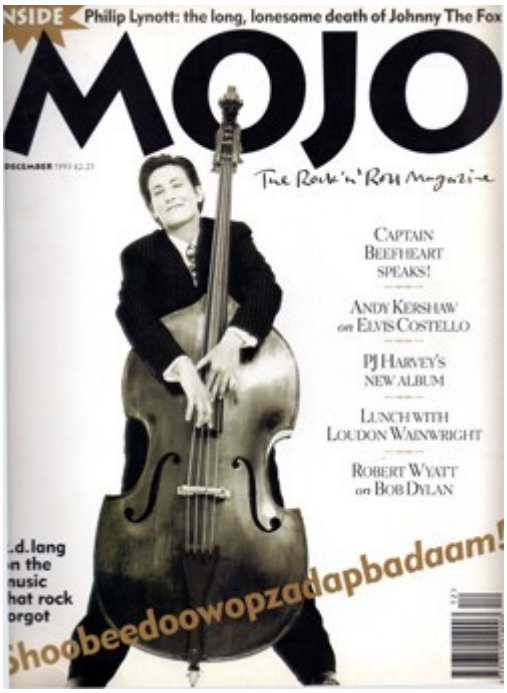
Wrong Movements' comes with a comprehensive discography of official releases, compiled with customary accuracy by Manfred Bress, editor of Canterbury Nachrichten. This includes details of guest appearances and samplers as well as the various editions of solo material, Softs albums et al.

As inspiring a work as I've read, Wrong Movements' is essential reading.

In Issue 14 we hope to publish an article by author Mike King about the compilation of 'Wrong Movements'. This may also Include any updates since the first edition of the book went out, plus unpublished artwork.

Previous article Next article

Hear this man do it, and take courage - By Robert Wyatt - Mojo - December 1993



December 1993
BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME
A review of recent releases



"Hear this man do it, and take courage."

By Robert Wyatt

I JUST REALISED, THIS MOJO IS MEANT TO BE about rock'n'roll, so I'm shafted before I start, really. I like to roll with the best of them, but the rock face feels too flinty to me, the backbeat that an idiot couldn't lose. So what are my qualifications, or Dylan's for that matter?

Well, I did shell out for a Chuck Berry cassette at Tesco's a couple of weeks ago, and Broke Down Engine from this World Gone Wrong record could almost be one of the tunes on it. There's no rhythm section on the Dylan album, though; if you want that, you could just thump along on the table-top with Dylan's rhythm guitar, reverse karaoke style. But before I get stuck in... all I really want to say is... order this from your local municipal library's record department now. (CDs etc are far too expensive, and it's not as if the musicians get most of the money.)



> Zoom

World Gone Wrong is a beautiful record by a beautiful man. Readers in a hurry, I have to tell you: that's the review, really. The rest is indulgent speculation. Like a lot of our timeless heritage, folk music as a form was invented in the 19th century — in this case by a German musicologist who was getting his lederhosen in a twist, mourning the destruction of rural culture by the all-engulfing hell of the industrial revolution.

The English-speaking tradition, or at least what I've come across of it, was word-based, and that's been its fundamental limitation, musically.



TRACKS

World Gone Wrong is an all-acoustic album of traditional songs. The following quotes and track information are culled from Dylan's own sleevenote.

(Maybe real authorities like Karl Dallas and Ian A. Andersen would baulk at that. I dunno).

I do know that, as a lad just getting into my teens while Robert Zimmerman was already getting out of his, I could hardly breathe under what felt like the dead weight of the sex-free rhythms, the solemn tremolo, the heavy pauses for emphasis of significant words, the hushed and reverent gatherings. And even worse, the desperate, flushed lurches into Shakespearean mirth. All so uncool!

Don't get me wrong, I don't remember feeling rebellious against it, or wanting to hear fellow adolescents share their teenage angst with me; nor was I easy prey for the new-generation-as-a-tribe marketeers. I was too wary for that. It's just that in the search for musical and cultural stimulus, 'folk music' gave me harmonic claustrophobia.

But of course I didn't know the half of it, and researchers with ears more blessed than mine had already brought precious gold up from rich seams where I'd only seen the dull earth on the surface. In Britain, A.L Llyod begat Annie Briggs and Dick Gaughan; in America Alan Lomax led, in a way, to Leadbelly, to Woody Guthrie, to Bob Dylan. The term 'melting pot', may be a cliché, but it's not a bad metaphor for American culture.

Watching a recent telly film exploring Highway 61, I found out that I could, after all, have identified with the schoolboy Zimmerman if I'd known then about his early 'reference library' and the breadth of his discoveries. Apparently, he never just stuck his nose in the archives, valuable as they might have been. For example, he was a right little rhythm & blues fan way back.

Perhaps that doesn't surprise you, but it was a nice surprise to me. This bloke then descended on New York's already potent folk revival, well tooled-up, self-educated in a living folk culture, ready to cross the bridge already knocked up by Woody Guthrie and his pals, and ready to revitalise old people's fading dreams.

But isn't the point about Bob Dylan that he was what Americans call a 'radical'? An original? Well... 'radical' does mean 'starting again from the root'. And then, isn't the point about him that he is a poet, just as Johnny Cash said he was? Well, no, I don't think it is. I think the point is this: the innovation, if you like, is and always has been in his curiously modest and unpretentious singing. It's the way he tells them, that makes it all his own.

He made it new because he wasn't just another necrophiliac; he didn't embarrass the shit out of everybody by acting out some pious reverie, or by pretending that he really was the son of Victoria Spivey. He had the nerve to draw on history as a living stew-pot. Right from the start.

And that's why, when he sings from the tradition, it's just as good as when he uses his own compositions. He can write as well as anybody, but he doesn't have to. He is a complete musician.

World Gone Wrong finds Dylan strumming again through



World Gone Wrong

"Done by the Mississippi Sheiks . . . all their songs are raw to the bone."

Love Henry

"A 'traditionalist' ballad. Tom Paley used to do it."

Ragged & Dirty

"One of the Willie Browns did this . . . heavy moral vocabulary."

Blood In My Eyes

"By the Mississippi Sheiks . . . rebellion against routine seems to be their strong theme."

Broke Down Engine

"A Blind Willie McTell masterpiece."

Delia

"One sad tale . . . seems to be about counterfeit loyalty."

Stack A Lee

"Frank Hutchinson's version . . . it says no man gains immortality thru public acclaim."

Two Soldiers

"Jerry Garcia showed me Two Soldiers . . . a battle song extraordinaire."

Jack-A-Roe

"Another Tom Paley ballad . . . the young virgin follows her heart."

Lone Pilgrim

"From an old Doc Watson record."

PRODUCED BY BOB DYLAN.

songs from what he sees as his tradition. It is still, totally, a Bob Dylan record. Hear this man do it, and take courage. How great it could be if everybody struggling to find their own voice were able to just sort of stop struggling and.. well, use their own voice. We all got one, unique as a fingerprint.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

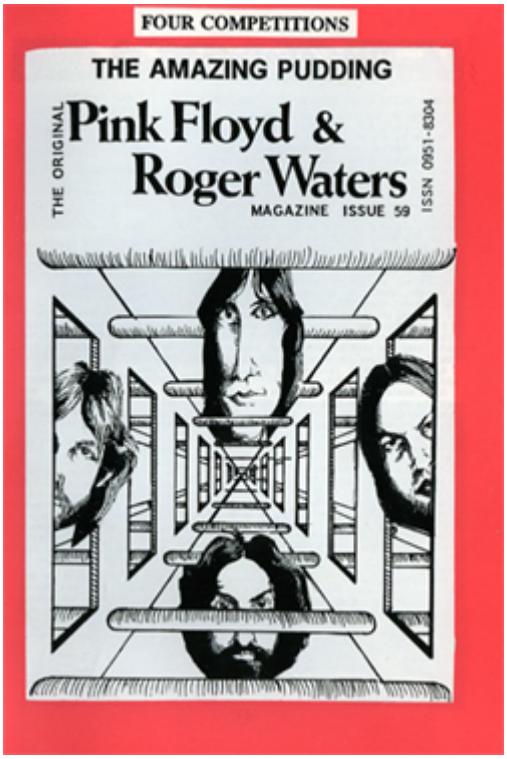
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Who, Wyatt, Where - The Amazing Pudding - #59 - June 1993

WHO, WYATT, WHERE



Robert Wyatt: quirky musician, Soft Machine drummer, gentleman, Marxist, Floyd pal, Madcap sessioneer and now TAP interviewee. This interview was conducted by post; his answers appear below, edited but still weird!

Recollections of the early Floyd?

Eight gangling legs in a dressing room in the Irish centre Hoppy hired. Downcast blushes in the presence of a Paul McCartney dressed in (I think) an oriental robe of discreet but effective turquoise hue...

Pin' Flo' shy, reserved, but friendly eventually and witty. Always very helpful if we had equipment trouble or anything. Unnervingly well organised, in fact, but a refreshing change from your usual Brit Rock loot. It has been written that we had a motorcyclist revving up round the rim of the roundhouse while they played once. This is not the case. During our set, yes, theirs, no.

I see but a tenuous connection with any underground, incidentally. Rock is about as overground and ostentatiously attention seeking as you can get... Underground, like 'Avant Garde', is one of those terms adopted by the chic much as they wear, say, worn jeans or bomber jackets.

The Madcap Laughs...

I liked the tunes on Madcap and the way he did them. We just started to feel our way round them when he said "OK, that's it". So the final recording was like a sketch of a painting never completed. Dead punk when you come to think of it.

I didn't notice we weren't credited, but I'm sure we got paid which is fairly novel. I played it a lot later, at home, 'til Elton Dean came from his room next door and asked me to stop playing "that nonsense" and listen to more sophisticated musicians like Joe Henderson. Ever the sporting neighbour, I lost Madcap.

Peter Jenner and Andrew King?

I've seen Andrew on and off since then, around Twickenham, I remember we got on fine, I liked him anyway and Peter Jenner is at least always nice to your face, which is a lot easier on the nerves than some managers' behaviour, which can be quite grotesque, like that of an American policeman. But the manager I'm most grateful to is Steve O'Rourke, who did so much for me when I was hospitalised in 1973 which leads to:-

Post-Syd Floyd?

My favourite thing was on the second PF LP I think, a beautiful piece by Rick the organist. Was Barrett on that? I forget, so long ago...

They played a benefit for you after your accident. Any comments?

Ronnie Scott and Pink Floyd started helping me when I was still completely out of it on painkillers etc, the first month or two.

I believe the witter Dave Gale alerted P.F. to my horizontalisation. They saved my life as much as the doctors and nurses. What can I say! If any of them see this - thanks!

How did Mason come to produce Rock Bottom, Sonia and I'm A Believer?

In fact I think a reason for asking Nick to help me put Rock Bottom together was to acknowledge that amazing help. Although strictly speaking Moon In June and End Of en Ear were my first solo sides, I consider *my life as a grown-up began with Rock Bottom.

Nick also helped out on a couple of other things : Chris Andrew's Yesterday Man (my favourite) and I'm Believer (on which he played drums - the only one he did play on) and finally my last souvenir of the trumpeter Mongezi Feza on his own Sonia.

[*Since Virgin Lost the names of the musicians in transferring to CD, they are: Richard Sinclair, Hugh Hopper (bass), Laurie Allen (drums), Gary Windo, George Khan (saxophones), Fred Frith (piano]. On the singles, John Greaves, Bill MacCormick (bass), Brian Eno (sin) and Mike Oldfield who also helped on producing. And Ivor Cutler (on mouth and squeeze-box). The best groups I ever worked with.*]

Mason's drumming?

Nick's careful signposts and clear dynamics much impressed Carla Bley who subsequently involved him in her own stuff. She then passed him on to fellow WATT writer Mike Mantler. I knew them because they'd asked me to contribute to a couple of LPs of his tunes she produced.

I don' t know why they asked me. Musicians don't say what we think of each other, it's uncool!

Fictitious Sports - were you 'just' a singer or did you play a bigger part?

Just a session singer and a very honoured one too.

Will you work with Mason again?

Nick and I met recently at a do organised by Mitch Mitchell's wife Dee. But yes, I think we've drifted too far apart to work together again.

Things have a time and a place as Sid Greenwich would say.

Ditto Mike Oldfield?

Ditto Mike Oldfield, as Otto Hardwick would say.

What about other old cronies?

Old cronies in touch with list: Didier Malherbe, Hugh and Brian Hopper, Richard Sinclair, Daevid Allen. Many musicians, mainly 'jazz' e.g. Ronnie Scott, Laurie Allan, Evan Parker, but also Brian Eno.

But a longer list would be of old friends who've died, Chris McGregor and Duda Pukwana, whose ghosts keep us company and whose spirits live on in their friends' hearts.

Top Of The Pops?

I'm never up in time to watch children's TV like Blue Peter or Top of the Pops. I watch the adult, serious late night stuff like Cheers, Roseanne and Prisoner Cel Block whatsit.

Post-Wyatt Soft Machine?

Oh fuck, who cares? Quickly to:-

The Final Cut and Shipbuilding were the only (non punk) records to address the Falklands troubles - how do you feel about this? Were you surprised Roger wrote so strongly?

I mean of course (ta, Rob! - Eds).

Here you consulted by Virgin before they issued your early albums on CD?

Yes... They asked if I fancied including the singles. I said no because I see each record as complete - or at least distinct - entities. I hadn't got CD then anyway and didn't know how much you could get on them. .

Musicians you'd like to work with?

As a subscriber to the Big Bang theory of the origins of the universe, I tend to end up playing, most satisfactorily, with myself.

The filthy rumour, however, that the Spanish named Tosseer de Mar in recognition of my contribution to their tourist industry is entirely without foundation and legal advice will be sought following any such allegations made in the future.



WHO, WYATT, WHERE

Robert Wyatt: quirky musician, Soft Machine drummer, gentleman, Marxist, Floyd pal, Madcap accelonover and now TAP interviewee. This interview was conducted by post: his answers appear below, edited but still weird!

Recollections of the early Floyd?

Eight gangling legs in a dressing room in the Irish centre Noppy hired. Downcast Blueberries in the presence of a Paul McCartney dressed in (I think) an oriental robe of discreet but effective turquoise hue....

Pink Floyd shy, reserved, but friendly eventually and witty. Always very helpful if we had equipment trouble or anything. Reservingly well organised, in fact, but a refreshing change from your usual Brit Rock lout. It has been written that we had a motorcyclist revving up round the rim of the roundhouse while they played once. This is not the case. During our set, yes, there, no.

I see but a tenuous connection with any underground, incidentally. Rock is about as overground and ostentatiously attention seeking as you can get.... Underground, like 'Avant Garde', is one of those terms adopted by the chic such as they wear, say, worn jeans or bomber jackets.

The Madcap Laughs...

I liked the tunes on Madcap and the way he did them. We just started to feel our way round them when he said "OK, that's it". So the final recording was like a sketch of a painting never completed. Dead punk when you come to think of it.

I didn't notice we weren't credited, but I'm sure we got paid which is fairly novel. I played it a lot later, at home, 'til Elton Dean came from his room next door and asked me to stop playing "that nonsense" and listen to more sophisticated musicians like Joe Henderson. Ever the sporting neighbour, I lost Madcap.

Peter Jenner and Andrew King?

I've seen Andrew on and off since then, around Twickenham. I remember we got on fine, I liked his anyway - and Peter Jenner is at least always nice to your face, which is a lot easier on the nerves than some managers' behaviour, which can be quite grotesque, like that of an American policeman. But the manager I'm most grateful to is Steve O'Rourke, who did so much for me when I was hospitalised in 1973 which leads to:-

Post-Syd Floyd?

My favourite thing was on the second PF LP I think, a beautiful piece by Rick the organist. Was Barrett on that? I forget, so long ago....

They played a benefit for you after your accident. Any comments?

Ronnie Scott and Pink Floyd started helping me when I was still completely out of it on painkillers etc. the first month or two.

I believe the writer Dave Gale alerted P.F. to my hospitalisation. They saved my life as much as the doctors and nurses. What can I say? If any of them see this - thanks!

How did Mason come to produce Rock Bottom, Nonia and I'm A Believer?

In fact I think a reason for asking Nick to help me put Rock Bottom together was to acknowledge that amazing help. Although strictly speaking Moon In June and End Of An Era were my first solo sides. I consider my life as a grown-up began with Rock Bottom.

Nick also helped out on a couple of other things: Chris Andrew's Yesterday Man (my favourite) and I'm A Believer (on which he played drums - the only one he did play on) and finally my last souvenir of the trumpeter Mongezi Feza on his own Nonia.

[Since Virgin lost the names of the musicians in transferring to CD, they are:- Richard Sinclair, Hugh Hopper (bass), Laurie Allen (drums), Gary Windo, George Khan (saxophones), Fred Frith (piano). On the singles, John Greaves, Bill MacCormick (bass), Brian Eno (sax) and Mike Oldfield who also helped on producing. And Ivor Cutler (on mouth and squeeze-box). The best groups I ever worked with.]

-20-

Future recording plans?

I hope to churn out some more tunes for the Eurasian market. More specifically for Yuka Terada in Tokyo, a big fan of Stunning Desserts type culture, incidentally. Hello Yuka!

Will you perform live again? PLEASE!

Thanks for asking so nicely, but - I got chronic stage fright, I'm sorry to admit it, I have nightmares about forgetting the words.

The Amazing Pudding?

Frankly, you are not half so amazing as fried beef and sultanas on floppy raw pastry garnished with sand, but I myself prefer your relatively safer traditional recipes anyway, especially that issue with extra dollops of mature Cheddar sauce for the first 8.5 new subscribers.

The best joke you've heard recently?

Jokes too, I like old and matured in the wood. E.G. when anybody trips over on something 1 always say "Hope you enjoyed your trip" and it always makes me laugh.



SELECTED WYATT DISCOGRAPHY

Any Wyatt (and Soft Machine or Michael Mantler) album merits investigation, but these are compulsory listening for Floyd completists (ft for CD unless stated):

I'm A Believer/Memories (7- Virgin VS 114)
Rock Bottom (Virgin CDV 2017)
Yesterday Man/Sonia (7" Virgin VS115)
[all the above produced by Mason]
Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard
(Virgin CDV 2034) (includes Sonla)
Nick Mason: Fictitious Sports (LP Harvest SHSF 4116) (Wyatt shares vox)
Michael Mantler: The Hapless Child... (WATT 4) Wyatt sings while Mason speaks ('.), engineers and mixes.

Robert's most recent records are Dondestan (Rough Trade R2742) and A Short Break (Voiceprint VP108CD).

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Jimi & Soft Machine - Univibes N° 8 - Novembre 1992

JIMI & SOFT MACHINE



PART ONE - INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT WYATT

by Caesar Glebbeek

UniVibes: How did Soft Machine get hooked up with Michael Jeffery?

Robert Wyatt: Kevin Ayers who had written quite a bunch of songs did come to London and looked around and gone up to various people's offices... Jeffery said: "Mickey Most will do a single for you, that means you've made it." We said, "Oh, that's nice". He said, "The only thing is that he decides what material you do and how you are doing it. So you put yourself in his hands and he will make you successful" and we thought "what's the point in that?" I think that they lost interest in us after that.. [Management] had another bloke there Tony something...

UV: Garland?

RW: That's right. And he used to worry about our dress-sense and say, 'look, you don't have to go mad, I don't wear a white shirt" He was very nice... and very smart... There was an amount of bad feeling with us from the start because a couple of people were interested in producing us and helping us because they were sympathetic to the more innovatory side of what we were doing. Where as far as I understood it the Anim office were more concerned with the route of turning a group into a proper professional pop group. And trying to get us disciplined to make [and] do proper songs...wear proper clothes and then we could make an LP and freak out a bit... They weren't interested in that...

UV: And what about Kim Fowley as Soft Machine producer?

RW: There was Kim Fowley certainly. He was interested in us. He wasn't a bit interested if we had a hit or not, he just thought, "oh, this is a group that I can make funny noises with."

UV: What were your impressions when you saw the Jimi Hendrix Experience rehearsing?

RW: The sound totally filled the room I couldn't even tell you where it was coming from. It was like a Science Fiction film where you were in an enormous place and you open a door and suddenly you are in a vortex, you know, without a bottom and a top and a ceiling; it was almost choking. I didn't in fact identify immediately particular tunes or instruments, [it was] just a sort of orchestral effect... this was something like total guitar, a total group actually. I think that people underestimated the importance of say Mitch on drums. Mitch

his reputation preceded him, he was already a heavy weight... He was very fluid, he would just kind of 'swoop and dive' along with Hendrix, so that it all helped to make this kind of swirly atmosphere instead of that kind of ploddy atmosphere that most rock bands have...

UV: What about Mitch and Noel?

RW: They both had their role. I always compare it with the John Coltrane Quartet - if is very important that the bass player and the pianist stepped into these very simple anchor points... I don't think Noel's interested in improvising and all that. And I think that three improvisers wouldn't have worked... Noel and Mitch, if anything, suffered in reputation 'cause they were so good at being that one sound, getting the effect that Hendrix was after and allowing him to be the spectacle, the front of it...

UV: What did you think of Mitch as a drummer?

RW: I didn't expect it. You don't expect it in pop groups. You don't have to be a very good musician to be a good rock musician [!]. Mitch was holding the sticks right! In the end I start holding them wrong - you can break rules when you know them - and a lot of people thought, "weIl you can't if you play rock 'cause it's too loud', but he did... Jimi didn't actually display himself as a working musician the way a lot of the musicians do... If you listen to his records they were really the heavier side of the black funk of that period. He was interested in getting those rhythm's right. I do remember that he would work with Mitch on the drum parts. As the composer of the pieces he would have an idea of what everybody would be doing, or at least what the basis would be. Like he wouldn't just compose his own bit. Having said that, once they got the feel then they [Mitch and Noel] were as free as the wind... If we got flack for playing incomprehensible music, or for not playing hits, Hendrix was always [saying], "don't pressure them." He was very keen on people experimenting, I think he liked the fact that we were trying out unusual things more then the results.

"He was a master of organising a dramatic event... he couldn't stand boring bits and he would keep things moving or changing or tighten them up to get the boring bits out. He was ruthless like that with his own material. Don't let himself get away with anything...

UV:
What about Jimi's character?

RW: He was so cool and so shy. Spoke quietly. I mean he had his act but apart from his act you didn't feel like invading his privacy in the same room, at least I didn't. I can see people did and it was very embarrassing. Sort of an illusion that because you admire somebody they want to have you breathing down... When he wasn't working he was usually protected by sort of a praetorian guard of leggy women... obviously rather more interesting than [talking to] some fucking drummer!

UV: How did Soft Machine come onto the 1968 tour?

RW: I don't remember a single conversation about it! It's more like being a private in the army, you're not at the generals discussions of strategy...

UV: Did you see much of Michael Jeffery?

RW: When we did see him every once a year or whatever it was, he seemed to be much more sun tanned every time! The management take on all the kind of hustling qualities off the musicians, so he can appear like a fucking saint, you know what I mean? Whereas lesser mortals have to do their own hassling... Yeah, you'd see more of Chas [Chandler]... I never worked out what they [managers in general] were for!

UV: How did Vanilla Fudge come onto the tour?

RW: Michael Jeffery was a bit sheepish about this - he said, "I know you got your time sorted out for your act, whatever you do, you know, 35, 40 minutes, 'but we got a fourth group on, so you got to cut it down to 20, 25 minutes." He said, "we didn't really want

them but anyway don't make a fuss." And then the Vanilla Fudge arrived, and accompanied, I kid you not, by two geezers straight out of the Godfather. You know, sort of scars down their cheeks, kind of looking around at everybody watching the equipment... and everybody including Michael Jeffery was frightened. That was the only word for it. And apparentIy according to, it may even have been Neville [Chesters], maybe Chas, Mike Jeffery got a phone call saying, "The Fudge haven't made it on the West Coast, they'd like to join your little tour." And they said, "no, we got our package tour." And they said, "you don't understand what I'm saying, the Fudge would like to join your tour, you don't want any trouble, the Fudge join your tour." And big and powerful though they were, everybody made a gap, even Hendrix played shorter. It was frightening... it looked like a straight Godfather phone call...

UV: Mafia?

RW: Oh, absolutely! They decided, they invested in this band and that this band hadn't done well on the West Coast yet... and they decided the way to do it [was to] stick them in just before Hendrix... And me and Mitch used to sit in the back doing little satirical routines behind the stage - every time the organist [Mark Stein] got down really awkwardly, playing with one hand, getting down on his knee, for I think a bit of [sings] 'People get readyyyyyy', we all would get down on our knees and behind backstage with our hands up in the air [sings] "readyyyyyy." And you saw scar-face looking and you would say, "oh, sorry sir" There was this really frightening atmosphere when they were on. We were all very glad when they were taken off. It was a failure...they certainly were spectacular, but their routine was actually so tight and slick that it didn't go down that well, because the rest of it... there was a kind of real wildness about it, the music there was a kind of looseness, a freedom about it, that you can't manufacture. You can't manufacture excitement like that... I think Eire Apparent's roadie [Dave Robinson] complained about their equipment being shuffled off stage in a heap once instead of taken off, and was beaten up and complained to management and they said, "don't make a fuss", you know...

UV: How were the guys in Vanilla Fudge themselves?

RW: They were allright, they tried to be friendly...the only one I actually remember being unpleasant was the drummer [Carmine Appice]...[like] he was the thing and Mitch was shit... he [Carmine] had one af these kits that sort of looked like an antique shop...

UV: Back to Jimi again, would he pop in during Soft Machine studio recordings?

RW: I seem to remember him during studio work mainly on the West coast... but I remember him actually in there more towards the end of the year [1968] and then being in and out...

UV: Tell us about your demo, 'Slow Walkin' Talk', with Jimi.

RW: I recorded the song on the West Coast [at TTG, late October 1968] which I didn't use until years later [note: re-recorded with the new title 'Soup Song' and released in 1975 on Robert's solo LP Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard]. The vocal wasn't very good, which is why I think we didn't make anything of it... Hendrix came in and played bass on it. 'Cause I just did vocals, keyboards and drums. It was a kind of a Mose Allison kind of thing... he came in and listened and whispered something... He would retire to the corner and be a shadow and say, you know, "I could try the bass line an that, you wouldn't have to use it." And he got Noel's bass and you have to remember he's left handed, so he's playing bass the wrong way around, puts down a first take, a fucking Larry Graham bass line. He heard it once including the changes, the breaks and all that, and it was staggering.



> Zoom

UV: What about Jimi's ability to play rhythm and solo at the same time?

RW: Even the good ones, they'd have their rhythm guitar and then they switch a button and then they can play [the solo]... then switch a button and they'd have two things they did. I don't remember that sort of crude division with Hendrix at all... the effect of what I call picking guitar 'cause what he reminded me of in his singing and his playing was actually more like acoustic blues picking people, who of course would do that. Like Spanish guitarists, they're using their fingers, they're not just trashing with the plectrum. Well you can pick a few notes at once whilst doing a sort of bit of a bass-line or you can do something at the bottom whilst moving a top-line.... There's lots of places on the guitar where you can get the same note but of course you can do different things with it. And his work on that, on actually finding different ways to get to the same note, so the effect to move from one to the other could be exciting. I mean of course this is what every musician tries to do but I just remember him being very conscientiously trying, always working the best in [the] most exciting way of doing that...

UV: He used his thumb as a kind of 5th finger on the guitar.

RW: Yes that's right. But also you'd have to have the imagination to hear it...

UV: What about ladies during the 1968 tour?

RW: It was sort of open season!

UV: Would you watch the JHE performances during that tour?

RW: Oh yeah! I mean, that's the funny thing 'cause I've been on the road with other people and you would absolutely not bother. I mean you found out what they were doing and you'd go and get drunk. Of course not every night but on the whole I would, partly because it would never be quite the same and partly because as a drummer... Sitting behind Mitch was ways on education... After all the psychedelic and roar there comes a moment in the evening when he'd [Jimi] take it right down, as they say, and do "Red House"... and your heart would be in your mouth. I mean your hair would stand on end, that was so beautiful. These hushed opening moments and the way that was played. I wouldn't have missed that, I mean every night you would see, you'd think God, this is a great moment of music concerts you've seen here, and even on the 20th night in Wisconsin you would realise that. But that would be the very simple thing, Hendrix playing the blues. It was so intimate. He brought that intimate blues to the masses in a way that the rhythm and blues movement didn't on a whole. They sacrificed that intimacy to be rock bands, so they used the shouting blues as the basis for the English rhythm and blues movement... This is actually an intimate quiet blues, that you wouldn't dream of doing in front of a rock audience. And that's it, they heard the blues sung like it ought to be sung. Because he was a great blues singer... Apart from being a musical gig, the going to a gig is also going to the theatre. And that's the thing with Hendrix - it was a theatre piece. And there again I don't mean this like a circus act. I mean everything you'd expect from a theatre, the drama, and the pace and the variety and the build-ups and the drops. I think he was a master at organising a dramatic event. He wasn't indulgent actually, he hated the boring bits, he couldn't stand boring bits and he would keep things moving or changing or tighten them up to get the boring bits out. He was ruthless like that with his own material. Didn't let himself get away with anything.... He wouldn't want to break the spell. He'd get on stage and there would be a spell and he had to keep that spell. And things can break a spell. We all know those gigs and you see three numbers and you think, "well fuck, I'm going to the bar"... but that's partly because Jimi wrote interesting songs that

were all different from each other. They weren't just different versions from the same song...

PART TWO - SWAP-OVER- RECORDINGS

by Caesar Glebbeek

For many years there's been this rumour that Jimi played on the first Soft Machine single ("Love Makes Sweet Music" produced by Chas Chandler b/w "Feelin' Reelin' Squeelin" produced by Kim Fowley) - released 17 February 1967 on Polydor. Ian MacDonald wrote in his article on the Soft Machine in *New Musical Express*, 25 January 1975: "... The first mix of the A-side featured rhythm guitar by Jimi Hendrix... who happened to be down the corridor in the next studio doing his debut single, Hey Joe. The two groups dropped in on each other's sessions and became friendly - to the point where Hendrix invited Wyatt, Ayers and Allen to do back-up vocals on "Stone Free". Finally, however, both swap-over appearances were rejected in favour of alternative takes." The song which MacDonald is actually referring to is "Feelin' Reelin' Squeelin" which was the *original* A-side of the single until one week after its release Polydor switched the order around by making "Love Makes Sweet Music" the new A-side. In a recent interview with Kevin Ayers in *Record Collector* (June 1992) he answered the question whether Jimi had 'been at the session for the first single' with: "He was, but I don't think he was actually recorded. I remember him scratching around and I remember him liking the lyrics to "Feelin' Reeling' Squeelin". Going back to MacDonald's article, he states that "Feelin' Reelin' Squeelin" was recorded at De Lane Lea Music studio in London. However, according to the Soft Machine release *Triple Echo* the song was recorded at CBS Recording Studios, also in London. But during January 1967. As far as could be determined, the JHE recorded at CBS on 13 and 21 December 1966. If Jimi was 'down the corridor' it could only have been in December 1966 at CBS, but not as MacDonald claims doing "Hey Joe" (recorded 23 October 1966 at De Lane Lea or 'Stone Free' (recorded 2 November 1966, also at De Lane Lea). Unfortunately it's impossible to pin down where the Soft Machine recorded at any given period between late 1966 and early 1967 as they (just like the JHE) were booked into any studio that was available at any given time: Advision, De Lane Lea Music Ltd. and CBS. Also, to make things even more complicated, as late as 4 February 1967 the Soft Machine were doing a final overdub session for their first single at Olympic Sound Studios (just 13 days before its release!) - and who were in the same studio recording until 09.30 of that very same morning? Indeed, Jimi, Mitch and Noel... As "Feeling Reelin' Squeelin" was almost certainly recorded during several sessions spread out over several studios it's anybody's guess when the 'swap-over appearances' actually took place.

Robert Wyatt: I don't remember any of that really except that he did play some guitar... It [has been] suggested that that's how we met Jimi [but] we met him because we were already signed to that management and then they signed Hendrix shortly after we had been signed to them... and using the same rehearsal rooms. So that's how we met... and they would book us into the same studio...

UV: So it is in fact possible that Jimi did play on some stuff?

RW: Certainly if he is, it's an academic point, because if he is on it it's in a very sort of low key way. He might actually [be] backing up Kevin's rhythm [guitar], I don't know, or David's. I just can't remember, I remember that yeah he would come into the studio...

UV: So which studio was it, Advison, CBS, De Lane Lea?

RW: I don't remember...

Another claim about Jimi playing during or on a Soft Machine session comes from Kim Fowley, the producer of "Feelin' Reelin' Squeelin". He has stated that Jimi recorded his song "Fluffy Turkeys"(released on *The Incredible Kim Fowley* LP in the U.S.A. on the Original Sound label - year of release unknown) with a Soft Machine member. Years ago I decided to write to Kim Fowley but not really expecting a reply. Surprise! About nine months later he mailed me a postcard stating that Robert Wyatt was present at the 'Fluffy' session with Jimi.

Robert Wyatt: Thanks Kim! I don't remember that...

PART THREE - HUGH HOPPER INTERVIEW

by Caesar Glebbeek

Univibes:
Were you a roodmanager prior to the 1968 Hendrix/Soft Machine tour in the States?

Hugh Hopper: No, not really. Well, only in England with the Soft Machine... I was in school with Robert Wyatt and I was in a band here in Canterbury with Robert, which then split up into Soft Machine...

UV: Wilde Flowers?

HH: Yeah, the Wilde Flowers was originally the band yes, right. So that continued in Canterbury slightly different. And Robert left with Kevin [Ayers]. But they were actually doing music of mine anyway, songs of mine anyway which I had written, that we played as Wilde Flowers... and then about a year after they've been in London, I think, Robert asked me if I wanted to be a Soft Machine eh, roadie, because their roadie had left or wasn't happy or whatever [but] I was involved with them anyway, musically and as friends.

UV: What did you do during the 1968 tour?

HH: Hendrix had one roadie who was Neville Chesters. And Soft Machine had one roadie, which was me... I had to set Soft Machine's gear and also both of us loaded all the gear. To start, there was only one load of gear, there was only one lot of Fender amps...

UV: Only Fenders, no Marshalls?

HH: No. At the beginning of the tour Fender actually provided, I think, something like three or four amps. Which had to be used for both bands, which was not a good situation. And in fact Neville wasn't told [about] this 'til we were getting on the plane, that another band was using his gear as well.... It could have been disastrous. In fact it was fairly disastrous anyway because it wasn't the right gear for Hendrix. It was too clean and not enough orbit... Neville did most of the driving... he wouldn't let me drive because he was the chief roadie... He was a nice guy in some ways but he was also very kind of obsessed by some things... he was very conscientious. He really sort of cared... we always got to a gig late but I mean he cared whereas I didn't really care. I only [was] just doing it 'cause I was working for friend...

UV: So as soon as one gig was over you tore down the gear and hit the road again?

HH: We started off, first of all, flying the gear. But this was before the flightcase stage. So in fact a lot of the things got broken, amplifiers got smashed, so in the end it wasn't worth flying. So we had to drive. So it meant driving overnight to the next gig... but he [Neville] was very conscientious and it really hurt him if something went wrong. But we were always late, every gig. I think we never were on time at all. Because it was such long distances...

UV: Would you stay in the same hotel as the groups?

HH: Oh yeah. Sometimes. There was no real kind of separation... more times than not we were in the same hotel. But sometimes we had to stay en route somewhere else, like in a Holiday Inn, because it was easier for us to go on...

UV: Kevin Ayers once claimed that the only reason he thinks the Soft Machine was on the tour was because Jimi liked the Soft Machine.

HH: I don't know. The basic reason was because it was part of the same management... There was no way you would be on it. Because that tour consisted of about six bands... Hendrix and us, there was the Animals and Eire Apparent, Alan Price... I mean it was an Anim agency tour... Most of the time it was just Hendrix and Soft Machine going around. And there was the Animals and Eire Apparent going on another circuit. Sure, obvious if

Hendrix hadn't liked the band then there was no way he would have allowed it, or he would have made it heavy... Robert, and Noel and Mitch were quite matey...

UV: So what kind of problems did you have on the tour?

HH: It wasn't technically very difficult. It was just very hard long hours... and also during the tour more and more equipment got added. I mean, we started with very little equipment. Not enough. We ended up with about three times that. And various people would actually give us equipment on the way... By the end of the tour it meant that we had a truck full of stuf whereas before we had sort of a small truck half empty... There were times when I'd been actually loading this gear that I had taken out of the truck only a couple of hours before, loading in at 1 o'clock in the morning in this strange place, in the middle of nowhere in America, you know, to go somewhere else. Some nights we checked into the hotel maybe for on hour just to get a shower... So I was really starting to get disorientated and feeling strange...

UV: What did you get paid? Per week?

HH: Yeah, and it was not very much. I started off on 100 dollars a week. There weren't many expenses.... and Neville was very generous. He liked to pay for my hamburgers! It was part of his thing, you know... We were always complaining 'cause it was so hard, so difficult to get actually to the gig and set it up... the two of us... so eventually the management put it up to 150 dollars a week...

UV: Who would get things together if Chas Chandler wasn't there?

HH: Gerry Stickells. He was really the guy. Gerry was actually the guy that kept that tour together... in fact if it hadn't been for him, well... that could easily have been a real disaster for the tour. As it was, it was kind of limping along the whole thing. Because it was very thrown together. And we started off with a few gigs and most of them were changed. But then more and more [were] added as Hendrix became more and more known... but I always thought, compared with today when you have a roadcrew, thirty at least, three trucks, lighting. I mean it's a joke, two people! One person for Hendrix, one person for Soft Machine...

UV: Wasn't Roger Mayer around?

HH: Yeah, weIl, yes and no. He was supposed to be the electronic wizard, so he showed up at a couple of big gigs and then cleared off and didn't do a thing [apart from] having a good time... he didn't do anything. He just came over on the strength of having built Hendrix's Octavia...

UV: But didn't he do repairs to gear?

HH: No, no...

UV: Who took care of that then?

HH: Well in fact, nothing much really went wrong with the gear. Except that things would be completely smashed in an airplane, so that was gone...so, no, in fact a lot of things kept going and finally Hendrix sent for Sound City and Marshall amps from London, his favourite ones and ended up with all the odd gear anyway...

UV: Did they take off the Sunn gear at that moment?

HH: I think Soft Machine got that eventually if I remember... well everyone was using the Fender, right. And then Jimi got Sunn gear and I think he got a Marshall amp and Soft Machine had the Fender gear and so that should make things a lot better...

UV: Remember anything about the press conference in New York, 30 January 1968?

HH: There was a guy, who was this publicist [Michael Goldstein]... He was great, he was like the typical New York, Jewish PR guy... with this little revolving badge or something lighting up. Completely in the park... It was like the usual stories, like The British Are Coming, or they trot out every year...

UV: Were there other people helping out during the tour?

HH: Occasionally in a big theatre there would be a sound person or a lighting officer... It

was nothing like today...

UV: Columbus, 3 March...

HH: One of Hendrix's guitars got stolen. I think it was in Columbus because we got there really late. I mean really, really late and we needed some help to carry the gear in, so one guy picked up... everybody was sort of taking stuff in... and some guy walked away with it... I think Fender gave him about three or four during that tour...

UV: Any after-gig jam sessions you went to?

HH: I remember the Shrine, in L.A. [10 February]. Before the gig we had the sound check and various people kept turning up, Dave Crosby and Micky Dolenz and all these people. There was a jam with Buddy Miles on drums... Electric Flag. 'Cause I remember they were actually on stage, they actually had a little American flag in a spotlight... I seem to remember he had a blow with Hendrix in the afternoon. L.A. was like that... we would put an amplifier down and someone would plug in immediately...

UV: Texas gigs...

HH: There was a guy who did the Texas gigs called Bob Cope, the promoter. And he was really on the ball... he was like an old-time promoter... he was a real Texas guy and he was really in charge of everything. Like if anything went wrong, that guy was fired... and very nice to the musicians... When we first met Bob Cope's crew, they met us at the airport... we picked up the gear from the airport and we came to unload at the theatre and there was this sack... it had Bank Of Texas on it... [us thinking] like a billion of dollars in the sack. And the American said, "don't dare open it", so we went back to the airport... We suddenly realised that Mike Ratledge's organ wasn't in the van... this had been loaded, the sack, instead of the organ, which was left in the airport. In fact all it was were returned checks!

UV: Smashing Up Time...

HH: It was usually very controlled anyway, it was all part of the last number. And Gerry Stickells was at the back holding the amp. There were times when Hendrix was pissed off in the middle of the tour, he wasn't happy, you know, because the sound wasn't very good...



> Zoom

UV: Chicago, 25 February, afternoon gig...

HH: There was a slope down into the theatre in Chicago, [Neville had] forgotten that he had already opened the back of the truck...

UV: So all the gear went out?

HH: The only thing that was smashed was a suitcase of mine... it was just like one of those sort of comic film moments, rumble, rumble, rumble, imagine all this priceless gear...

UV: Madison, 27 February 1968...

HH: The sound was fantastic. It was a fairly small place and a shitty little club, terrible, no room for gear but in fact it was a great sound...

UV: Mark Boyle...

HH: Mark Boyle was very pro Mike Jeffery. Because Mike Jeffery supported him a lot... you never heard a word against Mike Jeffery. He thought he was a great guy...

UV: Teamsters in Cleveland, 26 March...

HH: Neville and I got to the theatre and they asked us if we were members of the Teamsters, which was the drivers Union... we just sat in the truck while they were sorting it out... first thing they didn't want [to have] anything to do with the band at all...

eventually something was sorted out and we had to tell them exactIy where to put things. We weren't allowed to lift anything which is really annoying, it takes you twice as long to tell someone where to put it...

UV: Chicago, 29 March...

HH: That's the only one which Hendrix didn't play... he was picking up radio on aIl the amps and I think it's because there was actually kind of a steel building...

UV: Soft Machine did play, though.

HH: We did play, yeah, that's right... it was just the radio and buzzing. I think that was the only one that was actually cancelled on the tour...

UV: Yeah, apart from being a bit late.

HH: Not a bit late, a lot late!

UV: Newark, 5 April...

HH: I was loading at the back of the theatre and every thing had gone in except one microphone standard and I just went out to get it and the door was shut and locked, you know, I couldn't get in, so I had to walk around several blocks to get to the front of the theatre holding this mike stand which could have looked like a gun or something. That was the only time I really felt, you know, I could actually be shot at this moment. The second show was cancelled...I just felt, you know, such a strange feeling... feeling very uncomfortable, just wanted to get it out of the way as quickly as possible... In fact there weren't any problems, it was just very, very quiet, almost kind of stunned...

UV: End of tour - 1st leg...

HH: That's when Soft Machine were recording here [New York]... Neville split there in fact. We parked the van with all the stuff in and we parked it outside our hotel and then Neville split...it was just sitting outside and it finally got towed away. I had to go and get it from a very spooky place somewhere out in New York by the cemetery, and most of the stuff was still in it... There was a picture of Hendrix somebody had given us on the road when he painted a picture of him and the radio was gone but all the gear was safe in the back. I remember I had to contact U-haul, the people who owned the van and this very nervous guy came to the hotel in New York 'cause a great deal of money was owed because we took the van over three months before and it was supposed to be for a couple of weeks but in fact because of the tour we kept driving around. So anyway, several thousand pounds or dollars was owed... he thought first of all I was not gonna pay him or secondly that I was gonna attack him, or whatever, I had the cash there... that made him even more nervous...

UV: Would Jimi pop in during the Soft Machine recordings?

HH: [When] he was [also] recording, I think they did. I think they all popped in from time to time... because it was all part of family anyway...

UV: Would you see much of Jimi besides at the concerts?

HH: As much as I saw Hendrix, Hendrix wasn't out to partying... because on the road it usually was hotel, hotel, hotel, so during the day Hendrix wouldn't get up until Gerry Stickells woke him up. Neville used to say that on the first tour [1967] he [Jimi] was known as the bat, 'cause he was always in his dark room and had his clothes on. I wouldn't really see Hendrix until half an hour before he was due to go on, you know. Gerry Stickells was the guy who's had the problem of waking them all up... I don't know how he did it... he was certainly the guy who held that tour together...

UV: How much drugs were there around?

HH: Everybody was smoking obviously, that was normal. I think things like speed, acid. I think that's as much as there was. I certainly don't think there was any heroin... I could not even remember if I ever saw Hendrix smoking but I'm sure he must have done, everybody did... I remember Mitch always seemed to be awake during the night and asleep during the day and he always said he was an downers during the day and uppers during the night, which I don't know if it's true... in fact the best time we saw Noel play was when he had obviously drunk a bit more than usual but was not incapable and he



> Zoom

played like a dream and he was sort of fluid and all that... There wasn't any kind of crazy, sort of 'over the top' things. Certainly not before a concert...

UV: Do you recall seeing Jimi ever writing down Iyrics during the travelling?

HH: The few times I actually travelled with him and flying he'd be kind of distantly, sort of obviously thinking about things like that... Once going up the steps to a plane, there used to be an airline called Braniff from Texas and all their planes were [in] different colours, really bright colours, red, orange, yellow, green. And he was actually standing next to me sort of saying, "Wowl The colours!"... always feeling, sort of digging things... he was really kind of a quiet guy actually in public in most occasions. He was very kind of within himself and digging things from a distance... He was never kind of raving party-goer like Noel and Mitch... Noel always seemed to be like a kid. He liked jokes and he liked sort of practical jokes and playing tricks on you... but Mitch is a sharp guy, he is really kind of intelligent and witty and sharp, sardonic, so I can see that Noel would actually get on his [Jimi's] nerves... I remember one gig [Fort Worth, 17 February] where after the gig Neville and I were packing up the gear and Noel came out to talk to Neville, 'cause he was quite friendly with Neville, in tears, because Hendrix hadn't liked the gig and Noel had gone into the dressingroom to say something and Hendrix said sort of, "I don't wanna speak to any fucker tonight" and it may have been because of Noel or maybe just his general feeling but Noel took it really as a personal thing and he came out and he was actually in tears... I remember a period in the middle of the tour when Hendrix was really pissed off a lot of the time, just with sound problems, I mean it was difficult music. It would be easier now but then it was just like big amps behind and then a microphone and that was it. It wasn't easy to produce. Hendrix was having problems probably getting across and I don't how much of that was because he wasn't happy with the music, he seemed to be happy enough playing most of the time...

UV: How would Gerry Stickells deal with Hendrix babies during the tour?

HH: He would probably just refer it to the lawyers... there must have been a lot of Hendrix babies around but I am sure there are quite a few phantoms as weIl...

UV: There were also bills for damaging theatre equipment?

HH: Yeah, I remember the one period when Hendrix was pissed off and at the end he did "Wild Thing" - the last number. At the end he didn't do the business with the guitar on the amplifier, what he did [instead] was get the head of the guitar and ride along the footlights at the bottom of the stage and popped them all. It was really impressive. It looked good but the theatre did not like it at all...

UV: Do you remember where this was?

HH: It could have been something like Wisconsin, it was a smallish town and I remember the guys, sort of stagehands, all sort of straight stagehands sort of shaking their heads... the audience loved it, but I mean it wasn't planned I think...

UV: Would Jimi ever make comments like 'weIl done' after a show?

HH: Not to me... I only remember Hendrix saying very few things to me. I mean it was things like, "hey, hey, where's my guitar?" because often he wouldn't have a guitar with him, he'd just arrived from the hotel, 'hey, where's my guitar?"...

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Tough Guys Don't Dance - Bill Nelson meets Robert Wyatt - originally appeared in the August, 1992 edition of Musician magazine (US)

TOUGH GUY'S DON'T DANCE
BILL NELSON MEETS ROBERT WYATT

An extraordinary dialogue between two kings of the underground. Nelson and Wyatt have each spent decades producing music of depth and personal vision for a small, devoted audience. Each continues to face enormous hardship in trying to get his music out. You think you know tough guys? Meet the real thing.

Bill Nelson meets Robert Wyatt. For 20 years they've bucked the system and have been making music at the edge of rock. Two vets discuss the never-ending battle.

The first time Bill Nelson met Robert Wyatt, in 1974, Wyatt asked for his autograph. Nelson, the Yorkshire-born singer/songwriter/guitarist, was just starting as a professional. He'd released a limited-edition solo album called Northern Dream and formed a band, Be-Bop Deluxe. The solo album caught the ear of legendary BBC DJ John Peel, who played it on his influential Radio One show. Peel must have been impressed because he invited Nelson to his wedding. Among the celebrities in attendance was Wyatt, who'd established himself as a drummer, vocalist and writer for the Soft Machine and Matching Mole before falling from a third-story window and permanently paralyzing his legs. Nelson admired Wyatt's work, but couldn't get up the nerve to start a conversation. Wyatt had heard Northern Dream and liked it. He wheeled his chair over to Nelson and asked, "Could I have your autograph?" Nelson said, "Only if I can have yours."

The second time Bill Nelson met Robert Wyatt was for this interview, nearly 18 years later. "You haven't changed at all," Wyatt said cheerfully to Nelson. Maybe he hadn't, but much had happened to both of them. Be-Bop Deluxe recorded six albums, getting a British Top 5 hit with "Ships in the Night" and achieving moderate cult status in the U.S. In '78 Nelson formed Red Noise, which made one brilliant album that went nowhere. After that, he began a solo career (literally solo - most of his post '79 music has been recorded at home without collaborators). On the one hand, he produced a series of instrumental records on his own Cocteau label that could almost be called "ambient music" if they weren't so sophisticated. On the other, he made left-of-center pop gems like The Love That Whirls (1982), Vistamix ('84), Getting the Holy Ghost Across ('86) and last year's Luminous, filled with great radio songs that somehow never made it to the airwaves.

Meanwhile, Wyatt recorded two discs for Virgin in the mid-'70s and then dropped out of music for several years. He resurfaced in 1981 with a stunning series of singles that were later compiled on Nothing Can Stop Us. His music, like Nelson's mostly recorded solo, was more stark and somber than before, his lyrics more political. One thing hadn't changed, though: his heartbreakingly tender singing. For the first half of the '80s Wyatt was relatively prolific; then, after '85s Old Rottenhat, he vanished again, emerging after six years with Dondestan, perhaps his best album.

This interview took place over two days in March at Wyatt's cozy 19th-century house in the Lincolnshire town of Louth, a charming village of narrow, winding streets, antique buildings and crooked alleyways isolated by miles of flat green fields and marshland. There's no railway station, and the nearest noteworthy town's about 30 miles away. To most of Louth's inhabitants, Robert Wyatt is simply the guy in the wheelchair, who moves around faster than some cars. Almost nobody here knows about the 30 years he's put into

music, and he likes it that way.

At the time of the interview, neither Nelson nor Wyatt had much reason to be cheerful. Nelson was in the middle of a lawsuit with his former business manager who, Nelson says, is illegally claiming full rights to the Cocteau catalog. He says Virgin has agreed to release three new Nelson albums provided they get the back catalog too. So until the ex-manager lets go of it, Nelson says, there's no deal. What with mounting costs and the lack of cash coming in, he may lose his house, his car, his studio - in short, everything he owns.

Although Wyatt's living in comfort for the first time in years (thanks to friends of his wife Alfie, who gave them the money to buy the house in Louth), his future is also uncertain. Rough Trade, the label he's been signed to since 1981, has gone bankrupt. Though Gramavision is licensed to distribute his records in the U.S., he is essentially, like Nelson, a man without a contract. And like Nelson, he's seen no money for some time.

For decades Wyatt and Nelson have struggled on the perimeter of pop, often with little reward save the devotion of a select group of listeners. They simply love what they do. They are, as Nelson put it, representatives of "two complementary aspects of the human condition - the inward-looking, spiritual side (Nelson) and the outward-looking, political side (Wyatt) that's concerned with how that spirit deals with the rest of the world." And, as Musician quickly learned, they are talkers of a very high order. When the articulate, soft-spoken Nelson and the earthy, wisecracking Wyatt sit across the table from each other drinking wine, laughing, and talking about music in the company of Wyatt's comfortable old mongrel, Flossie - you can't help wishing the conversation won't stop.

MUSICIAN: It seems there's a small group of English musicians who spend most of their time staying home and making records, including both relatively famous people-Peter Gabriella, XTC-and some lesser-known ones-The Bevis Frond, Peter Hammill And then there's you two. Do you see yourselves as part of this - if you can stomach the apparent contradiction-group of individualists?



> Zoom

NELSON: Sometimes I wonder whether all these people had train sets when they were kids. I know Andy [Partridge, of XTC] and I know Peter, and there's something of that in me as well. It's the boy in his loft with his gear. Life passes him by. He's living inside his head all the time. It's an obsessive thing, and you tend not to have time for other people. It's a sad, sick reflection on what we've become. [laughter] I'm terrible sometimes, I don't want to know that there's a world outside that door.

WYATT: Not all of the arts are intrinsically performing arts. Composers, painters, novelists, poets are solitary workers. That's what the job requires. You have to get into a state of mind which too much human traffic can destroy. To use a crummy metaphor, you're working in a pond and it has to be still; otherwise you'll never see to the bottom. In music this may seem odd, because people think of music as something that's performed. But compare it with painting, and you see an analogy that's very obvious.

A lot of English pop music of the '60s came more out of the art college tradition than the conservatory tradition. John Lennon, Pete Townshend, Brian Eno, Ian Dury, were all art students. In the '50s, it was one of the only places where kids could go who didn't have qualifications, who weren't articulate or impressive in academic fields. They could suddenly feel welcome, allowed to do their own thing. They could become kings of their imagination, instead of failures in some system they couldn't understand. I was only in one for three months, but it has to be acknowledged as an English thing.

NELSON: I'm from a working-class family, and I wasn't happy at school but I always liked painting. When I got to art college, it was like going to heaven; everything that made me an outcast before made me acceptable there.

WYATT: I don't think this maverick thing you're talking about comes out of the music colleges. These mad breakthroughs that have taken place from John Lennon onwards,

totally unpredictable things that set off a chain reaction, that has to be attributed to the anarchism of art colleges. By that I mean the lack of hierarchy, the governmentlessness, the feeling that you could be anything you wanted to be.

NELSON: When I was at art college, I used to pick up the International Times to find out what was happening in London. I read about Robert's band, and I'd think, "This sounds wild!' And without being able to go down there and see for ourselves, we made up our own version of what we thought was happening. We did concerts with light shows and the whole thing. Nobody knew what was going on-'Where the hell's this coming from?"-because it was only three of us reading the International Times who knew what was happening anywhere south of Barnsley.

WYATT: That's fantastic.

MUSICIAN: Robert, how did you become apart of that underground London scene in the mid-60s that Bill thought was so wild?

WYATT: I'm afraid I may have to dodge that question, because ... well, people think I must have problems talking about my accident. But I don't; what I have problems talking about is what happened before the accident. Rock Bottom [1974] and beyond, that I see as me. But my adolescent self, the drummer biped, I don't remember him and I don't understand him. I have a hard time dealing with the way I was before; it's almost as if the fall affected my mind. I see the accident now as being a sort of neat division line between my adolescence and the rest of my life.

This was how the accident went: in order, wine, whisky, Southern Comfort, then the window. The doctor was amazed. He said, "You had to have been really drunk to fall in such a relaxed way.' If I'd been any more sober, I probably wouldn't be here today; Id have tightened up with fear shattered. It's been a long time now and it's been hard, but at least the top part of me works, though I'm never quite sure about what's going on in here[points to his head]. I do know exactly what I can and can't do, and that makes it easier.

MUSICIAN: Which players inspired both of you?

NELSON: When I first started out, I played in groups that did everything- country & western, jazz, blues, rock'n'roll, psychedelic. At one time I just wanted to get all the technique together. I had a turntable that went down to 16 so I could slow it down: "Ah, that's how it's done." First it was Duane Eddy, Hank Marvin and the Ventures, the twang. Then Beck and Clapton, and Townshend, more for his attitude than anything else. That little flourish in his chord playing, which is a sort of Wagnerian thing - every guitar player's got that in his book of tricks now, but Townshend was the guy who did it. And if you want to hear the entire catalog of what a guitar can sound like, you have to listen to Electric Ladyland. Nobody yet has gone much further than Hendrix.

WYATT: Music was my way of escaping from school. Mostly jazz; old as I am, I'm more old-fashioned than I need have been. I did have a romantic association with pop records of the time-Roy Orbison, Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran-but that had to do with where the girls were. Whereas Jazz was my comfort when I was struggling with homework that I couldn't make head or tail of. Miles Davis' voice, getting lost inside a Mingus arrangement, being carried along by the band, chucked from one soloist to another - that saved my soul as a schoolboy.

Then Coltrane and Miles Davis encouraged me to listen to Indian music. At that time more musicians were coming from the Indian subcontinent to England, so Indian music was around. And the fringes of Europe generally, where European harmonies meet something else, that's interesting to me. Not for some ulterior motive, I'm just an aural tourist.

MUSICIAN: Both of you have definite Eastern influences in your music.

NELSON: It's weird. The first time I worked with Yukihiro Takahashi it was for an instrumental piece. He had a half-completed track and no ideas for melody lines. So I put some things down using the E-Bow. And he said, "God, you sound more Japanese than I do.' [laughter]

WYATT: It's just a question of using scales which tend to be identified as Oriental or non-European. But often you'll find they're discarded versions of Greek modes, perhaps from someplace like Macedonia. You hear it in Bulgarian folk music to this day, which is probably closer to ancient Greek music than we realize. I've always liked scales that had

an ambiguity about whether they were major or minor. What I like about flamenco is they use gypsy scales, where the second note is only a half-step up; both our major and minor scales go up a whole tone on the second note. That half-step's a North African thing, because a lot of Egyptian scales are like that.

MUSICIAN: How important was John Peel for your musical generation?

WYATT: I think you'd hardly recognize English rock without him.

NELSON: After I first heard Peel, I started buying American imports, because you could only hear them on his show. And that influenced the way I played. Then he picked up on my things and played them, so it's almost like showing me what was possible and then giving me space to do it myself.

WYATT: By the way, the bloke who put out The Peel Sessions in the States made a fortune. None of us got much of a look-in on that. It's depressing that the memory of the Peel days is spoiled by people who think, 'Oh, these lot are a bit innocent, they're looking the other way, we can clean up."

NELSON: You know Imaginary Records, that put out Luminous? They asked, "Why don't we get the Peel sessions that you did with Be-Bop Deluxe? Would you mind?" I said no, there's some good stuff there; in fact, some songs we did for those sessions never got recorded. There'd been no plan to release the Be-Bop Deluxe Peel sessions. But as soon as these people found out that Imaginary were thinking of doing it, "Ah well, we might wind up putting them out." It's still not resolved.

WYATT: Columbia has a load of stuff I was involved in, both in Soft Machine and Matching Mole. It comes out here and there, on Japanese imports or whatever. But if any of the musicians phone them up to get a handle on anything, they say, 'Sorry, he's out of the office,' 'Oh, you want the legal department," 'He's not here....' They treat musicians like crap, unless, I suppose, you're Wynton Marsalis. And it's a shame, because I know people who want to put that stuff out but CBS won't put it out. So I'm getting publicity for stuff that nobody can buy.

NELSON: All you need is one Top Ten mainstream-play record and that stuff would just roll out. It's waiting for that moment.

WYATT: That's right, and whether you earn a living in the meantime is not a major concern.

NELSON: I've had a lot of pressure from people on the business side. Normally I'd ignore that, but sometimes it looked like by the end of the week we wouldn't have a roof over our head. Then you start thinking, 'Maybe I could compromise...." You always regret it. A few people make a career from music and are utterly uncompromising. They don't give a shit what anybody thinks, they just do what they do. I admire that. It's the only way.

WYATT: Some people can't do that. For kids from tough backgrounds, the only way out is to "make it." The only other choice is the dole or a boring job in the local factory, and they want to make something more of things. So they go for success. The people at Motown said, "We want a classy black record label," and they groomed it to be an imaginary mainstream America. It was a bit utopia but I find no fault with that, because what were the alternatives?

NELSON: And they actually produced decent music.

WYATT: Wonderful stuff. Marvin Gaye knocks me out to this day. You know, politically speaking, black America has been a failure - but often to what's come out of it! All this music that's been my sustenance and made life worth living. Never underestimate the power of failure.

NELSON: I played a long time before I ever thought of making a career from it. One of the spurs in the early days to practice a bit harder was what happened the first time I gave a public concert at school: Suddenly girls would talk to me. I mean, sex had a lot to do with it.

WYATT: Oh yes! He's got a point there...'Sex had a lot to do with it.' That's gotta be my epitaph. [laughter] Especially since I couldn't dance... I mean, how do you meet them? Let's see, a drummer gets to meet them... right. Lester Young started out as a drummer, and he figured that the saxophonists got the nicest girls because they wouldn't wait for the

drummer to dismantle his kit. [laughter] So he changed to saxophone, and became one of the most important players in the history of the instrument.



NELSON: I've worked with young bands in the studio, and you discover people's motives quickly. For a while now there's been a push for music to be a career move, which I think is dangerous. That's forced upon us by the economic climate we live in; there's desperation in this country. Not only do people not have money, but they lose self-esteem. And the myth that pop music creates is so glamorous to younger people. This can show they've achieved. But when they've got into it, they find out it's all a front and they're still stuck with nothing at the end of the day. WYATT: They're calculating career moves, and that's okay, but it can be the wrong place to take your talent ... that week. Talent is a tough taskmaster, first of all, you never know whether you've really got any. But you have to follow it, you can't afford not to. It tells you what it needs. And if you have another master, you're just thinning it out.

MUSICIAN: You would say that the audience is second, and when you're working, you do it primarily for yourself

NELSON: It's a totally selfish experience, creating - it has to be. It's one of the few things where you have to deal entirely with yourself, with your own experience and limitations. But despite that, it still will connect. I think the more true you are to yourself, the more chance it has of connecting with other people, because there are common threads under the surface.

MUSICIAN: What are your views now on the progressive scene of the '70s that you were both, to some extent, apart of?

NELSON: The '70s I spent mostly on tour. I was so wrapped up in what the band was doing that I didn't notice anybody else; I was dismissive of other people. I don't see anything important about what I did then-still [laughs] although EMI re-released the records and people still liked them. But I can only listen to them and hear a young guy struggling with ideas.

I went through a period of buying music that was difficult to play and difficult to listen to. The idea was, if you even pretend you can listen to this, you must be pretty bright. It's like watching people with muscles flex them. They're all oiled up and you can see there's years of work gone into this. But a lot of those people who had all those muscles never actually went out and hit anybody. They didn't do anything except pose around. And the older you get, you see that truth doesn't reside in incredible shows of technique. I used to do 20-minute guitar solos, but I don't anymore; some might call that a retrogression. But I think, why waste your energy?

WYATT: As a drummer, I tried to play things people needed, but at the same time I had my own ideas, and I didn't know anybody except me who was interested in them. [In Soft Machine] they wanted a drummer who could play in any time signature for very long solos. They didn't want a drummer who kept showing alarming tendencies toward turning into something else.

I'd already done what amounted to a solo record, which was 'Moon in June' [on the Soft Machine's Third album]. I'm not credited with it, but I played it nearly all myself; I got the others in just to do a sequence towards the end. They didn't want to play it and I was embarrassed to ask them. I don't think they liked me having ideas, but I don't know-, we didn't talk to each other much. I thought, "If I weren't in a band, I could do more." But obviously, if I wanted to work as a live musician, I had to be in a group. So I wasn't released to concentrate on what was growing in my head, funnily enough, until I found myself in the wheelchair. Then I couldn't live a group life anymore, so I had to take control. And everything got simpler.

MUSICIAN: Didn't you do some live performing after the accident?

WYATT: I did two or three gigs, and the practical side was very difficult; I was nearly fainting with exhaustion onstage. I suppose vanity prevents me from wanting everybody to know that I'm incontinent, but I am, and that's a big problem when you're on a stage somewhere. It's too embarrassing. If I go anywhere or do anything, it has to be carefully worked out.

MUSICIAN: What are your feelings now on the punk revolution of 76-77? It really seemed to change your music, Bill - Red Noise sounded so different from Be-Bop Deluxe.

NELSON: I was listening more to electronic music, and people like the Residents; I'd always liked Terry Riley, Karlheinz Stockhausen. I was using a synthesizer guitar instead of an ordinary guitar, and putting the snare drum through fuzz boxes, making drum loops, manipulating tape. Those were the concerns and not so much the punk thing. The good thing about what happened then-briefly, before the industry grabbed hold of it and strangled it to death-was that it opened up possibilities for people to have a platform to say something. I didn't think the music was all that wonderful, because it sounded incredibly old-fashioned. Apart from John Lydon's voice, I thought the Sex Pistols sounded so dated. Amateur Chuck Berry, full-stop. But John Lydon's voice was very interesting. And I still like Public Image, I'm a big fan. I was listening to a lot of American bands of that period, more than English ones. I liked Television and Talking Heads.

WYATT: What was I listening to then? Calypso and Nat King Cole. [laughter] And shortwave, getting the Latvian version of events. If I heard music that I liked, it was usually Radio Sofia, Bulgaria. But it's the age-old thing, the young bullets coming up. I thought they were sweet little things; Johnny Rotten makes me laugh every time I hear him. And I tend to like things when they're in a state of terminal collapse.

I was taken by [Rough Trade's] Geoff Travis to meet some people, and I thought, 'Do they allow people over 21 in here?" 'Cause I always think of rock 'n' roll as being the land of age apartheid. But people were friendly, they came up and said hello. And I felt at home with them, except I suddenly realized that they were saying hello like I used to say hello to an uncle. They weren't saying hello to a contemporary, and that's a very funny feeling, because I'd never grown up inside.

NELSON: The industry is so youth-oriented. That ageist thing is as bad as any divide between the sexes.

WYATT: And you really feel you're just getting there now. That's accepted in painting, in classical composing. If we were politicians, we'd be considered still in nappies. It's a cruel irony, in a way, that just as we reach adulthood, we no longer belong to anything we can participate in.

MUSICIAN: What prompted you to get back into music, Robert?

WYATT: Alfie saying, 'We're running out of money and you can earn it quicker than I can." And Geoff Travis saying, "If you want to record for us, you can." I fell into it. I might have drifted away altogether, except that I think Alfie worried that whatever I was drifting into didn't constitute earning a living. She also felt I was fraudulent, because on the marriage contract she married a musician. You can't marry someone and then they turn into something else, that's cheating. [laughter] So she and Geoff got me out of it. But if I didn't have to earn a living, I'd be quite happy to disappear completely. I'm not in the music world half the time anyway, I'm somewhere else. There's a dog to be fed - this is serious stuff, you know [laughter]. And when I listen for stimulus, it tends to be music which I have no part in. I'll recreate Harlem 1940 in my front room, because it's untouchable and I can build up a fantasy about that that isn't brought down to earth by any real experience. I tend not to hear what my contemporaries are doing, especially other songwriters. I'm almost nervous of it in a way. Since I stay home a lot, I like music that's comfortable. If you're in the city rushing about, you might very well want to hear music that's like a train driving through your skull. But I don't listen to stuff like that so much. Also, since I haven't been able to see the world, particular emphasis has been on vicarious travel.

I've worked with musicians who are really prolific; I wish I was like that. [Elvis] Costello writes a lot of songs, they pour out all the time, and I was impressed that he was so certain. I think Bill's more like that. I get disheartened, and I spend a lot of time thinking I just can't do it. Nobody's that noble-if you're trying to do something and can't get it how you want it, you go fry an egg. 'Cause I can do that, I know it's going to work. [laughter] Even out of the amount I do, not a lot gets out.

MUSICIAN: That's very different from Bill.

NELSON: But don't forget, I've had the luxury of having my own studio and label. It's like self-publishing; you can foist it on people and they've got no say in it whatsoever: "You will see this exists." If I hadn't had that outlet, it would have been different.

WYATT: Peter Cook, the English comedian, once said his motto was "If at first you don't succeed, give up." Unfortunately, he's had an enormous influence on me. [laughs]

MUSICIAN: Do you miss working with others?

NELSON: There was a time when I struck out just to see what happens when you play everything rather badly and only one thing slightly well. [chuckles] At the moment, I'd crave to have musicians around me to take a skeleton of a song and say, "Okay, you can go down the pub for half an hour, we'll make it sound good." But that's an impossibility at the moment.

WYATT: I don't understand machinery well enough to do the finished object myself, only enough to get the ideas down. My room's just a sketchbook, not a painting; I need people with know-how. The real problem is there just isn't the money. Usually when you're making a record, a record company puts up money upfront. Well, our record company has no money. They can't pay me, how can they pay someone else? That's the inhibiting thing at the moment. It's not an abstract thing of 'what would you like to do,' it's 'what can you do.' And I've ended up just doing what I can. But there's a kind of pride in that. I made the great discovery, influenced by Stevie Wonder, that you can play your own basslines. I thought it wouldn't sound right, but his are so organic. And by covering everything himself, he was compensating for disabilities in real life. There may be an element of that in me as well. I like to hear that rhythm section, that bass player, that drummer.....that's me. Even if somebody else could do it better, it's still a nice feeling. And at least they're playing within your range of technique. They know the tune. [laughter]

NELSON: For me, it's also a way of seeing yourself in a clearer light, because you see everything undiluted.

WYATT: That's very true. Undiluted is a good word.

NELSON: And it might not be brilliant, and it might not be what you'd like to achieve, but it's honest and it's a real mirror. Which is why sometimes it's uncomfortable to listen. I hear everything that's wrong with it and nothing that's right. Then you get on with the next one and say, 'This one'll be okay." But it isn't. [laughs]

MUSICIAN: Yet you make such a point of declaring the imperfections in your work - the broken tape machines and so forth - that you seem to have a certain pride about them too.

NELSON: It's a romantic thing. I've put on the back of my record sleeves that only 14 of the 16 tracks work and the speaker distorts. It's a charming thing to write about, but sometimes it's a bitch to deal with.

MUSICIAN: Robert, have you ever put out anything recorded completely at home, as Bill does?

WYATT: A couple of things. In the early '80s Dave Macrae, who was the keyboardist in Matching Mole, helped me out on a couple of old jazz standards, "Round Midnight" and "Memories of You." I wanted somebody who had enough of a jazz education to play the chords right, but at the same time could drain out everything. I just wanted the skeleton of the tune, but having revealed it, I wanted the bones in the right place.

MUSICIAN: Trying to get to the skeleton of the tune seems to sum up your general approach to music.

WYATT: I've been looking for the essence of what it is I like about a piece. Is it just that one bit where the harmony changes or that one note or the way that beat falls ... it's a process of tracing it and thinking, 'Well, if I'm right, it should stand without any covering." if it collapses under exposure, then it isn't right and I've exposed a fault.

I'm scared of doing what happens a lot in music, which is getting too intoxicated by the beauty of the sound you're creating or the energy you're putting out to actually hear inside

it. The skeleton of the music can be a very rickety and inadequate thing that pulls apart once the excitement's over. That's one of the reasons I'm scared of expensive synthesizers, because you can just sit on 'em and sound great. I've got a feeling that's more or less how some records are made. [laughter]

NELSON: I wouldn't in real company admit to actually being a musician. I'm more of a person who tries, using music as much as I can get my hands on-which often is not very much [laughter]-to express something for myself, about myself, my relationships, whatever. So often my preoccupations when I'm writing aren't musical ones at all.

I'm not a great technician. I've had a reputation in some quarters for being a perfectionist, and I'm not. I'm a lazy sod when it comes to it; I want to get there the quickest route possible. If I had more confidence in myself as a musician, I'd be more thorough, and a lot of what I do isn't. It's not so much that it's slipshod, but I have to let things stand because they came out spontaneously and they're an honest reflection of what I was doing at that moment. Since I often don't know whether it's going to be heard by anybody else, it doesn't matter whether it's perfect or flawed, as long as it's true. So I'm not always pursuing music, it's something else, but I'm not sure how to explain what that something else is.

WYATT: We have a lot of difficulty in this context talking about what we do. When you read about what musicians or artists do, you're not reading about what I sit down and think about when I go to work. If I'm full of too many ideas and theories, it just blocks every route to getting there. It has to be a physical, instinctive thing, just you and the instrument and the sound you're making. All this analysis is retrospective.

Say you sat down and talked with your girlfriend about exactly why you were about to go to bed, it could kind of. - -spoil it. And I think a lot of important activity can be talked out. It's pretentious to use words like 'sacred'; all I mean is that the whole point about music is it isn't accessible to logical analysis. And I don't think those of us who make it know quite what we're doing. Professionalism just consists of knowing which trigger mechanisms are most likely to work. We turn on the tap, and what comes out, that comes from somewhere else. Art Blakey said that music comes from the Creator through the musician to the audience in one split-second. I understand what he meant, though he used the word 'Creator.' But I know Americans are very religious people, I've read about it in the papers. [laughter]

NELSON: I think you'll find that people who are committed to music-and, despite Robert saying he doesn't do it all the time, there's obviously a life commitment there - everyone I've met with that commitment is very cagey about going into too much detail about what the actual creative process is. But if they've had a drink or two, or they know somebody well, you'll always get this reference to it coming through from somewhere else. There's a kind of religious feeling, an awe about it. You know that it's something you can't trivialize or muck about with because it's so fragile. There are so many explanations for where it's coming from, the unconscious or wherever, but whatever it is, it's intangible. So you don't feel comfortable talking about it in front of just anybody.

WYATT: There's actually a hint of apology. We're saying not that we're at the source of creative power, but precisely the opposite, that we're simply tools in the hand of forces that we cannot presume to understand. Even the best gardener couldn't make a single flower. He can only understand how to nurture the process.

MUSICIAN: Do you believe there is a musical mainstream and consciously see yourself as outside it?

WYATT: Stan Kenton was once asked, 'Where is jazz going?" and he said, 'Well, we're going to Cleveland on Tuesday.' [laughter] I've always considered myself absolutely normal. Not only am I in the mainstream, I'm possibly the only mainstream there is. I write absolutely normal tunes, I make absolutely normal records, and it sounds totally sensible to me. People who are deliberately eccentric must be insane; I have enough trouble just trying to be normal. [laughs]

NELSON: It's always a shock when you offer something you've done to someone to listen to and say, 'This is really commercial," and they go, 'This is weird. Where's your head?" And you say, 'No, honestly...'

WYATT: That happened to me when Virgin wanted me to make singles. I'm a girl who likes to say yes, so I did one [a cover of 'I'm a Believer'] and then another, and I really enjoyed it. I did 'Yesterday Man,' a major-key, upbeat, jolly pseudo-reggae thing. I bent all

the chords out of shape and did the whole thing kind of sideways. And I was so happy with that. They said, 'We're not putting this out. It's too lugubrious." I thought, "that must be good," but I got a dictionary, and it's not. [laughter]

MUSICIAN: Robert, how did you go about setting your wife Alfte's lyrics to music for the first five songs on Dondestan?

WYATT: I work from sound, from atmosphere, and the words have to appear out of that, like out of the fog. I had some unpopulated landscapes, and what was surprising was, the words that came were Alfie's and not my own. She wrote those poems in the mid-'80s when we were in Spain. I happen to know that everything she describes is true, like when she describes the wind on the beach sweeping everything away ['The Sight of the Wind']. Everything she describes-"a plastic bag caught by a rail" - that's what we saw. So I wanted the music to give a sense of the event, the time and the location. I worked on it a lot, because I wanted the end result to sound fairly spontaneous. I have to do a lot of work on words to make them sound like there hasn't been a lot of work.

I recorded the whole LP 10 times at home, a kind of dry run before going into the studio. What's in this room is what's on the record. I work at home on the four-track and get it as near completion as I can, and then I beg the studio for a bit of cheap time. And I get in there and work as fast as possible. I have to work cheap because my records don't sell enough for me to work any other way. The last expensive record I made was Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard in 1975. That was with the Virgin lot.

NELSON: That's still selling, isn't it?

WYATT: Yeah, and thank goodness it is, because I only finished paying for it about two years ago. Virgin charged me for making the record. They're a clever lot, you can see how Branson got rich. Everything's collateralized. Any money that came in from a record, instead of you getting it, they'd say, 'Well, you're recording again now, so we'll put it straight back into your next one." You're always behind, and someone's getting your money. I was in debt for years on that one, and I thought, "I can't live like this." So I had to start working dead cheap. But it doesn't make much difference, because Rough Trade's going bust. We're all going bust in England, you've landed on a sinking ship. [chuckles]

MUSICIAN: I guess so. Bill's been telling me all his horror stories.

WYATT: Well, tell me then.

NELSON: Oh, I'm trying to take some people to court at the moment, and they're blocking everything. I set up a label 10 years ago which I funded out of my own income. The guy I'm suing was my business manager, I hired him after the label had been set up, to do the administration, because I didn't have time for that and music. It turns out he's put things through different companies and various manipulations until it's ended up all in his name. He claims that all my work of the last 10 years is his and not mine. And I've just had a deal ... from Virgin, ironically. They want to buy the back catalog, which would bail me out of a lot of problems, because besides appropriating the label my ex-manager didn't deal with taxes, and I ended up getting stuck with them. Virgin wants my catalog, but my ex-manager's claiming that the stuff's his. And I'm saying he has no right to it. It was my label in the first place. I set it up and ran it, and I was virtually the only artist on it! We've got to resolve this, and all he did was apply for extension after extension for time to put his defense together. And when his defense came through, it was a tissue of lies, so that's got to be taken apart. I could go on for months and months.*

*Nelson's ex-manager, Mark Rye, denies ever claiming that Nelson's work belongs to him: "I'm simply trying to get my bill paid. I haven't been paid for the last five years, and until the debts - paid off I'm not prepared to let anything go. He had a debt when I took him on, and he still has one because he spends more DM he earns. The trouble with Bill is he doesn't understand business. He's very talented, but when things go wrong, it's always somebody else's fault."

WYATT: And it costs, doesn't it? Apart from burning up valuable brain cells?

NELSON: Yeah, the Inland Revenue Bankruptcy Department's on my back, and I stand to be homeless within a few weeks, unless a miracle comes out of the sky. Selling the house would clear up a lot of problems, but I don't know what to do after that. It's more of a worry because I have a family; I worry about them being warm and fed more than myself.

WYATT: Oh, it's a bastard. It's such a cesspit, this industry. People think we live on a

higher plane, we're artists. But we're talking about the mechanisms whereby we live. It would be so easy to do a straight deal: 'You make the records, I'll sell them. Percentage so-and-so of retail well crosscheck accounts regularly. You get this amount, I get that amount. Deal? Deal. Right, sign here.' Why work out all these fucking scams?

NELSON: It's not like we're talking about huge amounts of money, especially with people like me. My ex-manager knew how much music I put together on a daily basis. It's been 20 years since my first record, and I've done over 40 albums. The majority of that has been on the Cocteau label which he's got his hands on. And I've no particular faith in the system, or that I'll come out with a fair settlement. I hope so, and the lawyers say so, but they're bound to say that, and there've been so many miscarriages of justice in the past, I don't know.

WYATT: Well, at least you've got a solid body of work, and you know it's yours. There are laws coming to our rescue. I'm thinking of the European stuff about intellectual property and moral rights. There are new laws on the horizon. The last check I got was for what Gramavision picked up in America on my last LP, and that completely disappeared into the Rough Trade debt. So I haven't actually yet made a penny from Gramavision. It discourages you; you think, 'How can I afford to make any more records?' But I must say I like Gramavision's catalog, they've got a great bunch of music.

MUSICIAN: If an artist becomes involved with business, particularly the huge bureaucracy of a major record conglomerate, doesn't that immediately compromise the art?

NELSON: There has to be some kind of compromise, because of the nature of the beast. I always had this dream that you could change things from the inside, and I don't know if I've completely shaken it off yet.

WYATT: I remember when they said the Clash sold out. Well, the lads are only trying to earn a living, you know! Give me a break. [laughter]

NELSON: That's an important point. If you've put your life on the line for music as a career, then you have to survive. A big record company can help make things more successful for you than an independent label. It's not so easy to say, 'All major companies are automatically terrible and corrupt.' I've met some people in majors who don't give a shit about music and all they want is whatever freebies come with the job and as much cocaine as they can get through. But there are some genuine music lovers as well who've got good taste, who really give a lot of their time for what for you're trying to achieve. And I've seen ripoffs in the indie scene just the same as in the majors.

WYATT: It's a romantic illusion that you can extricate yourself from the system. Systems are a bit tougher than that, systems are the way are organized. And you can turn your nose away so the smell doesn't kill you, but really you're in the shit with everybody else. I don't think there's any such thing as an independent record label; there's no such thing as an independent person. Put a self-sufficient individualist in a desert without water and he's dead in a day. A thing that worries me is that, even in the indies, there's tendency for the music to be a hastily cobbled-together afterthought, once the serious business of getting the haircut has been sorted out. [laughter] Obviously, I have personal reasons for feeling threatened by that. At the moment I've nervous about how to function in the future. Because apart from these high aspirations we've been talking about, we are talking about a job and trying to earn a living. I'm not getting any younger, and it's not getting any easier. There are some tough times ahead. And there's nothing I can see on the horizon that'll help much, we're on our own.

NELSON: Everybody could make their own records. It doesn't cost an awful lot to print up a few. I had this dream once that you could release them like you would a newspaper, on a regular basis and quite cheaply. People could try them out and throw them away; they weren't precious so it didn't matter. But the industry has made people expect to pay money. If you start offering people cheap records, they'll think that the music on them is cheap; there's a psychology that goes with it.

WYATT: In my case, I don't think people are saying, "Well, we've got Diana Ross, I know what we need now ... Robert Wyatt!' [laughter] But I don't want to say anything about my decisions which might cast aspersions on somebody else's. For example, I personally have had a very hard time with Columbia, but I also know they've looked after some musicians I admire very much. Maybe there's an inadequacy in me that I'm dumping on the record company. Look at the art industry, the film industry, the way people run supermarkets. There aren't a lot of virtuous organizations out there, really. Just the way things are done

is pretty hair-raising.



> Zoom

You may have thought, 'If he's struggling, how come he's got this nice house?' And I'll tell you. My wife knows a film actress, and after I had the accident, this film actress, in an amazing act of generosity, gave Alfie the money that she'd earned off a film so we could buy a flat. And it was with the money from that that we got this house. This isn't music money. Ronnie Scott and Pink Floyd and a few others also helped set us up. So a lot of what I've got is due to the generosity of particular people, and I'm just glad to have the opportunity to say thanks again. This is indulgent of me, but one man was very nice. I'd only met him once, and at that time I'd had a blazing alcoholic row with him - I can't remember what side either of us was on or what the details were, but there was a lot about Pinochet and Chairman Mao in there. That was the only time I met him, and I was just a friend of a friend. When I broke my back, he was in America. He came to England to see me in the hospital and he said, "I want to put you in the best hospital money can buy. I'll take you anywhere and you won't have to worry about the bill.' Isn't that amazing? It was Warren Beatty. Since he's the kind of man who often gets unsympathetic press, I just wanted to say there are some things about him that he himself would never talk about.

MUSICIAN: If the music world is really so terrible, why carry on?

NELSON: Musicians do complain about business and the rest of it, but ... they're so damn lucky. Despite all the threats of bankruptcy and all the angst, I wouldn't change any of it, because I love what I'm doing and I couldn't do it any other way. I've got a life that would be a dream for some people, so there's very little room to complain. And I'm bloody useless at anything else. [laughs]

WYATT: My maths teacher at school told me once, Look, if you don't pass maths 0-level, you'll be coming back here, 'cause you won't get any work, you know.' And I haven't had to go back to him yet. I've gone a long way without any exam results - I must be well over halfway by now. And I'm proud of that; it's pure vanity.

NELSON: That's like the day I left my day job. The boss said, "Now, about this pop business, Bill... [Laughter] it's rather flaky, you know. I don't want to put you off or anything, I'm wishing you all the best, but your job's always here for you if you have to come back." I got outside that door and I went: ' Yeah!" And I've never gone back. Not even to give them any autographs.

How to make a ROBERT WYATT record: Riviera portable keyboard and make sure the vibrato's set real slow. "It matches my voice," says Wyatt of the instrument that he found in a Venice toyshop back In '73. Also in Wyatt's Louth abode are a Yamaha baby grand piano and PSS-780 keyboard, and two AKG D1200 E microphones. Percussives Include some no-name timbales, Paiste crash, Black Rock Ride and an old Gretsch snare which hasn't been used for a while. "I never liked snares because of their martial overtones, so I've gotten rid of them for my solo records." He also favors brushes and mallets over sticks. Wyatt gets it all down on a Tascam 244 four-track recorder, hidden underneath the Kampuchean Flag.

And here's all you need to duplicate BILL NELSON's Studio Rose-Croix in your very own home: a Fostex B16 tape machine, A.H.B. Systems 8 32-channel mixing console, Sony PCM-Fl mastering deck, Quad amp driving Tannoy Little Red Monitors, and for outboard, a Yamaha SPX90, Fostex compressor/limiter, and MXR 0/1 reverb. Keyboards include an E-max Series 1, Yamaha DX7 and CS70M, while the drum machine's an Akai MPC 60. For guitars, Bill's got three Yamaha SG2000s, Ovation 6 and 12 string acoustics, a Rickenbacker stereo electric 12-string guitars, a Guild D50, and a custom-made Viellette-Citron. A devoted E-Bow user, Nelson has one of the original silver models.

Mac Randall

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

Robert Wyatt - Record Collector N° 154 - June 1992

ROBERT WYATT



CANTERBURY SPECIAL

ROBERT WYATT

MARK PAYTRESS MEETS THE INSPIRED AND POLITICALLY-COMMITTED SINGER & WRITER

Of all the active Canterbury-based musicians who came to prominence during the Sixties and early Seventies, Robert Wyatt retains the critical and musical edge. Over the years, he's transformed himself from a drummer with a keenness for inventive solos into a songwriter, and interpreter, of the highest calibre. His delicate voice is instantly recognisable, even if it sometimes seems to go unheard outside the close-knit world of musicians and critics. Elvis Costello wrote the classic "Shipbuilding" for him; countless others cite him as one of the finest singers in contemporary British pop music.

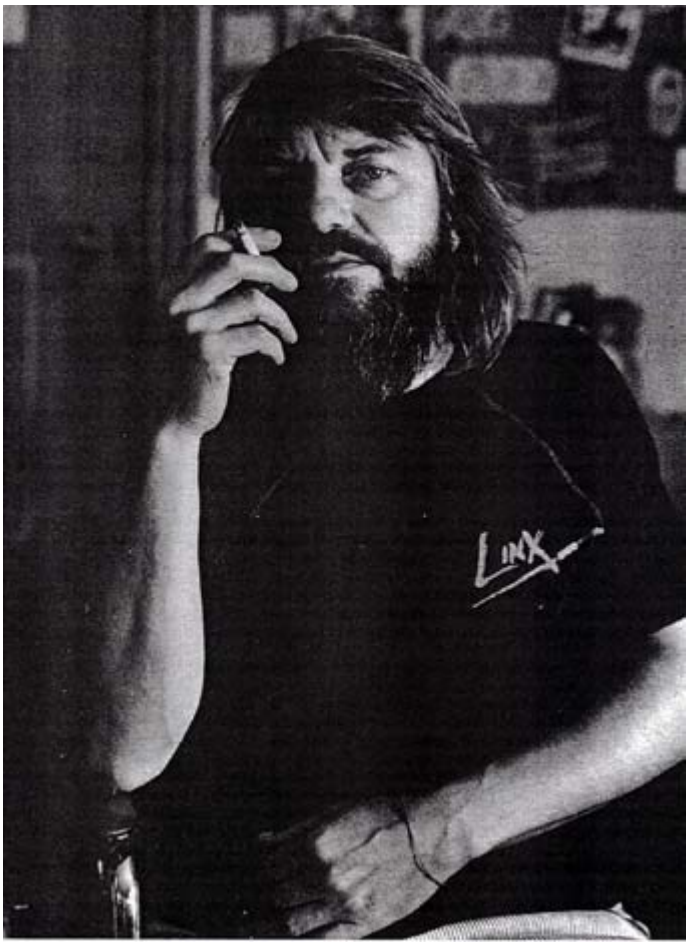
Wyatt is a contradiction. A drummer-turned-singer with a capacity to reduce the hardest of souls to tears with a few bars of verse; the avant-garde jazz fan with an uncanny knack of writing memorable ballads; and the self-confessed musical doodler who likes nothing better than to construct soundscapes in his music room, while retaining a vision that extends far beyond national and cultural boundaries in search of meaningful songs to cover.

When he left the Soft Machine, that group was entering its final, least inspired phase. Wyatt released one patchy solo album, "The End Of An Ear", before forming Matching Mole, a criminally overlooked outfit from the early Seventies who, like Henry Cow, reintroduced political polemic into the broad spectrum of popular music.

In 1973, Wyatt's musical career was jeopardised after an accident left him unable to walk. Since being confined to a wheelchair, he's made the somewhat inevitable switch from drum-kit to keyboards and percussion instruments, and his work has taken - on an intensely personal style, sometimes haunting, at other times warm and profoundly moving. His

acclaimed series of solo recordings have taken him into the Top 30, seen him forge links with the post-punk independent scene, and work with some of the most accomplished songwriters of recent years.

Back in the Sixties, it was Robert Wyatt's intricate, jazz-inspired drumming which won him most praise. His occasional vocal excur-sions — high-pitched and sung with a lisp — were often regarded as a gimmick, a view enhanced by the nonsense lyrics that were a feature of the early Softs material. Then came "Moon In June", his side-long contribution to the band's "Third" album, a piece brimming with inventive melodies and musical inspira-tion, which revealed Wyatt's true capabilities as a songwriter. This talent was honed down for "0 Caroline" from the first Matching Mole album, a rare piece of originality in the often hackneyed world of the romantic balladeer.



Wyatt re-emerged with the self-explanatory "Rock Bottom" album in 1974, a poignant collection of song-based material infused with the inquisitive passion for musical adventure which always informs his work. Last autumn, he returned with a new album, "Dondestan", which received the usual plaudits from the critics, and this year is likely to see the release of some notable archive recording; on Recommended and/or Rough Trade Records.

When I spoke to him, Wyatt — one of the most thoughtful and entertaining interviewees I've ever encountered — was probably keener to discuss the current state of political opposition in this country (and this was before the election!) than trawl back through the memory banks, past the pre-accident barrier, an era which he now claims an amnesia for. You might not find exactly which Soft Machine track it was that Hendrix played on, but you will discover some acute observations on the development of popular music throughout the course of the interview.

Record Collector: There's a melancholy feel on your latest album, "Dondestan", particularly on the tracks where you set music to your wife Alfie's lyrics, which contain a lot of natural imagery. Is this indicative of a kind of retreat from the outside world on your part?

Robert Wyatt: I can't speak for Alfie. She didn't write them as song lyrics, but as a group of poems called "Out Of Season", which were written while I was working in Spain. It was winter, and we were in a holiday area out of season. Being in such an artificial place built for tourists was particularly strange in winter when no-one was there: it had a very strong atmosphere, very specific. The sole person you'd meet would be a West African trinket seller with only abandoned dogs to sell them to. The songs I chose tended to be just about that atmosphere, being on the beach by the sea, literally at the edge of things.

RC: The political content that many expect to find on a Robert Wyatt record eventually surfaces on the second side. Tieing in with what I may have misread as melancholy is "CP Jeebies", which appears to be a veiled attack on the state of the Communist Party. You've been a well-known member of the CP for many years,

but a line like "there will be nothing you can put your finger on" seems to hint at the Party's abandonment of Marxist principles in recent years.

RW: I'm glad that's apparent, yes! But I would say it's more personal. When I joined the Party in the late Seventies, the people I actually liked and got on with were very often the ageing battled-scarred anti-Fascists who'd been in it since the Thirties and had been through a thing or two. There was a plumber who, despite the opportunity to get promoted, chose to stay at the hard end, and really lived the meaning of what he was doing. We used to go to "Morning Star" bazaars and I completely fell in love with the people there.



"At Last I Am Free" was coupled with a fine reading of "Strange Fruit" on this 1980 single.

But then I felt disappointed when a much trendier bunch of post-Beatle people picked up on it, and sat around making sarcastic jokes about these old people because they listened to Paul Robeson and didn't know about what was going on today. I didn't like those people at all! I felt I was being patronised — "Oh, we've got a musician, a real useful badge for our new image." I wasn't interested in helping the right wing do what they do so well anyway, which is laugh at old lefties. Nearly every other Radio 4 play was doing something like that. It's too easy, and it's ageist as well.

RC: Do you see yourself as an artist in opposition?

RW: I don't think the rock idiom itself is inherently revolutionary. I use what comes naturally to me, which is playing music. I can imagine and have seen situations where people who sing songs can be part of a general psyching up for a movement, but I can't see how it could possibly ever be the basis for one. So I see myself as a supporter, a cheer-leader, but rock music is not a substitute for real politics.

The reason I joined the Communist Party during the late Seventies was that I couldn't see rock groups' pose-striking attitudes as changing anything or presenting the slightest challenge to the establishment. There's a lot of that in rock'n'roll, all that "I'm frightening the grown-ups" nonsense. It was conceited.

I left the CP a couple of years ago. It just seemed to be a launching pad for media pundits. I can see no difference between the stance of "Marxism Today" and the David Owen/SDP viewpoint. When I first said that, I was told I was just being provocative, but later on, they took on board a great deal that. I don't need that. I left the Labour Party in the first place because there were too many people like David Owen in it. At least we had a good laugh thinking up some new titles when "Marxism Today" asked readers to send suggestions for its new name!

RC: As part of the Soft Machine in the late Sixties, how much was there a sense that you were chipping away at established styles at the time and forging something new?

RW: I can't really remember what we thought. But if we did think we were changing the

world or loosening the bricks of the establishment, I'd have to say that I think we were probably wrong about that. Any thoughts that I may have entertained in that area were crushed by hearing the group being played on Radio Free Europe to prove how wonderful the West and the establishment is. And so, on the contrary, I think pop and rock has helped the establishment to become more adaptable. No real power shifts have happened.



"Stalin Wasn't Stalling" was a reminder of the Soviet Union's crucial role in the last War.

RC: The sleeve-note for the second Soft Machine album spoke of "music for the mind", as if you were actually rejecting dance music.

RW: It wouldn't have been me who put that on there. That's the kind of remark that would have led to me leaving! It could have been somebody at the record company, but as we couldn't play dance music at that time, it's purely academic anyway! When we started, we did play James Brown medleys, and aspired to what Georgie Fame and Jimmy James and the Vagabonds were doing, but in a provincial, clumsy way.

RC: How did Soft Machine end up playing at the Proms?

RW: That actually happened because a composer, Tim Souster, who had written a piece for his spot, still had half the evening to fill, so he thought he'd be naughty and get in a rock band. There was a certain amount of fluidity at that time amongst certain musicians, it was fairly open-ended. I don't think it was a particularly good gig, though: the Albert Hall isn't a very nice place to play.

RC: Can you recall the Soft Machine playing any gigs before the IT benefit in October 1966 as the Soft Machine and not as the Wilde Flowers?

RW: I remember some of us playing in proto form at the Establishment nightclub: me, Hugh Hopper and Daevid Allen. And I remember another event where we played at the Marquee one night when they also had Donovan and a sitar player, and free music by AMM, but I don't recall what we were called. I seem to remember the first gig where we used the name was at the Roundhouse, but I could be wrong.

RC: There's a studio out-take that purports to be Jimi Hendrix and Soft Machine, but the vocalist is certainly neither you, Kevin Ayers nor Hendrix. Do you recall any studio jams, and can you confirm. Hendrix's presence on either side of the first single?

RW: I seem to remember that he came in and put some rhythm guitar on one of Kevin's songs that came out on single. Because we had the same manager, we'd sometimes be in the same studios at the same time, but I can't recall any specific occasion.

RC: Why did you leave the Softs after the release of "Fourth" early in 1971?

RW: I don't know why I was ever in the Softs! I suppose I wanted to work with musicians that I got on with, could talk to and share ideas with. We'd got together because we were the only ones who could play the appropriate instruments, but when we got to London, we started to meet other musicians. It was exciting getting the band well-known enough to headline gigs, but the last vestige of adventure left it at that point.

RC: Wasn't it getting musically sterile?

RW: Yeah. I'm not particularly interested in English jazz-rock. Different musical textures were forming in my head, which were not just related to drumming on endless rehashes of half-remembered Eric Dolphy solos.

RC: Were you pleased with your first solo venture, "The End Of An Ear"?

RW: It was good fun doing it. There was a great feeling of throwing off the corsets. I couldn't believe my nerve, actually — playing piano on a record!



"Arauco" / "Caimanera" was probably Wyatt's most artistically successful Rough Trade 45.

RC: By 1972, you'd formed Matching Mole, who almost uniquely at the time, introduced politics into rock music.

RW: A lot of people haven't noticed that: they assume that really only started to happen in the late Seventies. At that time, the world seemed to become more solid around me, and I felt more assertive and willing to try and not be part of this 'setting' mould, whereas in the previous decade, there was a sort of feeling that — despite what I said earlier — it was all up in the air, that there could never be another Vietnam War, that racism and colonialism could soon be over. But by the early Seventies, you could see a narcissistic Englishness settling in the ground around you.

RC: Since your accident, you've consistently moved closer towards a song-based format. Do you miss collective music making?

RW: I get the sense of working with people in other ways. It's almost impossible to do a solo thing even if you want to. If I'm playing drums or piano, I'm thinking about previous drummers and pianists that I've listened to, so they're part of a gang in my head that I'm having conversations with. And then choosing other people's material, whether it be Latin-American or old gospel songs, to me that's a kind of a communion too. And you're always working with the engineer. It's always like a kind of blind date when you go into the studio — what's he going to be like?! So never felt in danger of being alone. Music making isn't like that. It is a social activity.

RC: Why did you stop making music after "Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard"?

RW: I got overwhelmed by other things that seemed to be more interesting, and embarked upon a process of completing the higher education that I never had, having left school early and gone straight into washing-up and working in a forest. I started to become interested in learning about things that I'd been too busy living before to get round to. Alfie and I used to really enjoy watching the Open University, with these extraordinary professors and their blackboards and charts. I'd watch them all, but particularly those ones that dealt with communication, education and politics, and the relationship between Europe and other countries. That became far more interesting to me than playing musical instruments and being with musicians.

Alongside that, we started going to the London Film Festival, which was akin to a psychedelic experience. We'd see something like 30 films in a fortnight, including many that would probably never get shown again — films from places like Senegal and Java. That was an extraordinary experience, the most exciting barrage of stimuli I'd had since I discovered jazz as a teenager.

RC: Did you see punk rock as a more effective disturbance of the status quo than Rock In Opposition groups like Henry Cow, whom you were loosely affiliated with?

RW: I liked the music of the late Seventies. I thought the Sex Pistols were a wonderful group and I loved Poly Styrene's lyrics for X-Ray Spex. I actually became more interested because it existed side-by-side with reggae. There was a new generation of black youth that seemed to be less English than their bus-driving, nursing parents, who'd been making more of an effort to be more English but who hadn't really been welcomed as much as they might have been. This new generation didn't bother trying and instead began recultivating rural Jamaican patois and all that. It was a grass-roots "fuck-you-too" movement, which actually was a great inspiration for punk alongside it.

It really climaxed in the Two-Tone era when people began digging up the old ska records. I loved Two-Tone. That was really just about the last era of pop/rock music that I felt totally at one with. Jerry Dammers and the Beat and all those people — I thought they were lovely. That whole late Seventies environment really was like a breath of fresh air.



Ivor Cutler's "Grass" was one of the later 45s in the Rough Trade series of cover versions.

RC: And provided the inspiration that led you directly to Rough Trade?

RW: Yes. I felt much more at home among that generation of musicians and the people at Rough Trade. It was like the days when I was a teenage jazz fan. All the labels then were indies, and it was very much that kind of atmosphere, disturbing the grand empire of accountants and lawyers of the major companies.

RC: Was it a definite political statement then, signing to an indie?

RW: No, I have to say it was more personal because I liked them. The songs that I sang around that time, some drawn from Chilean and Cuban culture, perhaps made the point

that while there's some really tough people on the front line of the fight, they actually sing very gentle ballads. South American revolutionary songs, which are sung by guerillas in the mountains, sound to us like "Come Dancing" music. And I thought that was very interesting and a point worth making. There is never a simple equation between making a racket and being dangerous and political activists. It's much more complicated than that.

RC: Don't you think that the growing sense of internationalism in music has, like the sound of the Sixties underground, now been incorporated into the mainstream?

RW: Yes. People are really getting interested in Cuban music, but it's almost invariably played by Cuban exiles in New York or Puerto Ricans doing salsa-fied version of Cuban music. Nobody's allowed to say Cuba's a hot-bed of wonderful music because it's seen as a non-country. So despite this recent upsurge in interest in Latin-American music, it by-passes the people who are actually living in Cuba and enjoy being there. It might have been an international celebration, but it's just become part of the cycle of appropriation of other people's stuff.

RC: You've rarely appeared in concert over the past 15 years, bar a couple of memorable guest appearances with the Raincoats and with Henry Cow. Is that something you miss?

RW: No I don't. I still have nightmares about twice a week about playing live. I used to drink myself under the table in order to pluck up enough courage to go on stage. I was always more interested in having the musical ideas and working them out than in the presentation.

Even going into the studio is a bit like performing. I get nervous. But that's what I have to do to make records. At home I have a four-track cassette, a couple of mikes and the sort of instruments that you hear on my records, and that's enough for me. I'm more interested in getting the bare bones of the music right — the words, the chords, the tunes, the rhythms. I don't like to dwell on the fancification of it all.

RC: But there are a lot of textures on your records.

RW: Actually I did spend quite a lot of time at home preparing this record, working out the layers, so that I can go into the studio and do it quickly. So perhaps it is fancification after all, getting the right textures and sounds to go with the words.

RC: Can you remain optimistic about the political and social concerns which has inspired your music?

RW: No. I heard the news the other day and the whole thing was basically Pentagon newspeak. The qualification for being a news-reader seems to be, "Can you read White House press releases?" It's never been more pathetic, in my opinion. We're really veering towards an American political system of identikit Republican and Democrat parties. And I think that's sad for the rest of the world because it means that the neo-colonialist practices are more safely established now than they were at the beginning of this century, and that means that a lot of people in the world are going to be in for a hard time for a long time. But I'm prepared to cheer-lead almost anybody who's still willing to have a go.

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

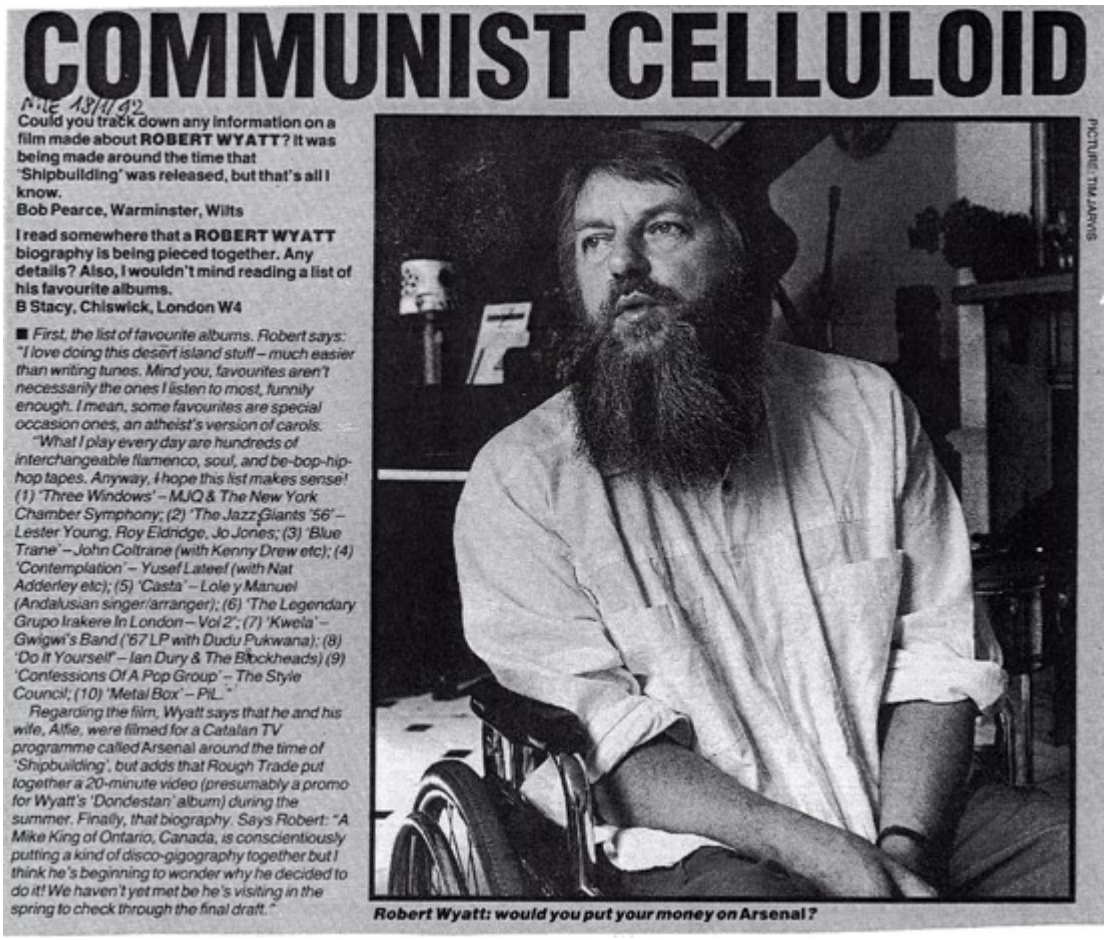
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Communist Celluloid - New Musical Express - 18 January, 1992

COMMUNIST CELLULOID



COMMUNIST CELLULOID

NME 18/1/92

Could you track down any information on a film made about ROBERT WYATT? It was being made around the time that 'Shipbuilding' was released, but that's all I know.
Bob Pearce, Warminster, Wilts

I read somewhere that a ROBERT WYATT biography is being pieced together. Any details? Also, I wouldn't mind reading a list of his favourite albums.
B Stacy, Chiswick, London W4

■ *First, the list of favourite albums. Robert says: "I love doing this desert island stuff – much easier than writing tunes. Mind you, favourites aren't necessarily the ones I listen to most, funnily enough. I mean, some favourites are special occasion ones, an atheist's version of carols.*

"What I play every day are hundreds of interchangeable flamenco, soul, and be-bop-hip-hop tapes. Anyway, I hope this list makes sense! (1) 'Three Windows' – MJQ & The New York Chamber Symphony; (2) 'The Jazz Giants '56' – Lester Young, Roy Eldridge, Jo Jones; (3) 'Blue Trane' – John Coltrane (with Kenny Drew etc); (4) 'Contemplation' – Yusef Lateef (with Nat Adderley etc); (5) 'Casta' – Lole y Manuel (Andalusian singer/arranger); (6) 'The Legendary Grupo Irakere In London – Vol 2'; (7) 'Kwela' – Gwigwi's Band ('67 LP with Dudu Pukwana); (8) 'Do It Yourself' – Ian Dury & The Blockheads) (9) 'Confessions Of A Pop Group' – The Style Council; (10) 'Metal Box' – PiL."

Regarding the film, Wyatt says that he and his wife, Alfie, were filmed for a Catalan TV programme called Arsenal around the time of 'Shipbuilding', but adds that Rough Trade put together a 20-minute video (presumably a promo for Wyatt's 'Dondestan' album) during the summer. Finally, that biography. Says Robert: "A Mike King of Ontario, Canada, is conscientiously putting a kind of disco-gigography together but I think he's beginning to wonder why he decided to do it! We haven't yet met be he's visiting in the spring to check through the final draft."

PICTURE: TIM JARVIS

Robert Wyatt: would you put your money on Arsenal?

Robert Wyatt: would you put your money on Arsenal ? (PICTURE : TIM JARVIS)

Could you track down any information on a film made about ROBERT WYATT? it was being made around the time that 'Shipbuilding' was released, but that's all I know.
Bob Pearce, Warminster, Witts

I read somewhere that a ROBERT



WYATT biography is being pieced together. Any details? Also, I wouldn't mind reading a list of his favourite albums.
B Stacy, Chiswick, London W4 .

First, the list of favourite albums.
Robert says: "I love doing this desert island stuff - much easier than writing tunes. Mind you, favourites aren't necessarily the ones I listen to most, funnily enough. I mean, some favourites are special occasion ones, an atheist's version of carols.

"What I play every day are hundreds of interchangeable flamenco, soul, and be-bop-hip-hop tapes. Anyway, I hope this list makes sense !

(1) 'Three Windows' - MJQ & The New York Chamber Symphony;

(2) 'The Jazz Giants '56' - LesterYoung, Roy Eldridge ,Jo Jones;

(3) 'Blue Trane' - John Coltrane (with Kenny Drew etc);

(4) 'Contemplation' - Yuse fLateef (with Nat Adderley etc);

(5) 'Casta '- Lole y Manuel (Andalusian singer/arranger);

(6) 'The Legendary Grupo lrakere ln London - Vol2';

(7) 'Kwela' - Gwigwi's Band ('67 LP wit hDudu Pukwana);

(8) 'Do It Yourself - Ian Dury & The Blockheads);

(9) 'Confessions Of A Pop Group'- The Style Council;

(10) 'Metal Box' - PiL.'

"' Regarding the film, Wyatt says that he and his wife, Alfie, were filmed for a Catalan TV programme called Arsenal around the time of 'Shipbuilding', but adds that Rough Trade put together a 20-minute video (presumably a promo for Wyatt's 'Dondestan' album) during the summer.

Finally, that biography. Says Robert: "A Mike King of Ontario, Canada, is conscientiously putting a kind of disco-gigography together but I think he's beginning to wonder why he decided to do it! We haven't yet met be he's visiting in the spring to check through the final draft."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt - Ptolemaic Terrascope Vol. 3 - N°1 - January 1992

ROBERT WYATT



The "Canterbury Scene" are three words which have become common coinage in these pages in recent times; not because of some strange fannish addiction to anything emanating to that region of England, but simply due to the sheer quality of the music which has umbrella'd out over the years since those humble 'Wilde Flowers' beginnings of 1964. Whilst musically unimportant in itself, the Wilde Flowers contained in its original line-up three people who, within a decade, were to be considered in many circles, the definitive English rock vocalists: Richard Sinclair, Kevin Ayers, and of course Robert Wyatt.

Whilst always highly rated as a drummer, it is for his wonderful singing and songwriting that Wyatt is today universally admired and respected. The lack of his vocals in the Soft Machine after the glorious 'Moon In June' on their album 'Third' (unbelievably, he only drums on the following album, 'Four', as the rest of the band believed his voice to be dispensible!) marked the departure of any real interest in the band; however in the subsequent Matching Mole, not only is there the treat of hearing Robert's voice combined with the equally unique sound of Dave Sinclair's keyboards, but there's also what many people consider to be one of Wyatt's finest moments - the near perfect love song 'O Caroline', a desert-island-disc if ever there was one.

As is Wyatt's second solo album, 'Rock Bottom' - a masterpiece of languid depths and charged emotion. The previous LP, 'End Of An Ear' is for avant-gardeners only, while the third LP, 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard' is more free blowing but none the less essential. Together, this pair of platters confirm for all time the talents of Robert Wyatt and his place in the hearts and minds of his listeners. Since then he has sporadically put out a handful of excellent singles and the occasional LP on Rough Trade as well as making several guest appearances, most notably on Nick Mason's LP 'The Fictitious Sports' alongside jazz keyboardist Carla Bley.

Now that the Canterbury scene is again up and running with Caravan, Going Going (featuring Hugh Hopper) and Richard Sinclair's Caravan of Dreams, as well as rumours of an upcoming and long overdue return to form for Kevin Ayers and a strong new album from Robert Wyatt entitled 'Dondestan' on Rough Trade, it seems only right and proper that the Terrascope should be in the thick of it. Hence the following interview.

Whilst Robert, as you will see, was until recently unaware that he was considered an integral part of the 'Canterbury Scene', there is no denying that he has always been considered as such and his response is in terms of a mistaken geographical and biographical reference rather than in the general use of the term 'Canterbury' as a broad but distinct musical genre - one which rightly labels the likes of Dave Stewart and Jimmy Hastings as 'Canterbury', even thought neither of them has ever lived there. That small point cleared up, it's on to the results of a delightfully jovial afternoon spent in the relaxed and friendly company of Mr. Wyatt, an afternoon in which, fuelled by impromptu notes, failing memories, quite a lot of tea and the occasional (and vaguely apt) banana, we touched on as many aspects as possible of his long and never less than interesting career...

PT : How did it all begin?

RW : It's a long story. When the Romans left Britain... oh, then a few other things happened, I was born in 1945, went to school in the Fifties and left at the end of them. I think the Fifties were a very good time to be at school. It was in Canterbury - people say 'Oh, Canterbury', but I went to school



> Zoom

there and that's all there is to it.

PT : You didn't live there then?

RW : No I didn't, I lived near Dover actually, although I did have a spell there in late 1960 or early '61. I couldn't make head nor tail of school, I had a coupIe of friends there - one of whom from the age of about 10 was Hugh Hopper. His older brother played clarinet and had some nice records. My big brother had some nice records as well. But because our records were our big brothers' jazz record collections, people think we had older tastes than others our age.

PT : You obviously heard the radio as well, though?

RW : Not obviously at all. I never heard the thing much, quite frankly. We preferred records: jazz, some R&B - we were fans, as teenagers are. Then Hugh got a bass guitar and started playing some Ray Charles type stuff, so there was this twin-tracked thing going on, some dance or song-based music like R&B and some harmonic and melodic deviations of the modern jazz of the time. What we played was neither one or the other in the end, we sort of fell between two stools and stayed there, on the floor.

PT : Great play has been made down the years of the fact that you had various musical contemporaries at school, but in fact they weren't exactly contemporaries at all - there was a year or so between you all?

RW : That's right. I vaguely remember Dave Sinclair playing piano for the school hymns, but I knew his older brother better because we studied violin together for a couple of years. I think the myth really is more glowing than the reality. School life for me consisted mostly of trying to catch the same bus as the girls in the other schools. And I'm very glad I did, because my first wife, Pam, was a girl who lived on the same bus route. She kept me for years afterwards, working as a secretary for some fairly unpleasant cleric when I didn't have two pennies to rub together. I did a few jobs after leaving school, worked in a forest near Folkestone for instance, but that was it. We had a son - he's in his twenties now and a nurse - but that's really the most positive thing I can remember coming out of school. There was some music though, of course. Daevid Allen, who's a nomadic Australian, had come to Europe and floated about London and had some contacts which later became invaluable - people like Hoppy, who set up various gigs. I've come to the conclusion that the whole world is gradually becoming Australian... anyway, there was this bunch of people who were fairly radical in their own fields. And Daevid was older than us, so he showed us around. He used to get stoned, so he was my introduction to all that. He also had a dog which he used to take for walks with him - it was actually a tin can on the end of a bit of string which he would trail some yards behind him. To an impressionable lad of my age, that was pretty far out!

PT : And your first group, The Wilde Flowers, came together then?

RW : Hugh was the one in Canterbury who wanted to get a group together. We (the Wilde Flowers) did basicalIy R&B covers rather than hits, although we did occasionally do Beatles songs and stuff. The point is though, Hugh started writing his own material at this time and I would do odd bits as well - I started singing for instance, because he wouldn't sing himself. It was all a learning process, realIy. [Referring to Richard Sinclair's comments in issue 8 of the Terrascope:] Mine and Richard's memories of Wildflowers material seem slightly out of synch - the soul material I remember doing was like James Brown, Nina Simone, and simple jazz pieces like Watermelon Man (Herbie Hancock). But of course other stuff like by rock & rollers such as Chuck Berry was often thought of as Brit-beat music at the time...

PT : You did some demos as the Wilde Flowers, didn't you?

RW : Somebody knew a popular Radio Two styled musician named Wout Steinhaus who played steel guitar, he had a studio and let us make some things in there. I imagine they

were pretty appalling.

PT : They included a version of 'Memories', I think. (Robert later recorded it as the B-side to 'I'm A Believer')


National Jazz & Blues Fest Plumpton August 1969

Friday

FRIDAY was the dullest day with the Pink Floyd topping. Having heard the Azimuth co-ordinator at work several times this year, the novelty is beginning to wear off, and even the Floyd are getting a bit blase about the recorded seagulls! But they played well especially on "Cymbaline" and "The Journey" sounded effective with stereo speakers booming around the field.

Soft Machine were hit by two successive power failures. They gave up and walked off, their drummer, Robert Wyatt, tearfully kicking over his kit in frustration.

RW : It's possible, yes. Hugh wrote 'Memories' quite early on I can remember singing that. That was the challenge, really trying to play stuff that people hadn't heard before at local dances. Most of the time it was... it didn't have to be hits, but things that were on the band circuit at the time. I think after I left the Wilde Flowers went on to play that stuff very well, but by then I had drifted off with others, making odd noises here and there. The amoeba sort of split one half of the Wilde Flowers eventually became Caravan, and the rest became that other lot.

"One half of the Wilde Flowers eventually became Caravan, and the rest became that other lot."

PT : I've got the original line-up of the Soft Machine down as yourself, Kevin Ayers, Daevid Allen and Mike Ratledge, plus the guitarist Larry Nolan who left after a few gigs. Some demos were done with Georgio Gomelsky. Why did Daevid Allen leave fairly early on?

[as an aside, the demos are now out as 'Jet Propelled Photographs'. In 1972, Daevid Allen said of them, 'They're just a mortal embarrasment to me because it's probably the worst guitar I've ever played... but Robert is just magnificent so their release is justified'. The band also did the 'Feelin', Reelin', Squeelin" single - produced by Kim Fowley!]

RW : We played some music for a play by Alfred Jarry at the Edinburgh Fringe, I think it was. As a result of that we met people on the avant-garde circuit ('avant garde a clue', as Ronnie Scott calls it) who had connections in Paris, where there were student rebellions going on, people trying to set up autonomous universities and stuff. There was this bunch of people doing a play by Picasso called 'Desire Caught By The Tail' in the South of France, for which they wanted a band to play some suitably anarchic music. We went to do that and did some gigs alongside it in the same area. It turned out that a lot of Parisiens were down there, and some New York dropouts like Taylor Meade, so we got known amongst them. Anyway, when we came back, Daevid's Australian visa had run out and they wouldn't let him back into England. He stayed in France and went on to do stuff like Camembert Electrique etc. It was as simple as that.

PT : Then came the American tour with Hendrix and Eire Apparent? [with new member Andy Somers - later of Police - on guitar . He left after a few gigs to join Eric Burdon & The New Animals]


Soft Machine circa 67 l-r: Ayers, Wyatt, Ratledge

> Zoom

RW : Yeah, we got a deal with Anim-management, the Animals people, and because they'd also signed up Jimi Hendrix, we all went on the road to the States. What was useful about that was, a tour like that soon knocks the whimsy out of you. Playing in front of a few thousand beer-soaked Texan teenagers waiting impatiently for Jimi Hendrix does something for your nervous system. It makes you get on with things and state your case. It could have been awful, it could have been very frightening for us - we were going around there with very little money with bands who were using a lot of money (although it turns out they weren't getting to see a lot of it) - but luckily, the Jimi Hendrix Experience were very protective towards us. Like, Hendrix would sometimes get some flak for having this

weird-sounding band at the beginning of his show,
and he always said look, they're trying to do something, they're not trying to copy anybody else, and I want them on the show, OK? He personally stood up for us, even though we were making a lot of musical mistakes and hadn't got it fully together. The others in the Experience were simply terrific as well, and they were always doing things for us without seeming to use their privilege. Like, Noel would say look, we're all going down to this club and we want to go in mob-handed, so you'll have to come too. What he meant was, we know you couldn't afford to go in, we know you couldn't afford to buy any drinks once you're in there, so we're taking you. But they'd never put it like that. Mitch helped us a lot as well- such a brilliant drummer, he'd been with Georgie Fame before, and you have to be good to work with somebody like that. A very proud bloke, quick to take offence but he's actually all heart. Sitting there watching them play every night and seeing how they'd work was great for us. Mitch had had this maplewood drum kit made to his own specifications, and at the end of the tour he gave it to me. Everything I've played since as a drummer has been on that kit which Mitch gave to me.



PT : So you have some good memories of that tour?

RW : Absolutely, yes. I mean, I know 1968 wasn't an easy time to be in America, I saw a lot of horrible things which make you think a bit. You read articles here sometimes about racism and of course we have a right to talk about it, but unless you've spent some time in the States where the streets smell of racism, you really have no idea. I saw the kinds of things that a sheltered English lad had never seen, the hostility between the police and any kids with hair... the police would ride through crowds on motorcycles without even waiting for them to clear. I saw them pick up one kid, hold him horizontally and run him into a wall like a battering ram. We were pretty much sheltered as a group going from hotel to hotel, but you could see that life on the streets was sticky.

PT : Did Hendrix himself suffer from the racism at all?

RW : Well, Hendrix was a rich entertainer, therefore he couldn't really be black. It was a class thing. You'd get cops standing at the side of the shows saying 'hey! That nigger picks good!'. But there's always been a place in America for the black entertainer. Mind you, they've a reason to be grateful. I mean, where would American music be today without the black American's contribution? About as famous as New Zealand's I should think.

PT : The Eire Apparent album (on Buddah) came out of that tour - are you on it?

"Hendrix was trying to turn it from pop into something more dangerous..."

RW : Yeah, that was nice. Me and Noel did girly choruses basically, and Hendrix was trying to turn it from being pop into something more dangerous, as he saw it. Eire Apparent were a very nice bunch of Irish lads. They joined us for the second half of the tour, in a way it was to get something more poppy in on the act - but they'd been signed up and we reorganised the concerts accordingly. It was a good, contrasting sort of thing. I have to say though that even on our best nights, Hendrix would simply erase the memory of everything that had gone before. He was just so fucking good. And consistently good, too. Better than on the records, actually - that's one thing we had in common, I think we played better than we ever recorded and I think he did as well. That's the jazz element for you.

PT : The first Soft Machine album was actually recorded in New York?

RW : That's right. Now, what was the name of the guy that produced that?

PT : Tom Wilson?

RW : That's him. He'd worked with Frank Zappa so they figured he'd be able to deal with us. He was very nonchalent, not kind of fretting - just play, we'll tape it and it'll come out alright. It's easy. He was living his life, and we were welcome to join in if we wanted to. But he made sure all the nuts and bolts were all tight - he did his job. I have to say though that because we in the group never got on very well personally, in a studio situation you'd be dealing with each other much more whereas on stage, you're all facing the same way which is outwards - so somehow we could work together much better live than in the studio.

PT : When was the last time you listened to that album?

"I'd no more listen to that [first Sort Machine album] again than I would put my school trousers back on"

RW : About twenty years ago. I'd no more listen to that again than I would get out my school trousers and put them back on. I accept it completely, but the only way I can concentrate on doing my best is by clearing whatever's gone before ruthlessly away. I couldn't function by sitting in my own bath water!

PT : The Sort Machine disintegrated at that point - you stayed in New York and then later moved to Los Angeles?

RW : Yeah, I liked New York. Mitch took us around and introduced us to some other musicians that I might not have otherwise met - people like Larry Coryell. Then Hendrix booked a house in Los Angeles at the end of the tour, a big L-shaped place it was - basically they're only stage sets for Perry Mason films, but when there's no Perry Mason going on, people live in them. So there we were in this L-shaped stage set with people shouting 'hi!' across the swimming pool...

PT : You recorded some demos while you were in New York and LA?

RW : I did, yeah. Jeff Dexter's just found one of them, I must have left it at his house by accident - but it's only an acetate so it gets really grunged up whenever you try to play it. It costs a lot of money to re-record them and clean them up, but he's trying to organise that at the moment. I also started writing bits and pieces which turned up in later reincarnations of the group.

PT : At that time, did you consider yourself to be a part of Soft Machine?


The same crew as the above photo but with the addition (briefly) of Andy Summers.

RW : I don't know what I felt, really. I remember thinking that I wasn't being a very good father. Anyway, we came back to England and found people were wanting us to do some gigs, so we 'phoned each other up to see if we were all into it. Kevin Ayers wanted to do his own thing, so Hugh, who had already been roadying for us and had actually written some of the best tunes in our repertoire, was the natural choice for a replacement. We reformed really as a response to being offered jobs. I thought God, this noise we're making is boring. I went down to the Marquee and saw Keith Tippett's band and thought they were really good, so we asked if we could borrow their brass section for a while, which made it a bit richer. We went on the road like that for a bit.

PT : You'd already recorded the second Soft Machine album by this time?

RW : I think so - I can't really remember. I haven't got a copy of that one, either.

PT : And by the 3rd album, by which time sax player Elton Dean had joined, the band seemed to have fractured - it's like a side each, really?

RW : I suppose so, although I must say I enjoy Hugh's side, the live side. There was this British jazz-rock thing developing though and I found it a rather tight-arsed thing really, a fairly weak version of what was a pretty dodgy idiom in the first place. I thought, I'm literally not going to get a word in edgeways here. I got all my fun from doing gigs outside of it, playing with Keith Tippett's friends or with the South African exiles that were around. It might not leave any great records, but it was nice to be working with people you enjoy being with. The adventure of trying things out seemed to be more important than getting polished results and showing off tricky time signatures. The corsets seemed to be tightening by the month.

PT : The Soft Machine's appearance at the Proms happened about this time, didn't it? (13/8/70)

RW : Yeah, we were invited there by a very nice English composer named Tim Souster who, being an English composer, had a night to himself at the Proms. He'd written a piece for it which didn't last the whole night, so he thought 'I'll get that band in, that'll stir it up...'. I didn't really like playing there (the Royal Albert Hall) because I couldn't hear what we were doing - it's an appalling place to play. My microphone wasn't on when I was singing and the organ kept breaking down. We did get to be interviewed by Richard Baker though!

P**T : Next we had your first solo album, 'End Of An Ear'?**

RW : Yeah, that was me throwing off the corsets basically. All hell was let loose. I just screamed me head off and had a lovely time, I even played the piano. I can't actually play the piano, but I thought right - I'm going to play the fucking piano. Turned out I could play what I wanted to hear after all. Just goes to show, you never know until you try!

PT : And you recorded 'Bananamoon' with Daevid Allen....

RW : Did I? You're right, I think I did.

PT : .... and went on the road with Kevin Ayers and The Whole World.

RW : That's true. I remember, he'd take two rooms at the hotel - one for him and one for the rest of the band. I mean, I know it was Ayers' band, but I'd never heard of that before! I come from this sort of lefty, co-operative background so I wasn't used to this sort of colonial treatment. Me and Mike Oldfield, Dave Bedford, LoI Coxhill alI scrunged up in this little rat-infested room - well, I suppose we were the rats really. Anyway, I thought that was a bit off so I jumped out of the frying pan and went back into the fire for a bit.

PT : To do the 4th Soft Machine album.

RW : That's it. Back into the fire, as I say.

PT : And then onto Matching Mole with David Sinclair, who was later replaced by Dave MacRae, Phil Miller and Bill MacCormick?



RW : Well, I wanted to play with people I got on with, who would let me sing. Jazz and rock was turning into a horrible hybrid form like railway lines that you couldn't get off. I wanted something that was using that same eclectic approach but which was looser. I liked bands like Tony Williams' Lifetime, a real joyful sort of traffic jam of a sound - like a conversation rather than a series of solos. We did a few tours and a coupIe of albums and just muddled along for a lot less money than I was getting before, but I'm a bit suicidal like that. I left the previous band just as they were starting to break even as well. I think Matching Mole would have carried on, but at the end of it Dave McRae [the man who wrote all the 'Goodies' songs with Bill Oddie!] wanted a trio which concentrated on me on drums and I didn't want to be

corralled into that again. We did do some gigs as a trio, me and Dave and a bass player, and I really enjoyed those but I wanted to start singing properly. I also met people who hadn't been into the jazz thing at all, like Francis Monkman, who was into working out composed structures. I was working on both of those things really when I broke my back, so obviously that put paid to them both because I couldn't drum any more, and I didn't really feel like singing either. I spent most of 1974 - or was it '73? I can't really remember when I did it - in hospital. People think that the LP which came out afterwards, 'Rock Bottom' , was about being paraplegic or about breaking your back - but it's not. I don't write songs about being paraplegic, l'm not that introspective actually. I'd already written quite a lot of it beforehand, it would have been material for the group with Francis Monkman.

PT : That group [Matching Mole Mark 3] never happened though?

RW : The reason I didn't want a group was that it was totally unfair, for a start asking musicians to hang around for months while you're sitting in hospital even though, nice geezers as they are, they might have done so. It's just not fair on them, I mean they've got to earn a living. And then wheelchairs - you just can't get them anywhere. It's taken my wife six months to find this place we're sitting in now, a single flat in London that a disabled person can use and afford. Touring would be quite out of the question. It would be hampering a whole group of people if I formed a band, it's completely out of the question. So the best thing was that I get my material out, such as I had, and try to do as much of it as I could myself. I got together with Nick Mason, a friend from the late Sixties, and he helped co-ordinate stuff that I couldn't possibly arrange myself - and we just got other musicians in to flesh it out. They seemed to understand my stuff- to me, the Rock Bottom group was more like a group than anything I've ever had before. We knew each other well enough to be able to work together, but the situation was unusual enough to put an adventurous thread through it and make everybody stir the creative juices a bit. I felt better after that than I had done for years.

PT : You obviously had some understanding people around you then?

RW : I certainly did. I got remarried - in fact, I think our wedding day was the same day as 'Rock Bottom' came out. It all came together nicely. My first wife and I had split up quite amicably, but as I say I just hadn't been a very good husband or father. I was just too busy speeding about all over the place. So maybe it was a punishment or something...

PT : But then, with respect, you weren't able to speed about so much, were you?

RW : Well, no. That's what my wife says, too!

PT : And then you had your hit single, 'I'm A Believer'.

RW : It was more of a single than a hit, but you can put the two words together if you want to. It was Simon Draper, the A&R man at Virgin,'s idea. Especially in England, record companies get very worried if you don't do singles.

PT : And you did a concert, as well.

RW : Yeah, Dave Stewart came along, Mike Oldfield - he was brilliant, he heard all my keyboard stuff, which I thought was inimitable, and just did it. I thought well, that puts me in my place, doesn't it? It was a good laugh, except Virgin sneakily recorded it and then put the cost of recording onto my bill, which I thought was a bit nasty.

PT : Next, you did the second album - 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard'.

RW : That's right. Although it had my name on it, it was basically a lot of people doing things that they hadn't perhaps got another context for. I did a duet with Fred Frith on piano - Fred's got this wonderful lyrical side to his music which he likes to play down, but it's a shame to waste it. I just stuck some words on, and copped half the royalties for that which I thought was a bit unfair really. Brian Eno came along and mucked about with it all. He didn't like jazz, so it was good having him in on it - like a bit of salt where it might have been all sugar. He was good company, he's a witty man. They (Virgin) charged us an awful lot for recording it at the Manor - I think I only stopped paying it off two years ago. I don't think we're supposed to live this long, really. It's not in the contract!

"I don't think we're supposed

to live this long..."

PT : You were doing live stuff with Hatfield And The North as well?

RW : D'you know, I'd completely forgotten about that. Yes, I did do some stuff. And I'm on one of the tunes on their album ['Calyx']. I later wrote some words for it, but we never recorded that.

PT : Anyway, we had the two albums - what about 'Yesterday's Man' - wasn't that supposed to be a single?

RW : Well, yes - but Virgin Records felt it was a bit...lugubrious. I liked it, myself. It only ever came out on a compilation.

PT : So how much do you feel part of what we loosely term "The Canterbury Scene"?

RW : I didn't even know it meant me until interviewers started asking me about it. As I say, because I'd bussed in from outside to go to school there I didn't really consider myself a Canterbury person. I think it really means people like Hugh Hopper and Richard Sinclair, who are genuinely based in that area. I met them there and I'm eternally grateful that I met someone like Hugh who provided something I don't think anyone else could have provided. My mind doesn't dwell on it as a place though, if I recall a former fantasy world upon which I draw, it's Harlem in the Forties and not Canterbury in the Fifties.

PT : Then there was a bit of a gap in your career?

RW : Well, what looks like a gap was just me living and not putting things down for posterity. I spent a lot of time sitting and thinking, worked on some odd things including a play by Harold Pinter. By that time I'd become more interested in what's now called 'World Music' - basically it's just anything that's not done by young white men from England or America. Or Australia, yes indeed.

PT: Then we had the string of singles on Rough Trade?

RW : I was going to a lot of political gatherings. People would ask me who I thought the best vocalist I'd heard that year was, and I'd say Dennis Skinner. His gigs were a lot better than most rock gigs! Alfie (my wife) took very good care of me, was always devising things for me to do to prevent me from getting bored like going to a festival of foreign films, that was a real eye-opener. Either because of that or in spite of it, I started to get more and more impatient with the idea that rock music is intrinically rebellious. Compared to the marginalised lives that the people I was becoming interested in were leading, the rock thing was a very safe and cosy part of the establishment. The establishment has always had a place for rebellion. Rock and Roll didn't invent that. So then I met a woman named Vivienne Goldman who was writing at the time about reggae from a political point of view. It was a very enlightened look at why black kids in London were being more un-English than their parents. She introduced me to a friend of hers, Geoff Travis, who was a&r man for Rough Trade Records. Geoff said, if ever you feel like recording again, let us know. I hadn't got any albums in my mind, but I thought I could at least try some of these other songs that I'd been listening to. So I deliberately went out to do a Chilean song or a Cuban song or get some Bengalis in the studio to play something. That generated my juices again, and it's that which really got me back into it.

PT : So you did several singles...

RW : Well, I didn't figure I was ready for an album, and besides they weren't supposed to be something that would last. They were done quickly, and there was that feeling about the punk movement which I've always liked, the same as with Matching Mole, that it wasn't a question of a polished, finished product, it was just the adventure of trying things.

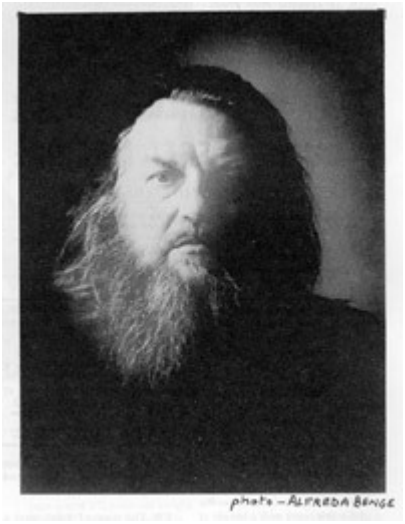
PT : I suppose the most successful one was 'Shipbuilding'?

RW : Yes, eventually. I think what happened was, Clive Langer and Elvis Costello had heard a few of my singles and cottoned onto them, I think Costello liked the way I'd done a choir-boy version of a chic disco thing ['At Last I'm Free']. So they wrote 'Shipbuilding' and offered it to us to do - said they considered it a Robert Wyatt song. I was really

impressed that they could do that, imagine what somebody else would do and find it just fits them like a glove. So Costello took us into the studio and produced it. Basically I just sang over a backing track. The bass player from Madness [Mark Bedford] played on it. Mind you, it all cost £10,000 more than it earned for us. That's what they call the price of success.

PT : An album came out which was basically the singles plus a couple more things besides?

RW : 'Nothing Can Stop Us'. A gratuitous title. Quite ironic really, it's meant to look like a Leftie sort of thing, but in fact it's lifted from some American talking in 1932 - "we should not make the mistake the English made of trying to govern the world, we shall merely own it. Nothing can stop us now!" At the time it was quite contentious, but I think it's turned out to be more or less true.



> Zoom

PT : 'Animals'?

RW : 'That was Victor Schonfield, an American film director who was making this 'Animals' film. He had a friend of ours doing the narrative and he asked her if she could find somebody who could do the film music. They got permission to use a track of Talking Heads music for the opening of the film, but they asked five hundred pounds for something like three minutes. He paid it, but he still had an hour and a half to fill. So I did the rest for a hundred pounds!

PT : Then it's 'Old Rottenhat' after that?

RW : Yes it is. I'd put ideas out without having a coherent reason for an LP. I was originally a drummer and not a composer, it's only occasionally it comes together enough. Thanks to the feedback from the singles though I'd become active again and had generated enough of my own material for an album, so I went and did it. I think the title, 'Old Rottenhat', was influenced by Ian Dury - he's one of the great lyricists in the English language, a very underestimated writer. He's also very funny, and I appreciate that. It was he who inspired me to use that obscure old London expression that I'd heard Alfie use.

"Ian Dury ... is one of the great lyricists in the English language."

PT : So we're coming now towards the present time.

RW : Inexorably, yes. I did an EP called 'Work In Progress' - Jeff wanted me to do *something* but I didn't have enough for an LP so I did that instead. I really enjoyed that - it was a nice studio. I did five things there including a Cuban song, a Chilean song, 'Amber & The Amberlines' (one of Hugh's tunes) and 'Pigs' for some Animal Rights people [Deltic, Captain Sensible's label]

PT : And then your new album, 'Dondestan'?

RW : Well, I'd been moving house further north where I could afford a room without any neighbours above for the same money. Now I can make a lot of noise and put my cymbals up - I've got a proper music room for the first time. The result of that is 'Dondestan'. The trouble was, I'd got the music, but I still hadn't really got around to the words. Alfie, my wife, had written all these poems in a collection called 'Out Of Season' which was ostensibly about being in Spain in the winter, but it also seemed to me to be about a lot of things... it would be pretentious to say what though, I just hope it resonates in different ways for the people listening to it. So I sang her poems to the music I was working on and just juggled it about until it all came together. There's one of Hugh's tunes on there as

well, I like to get one by him on a record - I'm superstitious about that - at least I've got somebody else to blame then!

At this point, we had to leave to make way for a journalist from some far glossier magazine than ourselves. We thank Robert profusely, shake hands and emerge onto the sunlit balcony of his flat. I'll leave the last words to Mr. Wyatt:



It's been a pleasure! A bit like a psychedelic experience going through it an that fast - I must have missed quite a bit out. I don't take any responsibility for lapses in memory or outright lies!

Interview : Mick Dillingham and Phil
Intro : Dill - Article : Phil
With thanks to Chris Stone for tea, sunbathing, bananas and organisation.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Hugh Hopper interview - Canterbury Nachrichten - N° 15 - Winter 1991



THE HUGH HOPPER INTERVIEW

"Keep on Caring", that is what Hugh Hopper did earlier that day for his daughter. But before he left, we made this 25-minutes interview:

F.: Hugh, what was Canterbury like 25 years ago?

H.H.: 25 years ago it was a very quiet place, it was just a small market town, nothing really happening at all. A very strange place to have a center of anything, because apart from the cathedral nothing happened there at all. Then about 25 years ago they started building the university, so things started. More influences came in from outside. And more and more tourism. It's still not a lot of music happening here but it's more an open place than it used to be. It used to be a very small market and country town.

F.: So what differed the Canterbury music scene at that time from the scenes at other towns like London?

H.H.: Well actually I think at the time it wasn't really a much difference. People like Richard, Richard Sinclair and Robert Wyatt and I were interested in different sorts of music, it wasn't just one sort of music we were in, just Rock'n'Roll or so... I mean Robert had listened to a lot of jazz, he introduced me into jazz. But his parents were interested in modern classical music, Stravinski and Varese and all this. I think what it was is that we were open to different influences from outside. Evenings of indian music and ethnic music, so it wasn't just... I think that most other bands that were still playing, were actually playing then in Canterbury were just doing one sort of music. They were playing Rock or Pop or Country and Western or something like that, whereas we were interested in lots of different things.

F.: How did you manage to get this all together?

H. H.: (laughs) That was a great difficulty, yes, it wasn't easy. We didn't play very much to be honest. I mean the Wilde Flowers, which was the first band we started about the end of 1964, and probably in the first year we only played maybe, I don't know, ten, twelve concerts the whole year. I mean, it wasn't a great festival of music. It was quite hard to find enough places to play.

F.: So at that time the Wilde Flowers were just a local band with no international or national meaning, wasn't it?

H.H.: Yeah that's right. We just played around the area, in Kent. I think we played one concert in Essex which is the other side of the river from London, that was it. It was really a local band, some of us had jobs as well and it wasn't professional, wasn't really fulltime professional.

F.: How did the kick come? Now, twentyfive years later, where do you see the point of break now?

H.H: I think probably the break really was in about '66, '67 when the music in England was open to different possibilities. So that when Robert left Wilde Flowers he started up Soft Machine with Daevid Allen. Because at that time there were lots of possibilities of different music, you didn't just have to be a soul band or a jazz band or country and western band. People were actually trying new things, it was the time of Hendrix and all the English bands, different bands, they were trying different things.

It still wasn't easy, it was not suddenly easy to be an avantgarde musican or whatever you want to call that, or experimental. Most people still wanted to listen to the music that had been before.

But in London there were possibilities, the clubs, to play different things. Which was all part of the kind of flower power and whatever hippy-stuff, it was going on at that time, you know.

F.: At that time you were a musician, but for Soft Machine first you worked as a Roadie?

H.H.: It was kind of mixed. It wasn't a clear distinction because for a long time I went to school with Robert Wyatt and we listened to music together and we tried different things, I was playing with Robert and Daevid Allen in London and in Paris just a very few things. We were trying out different things. And then towards the end of '64, '65 I started writing songs. Things like The Beatles were happening and it was suddenly like: O.K. you didn't have to be a jazz musician, you could be a songwriter as well, so I started writing songs.

In fact when Robert broke away from Wilde Flowers they still did some of my songs in Soft Machine, some of the older stuff which is on the first album. So I still connected really. And then there was one point where they needed a road manager and so they asked me if I wanted to do it. So I said yeah, why not. In fact soon after that went on the Hendrix Tour with Soft Machine in the States.

When they were recording the first album it was still Kevin Ayers on bass. But I did some things in the studio, I played a bit of bass here and there. And they were still doing music of mine. And then gradually towards the end of '68 when Kevin had had enough cause it was such a lot of work in America, it was like being at war. You're away from home for years and years and years and he didn't like it, so he left. So the others, Mike Ratledge and Robert, they asked me to join on bass, from then on I was full-time bassplayer.

F.: You just mentioned the connection to Jimi Hendrix. Where there more connections, is it true that Jimi Hendrix played guitar on the first Soft Machine single?

H.H.: I don't know if he played guitar. In fact he and Robert were quite friendly and there are some demos which Robert did after the first Hendrix tour. Robert was actually staying with Hendrix in California and Hendrix actually played some bass on demos of Robert's. Yeah, there was a lot of mixing, things like Robert used to sing, he did some backing vocals on "Stone free", which is on the other side of "Hey Joe", the backing vocal of Robert and there as well as other people. It was a mixture because Hendrix and Soft Machine were in the same Management Company, so they were all friends and if Hendrix was recording

then Robert was to go along to the sessions and Mitch would come along to the sessions we were doing.

F.: It was a very high time of Soft Machine with you, Robert Wyatt and Mike Ratledge. But then it flew away somehow. What did happen?

H.H.: The thing is that when it first started, Soft Machine with Kevin, it was a very different band. It was songs and it was kind of part of the whole sixties, late sixties atmosphere, with Daevid Allen. I mean when Daevid left Mike Ratledge became more dominant and he was more interested in composing and jazz and classical music. So it became more structured and more technical. I think that was the change. Robert gradually became less and less of an influence in the band. So the things like songs went out completely, it became more of a sort of a jazz-rock band. So it changed. But I mean it's like all bands, it changes all the time, it doesn't stay the same.

Kevin was only in the band for about two years. I think I was in the band for about four years. And they carried on after I left for about another five years with completely different musicians. There are two ways you can think about it. Either you should change the name completely as soon as the first person leaves, so it is no longer Soft Machine, it's something else. Or you can say it's like a changing group with people leaving, coming, going. I mean it did change, it became more jazzy, more technique really I think.

F.: What happened to you after you left the Soft Machine?

H.H.: The first thing I did I joined Stomu Yamashita who is a Japanese percussionist, played with him, did some records. Then I joined a hand called Isotope with Gary Boyle. Did some things with Carla Bley. Lots of different things really, I play with people in the jazz and jazz-rock area mostly. Made a couple of solo records and then recently, the last four or five years I've been working mostly with dutch and french musicians.

A very good guitarist called Patrice Meyer with whom I work with, he's one of my favourite musicians. In fact I feel happier playing music now than I was in Soft Machine days because at that time firstly I was younger and when you're younger you are always trying to find a way and it's very hard actually to find what you're really searching for. Also in Soft Machine, when you're in a band which has a certain amount of success then the problem is that you're really there it's like being in a job. It became very much like a job. You know that in six months time you'll he playing in Duisburg or you'll be playing in Paris. And it's really not like when you first start playing music which is: you want to play because you just want to play the instrument or you want to hear the sounds because you love music. But when you become part of a big band then it becomes a business really: You are going to play because you are being booked to play six months before. You may not feel like playing that night.

It's not always had, obviously, but looking back on it now I see that I'm actually happier now than I was then. Because I'm playing when I want to play and with the people I want to play with.

F.: So how did you survive all the time?

H.H.: Good question. I still get some money from things like Soft Machine records. They're all being re-released now on CD which is good. Money from writing music. I mean, I'm not a rich person, I don't have a big car and I don't have a big house so I don't need a lot of money. But I survived.

F.: I heard you worked as a taxi driver?

H.H.: Yeah, for two years I worked in Canterbury as a taxi driver. I havn't done it now for about two or three years. I was so because I was writing a lot. I wanted to be a writer as well as a musician. There are two ways you can do it: You can either look for music work which is not interesting but a lot of money like work in a restaurant, playing music you're not really interested in, which I don't want to do. You just as well might work as a taxi driver because it doesn't interest me to play notes. In fact it's better not to because otherwise you start hating music because you start not even thinking about music, it's just notes. Notes equal money, it's not for me, you know. I'd rather do just a few gigs a year and be interested in the music than do seven nights a week and not being interested in music.

F.: During time your approach towards music seems to have changed. With Soft Machine it was more the jazzy rock-thing, and now you are playing more the

rocky jazz-thing.

H.H.: Well, it comes and goes. It's never one thing or the other. There are times when I'm really interested in writing music, there have been periods when I've written a lot. When I work with Richard Sinclair there was a period about eight years ago when I was writing all the songs, the piano writing things a lot of course. I don't do that now, it comes and goes. I'm glad it does, I hate to be sort of the musician who just does one thing, it doesn't interest me. Although it might make more money.

F.: What do you think of today's music scene?

H.H.: There are good things. I mean lot of it doesn't interest me at all. In every sort of music there are like... Most of the musicians and the music is boring it's just copies what's gone before. There is just a very small percentage of people who are creative. And I don't think that has changed even now. It's easy to say it's all rubbish, it's all machine music. But even within machine music there are good things and bad things in the same percentage. It's the same in jazz. There is a loadful of very very boring jazz. Always has been, because people think: Oh, I like jazz, I play jazz but they don't necessarily have the genius to actually doing it different.

That's the same in all sorts of music. Whenever I listen to the radio, if I listen to a pop station there'll probably be one song in about ten that has got something interesting. So I don't think it has really changed. What has changed is you got a lot of technical advances now which we didn't have. When I first started playing most of the instruments playing with you just had to sit down and play. That was actually a physical thing you had to play with. But now you've got the possibilities of writing computer music and sequencers and things like that. So that has changed. But I think it still depends on being an interesting person doing the computer. It hasn't really basically changed.

F.: What do you think of your place in music business today?

H.H.: My place?

F.: You once wrote a song which was quite popular: "Memories", even sung by Whitney Houston on a Material record. You were a kind of pop star for a certain generation when you played in the Soft Machine. What do you think of your place now in music?

H.H.: I think that was almost an accident. I don't think I was ever a pop star anyway. Soft Machine when they were popular it was a lucky period because there was possibilities then to do something that was called progressive music. But for the great majority of people they weren't really interested in Soft Machine. They were still interested in Rolling Stones, Rod Stewart. And I don't think that changed. So I never really fell that I was a pop star. It was no question that we were. We were just a successful jazz-rock band. So in a sense I don't think my position has really changed, I still feel myself to be a very small part of music. It is not really my desire to be famous. It is more important to me just sort of write a good tune or to play a good concert with people.

Of course everyone likes to get paid money and it's nice to have more money than you've had before. But I never really tried to be famous, it's hard to tell though. When you're young you probably think, yeah, I want to be famous. I never felt myself to be in the mainstream of music anyway. It has never really interested me. I think if we were popular it's an accident more than a grant desire. I think that was the answer.



F.: What happened to the other members of Soft Machine, what are they doing now?

H.H.: I still play sometimes with Elton Dean, he's still active, mostly in Jazz, he's playing sax. He has his own band and he plays with Phil Millers Band. Mike Ratledge, the keyboard player, he is very very rich. He's doing music for television commercials and films. But he doesn't play music, he just runs a studio. He is very very successful. He does all the famous TV commercials in England: Renault cars and things like this.

Robert Wyatt is living up in Lincolnshire in the North of England. And in fact he is just being recording a record now which is good because he hasn't been working much. Robert is very... keeps very to himself and doesn't... he's not interested in just being a singer because he's known as a singer. And he wants to sing when he's got something to sing about or write about. So for a long time, I think it's for five years or something he hasn't brought out a new record. He's just been recording recently. That's good. I suppose Elton and I are the ones that are playing most still. Elton is an actual jazz musician and he will always be playing. When he has got a saxophone he will play it.

There have been times when I haven't played at all for a year cause I've been interested in writing and haven't been interested in music for a year. I don't consider myself just as a musician. I can do certain things in music but I'm not a great musician, not only a musician. I'm interested in writing and other things as well.

F.: You just got a new CD out, a live recording with a dutch band, very good jazz music. What are your plans for the future? Making that kind of music with a dutch band?

H.H.: Yes, I think so because I enjoyed playing with them. When that band started, that was another accident really because there was a friend of mine in Holland. I stopped playing for about a year and when I wanted to start again I contacted people to try and get some ideas for places to play. And so a friend of mine in Holland said, well I know this dutch guys who are very good, come and do a weeks work.

And so I did that and it could have been terrible but in fact it worked out well and the band has gradually changed. When it started it was two saxophone players and keyboards, guitar, bass and drums. And now it's just one sax player and a guitarist so it's more jazz-rock than jazz.

That's the band with Patrice Meyer, the french guitarist has settled into that formation and people I like working with. And a keyboard player Dionys Breukers I like working with cause he's not just a jazz musician, he will play sort of samples of different things, voices and sitars. Sometimes he wouldn't play at all in a number, he would just lend aside and let us going which is great because it doesn't mean you always gonna sound the same, sound different. I'm working with that. Also with Lindsay Cooper. Last three years we've been

doing the whole Moscow project. In fact it's almost finished and we only did two gigs last year. But we might be playing in Moscow itself in September.

I've also been playing with Didier Malherbe from France. Whoever phones. Whenever someone phones and it sounds interesting I'll play. Always doing things with Richard Sinclair, he's doing a recording project at the moment. He and I have done things in the past, writing songs together and playing together. So whatever happens, whatever the phone rings.

F.: Whenever the phone rings, that's the way musicians usually work if they're not only in it for the money. But what has this all got to do with Canterbury? Is there still a Canterbury scene, is there still a Canterbury music?

H.H.: I think it's a journalistic label... it's a useful thing... I mean I don't mind it but people like Robert, he in fact hates the idea if someone says: Oh, you're a Canterbury musician. He says: No, I was born in somewhere else. He just happened to go to school here. It's true that in the time when the Wilde Flowers started we hardly ever worked in Canterbury. It wasn't till Robert and Daevid went to London to start Soft Machine that anything happened at all. They weren't really a Canterbury band. So it's a usefull label that people have put on it to group together people like Caravan and... The only two bands really that were Canterbury musicians were Soft Machine, but they didn't actually start in Canterbury, it's really Wilde Flowers and Caravan. But it's a useful connection. Even when I play with Lindsay, I never played with Lindsay until three years ago, she was with Henry Cow and things like that. So people think of Henry Cow as being a Canterbury band, but they got no Connection with Canterbury at all. No one of them came from here at all, they came from Cambridge or something like that. It doesn't worry me, I use it if it helps people understand or listen to more music then it is fine.

I think it's a rather artificial label. Canterbury has never been a really good place to play. I played one gig last Friday and it was the first gig I played here for about two years. It's not virtually a musical place. There are lots of people who've come from it. There are few pubs here, but it's not really a musical hot bet at all.

F.: Is it true to say that Canterbury is a state of mind?

H. H.: Yes, I think that's right. It's a confused state of mind. Canterbury, what does it mean? I was born in Canterbury and I lived here until I was about nineteen and then I lived in other places in France and London, other places in Kent. Gradually came back this way. It wasn't really a plan, I don't know, it just happened this way. Richard is the same. Richard was born in Canterbury, he went to school here and he's lived in other places too, but he's back here. And Pye Hastings from Caravan, he's lived here, but he wasn't born here, he's from Scotland. It's a nice idea because it's a nice little town, it's got a cathedral and in the summer it looks good, it's a nice idea. It's not really much happening here. If you say to me: Well, where is it happening, I got to think: well, let's see, maybe one gig every two weeks.

F.: When will we see you back in Germany again?

H.H.: I hope to be playing in October when we're working again with Patrice and the dutch guys. I don't know how many days yet, we're starting in Holland in October and suppose we'll be connecting with German gigs as well. Also I have friends in Germany which is good, in Frankfurt and the famous Manfred Bress in Duisburg, he's got this fanzine. He's been responsible for a lot of things really because he knows things about me I don't know about myself. He connects that with lots of other people which is good.

It's always been much easier to play in Germany, Holland and France and Belgium than in England and it always was. Even when Soft Machine were at the peak of success. It's much more interest in those countries. In England it has always been very kind of closed. You're either interested in one sort of music or another sort of music.

There are not many people in this country here who are open to different things. I get the impression in Germany and France and Holland particularly that a lot of people will listen to jazz and listen to other things as well. They'll think: I may not have heard this but at least I'll give it a try. But in England the general impression is: I haven't heard it, therefore I don't want to hear it. If I've heard it already I'll like it maybe. People in England are very conservative musically. This is why I hardly ever play here. I used to play in Holland and Germany.

F.: Have you got any contacts in Germany?

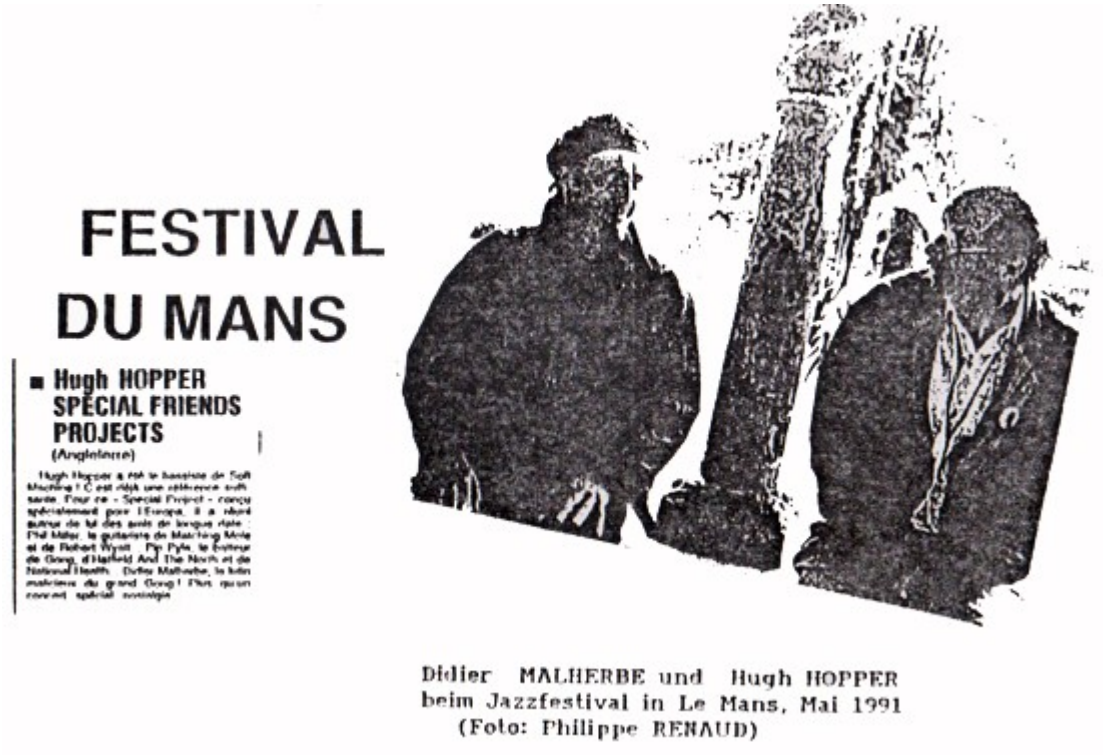
H.H.: There's a guy in Essen called Markus Figgen, he works for a production company called Hinkelstein. They are the people who are trying lo get me somewhere in Germany. I think we will be starting working with him in the Ruhr area cause that's where he is, round Essen and other places as well. We did a couple of gigs in Germany this spring. In Frankfurt we played once and right down in the south in Immenstadt, very small club.

I like Germany. I haven't always because I didn't speak German at all until quite recently. I actually started learning german because I felt so stupid not speaking any german at all. Once you can speak a little bit of a language it makes life a lot easier when you feel you're not completely lost. Because in England you usually learn French in schools and you only learn German when you want to. So I actually started doing lessons myself. Deutschländer.

F.: Would you like to say something to the Germans?

H. H.: It is difficult now. Das ist schwer. Dankeschön für... I can't remember it in german, it's stupid, isn't it? Ich habe alle mein deutsch vergessen. Wiederhören, wiedersehen and also bis nächste…

Frank Müller



Didier MALHERBE und Hugh HOPPER
beim Jazzfestival in Le Mans, Mai 1991
(Foto: Philippe RENAUD)

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Comrade Softy - Q N°61 - October 1991

COMRADE SOFTY



One-time drummer with The Soft Machine, full-time member of the Communist Party, Robert Wyatt's life was changed forever by the accident that crippled him in 1973. But he kept on making music - just about. "If anything," he tells Martin Aston, "it helped me with the music, because the hospital left me free to dream."

"**I'M A MUSICIAN** when I remember to be," Robert Wyatt confesses with an earnest tug at his straggly, greying beard. "In fact, I don't even think about it very often. I'm still mainly a jazz fan. If you could get a job as one, I'd apply for it. 'I want you to listen to the entire works of John Coltrane'. 'OK boss, sure...'"

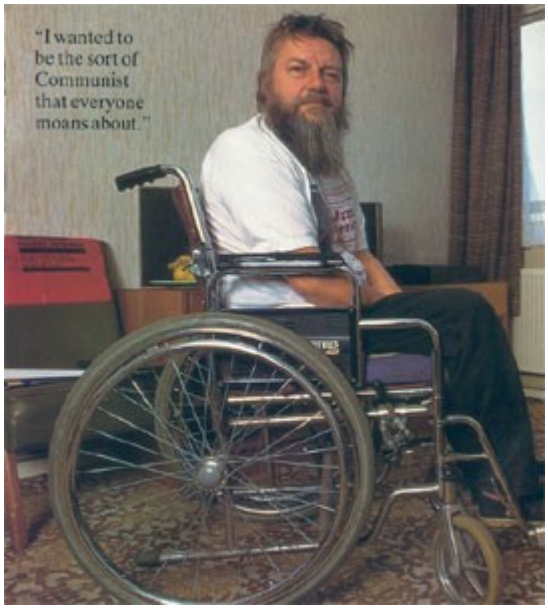
Over the years, Wyatt has become accustomed to defending his periodic absences from the music business. No two or even three-year between albums hibernation here; give or take the odd single or collaboration, since 1975's Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard, it's taken him five years to release a brace of singles and a film soundtrack, another four to release a selfpenned album and a further six years before the new LP, Dondestan, was ready to go.

"Basically, since the mid-'70s, you could say my preoccupations have been, uh, political," Wyatt sighs, visibly uncomfortable with the limited connotation of his words. "I've done things like write articles for the Morning Star on topics like Bulgarian folk music or foreign radio stations, or, in the case of my last piece, Courtney Pine. I also write letters to anyone who'll print them, and a lot who won't. It doesn't sound like a lot, does it? I've probably turned into the left equivalent of those anachronistic, retired generals who dash off furious letters to the DaiIy Express - except I write to the BBC..."

Wyatt's career would undoubtedly have taken a different turn had he not, in 1973 , drunkenly fallen out of a fourth-floor window at a party and broken his back. He'd left his Canterbury school in 1960 without any qualifications but with an overwhelming love of jazz - "I used to live precariously in a kind of reconstructed ' 40s Harlem in my head and only come out to eat and sleep" - which led him to the drums and his first group, The Wilde Flowers. They soon split in half, Pye Hastings and David Sinclair forming Caravan while Wyatt teamed up with Mike Ratledge, Daevid Allen and Kevin Ayers in Soft Machine.

The Softies, as Wyatt calls them, joined Pink Floyd at the forefront of Britain's new wave of psychedelic art-rockers, quickly turning to free- form jazz-rock fusion. But

there were constant tribulations - "The history of the group," Wyatt says, "was throwing each other out of it" - and Wyatt himself finally departed after the fourth album, to record the largely instrumental solo album, The End Of An Ear, after which he formed the equally experimental Matching Mole, a group of "people I could talk to" and who gave him the chance to sing in that characteristically affecting, melancholic voice. (When asked now whether he likes his voice, he dodges the question by self-deprecatingly referring to one critic who likened it to " Jimmy Somerville on valium.")



> Zoom

Robert Wyatt in North London, Summer 1991. Disabled by an accident in 1973, the one-time Soft Machine drummer turned his attentions to singing, to solo records like Shipbuilding, and to politics.

Matching Mole were already exploring Wyatt's melancholy fusions when his accident occurred, committing him to hospital for a year and depriving him of the bottom half of his drum kit when he got out. Unable to maintain a group from a wheelchair, Wyatt slowIy transformed the music that was to become the group's third album, ending up at Rock Bottom, a brave, deeply ironic title for a work whose vivid, painful introspection and dreamy, musical landscapes have been compared to those of Van Morrison's Astral Weeks. "I was just relieved that I could do something from a wheelchair," Wyatt confesses. "If anything, being a paraplegic helped me with the music because being in hospital left me free to dream, and to really think through the music."

AT VIRGIN Records' suggestion - "because they had this English idea, that to exist, you had to have a single" - Wyatt recorded The Monkees' I'm A Believer and found himself on Top Of The Pops when it scraped into the Top 30. But the follow-up, a cover of Chris Andrews's Yesterday Man, was never officially released, because Virgin mogul Richard Branson thought it "a bit too gloomy". Wyatt grins at the memory.

1975's Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard was a jazzier, eclectic affair, "more a case of roping in mates in and using their stuff." The mates included exiled South African trumpeter Mongezi Feza, guitarist Fred Frith and oblique strategist Brian Eno, "with his toy machines, desperately hating jazz," Wyatt fondIy recalls. And then silence. "Remember, I started out as a drummer and became a singer, because that was the only thing I could do properly once I found myself in a wheelchair. I've never been a songwriter in the sense of doing it all the time. When I have enough ideas, I start working on them. There has to be a reason for each record I make."

The reason behind his re-emergence in 1980 with four double-sided cover-version singles was two-fold. Being chairbound knocked the idea of the musician's life of travelling on the head, but paradoxically opened up a broader worldview via books, television and, in particular, radio, as Wyatt voraciously tuned in to local, jazz and black music radio and further afield to stations over the globe. Inspired by his wife Alfie, depressed and angry about the continuing existence of apartheid and what he perceived to be the NATO powers' colonial attitude toward the Third World, Wyatt became increasingly politicised, which culminated in his joining the Communist Party.

"I wanted to be the kind of Communist that everyone moans about. I wanted to stick to the party line and see what I got out of it. I wanted to work more as a party member who happened to sing than a musician who was dragging politics into music. At the same time, I came to the conclusion that rock, as an alternative culture and threat to the old order, was becoming increasingly hard to take seriously."

Wyatt's covers were a fascinating selection from diverse cultural contexts but unified by a folk/ethnic base and spirit of resistance. Caimanera (or Guantanamera, as it is better known in the West), virtually Cuba's national anthem, and The Red Flag rubbed shoulders



Wyatt drumming with Soft Machine. "It's taken me this long to get over not being a proper kit drummer. Now I enjoy the top half of the kit."

with an American a cappella tribute to wartime Russia, Stalin Wasn't Stallin', and a chilling version of Billie Holiday's Strange Fruit. Compiled to make 1982's Nothing Can Stop Us, and free of ego, fashion, patronage and sloganeering, the album is arguably the best political record yet made.

By this point, Wyatt had recorded the Animals Film soundtrack and relocated to the Catalan region of Spain, primarily because the light was better for Alfie's painting, but also as a necessary retreat from Blighty. Not that Wyatt could keep his distance. In 1983, he was back on Top Of The Pops with Shipbuilding, with its emotive, Falklands-inspired Elvis Costello Iyrics.

Complete with a smoky, jazz-trio arrangement, Shipbuilding was tailor-made for Wyatt's plaintive croon: "They sent me a cassette through the post because they thought l'd like a go, which I did. It was brilliant of them to think it sounded like a Robert Wyatt song, and not to have met me and got it so right. I was very moved."

WYATT has always enjoyed collaboration. Working Week and Ben Watt and Michael Mantler were among his cohorts through the' 80s, plus Jerry Dammers and the SWAPO singers, with whom he sang 1985's Wind Of Change single, to spotlight the South African occupation of Namibia. The following month, Wyatt returned with Old Rottenhat, 10 of his own songs which exposed a multitude of sins, two being the SDP/Liberal Alliance and the US-aided repression of the Pacific island East Timor. But can political pop stars make a difference?

"Well, yes. For example, I think the Nelson Mandela concert contributed something to his release, though it didn't get rid of apartheid, which is still intact in economic and political terms. One of the reasons why I got involved in politics was that I didn't think art, or culture, was a hammer. I think artists take a much more modest role as witness. I'm just trying to make a much better news programme that the ones that keep buggering up my radio!"

Which brings us to Dondestan, recorded at the start of 1991 near his Lincolnshire home, he and Alfie having come back to England for medical reasons - "the Spanish don't know much about aging paraplegics and I'd rather be near those who are finding out!" Wyatt still manages to chuckle. And the reason for this burst of activity?



> Zoom

"Well, it's taken me this long to get comfortable with being a group by myself, and to get over not being a proper kit drummer. Now I enjoy the top half of the kit, and working out bass lines and a way to play them myself, to make the songs all a piece and in character. My trouble was that the word part of writing songs hadn't been oiled for a while, because writing letters or chatting is quite different to writing Iyrics, which have to be repeatedly heard. But it occurred to me that Alfie had written a bunch of poems when we were in Spain, about the reality of living in a holiday resort out of season, and the flotsam and jetsam of things in a disorientated place. So I've sung half a dozen of her poems and tacked on my usual right-on stuff at the end."

Dondestan is Spanish for "Where are they?". The title track namechecks Palestine and Kurdistan, while Lisp Service and Left-On Man both tackle colonialism. Wyatt starts

grimacing for a change. "It's colonialism a-go-go. All political talk has been about East-West but I've always felt it was a North-South split, which is the exploitation of the underdeveloped countries by the developed. And I got incredibly depressed by the bombing of the Basra Road during the Gulf War, when everyone was retreating, and all the euphoria surrounding it. I would like to be happier, to see news on TV liked, but I can't. I have to swallow it and then exorcise it."

What Wyatt can, and does, enjoy is his beloved jazz. And yet he doesn't make jazz music himself.

"No, I'm a gawping tourist of jazz, not a participant," he wistfully concludes. "Songs aren't really jazz. Jazz was my education, but the only thing that sounded convincing to me was what I do. I'm not a black American in Harlem, I'm an English bloke born in 1945, so if that's what I am and what I sound like, then that's what I should be doing. It's been a long process, finding my own voice."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The born-again politico - The Guardian - September 26, 1991

THE BORN-AGAIN POLITICO

Jonathan Romney
The Guardian


The Guardian
Kinnock locks out two MPs
RAF welcomes Jackie Mann home
WRITERS!

ROBERT WYATT has just made a new LP, six years after his last one. He would have taken a lot longer over it, if not for the sight of two nuns walking on a Spanish beach. His wife Alfie wrote a poem about it, he set the poem to music, and the song turned into a record, Dondestan.

Rather than being the fruit of extended artistic agonies, the new record Wyatt claims, was made to pay the gas bill. "Every time I've done a recording I'm extremely dubious whether there's anything left in the tank." But over the last 25 years, Wyatt has consistently disgorged more and more intriguing tankfuls. Once the drummer with the Soft Machine, Dadaist doyens of thé British psychedelic era, Wyatt left to found his own group Matching Mole, but in 1973 fell out of a window, breaking his back, and has been in a wheelchair since then.

Dondestan arose out of two off-season winters spent south of Barcelona, Alfie's "verbal photographs" providing five of the songs. Wyatt's own lyrics on the record are more explicitly political, like the title track which posits an imaginary state of the dispossessed. "There probably is such a place. But it's also Spanish for 'Where are they?' We lived in a part of Spain which the locals couldn't afford to use when the tourists weren't there. Dondestan seemed the only title, when you add my songs about colonialism and dispossession."

The latter subjects have preoccupied Wyatt increasingly over the years. He admits to being a born-again politico: "I spent most of the seventies trying to climb out of the mirror world of rock narcissism and have a look outside." What he saw led him to record, among other things, an anti-vivisection film soundtrack, covers of Chilean freedom songs, and a single recorded with the SWAPO Singers and ex-Specials leader Jerry Dammers as a gesture of support for Namibia. For 10 years, he was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party, but that period ended recently, a parting celebrated in the LP's acidic jibe CP Jeebies. "I thought if you were prepared to call yourself communist, it meant you weren't afraid to be called Communist. But the party leadership spent the whole time apologising for the name. They've now become the Jolly-Nice-People-Like-Us-Not-Like-Those-Foreign-Ones Party. Some of the older communists I know, who still have Paul Robeson records, were really hurt."

Wyatt's enduring interest in what he calls "hard politics", and his availability to causes, make him an increasingly anomalous figure in pop. After the failure of Red Wedge and a

decade of post-Clash fatigue, the very notion of political pop is one that most commentators prefer to brush under the carpet. Wyatt is still committed to the idea of music as a soapbox, and feels an affinity with pop's inveterate orators, even if his own style is less vociferous than theirs.

"I totally enjoyed Red Wedge and the Style Council. My approach might be more circumspect but I don't wave the flag of 'subtle artist' at people. I would like to be unmistakeably right-on, but I don't have that confidence. I'm just grateful that there always is some little Speaker's corner somewhere." If that corner remains open in British pop, it's in no small part thanks to Wyatt's defiantly individual, if sporadic efforts.

- *Dondestan is available on Rough Trade.*

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Wheelie saying something - New Musical Express - 21 September 1991

WHEELIE SAYING SOMETHING



Beardy-weirdy radical ROBERT WYATT may have ended up in a wheelchair pursuing rock'n'roll Nirvana with '70s experimental cases Soft Machine, but he refuses to take the continuing distortions and skullduggery of the capitalist propaganda machine sitting down. His new album 'Dondestan', with help from poet wife Alfie, rails against Third World exploitation and the fate of the alternative viewpoint, reckons a hot to Trot STEVEN WELLS, and it's not half bad - for a Stalinist. (Black and) Wyatt riot:
TIM JARVIS.



Sometime between my bollocks dropping and my skin erupting I saw this beardy-weirdy in a wheelchair on *Top Of The Pops*, Cockernee geezering his way through The Monkees' 'I'm A Believer'.

I was very impressed, I remember, by the accent. For a few months "Then Oi Sawuh 'er Fayuss" became a catchphrase amongst Bradford youth.

Alfreda Benge grumbles as she drives us through flat, Lincolnshire farmland to a tea of ham and pickles, wholemeal bread and boiled eggs. She is Robert Wyatt's partner.

"I do the cleaning and the cooking and the shopping and he does the talking..." she says.

"They had an Acid House rave around here and all the locals were complaining about the noise. Then the week after they had this 'Fun Day' with Tornado bombers streaming over at treetop height. Oh, they didn't complain about that, they *loved* it!"

Robert Wyatt is an enemy of the state and he lives but miles from the airfields where US planes left to murder the children of Tripoli.

WHAT EVERYBODY knows about Robert Wyatt: he was the drummer for Soft Machine, he jumped out of a window and broke his back, he wrote 'Shipbuilding' (*really?- Ed*) and all left-wing music journalists have got their tongues stuck right up his arse.

Robert Wyatt is not Nikki Sixx, Ozzy, Izzy, Axl, or Sid the Vish. He's got a beard for a start, always a dead giveaway. And he has... these... long ... pauses in his conversation, like, dude, he is the only person in the entire world *who actually stops and thinks* before he answers a question. Spooky.

And there's his music. Um.



WHEELIE SAYING SOMETHING

Sometime between my bollocks dropping and my skin erupting I saw this beardy-weirdy in a wheelchair on *Top Of The Pops*, Cockernee geezering his way through The Monkees' 'I'm A Believer'.

I was very impressed, I remember, by the accent. For a few months "Then Oi Sawsh 'er Paynes" became a catchphrase amongst Bradford youth.

Alfredo Benge grumbles as she drives us through flat, Lincolnshire farmland to a tea of ham and pickles, wholemeal bread and boiled eggs. She is Robert Wyatt's partner.

"I do the cleaning and the cooking and the shopping and he does the talking . . ." she says.

"They had an Acid House rave around here and all the locals were complaining about the noise. Then the week after they had this 'Fun Day' with Tornado bombers screaming over at treetop height. Oh, they didn't complain about that, they loved it!"

Robert Wyatt is an enemy of the state and he lives but miles from the airfields where US planes left to murder the children of Tripoli.

WHAT EVERYBODY knows about Robert Wyatt: he was the drummer for Soft Machine, he jumped out of a window and broke his back, he wrote 'Shipbuilding' (really! – Ed) and all left-wing music journalists have got their tongues stuck right up his arse.

Robert Wyatt is not Nikki Sixx, Ozzy, Izzy, Axl, or Sid the Vish. He's got a beard for a start, always a dead giveaway. And he has . . . these . . . long . . . pauses in his conversation, like, dude, he is the only person in the entire world who actually stops and thinks before he answers a question. Spooky.

And there's his music. Um.

'Dondestan' is Spanish for "Where is it?" It's a pun about countries like Kurdistan and Palestine that exist only in the hearts and minds of their people. And it's his new album which is tinkly and breathy and sad. The first half uses some of the poems that Alfie wrote during a couple of long sojourns in Spain.

With titles like 'The Sight Of The Wind' and 'Catholic Architecture', Alfie's poems are not exactly in the dig-it-up-and-carve- 'New Age Parasite' -on-the-corpse-with-a-rusty-razor-blade Manic Street Preacher style of rock nihilism.

In a different decade, where anything seemed possible and Thatcherism was still a nightmare well under wraps, Alfie was a "drummer's moll" who met up with Robert at the suggestion of his then-wife to help get him over a bout of depression.

Alfie was born in 1941 in Poland. Her father was an Austrian border guard who got her mother drunk and seduced her and, being a good Catholic, married her when she became pregnant. Years later she visited her father's family, visited his grave. One of her relatives, when asked what her father's politics were, replied "he was a good National Socialist (a Nazi) until the end". She resisted the temptation to piss on his grave.

Alfie and her mother spent the war being shunted around the Reich in cattle trucks. Her mother requested and got a move out of Dresden days before it was firebombed into ashes by the Allies. At the end of the war, whilst in a refugee camp, a British officer gave her mother 12 gold guineas. In Vienna, her mother, being a fashion conscious woman, swapped the coins for a handbag before coming to Britain to marry the British officer who

also happened to be an active member of the Communist Party.

The rest of the lyrics on 'Dondestan' are Robert's and they cover much more conventional Wyatt territory, including the exploitation of the Third World, privatisation and the scum-sucking liberal shitehawks of *Marxism Today*.

Oh yeah, another thing everybody knows about Robert Wyatt—he's a Stalinist. Not one of the headbanging personality cult loonies who'll deny that Uncle Joe was a murdering psychotic, racist bastard, but a defender of the (ex) Soviet Union as an imperfect but socialist state.

Me, I think he's full of shit. Usually, says Robert, interviews leave him depressed, but this time "I knew where I stood from the start," meaning that I'm a Trot and he's a Tankie - so we don't waste any time.

"The right-wing establishment eats eight left-wing pressure groups for breakfast - like those monsters in films that the more you use the flamethrowers or whatever the stronger it gets. So I suppose I just wanted to be as inedible as possible."

But he hasn't been glued to the box watching the toppling of the statues of Marx and Lenin. Alfie vets the TV and newspapers for him.

"We're herded week by week from one news story to another, it's thought control really. Soon we're all going to be terribly excited at the thought of another election. I used to quite like listening to Radio Havana, which would talk about literacy rates in the Third World, fresh water supplies in Asia. I think they have a better sense of priorities!

"I find a lot of things offensive that other people don't. I flinch away from looking at right-wing propaganda in the same way that Clare Short flinches away from looking at pornography. And it is propaganda and like all propaganda it serves two purposes. It builds their side up but it also knocks our side down, attempts to undermine our confidence and our ideas."

There are those who shout about the smothering effect of baby boomer culture, of the softness and idiocy and hypocrisy of the '60s generation - the people who gave us sexual liberation and soft drugs, who stormed the barricades in front of the US embassy, kicked seven shades of socialist shit out of the Paris riot pigs and now read Q and buy Tin Machine CDs and think Mike And The Mechanics are exciting and that The Traveling Wilburys have really got something to say and, sporting a hideous ponytail and a Next suit, tell us to *"swim with the dolphins and the sharks*" and then settle down and get af------ing mortgage and rot in suburbia. So how the hell did this particular hippy end up - in disillusioned, battered, sell-out city - as the last rock 'n' roll communist? "

...(*pause*)... I... never enjoyed the cultural triumphalism of rock'n'roll, using words like 'balding' and 'ageing' as insults. The way I saw it was like with Hendrix. The youth of the West were meant to be au fait with black culture and yet, at the same time, their governments were responsible for hideous acts in Mozambique and Angola."

"I find a lot of things offensive that other people don't. I flinch away from looking at right-wing propaganda in the same way that Clare Short flinches away from looking at pornography."



"We're herded week by week from one news story to another. It's thought control."

MUNCHING SALAD with Robert and Alfie, avoiding the verbal bushfires that start when I'm no longer able to restrain my frustration and confusion as to how two such decent, sorted out and intelligent people were able to ever see the Soviet Union as anything other than the sick, murderous travesty that it was, Alfie, who claims that she always knew that Lech Walesa was an anti-Semitic bastard and who cheered when Solidarity was crushed, asks Robert if he thinks they should adopt a sea-side donkey for the winter and then they tell me how they intend to bury their two million-year-old dog when it eventually dies.

Russian beer and English sunshine. Rock'n'roll drummers and Nazi forced labour. American bombers and pickled onions. When Robert wheels himself to the office to get some fags he dons these massive rock'n'roll gloves that make motorcycle gauntlets look like kiddies' mittens. In the bog Castro's speeches nestle next to *The Book Of Heroic Failures*. There's a novel here somewhere.

What the hell - intelligent pop music made by people who couldn't tell you the difference between Kylie and her grinning sister and who just don't understand why, in a world that for the first time has the resources to feed, clothe and house everybody, we still have the homeless and the starving. You can keep your Morrisseys.

Tim Jarvis

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

There's a Wyatt going on - The Wire Issue 91 - September 1991



THERE'S A WYATT GOING ON

Robert Wyatt*, that is. The art-rock artisan of* Soft Machine *and* Rock Bottom *is back with a brand-new record.* **Ben Watson** *meets the unmatched mole of subversive pop. Photo by* **Michael Heffernan***.*

Robert Wyatt 's muse is back on-line. His new release, *Dondestan*, is a telling and sensual as anything he has produced over the last three decades. After a series of politically-oriented-projects - the SWAPO benefit with Jerry Dammers, "Winds Of Change", Elvis Costello's "Shipbuilding" - he has returned to the music he "hears in his head", a strange but effective mix of multitracked vocals and electric keyboards.

Drummer in The Soft Machine (the band, that, along with Pink Floyd, epitomised late-60s underground rock in London), Wyatt's second band Matching Mole was scuppered in 1973 by a fall that broke his back. Paraplegic and wheelchair bound, he had to do a musical rethink: jazz and rock drummers require legs. He found his voice could be an instrument.

In 1974 he released *Rock Bottom*, a masterpiece which many interpreted as a commentary on his condition. Such biographical interpretations are limiting. Being unable to stir up bass drum and hi-hat bombast may explain its calm, but the music was also an excellent critique of the techno-pomp that progressive rock had become. Its domestic quietism showed up commercialized virtuosity (Yes, ELP, Genesis, Chick Corea) as effectively as the garage virtues of punk did three years later. It had the haunting stillness of Claude Debussy or Marvin Gaye: power through poignancy. *Dondestan* does it again. How come?

"I got more into *Dondestan* than anything since *Rock Bottom*. The organ I used on *Rock Bottom* is called a Riviera. Alfie got it for us, it cost about ten bob in an Italian toy shop. It's a three or four-octave toy organ and I broke it in the late-70s and I thought, that's it - it's symbolic. But since coming here to Lincolnshire, Alfie said, Why don't you get it mended, and I've got it mended. It's one of the reasons I was able to pick up from *Rock Bottom*. You will hear the same sounds - it's exactly the same organ and they don't make it anymore.

It was not just the Riviera. Wyatt has a healthy horror of "setting texts", aware of the proper gel between word and note that characterizes authentic song. A Kip Hanrahan project on Paul Haines (lyricist for *Escalator Over The Hill*) led to a track he was pleased with. The project remains unreleased - unfortunate, because the other contributions (by, among others, Roswell Rudd, Evan Parker and Derek Bailey) sound intriguing too - but Wyatt learned that other people's texts could be a stimulus.

Robert Wyatt's partner, Alfreda Benge, had written a book of poems called *Out Of Season* when they were both wintering in Catalonia in the mid-80s.

"When you become very familiar with something, it becomes songlike in the head. I can't make a rule, but that's how it happened. The poems were not written to be sung and therefore they hadn't got the structures I fall into."

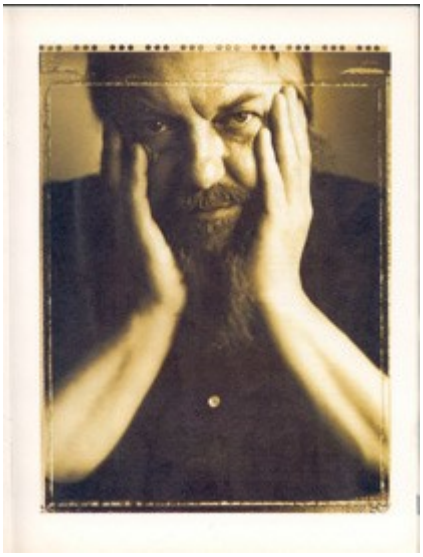
"The Sight Of The Wind" conveys what Wyatt calls "a sense of the unfixableness of things". Robert used a characteristically eccentric device.

"I used heavy breathing as a rhythm track which I haven't done since *Rock Bottom*, because you just get a dip and a rise rather than a punched-out beat. It was in seven, so it wouldn't settle."

Wyatt is quick to dissociate himself from the fusion groups who play in 7/4 in order to be "more complex".

"I'm not one for fancy time signatures - if you get too clever with time signatures it sounds like the *Newsnight* theme - but sometimes you do want an unbalanced shift. You can do anything in 4/4, look at Monk. 4/4 isn't just 4/4 anyway, it's 12/8. All any complex time signature really is, is binary, either twos or ones in various combinations - so no complex time signature is any more complex than a simple one."

There is a wonderful section in "Left On Man" where Wyatt choruses "oversimplify, reduce, oversimplify". This guying of the conventional refutation of Marxism sounds for all the world like Marvin Gaye singing "dance with me baby" on *I Want You*.



> Zoom

"Marvin Gaye is very close to my heart. There's something translucent about his textures, it's like a sea with various layers and undertones. But actually that comes off Groupa Irakere. They have this Cuban thing where a couple of blokes put down their instruments and do a chorus thing [sings and taps a clave rhythm]. I thought, it's so nice when they do that, why aren't I a group, why can't I put down my trumpets and trombones and do that as well?"

"Lisp Service" is a reply to Billy Joel's apology for US foreign policy, whose video appeased (supposedly) longforgotten wars by combining every famous image of American military atrocity - Hiroshima, napalm fire, summary execution - with a chorus that blithely claimed "*We didn't start the fire/It's been burning since the world began*".

"'We Didn't Start The Fire' worried me, I thought, Oh you smug git - yes you fucking did! If you're talking about 'we' I can talk about 'you'. I don't often listen to words, but he was saying, Listen to me, I've got something serious to say, and I thought - you'd better have!"

Hugh Hopper's rousing melody gives "Lisp Service" an eruptive force after the dreamy chant that precedes it. Wyatt's own tunes have startling intervals and pungent harmonies lacking in most pop music. Born in 1945, you might expect him to be a blues boomer. Actually it has always been jazz that fired him, ever since his father led him onto Fats Waller. He hears differently.

"My father used to play Shostakovitch, Hindemith, Bartok, and my mother played Monteverdi. I didn't hear much rock'n'roll and I never liked it. My dad introduced me to jazz, I think he'd seen *Stormy Weather* as a younger man. I thought it was so wonderful that it took over my ears completely. My dad got quite alarmed because I stopped playing the Bartok. That was it really, I was in love and I've remained so."

Just now, as Natalie Cole's revival of "Unforgettable" is bringing a startling shot of harmonic surprise to the charts - King Cole's piano intro suddenly unleashing chords synthipop producers have all forgotten - it is interesting to hear Wyatt point out a different direction to blues, rock and the pop norms of the 90s.

"I think maybe, being brought up on Hindemith and so on, I just wanted that bit extra out of the chords, the harmonies. When I did like singers it would be where there would be

harmonic stuff going on which you don't get on a blues record - Ray Charles is so sophisticated harmonically. That I could really deal with - it was the keyboard end rather the guitar end."

Robert listens hard to music *as music*: his observations have a spark lacking in either academic received wisdom or self-serving biztalk. The disinterest in guitar, for example, did not preclude appreciation of Jimi Hendrix, whom the Soft Machine supported for a year: "so beautiful every bloody time".

Wyatt is remarkably successful in using "world-music" aspects - Kurdish lilts and Ouspecki rhythms litter *Dondestan*, but he feels that any jazz enthusiast is already well prepared.

"It's like clothes - they have to fit. I don't have a sense of the exotic. If you are a jazz fan you're used to having people whose ancestors were African in your room, so the whole concept of 'world music' doesn't mean that much to you anyway."

His new enthusiasm is rap (a musical development that has turned people ten years his junior into nostalgia freaks).

"When you speak words it's atonal music and drumming is mostly atonal. Rap is very liberating, just getting the rhythms and rhymes - that's where the music is, not in the notes. It means that apart from the bass line, which can be quite conventional, the stuff they can do - the little textures and fiddly bits around the edge and the noises they are making - where is that coming from? How did they get that in there? How did they get so *much* in there? How do they get so much in there *clearly* between those two beats? Stunning stuff!"

New enthusiasms aside, he keeps returning to bebop.

"It's like cubism - obstinately unyielding and compressed, not what they call user-friendly. Or like *pemmican*, concentrated food Arctic explorers are. A taste of that and anything else is flaccid. I can see, outside it, the architecture isn't inviting, the space doesn't seem to be there to sit down and make yourself comfortable - but once you learn your way around in there it's utterly addictive."

When he talks about his upbringing, Wyatt's voice grows quiet, and it is important to remember the battles of his generation, a period when *all* black music was dismissed as trivial entertainment, to be patronised by those who knew classical music. His manner is so disarmingly unpretentious, that it was only when transcribing his words that I realized quite how angry they were.

"If you sing in a choir at school... we did Schubert, so I remember a bit about him. We were told how to sing vowels. We were told that the trouble with English was these short vowels - we can't sing them, you can't hold a note on them, so for the following vowels this is how to sing them, you've got to break them down: 'ow' goes 'aa-ooo' and you have to decide when to go from 'aa' to 'ooo'; 'i' goes 'aa-eee'; and if you think how posh singers sing, they sing 'through the naa-eet [night]' because they never sing 'i'. Which means that you get this really churchy mannerism that only has one connotation. If I'd been stuck in legitimate singing... I'm really grateful to all the musics we've been discussing for not being bound by rules like that."

selected discography

The Soft Machine - *The Soft Machine* (Probe) 1968
The Soft Machine - *Volume Two* (Probe SPB1002) 1969
The Soft Machine - *Third* (CBS66246) 1970
The Soft Machine - *4* (CBS 64280) 1970
The Soft Machine - *Triple Echo* (Harvest SHTW800) triple 1967-76
Robert Wyatt - *End Of An Ear* (CBS) 1971
Robert Wyatt - *Matching Mole* (CBS)
Robert Wyatt - *Little Red Record* (CBS 65260) 1972
Robert Wyatt - *I'm a Believer* (Virgin VS114) 7" 1974
Robert Wyatt - *Rock Bottom* (Virgin V2017) 1974
Robert Wyatt - *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard* (Virgin V2034)
Jan Steele/John Cage - *Voices And Instruments* (Island/Obscure 5) 1976
Robert Wyatt - *Animal Film Soundtrack* (Rough Trade ROUGH40) 1981
Robert Wyatt - *Nothing Can Stop Us* (Rough Trade ROUGH35) 1980-2
Robert Wyatt - *Shipbuilding* (Rough Trade RTT115) 12" 1982
Robert Wyatt - *Work In Progress* (Rough Trade RTT149) EP 1984
Robert Wyatt - *The Age Of Self* (TUC) 7" 1985

Robert Wyatt/SWAPO Singers - *The Wind Of Change* (Rough Trade RTT168) 12" 1985
Robert Wyatt - *Old Rotten Hat* (Rough Trade ROUGH69) 1985
Robert Wyatt - *Dondestan* (Rough Trade) 1991

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

No thing can stop him - Option - August 1991

NOTHING CAN STOP HIM

ROBERT WYATT,

NOTHING COULD BE MORE AUDACIOUS OR IRONIC THAN THE LIFE OF ROBERT WYATT. A POST-WAR BRISTOL CHILD TURNED ONTO JAZZ IN THE CANTERBURY OF THE 1950S, WYATT BECAME DRUMMER, LYRICIST, AND SINGER WITH THE SOFT MACHINE IN 1966. QUINTESSENTIALLY PSYCHEDELIC WITH STRONG LEANINGS TOWARDS THE

THE LAST DRUMMER

FREE IMPROVISATION OF JAZZ, SOFT MACHINE PLAYED MINSTRELS TO THE TECHNICOLOR LONDON UNDERGROUND OF THE FLOWER-POWER ERA. SUPPORTING PINK FLOYD AND THE JIMI HENDRIX EXPERIENCE, THEY BECAME A NOTORIOUS OUTFIT WHOSE SOUND DISMAYED AUDIENCES WITH ITS OUTSIDE, FREE-FORM CHARACTER.

Photos : OLIVER LIM

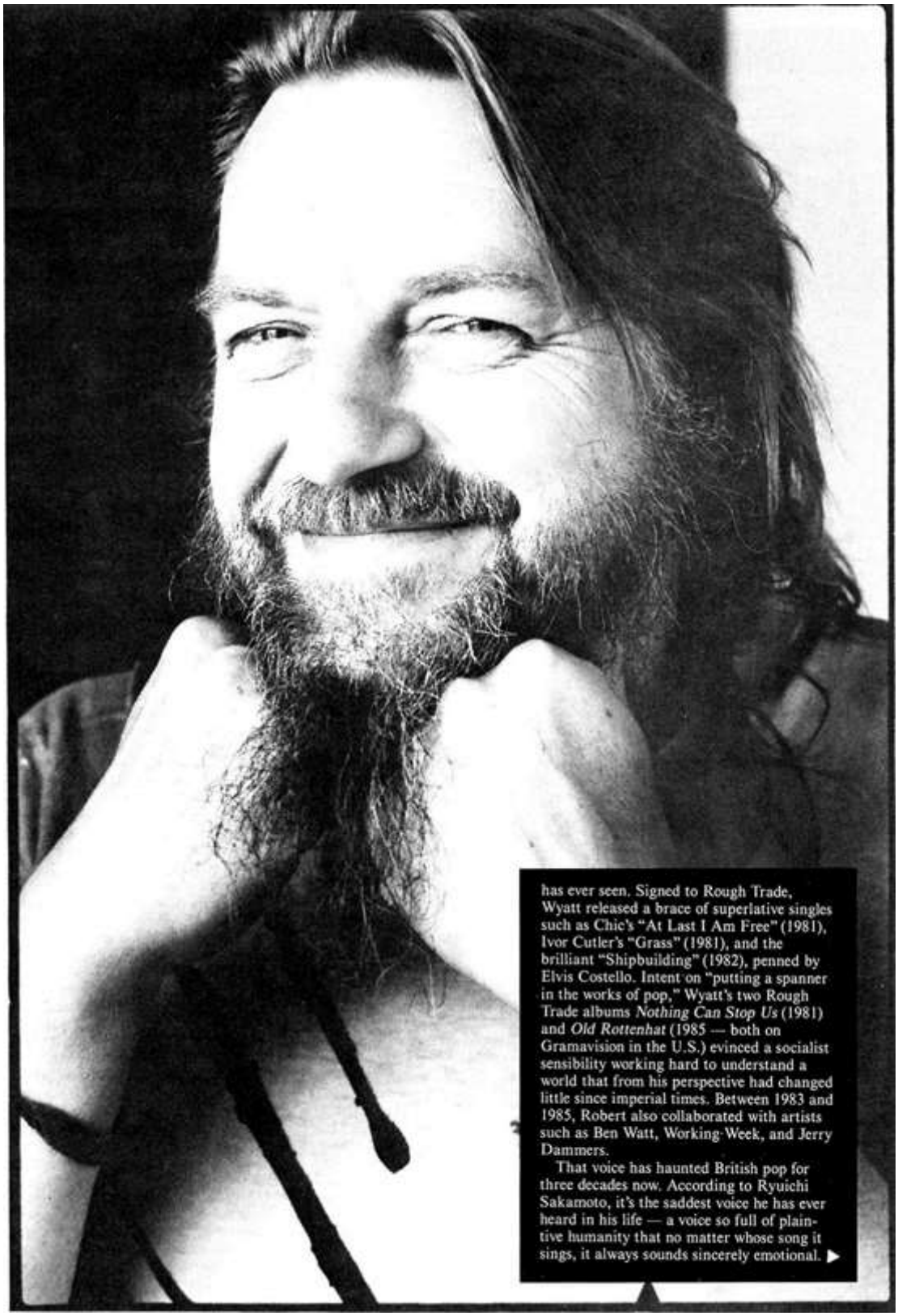
ON THE LEFT

After three albums with the group, Wyatt departed because of their increasing seriousness. The formation of Matching Mole (a pun on the French for "soft machine," a name itself lifted from the book by William Burroughs) in 1971 revealed him to be a truly gifted lyricist and singer, as on "O Caroline," from their debut offering on CBS. Following a second Matching Mole LP, tragedy came in June of 1973. Wyatt found himself in critical condition in Stoke



Mandeville Hospital, suffering from a broken spine after falling from a third floor window at a London party. LSD became the apocryphal culprit, but the truth was more mundane. Wyatt was trying to exit the party via a drainpipe when he fell because "of good old alcohol, the legal one." He would never walk again.

Six months in the hospital led Wyatt to produce his classic second solo LP *Rock Bottom* (1974), and with help from Pink Floyd his career was rejuvenated. His cover of the Monkees' "I'm a Believer" became a hit single that same year, and he later returned to live work with Henry Cow. If the late 70s saw Wyatt become more politically oriented, the early '80s saw him produce some of the finest independent pop Britain



> Zoom

So on Sakamoto's new album *Beauty*, Wyatt injects the Stones' "We Love You" with that trademark twist of melancholy. But it is a sound that also revels in celebration, in the sheer audacity of things.

• B Y M A R K P R E N D E R G A S T

These days Robert lives with his wife Alfie in the Lincoln village of Louth. His spacious 19th century home houses a grand piano, a drum kit, a home recording studio, a definitive jazz record collection, and a lot of books of the politically philosophical kind. In fact, his reading

desk is as much a focal point as his beloved piano. Asked about the use of *Music For Airports*, on which he soloed with Brian Eno, for some of the steamy sex scenes in the film *9 1/2 Weeks*, he chuckles. With no new album since *Old Rottenhat*, the appearance of "We Love You" with Sakamoto points to a low-key Wyatt, industriously working away in the background as others push themselves forward.

"I don't really use the word collaboration," he says. "I call it alternating dictatorships! Really, I work for other people or other people work for me. Specifically, the last thing I did was sing a song for a big band called Happy End. They brought the tape up from London and we recorded it in Sheffield. It was called 'World Upside Down' and I was very pleased to be asked. They are a big big band, around 20 people - bigger than the Count Basie Orchestra. I saw them a few years ago in London, probably at a miners' benefit," he recalls,before moving on to other works.

"Ryuichi Sakamoto is a really interesting composer. I like *Beauty* and I'm really into what he's doing next in New York with some hip-hop people. He's moved there now, you see. I really like the Youssou N'Dour track 'Diabaram,' and it's funny that, because it's more like the kind of track you'd expect to hear me on. 'We Love You' was sent to me with his guide vocal on it, and he just said replace it with my own. It was that simple."

Other recent work has been with Kip Hanrahan in the States and Chris & Cosey in Britain. "I did some music for a poem by Paul Haines which was put together by Kip Hanrahan. He does all kinds of projects and works on things simultaneously, so this hasn't seen the light of day yet. I chose the poem and put the music to it. Also Chris Carter and Cosey Fanni Tutti, who used to be in Throbbing Gristle. They now live in Norfolk and were just putting together some tapes and asked me to collaborate. It was the first time I heard my own voice being used with a sampler. I actually had a tape of me singing 'Autumn Leaves' and some other words, and Cosey shuffled them about into little fragments. Though it's basically her singing and. their music, it comes out feeling like me. They've got their own studio, are self-sufficient and do stuff. It was a true collaboration in that they did the work. I did the 'co,' they did the 'laboration,'" he laughs.

Wyatt self-effacingly admits to being able to do all his bits and pieces at home, where he can sing at his leisure and record at his pleasure. "I can go to a studio if I have to do more." For *Old Rottenhat*, his last proper album, the ten tracks were finalized in Acton and Brixton. He has been working up material for a new album for quite some time now. When ready this will be delivered to Rough Trade, a record company he's still loyal to because "they haven't got reams of paper saying you've got to do this, you've got to do that. They're absolutely straight and honest you know, which is such a nice feeling."

Working with Rough Trade is an intriguing juxtaposition of the old with the new, a post-punk enterprise which has only been around roughly half the length of time that Wyatt has been a professional artist. Wyatt contends that his musical taste had really been formed in the 1950s, but that his own abilities to make good music weren't developed until the 70s. "To me that was a strange, weird period. All sorts of things happened, but what I remember is hangin' around Victoria Station wondering if I missed the 10:50 back to West Dulwich and looking in the fridge and thinking sod, nothing in it again!"

Given the present fascination for all things 1960s, Wyatt's recollections of the era in which he first made his mark make for insightful comment. "For most of the '60s I was very hard-up. I spent the first half of it just struggling desperately, working in a forest, washing up, anything really. Then the music gradually evolved into various groups, and towards the end of it I was able to make a living. Eventually I became a drummer, but it wasn't by all means certain that that's what I'd become."

But there were flashes of rare experience, even if outside London the Soft Machine were booed off the stage on a regular basis. "What pulled us together musically was not audiences as such, but being on the road with the Hendrix trio in 1968. They were so nice to us. At the end of the tour Mitch Mitchell gave me this custom-built Maplewood drum kit. They knew we hadn't much money, but without being condescending they kind of just helped us along. They never tried to pull rank on you, they just wanted to encourage us by not saying anything about the duff bits in our set and helping us with the good bits. All three of them, Jimi, Noel, and Mitch."

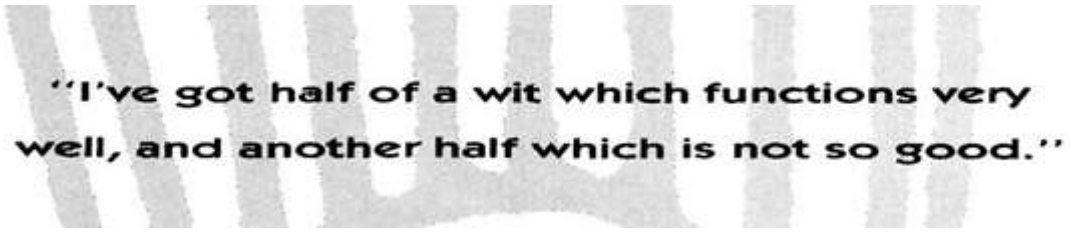
The Soft Machine lineup of Kevin Ayers, Mike Ratledge, and Wyatt were matched up with the Jimi Hendrix Experience simply because they had the same management team of Chas Chandler and Mike Jeffries. Advised to get Donovan hitmaker Mickie Most to choose some commercial material for a debut single, the Softs responded with "we're only doin' our own

stuff," so that was that. Their debut single "Love Makes Sweet Music," produced by Chandler, really didn't cut the mustard in an era of great pop tunes.

As to the years spent being the driving force behind one of England's classic psychedelic rock bands, Wyatt recalls Soft Machine's artistic development from an interesting perspective. "In terms of how we amplified our music we were a rock group, but what we heard in our heads wasn't pop music. We never looked to other groups for inspiration, in fact we were listening to Coltrane records. We got booed a lot in England at these dances where people were waiting for Jimmy James & the Vagabonds and instead got us - not a tune they recognized, just a row of stony faces; I thought the worst part of it was the break between numbers when there'd be this silence. So I suggested we link all our tunes up together so that the end of one was the beginning of the next. So the only time we stopped was when we left the stage, and that was how we developed the Soft Machine style of sustained continuous sets. Because of this brilliant compositional device, I never really had a clue what the audiences really thought of us.

"But we did get to make our debut album in New York at the end of the six-month tour of the States in '68. Now what was incredible about Jimi Hendrix was that he never got boring. You'd think seeing something each and every night after you played would make you want to go home, but not Hendrix. He was that good - all you wanted was more, even if it was the same. Another thing about him was that he was very professional and audience-conscious, if he was in front of a sophisticated bunch of New Yorkers, he would go every which way and try out all kinds of stuff - pure electronic music, even white noise. If he was in an aircraft hangar with a group of 14-year-old Texans, he would play the hits. Doing anything else would be going over their heads, and he saw there was nothing basically clever in doing that. In a sense he was a very old-fashioned entertainer who knew that people had paid money to see something, and he wanted to make sure they got it."

Working with Hendrix obviously sharpened Wyatt's perspectives on the so-called '60s revolution. What happened in America is viewed by him thusly: "During the '60s the black American civil rights thing had come to a head. And this had its roots in the Harlem renaissance of the 70s and the jazz scene of the late 1950s. That was taken up by radical whites who went forward with their anti-Vietnam War protests, but for me the central alternative thrust had already been there in the black American cultural thing. Charlie Mingus, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach were part of the central explosion. The rest was an offshoot of a cultural revolution I'd already experienced.



"With regard to drugs, straight dope/hash had always been part of black American culture. The difference between white hippie culture and black jazz culture was not there, but in the fact that hippie culture was a deliberate, we 're-not-having-anything-to-do thing, a deliberate drop-out. The black American experience was fall-out. They didn't have an establishment to drop out of. They weren't allowed in anyway."

Wyatt is aware that you can't generalize and that a lot of people don't qualify, but what he's saying makes sense. "What we are really talking about here is a cultural celebration amongst people who were already living in two or three of the richest countries in the world anyway. It was really about the young and relatively affluent exploring new cultural ideas. And that was very nice, but what would be silly would be to think that changed the fundamental structures. The notion was that we won't even try anymore, we'll have a good time in our own way and somehow we'll change the fabric of society. But that completely underestimated the plasticity and intelligence of the political, military and banking establishment of our economies and countries and how they're run. It was just children playing on the lawn while the grown-ups make the big decisions in their kitchen."

Conversing with Robert Wyatt, it is not long before the subject turns to politics, a force that seems to drive his very being. "I would say that almost by the mid-1970s I could hardly be called a musician. I felt like I've turned into one of those sandwich board nutters who go around saying the end is nigh. But as I happen to be a musician, it comes out through music. It's really what I think about, music happens, it's what I do. But the core of what I'm thinking is political."

A mere mention of any social or political phenomenon will launch Wyatt into a broadside which has all the incisive quality of distilled truth. "I haven't got a great knowledge of all the world, but there are particular things I think about which are as frightening now as they've ever been. It's funny to hear people talking about, it's post-cold war this and post-history that - post-ideology and post-every-bloody-thing. Most people in the world don't have access to free running water, most people don't have access to proper literacy. So what's that supposed to be. And it doesn't get sorted out.

"I have to admit I'm very narrow-minded, blinkered like a horse. I'm not a broad liberal thinker, but pursue certain things endlessly. And the people who put it articulately are writers like Susan George and Noam Chomsky. She talks about the problem, he talks about how the problem is maintained. She basically says that rich countries have developed purely at the expense of the poorer ones. And I know a lot of people know this, but the facts have been sort of marginalized.

"Chomsky is a hero of mine, he saved my life. He's an American linguistics scholar who writes about the complete moral collapse of the western intellectual world. Now I get emotionally heated and I'm what you call a half-wit (laughs) - I've got half of a wit which functions very well, and another half which is not so good. But he's got a whole wit." Chomsky's thinking and his views about distorted language are written all over *Old Rottenhat*, particularly such songs as "The United States of Amnesia" and "Speechless." To his way of thinking, what Wyatt sees on television and in the newspapers is only a version of the truth, wrapped up in a language that is acceptable to the west.



Wyatt has a good laugh after reading Chomsky

Wyatt tries to keep abreast of musical developments almost as fervently as he follows politics. Though he doesn't see the recent New Age or acid house movements as being significant agents for change, he's interested in the rap situation in America. "This is how a

lot of black Americans have found or come to terms with the fact that their revolution to be in control of their lives is a permanently put off fantasy! And that's because they're outnumbered. So rap is how to develop a kind of sense of 'we're gonna have a life,' 'we're gonna have a culture,' 'we're gonna do what we can,' but in a permanent state of siege."

Once Wyatt gets his teeth into a topic he finds it hard to let go, so a good 40 minutes is passed by his delving into the shortcomings of British politics, the Liberal/Tory power axis, and the ebb and flow that characterizes the unchanging face of the British power elite. He even has his doubts about the Labour Party, which holds views most closely associated with his own. "Still, I think the Labour movement is full of heroism and a tremendous energy. I admire Jerry Dammers, who was in the end responsible for the Mandela concert, Billy Bragg, the Communards, and all those who were involved in *Red Wedge*. If I vote Labour it will be out of loyalty to them and the local people here who may not know anything about access to power but are loyal to their party."

So Wyatt is not all doom and gloom. Though he sees world music and third world film as something functioning at the behest of first world technology, he's still inspired by exotic musical mixtures. "A lot of my musical inspiration comes from people whose ancestors come from other parts of the world. It means that there's a built-in possible future in our culture that hasn't yet reached the political establishment."

Gramavision, 260 W. Broadway, NY, NY 10013

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Dedicated To You But You Weren't Listening - The Concise SOFT MACHINE Handbook - Strange Things - Volume 1 * Number 6 - Summer 1989



> Zoom

THE CONCISE SOFT MACHINE HANDBOOK
by John Speeding

I was working the hole with the sailor and we did not do bad.

So begins *The Soft Machine*, a William Burroughs novel from 1961. That same year, the posse of Canterbury misfits who'd assume that same name began to interact.

The Simon Langton School has assumed a latent reputation as a place of education for the sons of 'intellectuals'. **Robert Wyatt**, however, only remembers a dull grammar school with little or no cultural direction. Perhaps then it was only coincidence that something of an avant-grade filtered through its upper forms.

Mike Ratelidge was eighteen and about to read Philosophy at Oxford, but was also known to play jazz-based variations with a saxophonist, **Brian Hopper**. The afforementioned Robert, two years younger, had meanwhile befriended Brian's brother, **Hugh Hopper**, in a mutual consuming passion for music. A final piece of the jigsaw, **David Sinclair**, was a further year behind and, in Robert's words, *"played piano at morning assembly."* He also recalls that there was little relationship across the forms, *"I only met Mike twice, once when he was a prefect. He came up to me and said, 'I believe you have some Cecil Taylor records. Can I borrow one?'"*

Since the dawn of the 1980s, Robert Wyatt has picked at the balloon which suggested the Canterbury scene's idyllic genesis. Despite his self-effacing honesty, a powerful image of such comparitive youngsters, embracing the wild jazz of **Mingus**, **Monk** and **Coleman** with the *'Please Please Me*' revelation still a year away remains, nonetheless, romantic.

The chronology here gets somewhat sketchy. At some point the stilled Wyatt quit school to study sculpture at the local Art College. Its regime proved as restrictive and he abandoned study for a penniless trip to Spain. At some point, either here or on a previous visit, he met one **George Neidof**, who returned to Canterbury with him and stayed with his family, in return for which he taught Robert drums. Neidof also knew **Daevid Allen**, who's introduction to the circle was crucial.

Allen's exploits are detailed elsewhere in this issue, but his early involvement was not only inspirational, but innovative. In early 1963 both Hugh Hopper and Robert joined him in his

London flat. Hopper recalls playing with **Michael Horowitz**, backing his poem, 'The Dalai Lama Is Coming To Tea', *"with our very loose version of Bizet's 'Carmen'."*

Hopper and Allen then made plans to travel to Tangier and play at a club called the **Fat Black Pussycat**. Instead Hugh joined Daevid in Paris, making the tape loop experiments which were later essential to **The Soft Machine** canon, before returning home with Wyatt and forming **The Wilde Flowers**.

Here they were joined by the elder Hopper, Brian, Richard Sinclair and Kevin Ayers. Mutual fashion rather than a common education had brought Kevin into the group, who's debut gig was at Whitstable's **Bear and Key** Hotel. *"They try for an Indian influence,"* noted the **'Canterbury Gazette**', *"but their **Rolling Stones** haircuts make the fans go crazy."* The Wilde Flowers set was British R&B, some Beatles and some originals, a flavour of which was caught on a brief 1965 demo. recorded at the unlikely Wout Steenhuis studio. The groups leafs its way through two covers. **Chuck Berry**'s '*Almost Grown* and **Mose Allison**'s reading of *'Parchman Farm*', alongside two originals, Hugh Hopper's reflective '*Memories*' and Kevin's rumbustuous '*She's Gone*'.

In common with their future aggregations, **The Wilde Flowers** were notoriously unstable. Ayers left, a new guitarist, **Graham Flight**, appeared and vanished and Richard Sinclair traded rhythm guitar for college. Robert stopped drumming in favour of permanent vocals. Richard Coughlan replaced him at the kit. and one **Pye Hastings** latterly joined on lead. By 1966 **The Wilde Flowers** were altogether smoother: they entered competitions both for **Melody Maker** and **Radio Caroline**, winning the latter with a heady mix of '*Sunny*', '*Papa's Got A Brand New Bag*' and '*You Put A Spell On Me*'. This line-up, however, crumbled around October 1966 with the departure of Robert Wyatt. (Hugh Hopper quit some five months later, the rest then added **David Sinclair** and became **Caravan**.)

Wyatt, Ayers and Daevid Allen had reestablished contact and a frustrated Mike Ratelidge had left university. The new group flirted with several names, another William Burrough's title, **Nova Express**, was considered, but **Soft Machine** was finally selected with Alien telephoning the author for permission and a blessing.

Following a disastrous opening at London's **Zebra Club**. Daevid's connections with the fledgling London Underground; **John Hopkins** and the **Indica** gang, provided the **Softs** with their spot at the party to launch '**International Times**' and subsequent residency at the hallowed **UFO**. On these early dates the group was supplemented by **Larry Nolan**, an American guitarist who vanished as mysteriously as he appeared, and by **Mark Boyle**'s evocative light show, which formed the perfect counterpoint to a collective increasing it's weirdo quotient. **Pete Frame** recalls their appearance at **The 14 Hour Technicolor Dream** in April 1967.

"Robert Wyatt huffing and puffing and singing from his drum stool, Kevin Ayers with rouge on his cheeks and u black cowboy hat surrounded by a huge pair of glider's wings and Daevid Alien with a miner's helmet (light switched on) and a fixed maniac stare."

In the meantime Kevin had tried to place some of his songs with **The (New) Animals**, an effort which brought the **Softs** into contact with **Mike Jeffries** and **Chas Chandler**. The former became their manager, the latter their early producer, responsible for the topside of the group's first single. '*Love makes Sweet Music*'.
Written by Kevin at his commercial best, it moved with an effortless, magical ease, both confident and irresistible. Its coupling. '*Feelin Reelin' Squeelin*", was produced by the itinerant Kim Fowley and reflected **The Soft Machine**'s wilder conceptions with Ayers' maniacal growl and Allen's liquid guitar.

Despite soaring to the dizzy heights of No.28 on the Radio London chart, '*Love Makes Sweet Music*' made little impression and *Polydor* dropped any option. A series of demos were subsequently cut at **De Lane Lea** studios, with **Giorgio Gomelsky** producing. These tapes have cropped up in various guises, most recently as ***Jet Propelled Photographs***. Although certainly rough and ramshackle, they mix missed notes with a raw ambition and are genuinely engaging.

The songs are split between Robert, Kevin and Hugh Hopper, now on the fringe of the group as their roadie. Both '*She's Gone*' and '*Memories*' are resurrected from **The Wilde Flowers** tape. The latter is as haunting as the group from this era could be, while other highlights appear in the splendid *'I Should've Known*' (freak-out via the '*Shotgun*

riff) and Robert's melancholic *'That's How Much I Needed To Know*', the melody of which would, alongside that of '*You Don't Remember*', reappear, shorn of its adolesent lyric, on **Third's** '*Moon In June*'. Indeed much of the collection would surface elsewhere; Kevin's '*Jet Propelled Photograph*' became '*Shooting At The Moon*', while '*Save Yourself*" and '*I Should Have Know*' were recut for the first official album,the former relatively intact, its counterpart, however, was somewhat remodelled and became '*Why Am I So Short*'.



The boys then recorded a third '*She's Gone*', this time with **Joe Boyd** producing. Scheduled as a single, and featuring **Bill Burroughs** on "*barely audible aphorism*", it was never released as such, although it was subsequently aired on **Triple Echo**, a 1977 retrospective. '*She's Gone*' also marked the end of Daevid Allen's involvement, his *de facto* deportation reduced the line-up to a trio and increased the "*jungle warfare*" (Allen) simmering within the group.



> Zoom

1967 ended with the **Christmas On Earth** concert, 1968 began with a marathon American tour, supporting **Eire Apparent** and the **Jimi Hendrix Experience**. Each was a part of the Jeffries stable, indeed Hendrix had some rhythm guitar to an early, rejected '*Love Makes Sweet Music*' while Ayers, Wyatt and Alien sang at the back of a similarly canned '*Stone Free*'. At least that's the legend. And while we're weaving webs, don't forget Hendrix makes a splintering, but brief, appearance on Eire Apparent's only album. (UK pressings only!) The U.S. tour lasted six months, and was gruelling. In an effort to diffuse the instrumental strain, guitarist **Andy Summers** was briefly drafted in, but he switched instead to **The New Animals**. "*Nightmare-ish*" was how Wyatt described one particular date at **Madison Square Gardens**, where the touring party was supplemented by **Albert King**, **The Chambers Brothers** and **Big Brother and the Holding Company**. The marathon closed at the **Hollywood Bowl** and an exhausted group was flown back to New York to cut their debut album.

Ostensibly produced by **Tom Wilson**, ("*We'd do a take*," remembers Wyatt, "*go hack into the control room, and he'd he on the 'phone to some girl*."). the set is a triumph of imagination over adversity, and captures many of **The Soft's** most thrilling moments. In '*So Boot If At All*' the group capture the essence of Underground improvisation, and match

the cascading genius of '*Interstellar Overdrive*'. Another Hugh Hopper revival. '*Hope For Happiness*', provides an ideal, stylistic introduction, while the rest of the record matches Kevin's angular eccentricity, the studied seriousness of Ratelidge, and Robert's heartfelt passion.

On completion, **The Soft Machine** disintegrated. Wyatt stayed behind in New York, completing '*Moon In June*' from his diary cum scrapbook, Ayers made for Ibiza and Mike flew back to London to compose. By winter Robert was in L.A., writing and recording enough for two demo albums, one featuring the full '*Moon In June*', the other fragments of older Hugh Hopper material, rearranged and given new lyrics, much of which appeared on their next album.

In the meantime *Probe* had released **The Soft Machine**. It became a cult success, and a demand grew for some kind of group to tour behind it. Wyatt and Ratelidge were, somewhat guardedly, reunited, but Kevin Ayers, who's quirky compositions were at odds with the studious keyboard wizard, was now uninterested and had sold his bass to **Mitch Mitchell**.

Hugh Hopper provided the natural replacement and a reconstituted **Soft Machine** began rehearsing almost immediately. They openned with a blow at **The Roundhouse** with Andy Summers and Zoot Money, before appearing, properly, in public at **The Albert Hall** alongside Hendrix and the **Traffic** substitute, **Mason, Wood, Capaldi and Frog**. A second album, **Volume Two**, was recorded over February and March 1969, and although another wonderful work, the divisions within the group seemed wider than ever. A scan of the titles reflects the gap: "*Thank You Pierrot Lunaire*'. '*Have You Ever Been Green*'' (the surreal Wyatt), against the formal eccentricity of '*Fire Engine Passing With Bells Clanging*' and '*A Door Opens And Closes*', two of Mike Ratelidge's moments. Although inevitably distanced from **The Soft Machine**'s paisley patterns, the new collection boasted a real maturity, and a sound refined to suit a studio environment.



Brian Hopper had re-emerged on the album to add both soprano and tenor sax, an indication of the group's future development. Between October and the end of 1969, the trio was augmented by a radical horn section; **Lyn Dobson** (flute & soprano sax), **Elton Dean** (alto sax & saxello), **Nick Evans** (trombone) and **Marc Charig** (cornet). Their collective pedigree included **Manfred Mann**, **Keith Tippet** and **Bluesology**, but the experiment proved too expensive and was dropped.

Although the septet would not offically record as such, a session was cut for **Peel**'s '*Top Gear*' that November. *'Esther's Nosejob' and 'the 'Mousetrap' /' Noisette' /' Backwards' / Mousetrap Reprise'* workout thus gave a glimpse into a somewhat unrealised potential, hut also showed the eclipse of the drummer's own ideosyncratic direction. The session was also revived on **Triple Echo**, along with two corresponding pieces. The first featured the basic trio on an inspired reading of Robert's '*Moon In June*', the lyric of which was specially written for the occasion to include references to the programme, **BBC** tea, **Caravan** and **Pink Floyd**. It was, and is, quite simply, a masterpiece.

The remaining session was from May 1970, and contained three Ratelidge compositions, *'Slightly All The Time*', '*Out Bloody Rageous*' and '*Eamonn Andrews*', the first two of which appeared (in different forms) on **Third**, the **Soft Machine**'s next album.
Although it featured several extra musicians, including Dobson and Evans, Elton Dean remained the only permanent addition to the Wyatt/Hopper/Ratelidge triumvurate. A double set spread over four basic pieces, the estrangement between Robert and the rest was near complete. They hated '*Moon In June*' and initially refused to play on it. Wyatt added his own bass and keyboards and although both Hugh and Mike would latterly play a

minor role, it is, obstensibly, a solo effort. The ultimate irony, perhaps, was that Robert admired what the rest were attempting, especially Hopper. "*(Hugh) was the most creative. Excellent though Mike's things were. they could have been written by Herbie Hancock or Wayne Shorter. It was putting us on the fringes of other people's worlds rather than at the centre of our own. To he to, say. Tony Williams, what The Stones were to Muddy Waters, was not really my ambition*."

The last act of defiance by what was recognisably the 'old' **Soft Machine** came in August and their performance at the Albert Hall's Pop Promenade. Sandwiched between the respectability of an archaic music establishment was a somewhat rough-hewn set, evenby the group's own standards, but one now captured on a new-ish release, **Live At The Proms 1970**. Whatever the contemporary controversy, the invitation to appear cemented the ascendant seriousness, as the more formal programme suggested.

Now somewhat alone, Wyatt embarked on a solo album, the punning **End Of An Ear**. Those expecting a further stream-of-consciousness were caught somewhat surprised, this was a sometimes impenetrable mix, but one which allowed an important breathing space. It was, in many ways, the instrumental interludes of the early **Soft Machine**, but without the songs or hooks to 'bookend' them together. Mark Charig and EIton Dean provided the woodwind, David Sinclair the organ, while Robert drummed (naturally), sang a little and began his experimentation with keyboards. If **The End Of An Ear** was autobiographical, it was in the titles; '*To Saintly Bridget*' (Bridget St.John), '*To Caravan And Brother Jim*', '*To 0z Alien Daevid And Gilli*', although the sometimes furious stew
which spilled out in places doubtlessly reflected the confusion of the times.



> Zoom

Wyatt indeed took a sabbatical and toured with **Kevin Ayers and the Whole World** before returning to **The Soft Machine**'s fold for ***Fourth***, a dour, paired-down version of its predecessors. His percussion aside, Robert's contribution is minimal, and a suggestion, to manager Scan Murphy, that he might like to try something else, was eagerly seized upon by Hopper and Ratelidge. Wyatt was fired in September 1971, and with him went the heart, soul and humour of a group, once excellent, now doomed to a future of cold mathematics.

Heartfelt thanks are due to Ian McDonald*,* Pete Frame *and* John Platt *for providing the original detective work and several of the above quotes.* ***Kevin Ayers****' subsequent erratic, but more often than not, inspired career can he found elsewhere in this issue, while What happened to Robert Wyatt will he divulged in a forthcoming volume of this magazine.*

Previous article

Next article

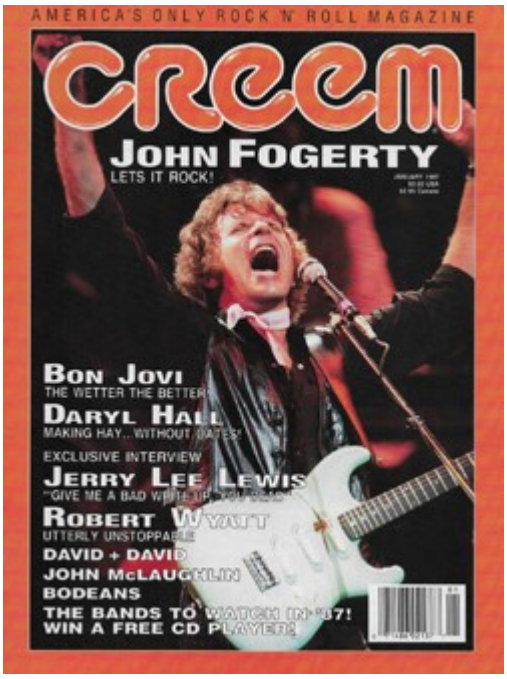
Back to the list

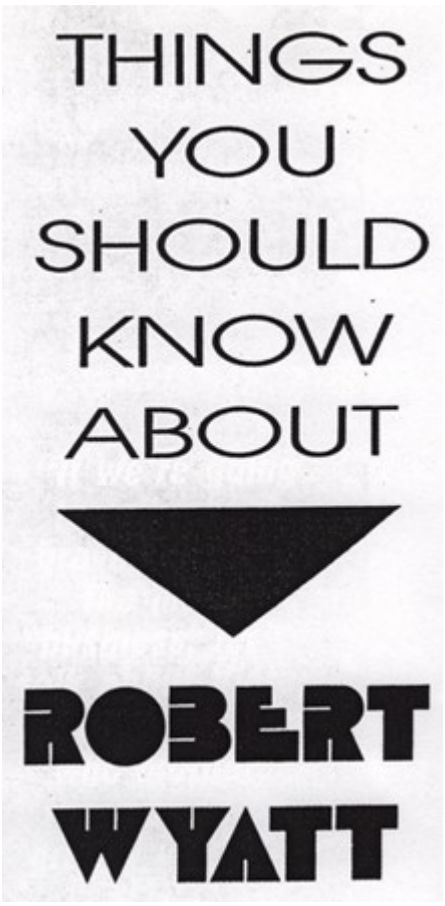
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Things you should know about Robert Wyatt - Creem - January 1987







It's difficult to call it more than coincidence.

The driver hired to take me south of London, to the home of the person I'm to interview, spends an extraordinary amount of time telling me how apartheid is inherently *good*—how the black people "down there" can't quite take care of *themselves* yet, that they're extremely violent themselves, what are they complaining about? — and much more of that talk, talk I'm not used to hearing in England. I guess there's a lot of it.

The driver has no idea where we're going. In fact, he tells me, he's glad I speak English — "I thought you were an Italian bloke," says he. We get very close to the neighborhood we're seeking, find the proper street, and search the small row of townhouses for the address he's been given.

Robert Wyatt's house stands out among the rest on his block; it's the one with the large END APARTHEID! poster tacked onto the front door.

The driver pulls out a book he'd planned to read in the car while I was doing my interview. It's by Jackie Collins.

Inside the house are many more books. These books are by Marx, Engels, Lenin and others; they're about Latin America and Africa, about political and economic systems; other cultures. Robert Wyatt's wife, Alfie, tells me Robert will be ready for the interview in a few short moments. Would I like some coffee or tea? Oh, and there's no point in the driver waiting outside in his car; invite him to come in as well.

A man in a wheelchair enters the room. The interview takes place.

Later, the driver and I get back in the car. His first words, spoken in amazement: "That woman was a bleedin' *communist*, mate."

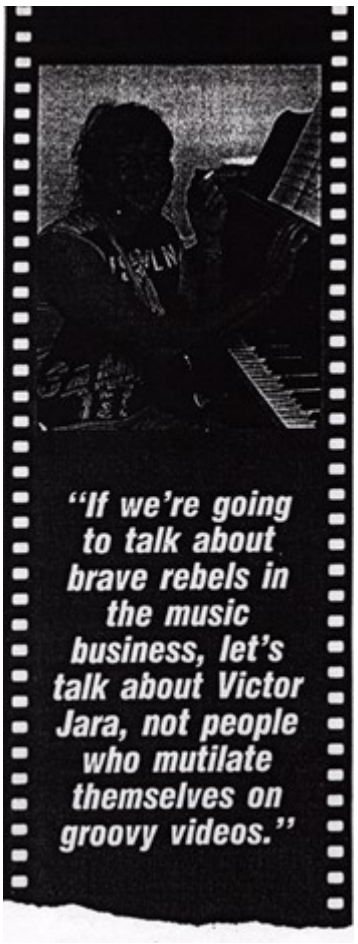
***

He's diplomatic when it comes to his reasons for leaving that pioneering band, though the back of his first solo album, 1970's *The End Of An Ear*, bears this intriguing self-description; "Out of work Pop Singer (Currently on drums with Soft Machine)." Wyatt wouldn't be hanging around with the band much longer after releasing it.

"It was sort of a 40-minute burst of frustration, in a way," says he.

Frustration with what?

"Well, I think a lot of drummers are neurotics. That's the sort of thing you used to get in jazz. Because the thing in jazz is, 'This band's got four musicians and a drummer,' that sort of thing." He laughs again. "And there was always that feeling. I was, and have remained, virtually musically illiterate. And you sort of feel — I mean, they used to say to me, 'Why don't you learn to read music?' And I would say, my excuse was, 'So you can't write own what I've got to *play*.'



"But it was sort of feeble. I always felt on the defensive, you know? So from *The End Of An Ear* onwards, I started to go on the attack."

What does he remember most about the band?

"What I remember was, a very experimental era in the early '60s, when we were mucking about with tapes, and where there were no holds barred and stuff like that. And the early group live was an extremely open format, I think.

"And gradually, it stalled to narrow down, and became what you'd call a jazz-rock group. And I felt like the options were closing, that the possibilities were being cut off. Although also during that period, we all got to play much better. So it was odd, we got freer in terms of technique, but it seemed to hamper and predetermine what we actually did with it. We were much braver before we had any technique."

Does he think the band should've changed its name after he left?

"Oh, I don't know—in retrospect, they're welcome to it, you know? But I think we should all give it back to Bill Burroughs and forget the whole thing."

***

Wyatt next turned up in his own band, Matching Mole, in 1972. People that know tell me "Matching Mole" means "Soft Machine" in French, at least phonetically. In the band were friends, like David Sinclair, Phil Miller, Bill MacCormick and Dave McRae. The records were excellent, and much more experimental than the fifth and sixth Soft Machine albums, both wordless and Wyatt-less.

"It was really a necessity," remembers Wyatt. "I had to put something together. Because it's very difficult to find bands to work in. I mean, very often if you're a drummer or a singer, there's *some* opportunity to join this band or that band. But the particular way in which / like to operate—which is, you know, I might want to do songs, but I might want at least as much instrumental, and I might want to have a few very accessible pieces, and a few pieces where we try everything we can think of on them—there wasn't any band to *join* where you could do that in.

"So the only way was just to find some sympathetic friends and carry on. But people who, even if they didn't like you singing, didn't have the power to *stop* you."

Wyatt smiles at his exaggeration.

A second Matching Mole album would soon follow, *Matching Mole's Little Red Record.* It was stranger than the first. Robert Fripp produced it, and former Roxy Music pop star Brian Eno even played synthesizer on it. The band was beginning to develop its own very charming personality.

And then Robert Wyatt's accident happened. A fall from building is what did it; he's been confined to a wheelchair ever since. For a drummer who favored using his bass drum and hi-hat, it couldn't be much worse. Yet after months in the hospital, Wyatt would emerge with what still stands as his masterpiece, 1974's *Rock Bottom*. From its very unusual cover, an illustration by Wyatt's wife Alfreda Benge, to its opening track "Sea Song" (which fans Tears For Fears recorded last year as a B-side), and its finale, "Little Red Robin Hood Hit The Road," *Rock Bottom* is one of the finest albums of the '70s.

"In a way," says Wyatt, "that was the easiest record I've ever had to make. It was the first record where you didn't have to spend half the time trying to carry the drum kit around all over the place." Again, he laughs. "Somebody else was the drummer - this was very liberating. So there was less to think about. Because before, I'd been trying to get about drumming and the kit, and writing and arranging and organizing gigs, and singing and writing songs. So cutting it down to those last two, just concentrating on the bits I could handle, and leaving more to other people, was quite liberating.

"It was just because I *wasn't* in a group, and I wasn't having to organize that, and I wasn't having to worry about what four people were gonna eat that week, you know? I could concentrate on the music. Like I hadn't really been able to before. So it was...that was easy.

"And the thing is, there was a piano in the hospital as well, in their visitors' room—and there weren't many visitors. At least there weren't after / got near the piano. They stopped coming. And so when I got out of the hospital, I was really ready. Because I had to spend about seven months in the hospital, and the last two months I was already in the chair, just learning to get around."

Many fans of Wyatt's assume the bulk of *Rock Bottom* was written in the hospital while he recuperated; in fact, prior to the accident he'd been preparing for a third Matching Mole album. "People think it must've been written all afterwards, but in fact no, [the unrecorded Matching Mole LP] would've been something like that anyway."

After that came an actual hit single for Wyatt - a cover of "I'm A Believer," ironically — a non-hit follow-up, "Yesterday Man," and the *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard* album. The latter was much more a collaborative effort that anything Wyatt had recorded previously; it's interesting and it's humorous, but it lacks the emotional bite of its predecessor. It was also the last Robert Wyatt album for several years.

The collaborations continued. He'd already done things on albums by Hatfield And The North and Henry Cow; soon his name appeared on works by Brian Eno, Phil Manzanera and

many others. Most notable were the series of albums he recorded with Carla Bley and Mike Mantler; the best of the bunch is *The Hapless Child*, though Mantler's adaptation of the Harold Pinter play, Silence, featured the great Kevin Coyne and also deserves serious attention. Wyatt also popped up on a solo LP by Pink Floyd's Nick Mason (who'd produced *Rock Bottom*) called *Fictitious Sports*, which not incidentally consisted entirely of material written by Carla Bley.

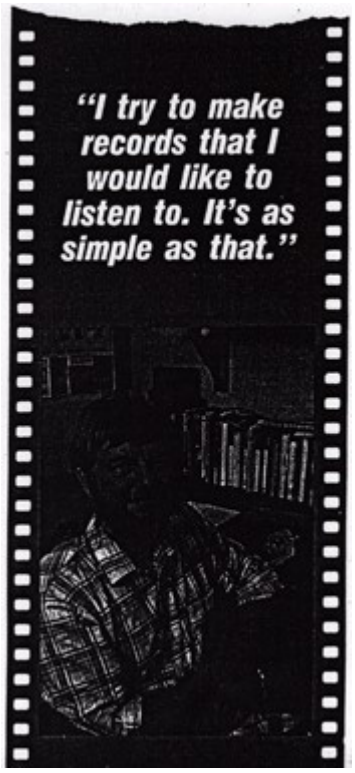
But it took a very long time for Robert Wyatt to release his own records again.

After a long period of silence, you finally started issuing some singles. How did you decide on that material?

***

"Well, during the *'70s,* something happened to my feeling, being in the rock world. There seemed to be this consensus, which was that it was a new and semi-legitimate art form, and it was a sort of natural vehicle for new and rebellious ideas. And during the *'70s,* it became quite clear to me that what we were, as rock musicians, were in fact members of the establishment. That it *was* an establishment, and perhaps it always had been, ever since Elvis joined the GI's. We thought we were kidding.

"But nevertheless, it became part of the big Western propaganda culture, all this stuff. And so really, I became interested in retrieving the idea of a sort of, if you like, *disobedient* music, where rebel poses had become so...sort of *established,* it's part of the whole rock 'n' roll circus.



"You were getting to funny stages, where people who deliberately maimed themselves onstage were selling themselves as brave and courageous, whereas you had someone like Victor Jara in Chile, who because he sang for democracy in Chile, was tortured to death. If we're going to talk about brave rebels in the music business, let's talk about Victor Jara, not people who mutilate themselves on groovy videos.

"And I just wanted to—I started to see more and more of the world that was truly alienated by our establishment, that wasn't *included* in rock 'n' roll, really."

How did you see this? From reading? Films?

"I don't know, in any one particular way. I was very, very hit by the death of Mongezi Feza, the South African trumpet player who was the same age as me, and died at about 31 in the early '70s. And really, he died of old age and a broken heart at 31, as a South African exile who thought he'd escape to England and found that you don't escape racism that easily. He'd come to the country that *invented* apartheid to get *away—and* exported it—but that hadn't occurred to him.

"His death hit me very hard. Quite selfishly, I was very angry to have been deprived of a musician I really enjoyed working with. I started to think. You know, we're told in rock 'n' roll that this is the democratic art form, this is the art form where the inarticulate are allowed to speak. You know? All that stuff—this is where black and white and working class, this is how we...

"But in fact, because it was so proud of being that, all the people who were alienated from this whole cozy consensus, you can see them in stark relief around you. People who *weren't* included in this happy rebel party of rock 'n' roll. So in different ways, I wouldn't say there was one line going through everything I did—but I would say *that* was the kind of thought that was going through my mind when I chose songs."

***

The string of singles Wyatt released in the early '80s was stunning in variety, conception, and performance. If you'd like to hear them, you can; most are collected on *Nothing Can Stop Us*, issued here in September on Gramavision Records.

Listen to these songs. Notice that they all have one thing in common: they are songs of freedom. Thus from Chic's "At Last I Am Free" and Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" to songs by Violetta Para, Victor Jara and Pablo Milanos, Wyatt has put together as aural collage that, however unusual the sources, holds together better thematically than anything he'd recorded in his life.

Listen to Wyatt's version of "At Last I Am Free."

"I think it's a mistake in thinking the only music of rebellious significance, of revolutionary significance, is in music which is consciously so," says Wyatt. "In any piece of music, if you say, 'We exist and we're proud of existing, we wish to do well and flourish, like everyone else'—in certain societies, it has political connotations.

"At that time, people like Chic, were being dismissed. I mean, I know that Chic, when they were young, had been attracted by the Black Power movement like a lot of people, but decided that the best thing to do was just to try and 'make it.' But the way they did it at that time had no legitimacy within rock currency, because they were smart, cleanly dressed, and everybody was, you know, *smart-dressed*, and you did really smart things at the discos. And although that was making money, it had no status.

"And somehow, there's always been this time-lag, it seems to me, with black American music, whereby you do something and it's enjoyed, but has no status, and then white people take it up and the genre gets status. So that 10 years later, it's really groovy to dress up smart and do good disco tunes. But it wasn't *then*, you know? So, I'm not trying to impose my views on Chic—but just simply from my perspective, the existence of them and what they were doing, was politically very interesting."

It was a good song, too.

"That's right—I mean, apart from that. It was a very nice song. I had the feeling about this song, that they had written this chorus and then backed off the implications when they came to the verse. And did what everybody in rock 'n' roll does— which is play safe and pretend that the whole thing was about personal relationships." Wyatt laughs uproariously.

I have to admit, I tell him, just those lines, "At last I am free/I can hardly see in front of me"...

"It's a great couplet. I mean, I think that's *great* poetry, just those two lines."

Wyatt's version of "Shipbuilding," written by Elvis Costello and Clive Langer and also included on *Nothing Can Stop Us*—was he pleased with it?

"Well, I mean, really, all I was doing there was exactly what Costello and Langer asked me to do, as well as possible. Strictly speaking on those things, they're sometimes *called* collaborations, but they're not. I was working for them, definitely, and I just saw my job as trying to sort of live up to what it is they expect me to do."

A hit, in fact, the single was Wyatt's closest brush with "rock stardom" in many years. He's not very fond of the scene.

"The rock establishment in England reminds me totally of the Royal Family and so on, in a way that not even Miles Davis does in jazz. Not even in terms of their attitude to themselves, but in terms of their role in the mass media, the newspapers and so on. And that may all be fine — there's nothing necessarily *wrong* with that kind of acceptance except that...I dunno, one thing and another, I didn't feel that I was part of something that really *meant* anything to me. So I was really looking elsewhere to act. But I couldn't *find* anything else, it was sort of too late. This is all I can do. And so I've come back to making records."

Wyatt's most recently recorded album, *Old Rottenhat*, came out last year in England, this year in the States. It's a remarkable record, filled with brand new Wyatt compositions, his first in many years. Political references abound: there are mentions of linguist Noam Chomsky, Indonesia, East Timor, songs like "The United States Of Amnesia" and "The Age

Of Self." All of this, mind you, miles and miles away from the genuinely hilarious Soft Machine lyrics Wyatt penned almost 20 years ago—but certainly much more incisive.

Wyatt's earlier comment about Chic doing "what everybody in rock 'n' roll does" ("play safe and pretend that the whole thing was about personal relationships") is most telling.

***

Nowadays, Robert Wyatt says he is "more likely to go to a political meeting without any music in it, than a musical meeting without any politics in it." He claims to not be in touch with the London jazz scene as he once was because, "like Duke Ellington said, I don't get around much anymore." He recently went in the studio with British saxophonist Evan Parker for a short bit on Kip Hanrahan's next record, a collection of poems by Paul Haines. He's got no idea what he'll be recording next.

He's one of the most inspiring individuals I've ever encountered.

"I don't think I choose to make a certain kind of record," he told me about Old Rottenhat. "When I remember making records, I make the only kind I can. My ambitions are very simple.

"I try to make records that I would like to listen to. It's as simple as that."

Dave DiMartino

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt - Record Collector N° 80 - April 1986

ROBERT WYATT



EX-SOFT MACHINE DRUMMER AND VOCALIST WHO HAS ESTABLISHED HIMSELF AS A CULT SOLO PERFORMER IN RECENT YEARS.

BY BRIAN HOGG.

Two minor chart hits - "I'm A Believer" in 1974, and "Shipbuilding" in 1983 - disguise the fact that Robert Wyatt is generally recognised as one of Britain's most consistently creative and articulate musical talents. Wyatt began his career in the mid-Sixties with the Soft Machine, recording four albums with them that developed from 'psychedelic pop' to a more jazz-based experimentation. Since then, he has emerged as one of the major artists on the British independent scene, with a string of classic singles for Rough Trade. Wyatt is also well-known for his session work, and has played with a variety of artists ranging from Henry Cow to the Raincoats.

The roots of his career can be traced back to the Simon Langton School in Canterbury, an educational facility reserved for the sons of local artists, run on similar radical lines to A.S. Neill's 'Summerhill', and whose other pupils included Mike Ratledge, David Sinclair and Hugh Hopper. Wyatt left the school around 1960, and fled to Spain and Majorca, where he stayed with the poet Robert Graves, a family friend. When he returned home, Robert brought with him George Niedorf who, as well as teaching him the drums, also introduced Wyatt to Daevid Allen, an Australian who lived in a houseboat in Paris. An enthusiast, Allen experimented with the tape-loop music of Terry Riley, knew and worked with William Burroughs, and consumed hallucinogenics - and this was back in 1962! Both Wyatt and Hopper visited him in Paris, and both were profoundly influenced by the trip.

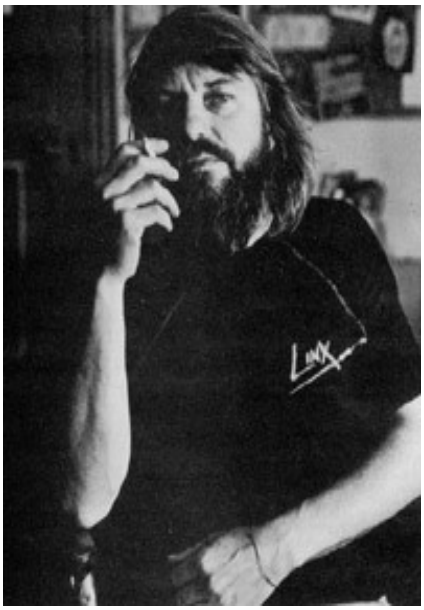
Upon returning to Canterbury, the duo pieced together a group of their own, the Wild Flowers, who made their debut in June 1963 at the Bear and King Hotel in Whitstable, Kent. The rest of the group included Kevin Ayers (vocals), Richard Sinclair (rhythm guitar), and Brian Hopper (sax), with Robert and Hugh on drums and bass respectively. Ayers was soon replaced by one Graham Flight, who in turn was ousted when Richard Coughlin joined as drummer, leaving Robert free to sing. So it remained until August 1966 when Robert left to form the Soft Machine. The Wild Flowers in the meantime added Pye Hastings and David Sinclair, and would, in 1968, evolve into Caravan.

REUNITED

The Soft Machine reunited Wyatt with Kevin Ayers and Mike Ratledge, as well as bringing them together with the mysterious Larry Nolan (who disappeared after a handful of gigs), and Daevid Allen, whose contacts with the embryonic London 'underground' ensured that the Softs became synonymous with the scene. Initially, however, their sets were less

radical, featuring original material mixed with current soul hits. However, by the time they came to record their first single, it was clear that such compromises were now past. The group had signed to Polydor in January 1967 (in the month that their underground contemporaries Pink Floyd released their first single, "Arnold Layne"), and they immediately began recording, using ex-Animal Chas Chandler as producer. While the A-side, "Love Make Sweet Music" was a fabulous piece of pure pop, with Wyatt's voice already distinctive, its flipside, "Reelin' Feelin' Squealin'", was much more like their Dadaist approach to music, helped by having the enigmatic Kim Fowley as producer. In fact, it may be that this track was recorded first, causing Polydor to baulk at its wierdness and demand something less radical. Strange it certainly was, with Kevin's booming depth-of-a-well voice totally upfront. The single itself was a complete flop and copies now are incredibly rare. However, both sides have appeared on subsequent compilations, "Rare Tracks", and "Triple Echo", the latter being a boxed set of Softs' material, of which more later.

DEMOS



> Zoom

Dropped by Polydor after the failure "Love Makes Sweet Music", the group's next move was to put together a set of demos. Although never intended for commercial release, they would ultimately appear on the French BYG label, before eventually being pulled together for a 1977 release on Charly, reissued again in 1983. Despite the sometimes erratic playing (and out-of-tune guitar!), there are some strong performances. Robert's voice is excellent throughout, and two of the songs, "Memories", and the magnificent "That's How Much I Need You Now", are among the best the group recorded. Although most of the material was cut with Giorgio Gomelsky, at least one track, "She's Gone", was produced by Joe Boyd as a projected second single. The album, "At the Beginning" is still in catalogue, and provides a fascinating insight into early British progressive music.

Meanwhile, the group continued to play at London's UFO Club and other burgeoning haunts, but also spent a considerable amount of time in France where they found a very receptive audience. But when they returned from one such visit, Daevid Allen was refused re-entry into Britain and the Soft Machine was thus cut to a trio. As such, they played the 1967 Edinburgh Festival and when Allen did return, he decided he wasn't happy in the group anyway, resettled himself in Paris, joined the barricades during the riots, and began hatching the equally bizarre Gong.

The Softs then began a gruelling U .S. tour supporting the Jimi Hendrix Experience. Between May and July 1968, the trio was augmented by guitarist Andy Somers, en route from Dantalion's Chariot, and before his spell in the New Animals. He joined just after the group completed work on their first album, recorded and mixed in four days in April at the Record Plant in New York, and released by Probe that December. "The Soft Machine" was never granted a U.K. release at the time, partly due to Probe's low profile here, and partly because the band spent most of their time in America anyway. However, it became one of the era's most endearing imports. It was a good album, with "Hope For Happiness" and "Why Are We Sleeping" among the highlights. Gimmicks such as Wyatt's phased drum solo sound rather dated now, but his heartfelt rendition of "A Certain Kind" still remains as powerful as ever. Indifference from the coproducers, Chas Chandler and Tom Wilson, resulted in a somewhat muddy and unfocussed sound which detracts slightly from the overall performance, but the album still remains an essential purchase for those who missed out the first time. It was actually available in two different forms; the earlier pressings had a revolving clock-like front cover (similar to "Led Zeppelin Three") featuring a collage of photos of the group. This was soon dropped in favour of a nondescript non-revolving green circle. Very early copies also lack the bikini crudely drawn on to the girl on the inner sleeve. The final irony was that the Soft Machine, exhausted by the grind of the U.S. tours, celebrated its release by breaking up, Wyatt remaining in America, Ratledge returning to London and Ayers heading for Ibiza.

ERRATIC

When the Softs decided to reform in February 1969, Ayers refused to be tempted back and

began his erratic and idiosyncratic solo career instead. Wyatt and Ratledge then drafted in Hugh Hopper, a promotion of sorts as he'd spent the past year as their roadie. The new trio immediately began work on a second album, "Volume Two", which was an altogether better work, balancing Wyatt's quirkiness with the more serious approach of Ratledge. Hopper's passion for instrumental experiments also pulled the group towards a greater seriousness which would fully manifest itself on later Softs' releases. Meanwhile, here was "The Concise British Alphabet' in all its glory, and other moments of lunacy, all granted a U.K. release this time 'round, although without the elaborate gatefold of the U.S. pressing. Either version is probably rarer than the 'green circle' first album, which was available as a cut-out here for several years, though the American issue is by far the hardest to find. Increasingly rare is the British double-pack of these first two albums, issued during the mid-Seventies as "The Soft Machine Collection", but deleted quickly when the parent company, Anchor, went bankrupt.

"Third", issued by CBS in June 1970, continued the schism between Wyatt and Ratledge, with Robert's masterpiece, "The Moon In June" outshining the more posturing "Out Bloody Rageous". Strangely, it was with this album that the group had their most commercial success, reaching No. 18 in the British album charts, despite the increasingly uncompromising nature of their music. "Third" saw the introduction of saxophonist Elton Dean into the group (as well as Lyn Dobson on a temporary basis); another sign that the group was moving towards serious compositions. In fact, around this time, the Soft Machine became the first 'rock' group to play at the prestigious 'Proms' concerts in London. This line-up can be seen performing "Esther's Nose Job" in the "Stamping Ground" film of the 1970 Rotterdam Pop Festival. When "Fourth" appeared in 1971, charting at No. 32, it became clear that Robert was being squeezed out of the group. He left that September, and although the Soft Machine continued without him until 1978, they bore no resemblance to the group of old. In truth, the spirit of the original group was continued in Daevid Allen's Gong more than anything released on or after "Fourth".

However, the story doesn't quite end there. In 1977, Harvest issued "Triple Echo", the aforementioned boxed set. It took in representative tracks from the whole of the Soft Machine's recordings, but in amongst some straight re-releases were sessions taken from John Peel's BBC Radio programme, 'Top Gear', none of which had appeared on vinyl before. The set thus had versions of "The Moon In June" "Noisette" and, "Slightly AlI The Time" alI of which would appear on "Third" but in different forms, as well as material such as "Mousetrap" and "Eamonn Andrews", which would not be available elsewhere. "The Moon In June" in particular, is a revelation. Broadcast a year (21/6/69) before the official version was issued, it is crammed with references to its specific recording, mentioning the programme, the BBC tea-machine, the Pink Floyd, and much more! "Triple Echo" is worth it for this track alone, but sadly, it was deleted in the early 1980's and is now increasingly scarce. It remains an essential purchase for anyone remotely interested in the group, coming as it does, with an eight page booklet filled with rare photographs, complete session details, memorabilia, and a Pete Frame family tree.



> Zoom

COMPLEX

Robert's immediate work upon leaving the Soft Machine was to make a solo album, punningly titled, "The End Of An Ear". This was a musically complex release, more in keeping with the instrumental fury of the group he was escaping than the intellectual pop one may have expected. Mark Charig and Elton Dean from the Softs played on it, as well as David Sinclair, but in truth, it was not a successful album and was deleted a few years later. However, it was recently repressed on the CBS 'Nice Price' series, and those wishing to hear jazz-rock in a freer atmosphere would find it a rewarding experience.

Robert retained David Sinclair for his next project, which he had pieced together by December 1971. Matching Mole were named after the French for his previous aggregation (machine molle), and also included Phil Miller (guitar), and Bill McCormick (bass). During the recording of their debut album, Sinclair

left to be replaced by Dave MacRae, confirming the line-up which would remain together throughout the group's career. Their eponymous debut was issued in April 1972, and immediately recalled the Soft Machine's ability to mix songs with experiment. The first side in particular, blends well, with the magnificent "O Caroline", "Instant Pussy" and "Signed Curtain". "O Caroline" proved so popular that it was lifted as a single, which is now a highly prized artifact.

COMPULSIVE

A second album, "Matching Mole's Little Red Record" was released in October that year, but was artistically less successful than its predecessor. A complex but compulsive album, once again, the highlights were down to Robert, most notably on "God Song". It was, however, to mark the end of the group, organisational problems and 'personality difficulties' caused them to break up. Both albums have since been deleted , though the first is easier to locate, having been reissued in 1982. Plans to ressurect the band around Wyatt, McCormick, Francis Monkman and Gary Windo were suddenly dashed by Robert's tragic fall, which left him permanently paralysed from the waist down.

A second solo album, "Rock Bottom", written during his long convalescence, was released by Virgin in July 1974. Produced by Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason, it was a rare masterpiece, deeply emotional, personalised, vulnerable, and easily one of that decade's most important and greatest recordings. The same sessions also produced "I'm A Believer", an excellent recreation of Neil Diamond's song for the Monkees, which gave Robert a hit single (No.29), and a 'Top Of The Pops' appearance in September. It was backed by a new version of "Memories", previously only cut as part of those 1967 demos. Plans to continue a singles' career were shelved when it was rumoured that the BBC were not entirely happy at having a man in a wheelchair appear on a pop programme. Chris Andrews' "Yesterday Man", another Sixties hit, had been scheduled for release, but instead, was placed on a Virgin double album sampler, "V". However, in 1977, the track was mysteriously put out as a single, but despite its excellence, disappeared without a trace, and is now highly collectable.

CLASSIC

Meanwhile, a second Virgin album, "Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard", was issued in May 1975. Another fine album, it moved some way towards combining the vocal and instrumental styles of the two previous albums, and it was not only confined to Wyatt's own material. Charlie Hayden's jazz classic, "Song For Che" was included, alongside contributions from Fred Frith, Phil Manzanera, and Mongezi Feza, to create a fascinating mixture. These two Virgin albums are now available as a budget-priced double-pack, although they are still relatively easy to find individually.

Robert then withdrew from active recording for several years, and it wasn't until 1980 that Rough Trade persuaded him to record a series of singles. Free to choose whatever material he wanted, Wyatt embarked on a fascinating cross-section of releases which indicated much about his politics and his aspirations. The first coupled two South American songs of hope, " Arauco" and "Caimenera", while the follow-up was a beautifully slow recording of Chic's " At Last I Am Free", backed by "Strange Fruit", a worthy rendition of the Billie Holiday song. Ivor Cutler's "Grass" was his third release, although Wyatt was not on the B-side, which was performed by a group of Bengali musicians, Dishari. "Stalin Wasn't Stalling" followed, this time coupled with Peter Blackman's "Stalingrad", while a further track from these sessions, "Born Again Cretin", a homage to Nelson Mandela, turned up on the Rough Trade/NME cassette. In 1983, Rough Trade collected these tracks together, added a version of "The Red Flag", and released them as the "Nothing Can Stop Us" album. Taken together, it allowed Robert the same kind of personal statement that "Rock Bottom" had been.

INDICTMENT

However, it was the fifth Rough Trade single, "Shipbuilding", which brought the most attention to his new music. Written especially for him by Elvis Costello, this subtle indictment of the Falklands War gave Wyatt his second chart hit, reaching No.35 in May 1983. Continued interest in the single was such that eventually it was added to the "Nothing Can Stop Us" album, making the first pressing of the LP increasingly rare. When the "Shipbuilding" single was repromoted, the 7" pressing was issued in a triple fold-out sleeve (the initial copies were not), while a new 12" pressing added another jazz standard, "Round Midnight" to the usual flipside, "Memories Of You". It had previously been only available on another NME cassette, "Mighty Reel".

Wyatt has also turned up on a couple of other collections. He had a one minute version of "Strangers In The Night" on the "Miniatures" album in 1980, then two years later, appeared on the "Recommended Records Sampler" with a rousing version of "The Internationale". Again in 1982, he collaborated with Ben Watt on a 12" EP, "Summer Into Winter". The same year, he made an unpublicised return to the stage, performing "Born Again Cretin" with the Raincoats at the Albany Theatre, London; his first appearance since guesting with Henry Cow back in 1975.

ANIMALS

Wyatt continues to record a variety of material for Rough Trade; his soundtrack album to "The AnimaIs Film" complemented the harrowing scenes captured on celluloid, while in 1984, the appearance of the "Work In Progress" 12" EP was led off by a great reworking of the Peter Gabriel song, "Biko". 1985 saw the release of "The Age Of Self", a single released on the TUC/7.84 label, with proceeds going to the Miners' Hardship Fund, and "The Winds Of Change", a collaboration with the SW APO singers, produced by Jerry Dammers, and proceeds helping the Namibia Support Committee. Robert Wyatt also contributed two songs, unavailable elsewhere, to "The Last Nightingale" EP, again, proceeds going to the Miners. On "Old Rottenhat", his most recent solo LP, Wyatt is backed with only keyboards and sparse percussion, his voice at the forefront. One unreleased track, "Pigs", is due to be included on the "Re Records Quarterly Vol. 1, No.3" disc-zine, and he has been working recently on the future "News From Babel" LP.

In fact, mention must be made of some of the guest appearances Robert has made, for he turns up on literally dozens of albums. Far too many to mention them all here, these include many of Kevin Ayers' earlier albums, Daevid Allen's "Bananamoon", Henry Cow's "Concerts", and Syd Barrett's classic solo, "The Madcap Laughs". More recently, he has worked with the Raincoats on "Odyshape", and Nick Mason "Ficticious Sports".

Taken together, along with his own work and with Soft Machine and Matching Mole , this represents an ambitious and fascinating body of work, the scope of which continues and extends to this day. Undoubtedly, Robert Wyatt has long been one of the most challenging individuals working in music, and as well as maintaining a consistently high standard, he retains a depth and perception that few other artists have achieved.



ROBERT WYATT
COMPLETE UK DISCOGRAPHY

SOFT MACHINE SINGLE

SOFT MACHINE ALBUMS

MATCHING MOLE SINGLE

MATCHING MOLE ALBUMS

ROBERT WYATT SINGLES

ROBERT WYATT EPs

ROBERT WYATT ALBUMS

RELATED EPs

RELATED LPs

CASSETTE COMPILATIONS

> Zoom

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

English as a foreign language - New Musical Express 14th December, 1985



ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Does **ROBERT WYATT** have the sweetest voice and sharpest brain in English pop ? Is the English language a tool of cultural narcissism? Which Fleet Street daily has the best tipster? Twickenham's Mr Rottenhat tells **SEAN O'HAGAN** about the problems of being a Red in the stale bed of Western imperialist pop.
Smoothed sheets by **ANTON CORBIJN**.

It seems like that voice has always been there. Raising our eyebrows, bending our lips into smiles and, occasionally, knitting our brows in bemused wonderment.
A reassuring presence, this voice, but also, paradoxically, a strange one. And, the ample evidence suggests, a strangely affecting one.

For such an emphatically English voice to spread out and embrace such an eclectic international spectrum is further proof of an imagination that recognises no borders. Songs as diverse as Chilean poet Victor Jara's 'Te Recuerdo Amanda' and Elvis Costello's 'Shipbuilding', as Ivor Cutler's 'Grass' and Chic's 'At last I Am Free'.

Yet Robert Wyatt's voice, its stately melancholy timbre, unites them all.

FITS AND STARTS

WAY BACK then there was Soft Machine, then an experiment with Matching Mole. Then there was that accident. Silence. Then the former jazz drummer underwent a startling and painfully introspective sea-change - chronicled on'74's 'Rock Bottom' LP - to emerge from the depths, shaken but stronger in resolve. Both 'Rock Bottom' and its offspring, '75's 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard', still stand as resonant, multi-layered, richly-hued landscapes but, for a while, it seemed their maker. Another silence ensued, broken, by of all things, a hit single. Robert Wyatt even made *Top Of The pops*, singing 'I'm A Believer' and, in the process, exorcised the ghost of The Monkees as well. Then another cover: Chris Andrews' 60s opus 'Yesterday Man' underwent the Wyatt treatment. After that, another silence.

A SPANNER IN THE WORKS

ENCOURAGED by his wife Alfie and Rough Trade's Geoff Travis, Robert Wyatt returned in the late '70s with a series of very different singles. Again cover versions were the order of the day, again Wyatt imbued each song with his distinctive breath. These singles - now collectively known as the 'Nothing Can Stop Us' LP - contained only one Wyatt original, the scathing 'Born Again Cretin', but, more importantly, they announced a new intent, a declaration of independence.

"Each song was chosen on quite a consistent basis, all part of a conscious attempt to make *un-misusable* music: music that couldn't be appropriated by the Right. This is also why the new stuff is much more straightforward. I was pushed into this by an alarming

occurrence: I was fiddling around on the short wave radio when I heard one of my old songs being played on one of those Western propaganda programmes - The Voice Of America or Radio Free Europe. Blow me, I thought, I don't want my music used in this way. So, I consciously set out to make records where the ambiguity was removed, records that would have to be rejected by anyone promoting Western culture. Now I make sure I always put a spanner in the works. A desperate move, but ..."

These spanners included heart-wrenching 'Strange Fruit', a bizarre 'Stalin Wasn't Stalling' (originally a patriotic American ditty), a Cuban folk anthem ('Caimanera') and, just so no one could possibly mistake his sympathies, a reading of 'Red Flag'.

Then the phone started ringing...

A VOICE FOR ALL REASONS?

"REALLY, I'D say Costello and Langer were the ones who helped get my name known to the biggest audience. 'Shipbuilding' - that was the one that did it."

'Shipbuilding' is craftsmanship *par excellence*, the perfect, seamless grafting of political *content* and songwriting *style*. The song's deftly executed overview including the irony of working class labour caught up in the imperialist wheels of industry, is imbued with a sad, knowing stoicism and the tenor of Costello's finest lyric fits Wyatt like a glove. Like 'At Last I Am Free' before it, the song became Robert Wyatt's.

Over the past few years, Wyatt's musical involvements have ensured a high profile: one third of the vocal frontline of Working Week's inspired 'Vencermos' debut; a meeting with Ben Watt on the latter's 'Summer Into Winter' EP; the 'Trade Union' outing featuring Bengali musicians Dishari; 'The Age Of Self' miners single, also featuring The Grimethorpe Colliery Brass band; and, finally, the celebrated Jerry Dammers-produced SWAPO song, 'The Wind Of Change'.



Last year Wyatt issued his own 'Work In Progress' EP which, alongside three more excellent cover versions, included 'Amber And The Amberines', only his second self-penned song in ten years.

"It's so bloody difficult to do my own stuff: that's why I'd much rather do covers or quite happily get roped into other people's projects. I go into this state of trance when I'm working on my own and really I have very little control of what I'm going to come up with. The songs tend to suggest themselves so the word 'creative' is a misleading one. For me it's more like fishing, dangling a line over the keyboards and hoping something will jump out at you".

OLD ROTTENHAT; THOUGHTS OF A RELUCTANT SONGWRITER

WHAT HAS "jumped out" is 'Old Rottenhat', an LP of ten new, original compositions. Continuing his catalogue of "un-misusable songs", 'Old Rottenhat' is, on one level at least, Robert Wyatt's most straightforward recording. Yet the targets he has chosen are slippery, ambiguous ones; the treacherous duplicity of political language, the lies that democracy depends on, the so-called plurality of thought that Western culture contains and the infectious spread of cultural amnesia. Behind this array of inter-related topics lurks the spirit of Marxist writer Noam Chomsky, that most mischievous disseminator of Western capitalist mores and guiding light in Wyatt's current way of seeing.

The music remains as haunting and dreamlike as ever, yet here and there an accusatory tone or caustic insight defines a certain shift of emphasis and suggests an angry, spirited individual hides 'neath this most gentle of men'. 'Alliance', the record's opening statement, is a case in point - a song possessed of a political critique and a personal sting: "*You're proud of being middle class (meaning upper class)/You say you're self sufficient (but you don't dig your own coal).*"

"It's a reactionary song. What I'm reacting against is being told that anyone who supported the NUM during the miners' strike was a mindless thug. I've got a couple of friends who, over the years, drifted towards the Alliance and what was nightmarish for me during 1984 was that the official opposition - as well as the usual right-wingers who want to smash the unions good and proper - were all so busy evading the issues. They all put pressure on the miners to accommodate the state instead of vice versa and really the reason the state have such an easy time is 'cause the opposition is so namby pamby. That song is about being painted into a corner called *extremism*; you're pushed into a position because of the sheer

unreasonableness of mainstream alternatives."

"There are degrees of amnesia, ways to forget"
'The United States Of Amnesia'

CULTURAL AMNESIA: the process of selection that allows nations to rewrite their past, highlighting the good, erasing the bad. If Communist countries blatantly rewrite their history to fit a post-revolutionary ethos, the West is, as always, more subtle, more undercover. Chomsky is continually pinpointing this slow, erosive fradulence, as Robert eleborates:

"The liberal and right-wing tradition here, and in the US, the big We, they have a kind of smug consensus which you can see in their self-image in the history books. This consensus gets its moral strenght, as far as I can see, from the fact that everyone else who tries an alternative seems to mess it up. Yet the argument for Western democracy seems to rest on *expedience*. I'm looking at what it means to be expedient all the time: it's expedient to boast about one thing and forget about something else.

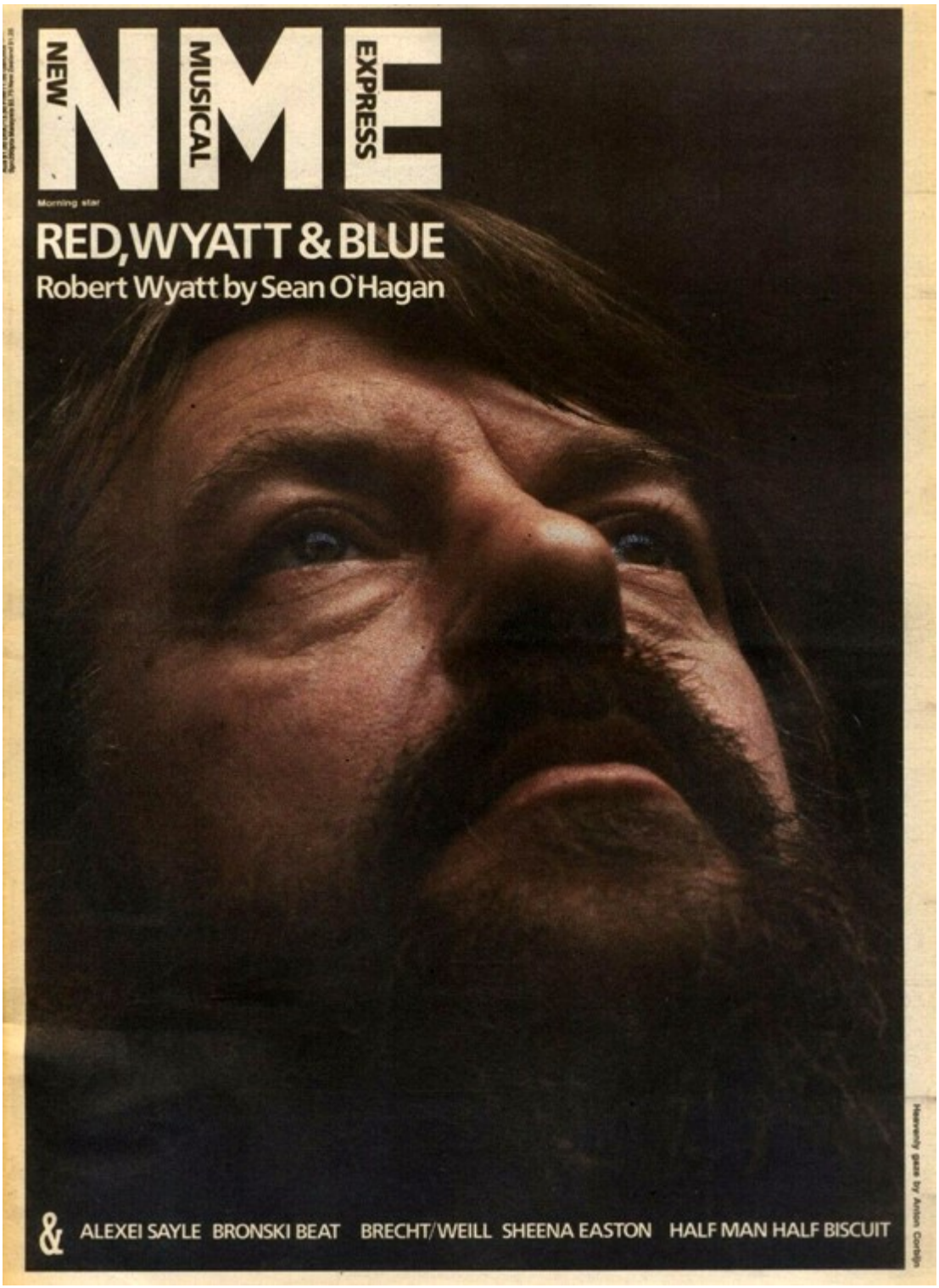
"It still happens all the time: take Western governments' involvement in the Pacific, which never gets publicised. That's why I wrote 'East Timor'. Indonesia, with the West's backing, decided to take East Timor and when the people reisted there was genocide on a massive scale. We need the Pacific for a source of constant cheap labour but we don't hear about the people who are still fighting out there. Now people say they are not interested in all these foreign problems, but our taxes are financing this sort of thing - you can't have it both ways. The song also concerns the very fact that nobody has heard about East Timor. Subtle stuff."

'The Age Of Self' confronts a different, no less pervasive form of amnesia: the constant accusation that the Left is too tied to the past, too fond of its heritage to be a relevant force today: "*they say the working class is dead, we're all consumers now*".

"Yeah, well, I'm all for progress on the Left but you don't do it by disowning your past, by saying you're ashamed of the unions and that. Telling the press we're really with-it now, we're not boring old Lefties - always eager to accommodate *them*. See, one of the things the Right have going is the continuation of their own romantic myth. It's quite a legitimate stance, actually. I think the Left should be like a family where the feeling you have for each other transcends all the pretty differences, and that strengthens all of you. It shouldn't be: let's move forward and discard the industrial workers. I think mutual affection is more in order..."

Is that why you turned out to the *Red Wedge* launch?

"Yeah. People seemed surprised, but the musicians asked for a bit of moral support and I came along. It's good for the Labour front benchers to meet people like that, though I didn't really qualify: I'm not a Labour Party supporter and I'm definitely not a youth!"



"WORDS TAKE THE PLACE OF MEANING"

LANGUAGE, ITS open-endedness and malleability, is something that has always tickled Robert's fancy but, where he once used to play on words, he now draws attention to more sinister types of word-play. 'Vandalusia' simply recites a few well-worn phrases; terms that have slipped into the English language as colonial archetypes and, through constant mindless usage, have become separated from their original, usually quite illuminating, meaning.

One of Robert's choices, "beyond the pale", stems from Norman times when the English "owned" one part of Ireland around Dublin which they christened The Pale, originally meaning 'Boundary'. Now "beyond the pale" has established itself as a phrase meaning "uncivilised" and "outside the limits of decency". Interesting?

"My preoccupation is to try and reclaim meanings from used words and see how they function and it's very interesting indeed. Words resonate and grow and get hi-jacked by

one side or the other, but now there's a distinctly unbalanced analysis of language. Everyone is so careful not to use left-wing swear words like 'fascist' carelessly, but the establishment use all kinds of words so carelessly. 'Extremist' and 'terrorist' are two that spring to mind. In the White House or the State Department a terrorist is anyone who believes in having good schools and hospitals and decides to do something about it. The media have to deneutralise words, steal their meaning as part of a process of self-justification for our method of democracy."



> Zoom

The inter-dependent relationship between the right-wing government and their press, in this country, has now reached ridiculous, yet nonetheless exceedingly powerful realms. The press baron has an unassailable powerbase that, unlike the politician, isn't threatened every five years. The media can have power without responsibility simply because the state is dependent on them to such a degree: hardly the ideal situation for democratic free speech to thrive.

"Well, if you consider the idea of a 'terrorist', they never get a fair hearing which is part of the reason they resort to such extreme tactics. You ignore someone with a legitimate cause until they take up a gun in order to be heard. Then you say that you don't talk to gunmen. All the way along the line, the establishment finds a reason for ignoring them: first they're not powerful enough, then they get power and are ostracised. Either way it's avoided. The media operate on a rough consensus of who the goodies and baddies are and that, of course, works very well for the people who run the set-up."

ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

ROBERT WYATT is a soul caught in a bind: an unfortunate accident of birth has made him (poor chap) indisputedly English. He worries about this, as well he might, and has my utmost sympathy. Try as he may he can't totally escape the chains that bind him to Albion, althought his Communist Party membership will be enough to get him disowned in most quarters of this "liberal" land. Even the CP, for all its internationalism, calls itself the Communist Party *of Great Britain*: an unfortunate case of colonialist infection.

"I feel like I could be an internationalist but the paradox is my extreme Englishness - I've desperately traced my family tree for some clues but the fartherest we come from is Bolton! But I find Englishness, the English language, forms an amazing power group and for all its apparent broadmindedness, there is a totally suffocating cultural narcissism which is a real problem, not only for the rest of the world, but also for our future. It is, quite simply, an inability to allow other people, who aren't like us, the right to live how they please. That's a problem I address right from the first song.

"It's not just a right-wing thing either but the unconscious racialism of the established Left which also takes this maternal view of movements around the world: telling other groups, in long essays, how to run their revolutions. We should have respect for people even though they makes mistakes."

Coming from a middle-class background, Robert Wyatt is also familiar with the "cunningness" of liberal ideology: the lack of direction disguised as broadmindedness, the inability to make a stand and say what you feel. This all adds up to a kind of political paralysis, a "suffocation" as Robert would have it, which means an "opposition based on consensus rather than challenge, scared of even challenging the fundamental, psychological notions that justify imperialism".

The song 'Gharbzadegi' is interesting in this context: being both a critique of 'Englishness' and a classic example of language becoming so analysed that it slips back into abstractness.

"First up, the very existence of the word makes me laugh - I *think* it's an Iranian word meaning 'westernitis'. I'd like to take this opportunity to say that the record might have been called 'English As A Foreign Language', because I'm, at once, incredibly English and also very uncomfortable with it. So I keep trying to see Englishness from an outsider's point of view. When I come across an Iranian word that means 'westernitis' and sounds like some weird disease, describing how people from other cultures try and become like us... well, what a wonderful word! The song itself is a tricky one, it's not a literal song. It's near the end of the record because I'm on the verge of giving up struggling with words by then."

"**EVERY NIGHT I GO TO SLEEP, I ALWAYS DREAM IN RED**"

'Biko' from 'Work In Progress'

WITHIN THE graduations that constitute the Communist Party, Robert Wyatt describes himself as "a *Morning Star* reader" and humbly suggests that if anyone wants to define that description their best bet would be to place an order for that august daily paper. It has, says Robert, by way of further enticement, "the makings of a good, all-round family newspaper: sympathetic to the international labour movement with a pop column, a gardening correspondent and the best tipster in Fleet Street" (he is reliably informed).

On an artistic level, his politics and his music are inseparable although he eschews the role of demagogic educator so beloved of many agit-pop stars.

"I don't bang my head against the wall trying to make people see my way as the only way. I'm more interested in trying to highlight certain issues, identify groups who need help to be heard. I work out where I stand on something and give my support accordingly, but it's not my place to choose issues and thrust them on people. Similarly I don't think we can tell South Africans how to get rid of apartheid; they ask for your help and support and you do what you can, but they are *there*."

INSPIRATION AND DEDICATION

"*I've got an 'at but it ain't like that - ooooold Rotten'at*".
Alfie's intro to 'Gharbazadegi'
"*For Michael Bettany*"
Wyatt's dedication on the sleeve of 'Old Rottenhat'

ALFIE - OR Alfreda Benge - has been the single most significant force in Robert Wyatt's life: his wife, his inspiration, his record-cover illustrator and the main catalyst for his politicisation. In many ways, the album's semantic preoccupations concern her also.

"The phrase 'old rottenhat' is a West London one which she picked up in her childhood. Now, she spoke German up until she was seven, so she actually remembers hearing English as a foreign language and German wasn't a very fashionable language round here in the late '40s (laughs).

"Alfie really made me look at the borders and dotted lines with which we surround ourselves and which take on some great spiritual meaning. I learnt a lot from her and her family about politics and music."

The name Michael Bettany is one now synonomous with betrayal but, amidst the stoked-up outrage that the media contrived, the individual's true plight, as ever, became buried: a self-made civil servant who worked his way up through the corridors of power only to reach the rarified suffocation of Whitehall.

"I think his real crime wasn't trying to give secrets to the enemy but the fact that he challenged the official ideology of Englishness and realigned his loyalties. Now he's classed as a traitor: this vague notion of Englishness suddenly becomes very specific when it comes to crossing the line. But the actual *pathos* of his situation... he was looking for a way of breaking this dead end - having worked his way up to the top - and when he went to the enemy, they were actually double agents.

"He'd gone as far as he could go to reach a world outside his own and all he reached was another layer of suffocation, a more sophisticated structure of confinement. A perfect subject for a short story.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF BLUES

OLD ROTTENHAT gathers all the strands of thought that Robert Wyatt tries to make sense of and, amidst all the theory and analysis, a music emerges that is the very antithesis of constrictive formalism. A loose, bendy, floating music that playfully raises all the right questions and asks you to look beyond the boundaries. He seems to have absorbed so much music of the early 20th century, taking in the European avant-garde jazz movement along the way, slipping on his international hat and finally allowing whatever takes his fancy to enter his consciousness. We talk about English lovers-rock reggae, soul, Soviet Jazz and the "the sheer courage of Ornette Coleman", who "fought against everything including the place that other musicians had set aside for what they understood as avant-garde. Ornette broke all the rules good and proper *and* he came back to a good danceable beat!"

When asked for current preferences, Wyatt talks enthusaistically about Artery, a group attached to *The Morning Star*, about Harry Gold And His Pieces Of Eight - a veteran of the "pre-war trad-swing style" - about Coleridge Good, one of the last of the "Jamaican Jazz

musicians who came over here just before all the dance music arrived".

His current favourite tune is Canadian folk singer Bruce Cockburn's excellent 'If I Had A Rocket Launcher', which Wyatt played, much to the consternation of the producer ("a little politics goes a long way, don't you think?), on Gary Crowley's Capital radio spot.

Yes, he's heard about Tears For Fears being big fans and rushed out and bought a copy of the single which included a cover of 'Sea Song' from 'Rock Bottom' on the B-side. "Oh, I was so impressed, it's a great feeling hearing one of your songs done well." The mind cannot help but boggle.

And this music of yours, Mr. Wyatt, how would you describe it? I've heard it called folk?

"Oh, I think that would be claiming too much for it. I honestly don't know what you'd call it, but it sure ain't rock'n'roll. I try to make completely normal records but they must come out funny... I haven't got that much control especially over this voice but, let's see... I actually do get very sad about the political climate - not in an abstract way but how it affects people... I am capable of much more energetic music, but I do tend to get brought down and it gets turned into a kind of English blues. Yeah! That's what I'd call it - *English blues*.

That'll do fine.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

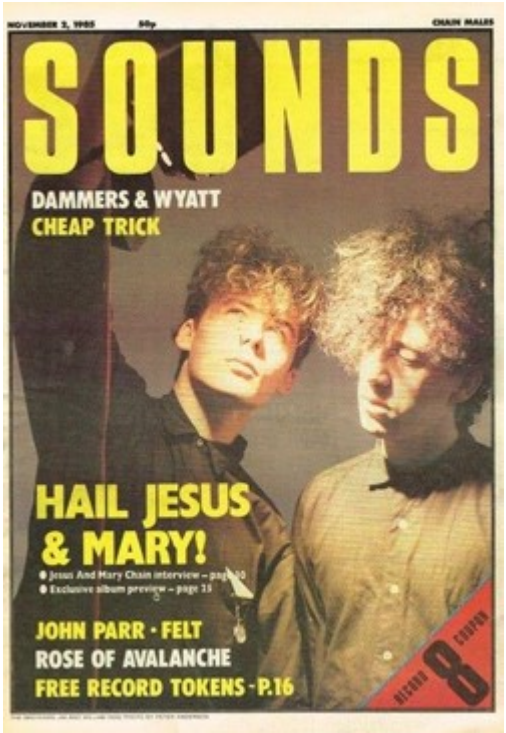
Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Wyatt & Dammers - Sounds - November 2, 1985

WYATT & DAMMERS
working to free namibia

Do politics and music mix? Or is it impossible to separate them?
JACK BARRON discovers ROBERT WYATT and JERRY DAMMERS ensconced in deepest England with Zimbabwean RICHARD MUZIRA, working on behalf of a repressed African nation.
EYE AND EYE spies…



IMAGINE...

TAKE TWO women...

One is a Namibian, 40-year-old. She was arrested in her own country by the security forces of the illegally occupying regime of South Africa. That was in 1980.

The reason? She spoke in support of the South West African People's Organisation, SWAPO - the national liberation movement recognised by the United Nations as being the authentic representative of the Namibians.

Tried and sentenced not in her own country but Prime Minister Botha's SA-dist apartheid state, the woman was pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy in jail. The child stayed with her a year and subsequently died. The woman was not allowed to attend her infant's funeral. She is still incarcerated.

The woman's name is Ida Jimmy.

Now remember a supposed world leader swanning around the luxurious environment of the Bahamas. A 60-year-old blue rinse bitch, for every year she has been alive, Namibia has been under the yoke of South Africa. She has, by virtue of her office, an historical responsibility for this abomination.

You see, the kingdom of SA-dists was a British colony when, post-World War One, the South Africans decided to administer what was later to become Namibia. Indeed, this warped state of ours wanted the territory to become a legally recognised part of SA-distonia. Even The League Of Nations weren't fool enough to fall for that.

So there she is clucking evil in the Bahamas. From her perch in the gallery of political despots she mouths empty slogans against Botha's fascist regime - here's the disgusting punchline - all the while plotting to stop other countries from taking practical measures against the SA-dists.

This other woman is, of course, Margaret Thatcher at last week's obscene conference of Commonwealth ministers at the millionaire's resort of Lyford Quay.

She made me ashamed to be British. Thatcher and Ida Jimmy have never met except in this Feature.

What has brought them indirectly togeteher in print is the release of a records, 'The Wind Of Change', by Robert Wyatt, The SWAPO Singers, and an all-star cast, which was produced and arranged by Jerry Dammers.

If pop music has a political role to play, I guess it's by alring publicy pressing issues, supplying information upon which the listeners can act if they choose. That's all.

'The Wind Of Change' nails a specific concern to its stake, its melodic breeze blowing on beautifully about the plight of people like Ida Jimmy: Namibian political prisoners held illegally by South Africa.

AN ATROCITY EXHIBITION...

TAKE THREE men...

Richard Muzira, black, bearded and baggy-trousered. Apart from being the catalyst behind and singing on. 'The Wind Of Change' project, he is the co-ordinator of the Namibia Support Committee's Repression And Political Prisoners Campaign.

He, Jerry and Robert now Sit drinking tea in Wyatt's house…

"The situation regarding the Namibian prisoners in South Africa has changed just recently," explains Richard, a Zimbabwean formerly involved in the liberation struggle for his country's independence. "There were 21 political prisoners at the last count being detained in South Africa. Now though, 17 of them have been moved back to Windhoek (Namibia's capital).



Page 20 SOUNDS November 2 1985

WYATT &

working to free namibia

IMAGINE...

TAKE TWO women...

One is a Namibian, 40-year-old. She was arrested in her own country by the security forces of the illegally occupying regime of South Africa. That was in 1980.

The reason? She spoke in support of the South West African People's Organisation, SWAPO – the national liberation movement recognised by the United Nations as being the authentic representative of the Namibians.

Tried and sentenced not in her own country but Prime Minister Botha's SA-dist apartheid state, the woman was pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy in jail. The child stayed with her a year and subsequently died. The woman was not allowed to attend her infant's funeral. She is still incarcerated.

The woman's name is Ida Jimmy.

Now remember a supposed world leader swanning around the luxurious environment of the Bahamas. A 60-year-old blue rinse bitch, for every year she has been alive, Namibia has been under the yoke of South Africa. She has, by virtue of her office, an historical responsibility for this abomination.

You see, the kingdom of SA-distss was a British colony when, post-World War One, the South Africans decided to administer what was later to become Namibia. Indeed, this warped state of ours wanted the territory to become a legally recognised part of SA-distonia. Even The League Of Nations weren't fool enough to fall for that.

So there she is clucking evil in the Bahamas. From her perch in the gallery of political despots she mouths empty slogans against Botha's fascist regime – here's the disgusting punchline – all the while plotting to stop other countries from taking practical measures against the SA-distss.

This other woman is, of course, Margaret Thatcher at last week's obscene conference of Commonwealth ministers at the millionaire's resort of Lyford Quay.

She made me ashamed to be British.

Thatcher and Ida Jimmy have never met except in this feature.

What has brought them indirectly together in print is the release of a record, 'The Wind Of Change', by Robert Wyatt, The SWAPO Singers, and an all-star cast, which was produced and arranged by Jerry Dammers.

If pop music has a political role to play, I guess it's by airing publicly pressing issues, supplying information upon which the listeners can act if they choose. That's all.

'The Wind Of Change' rests a specific concern to its stake, its melodic breeze blowing on beautifully about the plight of people like Ida Jimmy: Namibian political prisoners held illegally by South Africa.

AN ATROCITY EXHIBITION...

TAKE THREE men...

Richard Mudzi – black, bearded and baggy-trousered. Apart from being the catalyst behind, and singing on, 'The Wind Of Change' project, he is the co-ordinator of the Namibia Support Committee's Repression And Political Prisoners Campaign.

He, Jerry and Robert now sit drinking tea in Wyatt's house...

"The situation regarding the Namibian prisoners in South Africa has changed just recently," explains Richard, a Zimbabwean formerly involved in the liberation struggle for his country's independence. "There were 26 political prisoners at the last count being detained in South Africa. Now though, 17 of them have been moved back to Windhoek (Namibia's capital).

"It shows the South African Government are sensitive about the issue," continues Dammers. Since the days of 'Free Nelson Mandela' the Special-ist has sprouted an abundance of facial hair. "It's an attempt by them to clean-up their image a bit I should imagine."

"Yeah," agrees Richard, "they're trying to give credibility to the puppet-show of the MPC. But that doesn't get around the fact that the Namibians were tried illegally in South Africa, imprisoned there, and may still have life sentences hanging over their heads."

The MPC, I should add, is the Multi-Party Conference, Namibia's so-called 'Transitional Government'. It was unelected and established through proclamation by the head ape of apartheid, Botha, in June this year.

While the inauguration ceremony was taking place in Windhoek, down the road in the neighbouring black township of Katutura the South African terror 'police', Koevoet, were brutally dispersing a demonstration of protesters. Many were seriously injured.

"Another obviously related issue the record is meant to highlight is Koevoet," says Richard. "This is a fascist assassination squad formed by the South Africans in 1979. It has a reputation for atrocities, torture and indiscriminate killing.

"Koevoet is a counter-insurgency unit of the sort the Americans used in Vietnam. The same strategy has been used by the South Africans in Mozambique and Angola. So, as part of the campaign we are demanding that Koevoet be disbanded.

"The reason why this is important, apart from saving innocent lives, is because of Resolution 435 by the Security Council of the United Nations. This resolution sets out a plan to bring independence to Namibia, but the plan itself takes account of the internal forces in the country who will help administer the elections should they ever take place.

"Obviously South Africa's idea is that Koevoet will be part of the internal forces which will monitor the elections. Really though, like I've said, they are an assassination squad under instructions from South Africa. You can see the problem. Koevoet is called a police unit by the MPC, but it has always been a military wing suppressing and torturing the Namibian people.

"OK, that's two interrelated issues brought into focus partly by the record. Additionally the Campaign is demanding that the SWAPO freedom fighters be given the status of political prisoners. I call them political prisoners but the South African regime accords them the status of criminals.

"We're especially worried about one particular prisoner, Elster Tuhandeleni. He's a SWAPO senior member who has been in jail since 1968. He's in his 70s and is very ill. We want him and the rest of the prisoners freed," concludes Richard steelily.

OF 70 YEARS OF DEATH...

FOR SEVEN decades Namibia has been a political football, with South Africa doing most of the vicious kicking since they invaded the then German colony of South West Africa in 1915.

Despite repeated protests, and having their occupation declared illegal by the United Nations, the SA-dists have held on to the country ever since. Meanwhile they've introduced the population to all the demons of apartheid: the pass system, bantustans and so on.

Why?

Let's ignore the oft-blessed strategic *red herring* of Namibia being seen as a frontline against Communism, and the fact that South African governments appear to be filled with socio-paths.

"If you want to know how I view South Africa I think of it as Nazism in practice," comments Dammers.

No. Namibia's big problem is its fatal attraction to outsiders because of its wealth of natural resources: diamonds, gold and uranium among them. Those are the sort of glistening prizes countries will fight for: those are the kind of economic gains that make nations like Britain turn a blind eye to obscenities carried out in the name of apartheid.

"Of course the real string-pullers in Namibia are basically the London bankers, and British and American corporations," shrugs Robert Wyatt. "This hasn't come up before, but what happened to another German colony, Tanganyika, is relevant here.

"Tanganyika, as you know, became Tanzania. And when he was asked why Tanzania had got its independence relatively easily, Nyerere (Tanzania's then President) said, 'Luckily we are such a poor country, we didn't have anything anybody else wanted'.

"Namibia isn't so lucky. It's got things the West craves for like uranium; the South Africans are obviously interested in uranium as well. We still, as a nation, make a lot of money out of Namibia. That's worth pointing out since there's a lot of self-congratulation, rightly so, about charity for Africa at the moment. The last figures I saw though showed that Western developed countries take six times as much out of Africa as we give in aid."

As Richard points out, there are still some 70 or so British companies operating in Namibia – including Thorn EMI! The UN has long called for countries to desist from trading with Namibia, and equally Britain has always voted against or abstained in these resolutions. If it'll make us a rand or two we'll economically prop up the crumbling gold-mine of apartheid.

In view of this historical track record, Margaret Thatcher's subversion of the Commonwealth ministers' calls for mandatory sanctions against SA (and hence by implication Namibia) at last week's Bahamas conference is simply par for the course. What was vile was the way she glossed about her shallow 'victory'.

A victory for whom?

Certainly not the blacks in South Africa, or the one and a half million people in Namibia. And quite why that many Namibians need 125,000 SA-dist troops and police to look after them is another matter, I guess.

The relative smallness of the population of Namibia came as something of a shock to me. The reason for its numerical size is simple: prior to World War One the Germans committed genocide on the indigenous blacks, and since the introduction of male registration recently by SA – with the idea of conscription in mind – many Namibians have fled to SWAPO enclaves in Angola and Mozambique.

Mind you, being in a bordering country doesn't guarantee safety. In May 1978, for example, South African armed forces slaughtered 600 SWAPO members in an Angolan refugee camp.

The Namibians involved in 'The Wind Of Change' project, The Torch Singers of the cultural wing of SWAPO, have come to England from just such a refugee camp.

They include Bience Gawanas who performs the tone poem on the flip, 'When I Think About My Country', which was written by Vaino Shivute.

"They're all students in England at the moment," divulges Robert Wyatt, who himself has a fine album due for imminent release called 'Old Rottten Hat'.

"Being a responsible government in exile, SWAPO sends its youths around the world to get educated," he continues. "The reason I want to tell you this is the SWAPO singers like to talk about issues but are shy about themselves, unlike us narcissistic pop stars."

"When it came around to making the record, Richard gave me two SWAPO albums ('Namibia One Nation' and 'Onyenka') to listen to," fills in Jerry Dammers. "I selected two traditional-type songs as a basis for what we would record. We built on the tunes from there. Neither is an attempt at genuine African music though, I'm not a purist in any way when it comes to music."

Who put up the money for the record? I ask as Jerry leaves to make a phone call.

"We all gave our services for free," chuckles Robert, "but I think a lot of the money was Jerry's own, and Rough Trade put up some. I believe, I'd better tell you that because Jerry won't."

Having decided on the musical content, there was no shortage of artists willing to donate their skills: Lyndsi Golding, Ben Mandelson from Jazira, Ernest Mapasi Mothle – of whom Wyatt comments "I don't know a better bass player in the world." – Dick Cuthell, Annie Whitehead and others can be heard playing.

The last time Dammers was involved in producing and arranging a co-operative record with an issue in its heart was the UB40, Specials, Madness et al single, 'Starvation', in aid of famine relief. I wondered if he wasn't disappointed that 'Starvation' didn't do better in commercial terms?

"Yeah, I was a little disappointed," admits Jerry. "But 'Starvation' did raise £52,000 and that's not to be sneered at. At the time there was a lot of feeling along the lines of 'Oh no not another charity record', it had to contend with that, but it was definitely worthwhile."

Do you think there might be a similar reaction to 'The Wind Of Change', like Oh dear another charity record?

"Well, it isn't really a charity record anyway," corrects Jerry. "It's SWAPO making a record and getting royalties the same as Duran Duran or whoever. We're not making a big deal about that. SWAPO isn't a charity, it's a political organisation publicising its cause. And that campaign to free the political prisoners began before and will go on after our record."

"'The Wind Of Change' is just using pop music to spread information, that's all," grins Robert Wyatt.

AND WHAT YOU CAN DO...

YOU'VE READ the story, now it's your decision. After buying 'The Wind Of Change' you can either be apathetic or help turn it into a gale by:

- Raising the issue of Namibian political prisoners with your own political party, organisation or trade union. If you don't belong to any of these you can...
- Write to your MP demanding that the British Government stops helping South African racists in their repression of Namibian people. Plus...
- Money for medical kits for the refugees in Angola and elsewhere is badly needed. To find out how to donate, get in touch with Namibia Support Committee, P O Box 16, London NW5 2LW. Tel 01-267 1940/2.

Do politics and music mix? Or is it impossible to separate them? JACK BARRON discovers ROBERT WYATT and JERRY DAMMERS ensconced in deepest England with Zimbabwean RICHARD MUZIRA, working on behalf of a repressed African nation. EYE AND EYE spies. . .

"It shows the South African Government are sensitive about the issue," continue Dammers. Since the days of 'Free Nelson Mandela' the Special-ist has sprouted an abundance of facial hair. "It's an attempt by them to clean-up their image a bit I should imagine."

"Yeah," agrees Richard, "they're trying to give credibility to the puppet-show of the MPC. But that doesn't get around the fact that the Namibians were tried illegally in South Africa, imprisoned there, and may still have life sentences hanging over their heads."

The MPC, I should add, is the Multi-Party Conference, Namibia's so-called 'Transitional Government'. It was unelected and established through proclamation by the head ape of apartheid, Botha, in June this year.

While the inauguration ceremony was taking place in Windhoek, down the road in the neighbouring black township of Katutura the South African terror 'police', Koevoet, were brutally dispersing a demonstration of protesters. Many were seriously injured.

"Another obviously related issue the record is meant to highlight is Koevoet," says Richard.

"This is a fascist assassination squad formed by the South Africans in 1979. It has a reputation for atrocities, torture and indiscriminate killing.

"Koevoet is a counter-insurgency unit of the sort the Americans used in Vietnam. The same strategy has been used by the South Africans in Mozambique and Angola. So, as part of the campaign we are demanding that Koevoet be disbanded.

"The reason why this is important, apart from saving innocent lives, is because of Resolution 435 by the Security Council of the United Nations. This resolution sets out a plan to bring independence to Namibia, but the plan itself takes account of the internal forces in the country who will help administer the elections should they ever take place.

"Obviously South Africa's idea is that Koevoet will part of the internal forces which will monitor the elections. Really though, like I've said they are an assassination squad under instructions from South Africa. You can see the problem. Koevoet is called a police unit by the MPC, but it has always been a military wing suppressing and torturing the Namibian people.

"OK, that's two interrelated issues brought into focus partly by the record. Additionally the Campaign is demanding that the SWAPO freedom fighters be given the status of political prisoners. I call them political prisoners but the South African regime accords them the status of criminals.

"We're especially worried about one particular prisoner. Elizar Tuhandeleni. He's a SWAPO senior member who has been in jail since 1968. He's in his 70s and is very ill. We want him and the rest of the prisoners freed," concludes Richard steelily.

OF 7O YEARS OF DEATH...

FOR SEVEN decades Namibia has been a political football, with South Africa doing most of the vicious kicking since they invaded the then German colony of South West Africa in 1915.

Despite repeated protests, and having their occupation declared illegal by the United Nations, the SA-dists have held on to the country ever since. Meanwhile they've introduced the population to all the demons of apartheid: the pass system, bantustans and so on.

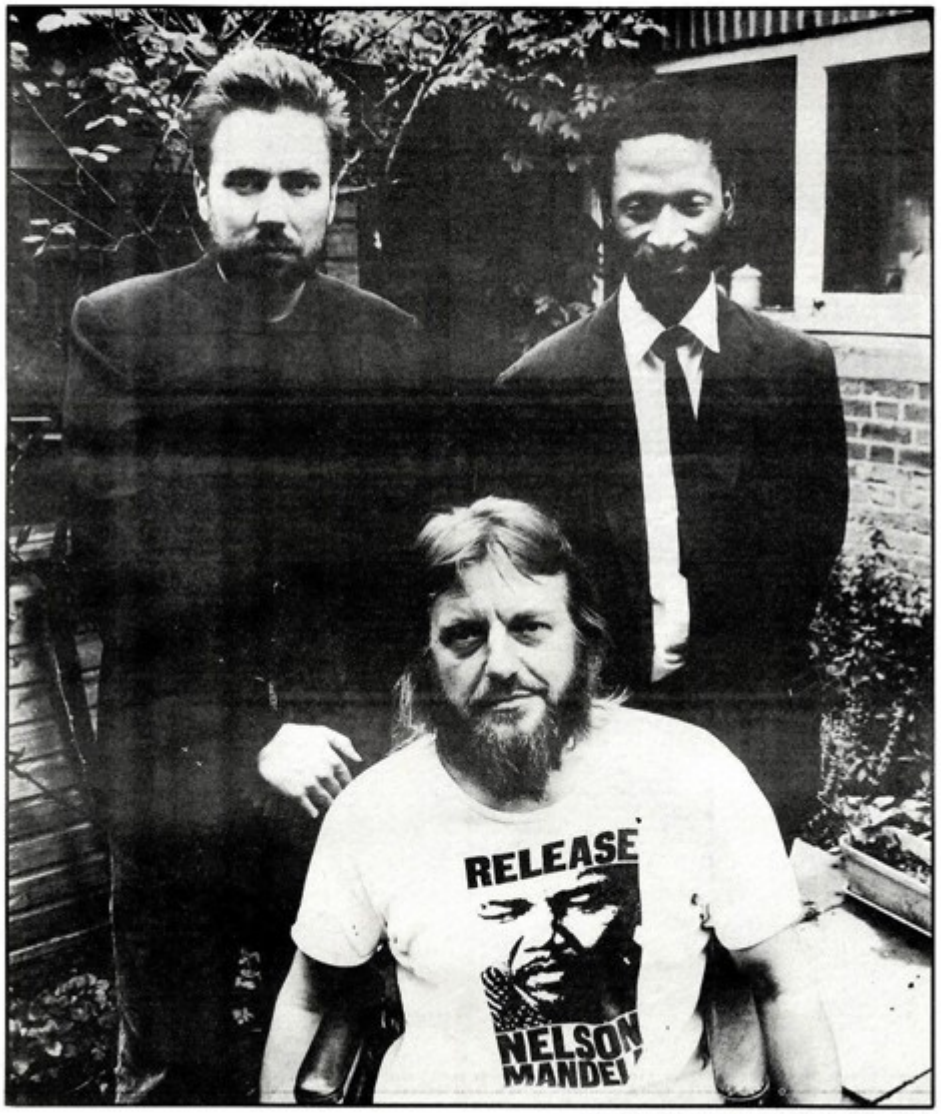
Why?

Let's ignore the oft-bleated strategic red herring of Namibia being seen as a frontline against Communism, and the fact South African governments appear to be filled with socio-paths.

"If you want to know how I view South Africa I think of it as Nazism in practice," comments Dammers.

No. Namibia's big problem is its fatal attraction to outsiders because of its wealth of natural ressources: diamonds, gold and uranium among them. Those are the sort of glittering prizes countries will fight for; those are the kind of economic gems that make nations like Britain turn a blind eye to obscenities carried out in the name of apartheid.

DAMMERS



JOINING FORCES: Jerry Dammers, Robert Wyatt and Richard Muzira

"Of course the real string-pullers in Namibia are basically the London bankers, and British and American corporations," shrugs Robert Wyatt. "This hasn't come up before, but what happened to another German colony, Tanganyka, is relevant here.

"Tanganyka, as you know, became Tanzania. And when he was asked why Tanzania had go its independence relatively easily, Nyerere (Tanzania's then President) said, 'Luckily we a such a poor country, we didn't have anything anybody else wanted'.

"Namibia isn't so lucky. It's got things the West craves for like uranium; the South Africans are obviously interested in uranium a well. We still, as a nation, make a lot of money out of Namibia. That's worth pointing out since there's a lot of self-congratulation, rightly so, about charity for Africa at the moment. The last figures I saw though showed that Western developed countries take six times as much out of Africa as we give in aid".

As Richard points out, there are still some 70 or so British companies operating in Namibia – including Thorn EMI! The UN has long called for countries to desist from trading with Namibia, and equally Britain has always voted against or abstained in these resolutions. If

it'll make us a rand or two we'll economically prop up the crumbling gold-mine of apartheid.

In view of this historical track record, Margaret Thatcher's subversion of the Commonwealth minister's calls for mandatory sanctions against SA (and hence by implication Namibia) at last week's Bahamas conference is simply par for the course. What was vile was the way she gloated about her shallow 'victory'.

A victory for whom?

Certainly not the blacks in South Africa, or the one and a half million people in Namibia. And quite why that many Namibians need 125,000 SA-dist troops and police to look after them is another matter. I guess.

The relative smallness of the population of Namibia came as something of a shock to me. The reason for its numerical size is simple: prior to World War One the Germans committed genocide on the indigenous blacks, and since the introduction of male registration recently by SA – with the idea of conscription in mind – many Namibians have fled to SWAPO enclaves in Angola and Mozambique.

Mind you, being in a bordering country doesn't guarantee safety. In May 1978, for example, South Africa armed forces slaughtered 600 SWAPO members in an Angolan refugee camp.

The Namibians involved in 'The Wind Of Change' project, The Torch Singers of the cultural wing of SWAPO, have come to England from just such a refugee camp.

They include Bience Gawanas who performs the tone poem on the flip, 'When I Think About My Country', which was written by Vaino Shivute.

"They're all students in England at the moment," divulges Robert Wyatt, who himself has a fine album due for imminent release called 'Old Rotten Hat'.

"Being a responsible government in exile, SWAPO sends its youths around the world to get educated," he continues. "The reason I want to tell you this is the SWAPO singers like to talk about issues but are shy about themselves, unlike us narcissistic pop stars."

"When it came around to making the record, Richard gave me two SWAPO albums ('Namibia One Nation' and 'Onyenka') to listen to, "fills in Jerry Dammers. "I selected two traditional-type songs as a basis for what we would record. We built on the tunes from there. Neither is an attempt at genuine African music though, I'm not a purist in any way when it comes to music."

Who put up the money for the record? I ask as Jerry leaves to make a phone call.

"We all gave our services for free," chuckles Robert, "but I think a lot of the money was Jerry's own, and Rough Trade put up some I believe. I'd better tell you that because Jerry won't."

Having decided on the musical content, there was no shortage of artists willing to donate their skills: Lynvall Golding, Ben Mandelson from Jazira, Ernest Mogosti Mothle – of whom Wyatt comments "I don't know a better bass player in the world," – Dick Cuthell, Annie Whitehead and others can be heard playing.

The last time Dammers was involved in producing and arranging a co-operative record with an issue in its heart was the UB40, Specials, Madness et al single, 'Starvation', in aid of famine relief. I wondered if he wasn't disappointed that 'Starvation' didn't better in commercial terms?

"Yeah, I was a little disappointed," admits Jerry. "But 'Starvation' did raise £52,000 and that's not to be sneered at. At the time there was a lot of feeling along the lines of 'Oh no not another charity record'. It had to contend with that, but it was definitely worthwhile."

Do you think there might be a similar reaction to "The Wind Of Change", like Oh dear another charity record?

"Well, it's not really a charity record anyway," corrects Jerry. "It's SWAPO making a record and getting royalties the same as Duran Duran or whoever. We're not making a big deal

about that. SWAPO isn't charity, it's a political organization publicizing its cause. And that campaign to free the political prisoners began before and will go on after our record."

"'The Wind Of Change' is just using pop music to spread information, that's all," grins Robert Wyatt.

AND WHAT YOU CAN DO...

You've read the story, now it's your decision. After buying 'The Wind Of Change' you can either be apathetic or help turn it into a gale by:

- Raising the issue of Namibian political prisoners with your own political party, organisation or trade union. I you don't belong to any of these you can…

- Write to your MP demanding that the British Government stop helping South African racists in their repression of Namibian people. PLUS…

- Money for medical kits for the refugees in Angola and elsewhere is badly needed. To find out how to donate, get in touch with Namibia Suppport Committee, P.O. Box 16, London NWS 2LW. Tel 01-267 1941/2.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

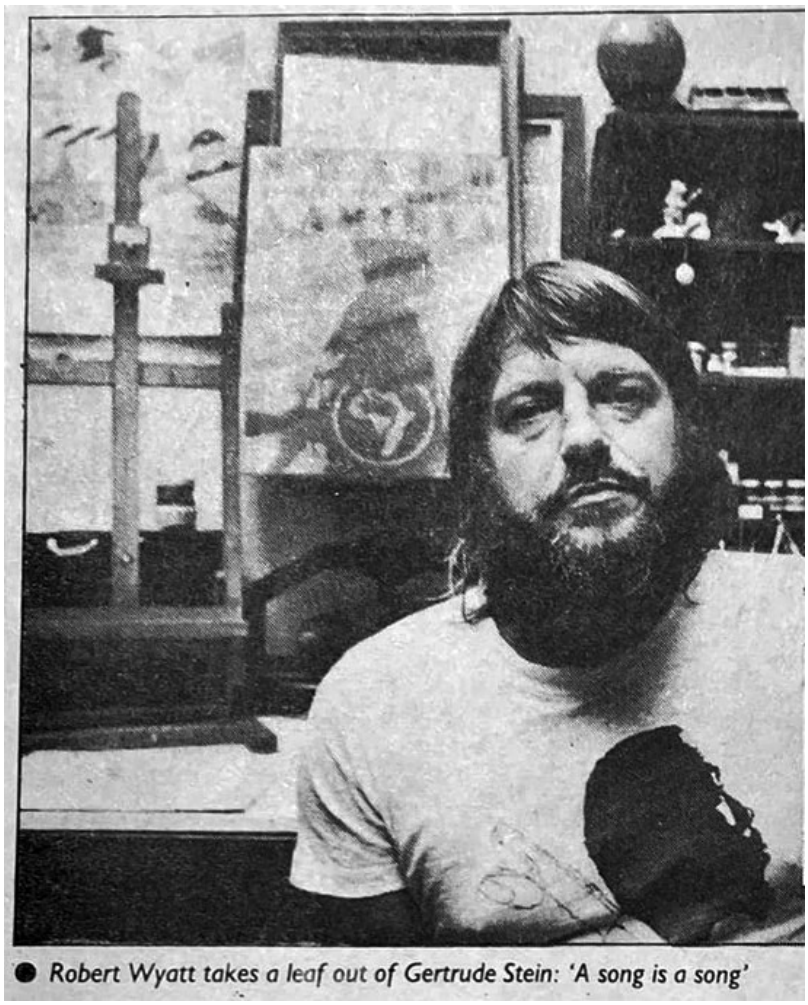
Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Chewing on Chomsky - City Limits - 1-7 November 1985

Chewing on Chomsky

A new Robert Wyatt album is rightly considered a cause for delight. And this one he wrote himself. PAUL KERR meets Chomsky's great admirer and wearer of a rotten hat.



● *Robert Wyatt takes a leaf out of Gertrude Stein: 'A song is a song'*

> Zoom

He was guest vocalist on Working Week's debut single, 'Venceremos'; Elvis Costello co-wrote 'Shipbuilding' for him, and last week he could be heard singing alongside a SWAPO student choir on Jerry Dammers' arrangement of 'Wind of Change'. I've got to keep working, because it's my job,' Robert Wyatt explains, 'but I don't do much writing - I find it very hard. I'm not prolific, I'm the opposite of Costello. But when I'm not writing at least I can sing.'

Wyatt's last album ('Nothing Can Stop Us') and 12" ('Work In Progress') contained precisely one self-penned composition apiece. So Wyatt-watchers will be doubly delighted that 'Old Rotten Hat' is a solo album in every sense of the word.

'I just wrote a whole bunch of songs and sung and played them myself - they were all simple enough that I didn't feel the need to get anybody else in on them. And I wanted to do something on my own.' There's no narcissism in that desire, as the terrific 'Age Of Self' makes abundantly clear, nor does Wyatt harbour archaic ideas about the artist working best in a vacuum. 'You don't have the choice of being an isolated individual developing your craft, even if you wanted to, because the official ideology is pumped in at you, it seeps under the doors, through the windows.

'Left to my own devices I might be a lyrical, singalong composer, but I happen to live in a world battered by offensive ideas and just out of pride you have to deal with that - or go along with it.'

The very first track, 'Old School Ties', sets the tone of Wyatt's counter-attack on what he sees as individualist ideology: *'A herd of independent minds - Chomsky got it right/jogging into battle, waving old school ties*.' The song is about betrayals, both of old friends (*'What we had in common makes it even worse*') and old phrases (*'You say you're self-sufficient but you don't dig your own coal*').

Coal - and the miners' strike - is very much the fuel of this album's melodic. melancholic anger. 'Miners in jail are political prisoners,' he says, explaining that the whole album grew out of 'the feelings that came up during the strike and the witchhunt against Scargill.' Hence a song like 'Mass Medium', with its wonderful opening couplet: '*And as history slips out of view/Bated breath for the 9,00 News*'.

To say that the album includes songs about imperialism, the end of ideology, news manipulation and even a couple of acid contributions to the 'Forward March Of Labour Halted' debate - not to mention a beautiful instrumental portrait of Andalucia which builds a haunting topography of chords and contours - is to do no justice to Wyatt's work at all.

His lyrics have taken a page out of Randy Newman's book with some perfectly pitched political ventriloquism and the music muscles into the fray too: the kettle drum alternately hammering out the headlines and underlining the ironies; the keyboards and the bass building an almost physical vehicle for that wonderful voice.

And the voice itself, which Wyatt uses. apparently effortlessly, is both an instrument (he hums, whistles, dee-dee-dees) and his very own vernacular, a conversational singing style par excellence. Wyatt describes his style as 'simply the kind of tune I like to hum. I'm very neanderthal technologically - I'm not a Luddite, I just depend on the engineers. I don't know what the buttons mean. A microphone, a tape recorder and an on-off switch do me fine. I try to do the least possible to get the thing across and that's also my vocal technique.'

He worries about the uncritical attentions given to what rock stars say (as opposed to what they do). In fact he's pretty unimpressed with the whole interview circus. But here we are anyway - after all, it's his job.



'An awful lot of weight is put on musicians, singers and songwriters to come up with stuff. Ideas. First of all what do we know? And secondly, a song is a song and the purest and best way of saying something is to say it.'

Before I can argue, he's back with the smiling reply, 'don't go on listening to me, go and play some Chomsky.' But, Chomsky having been out of the studio some little while, he elaborates on the politics of songwriting:

'You can't just take an article by Chomsky and put notes to it.' I started enumerating songwriters whose lyrics could only be improved by such a tactic—but Mr Wyatt is assuredly not amongst them.

Oh yes, one last thing—the title. 'Old Rotten Hat' is, it appears, the punch line of a playground rhyme from the East End. It goes like this: 'I got a 'at, but it ain't like that, old rotten 'at.'

Don't ask me what it means. Buy the album and work it out for yourself. You'll enjoy it. And so would Chomsky. ●

'Old Rotten Hat' is released by Rough Trade next week.

Previous article

Next article

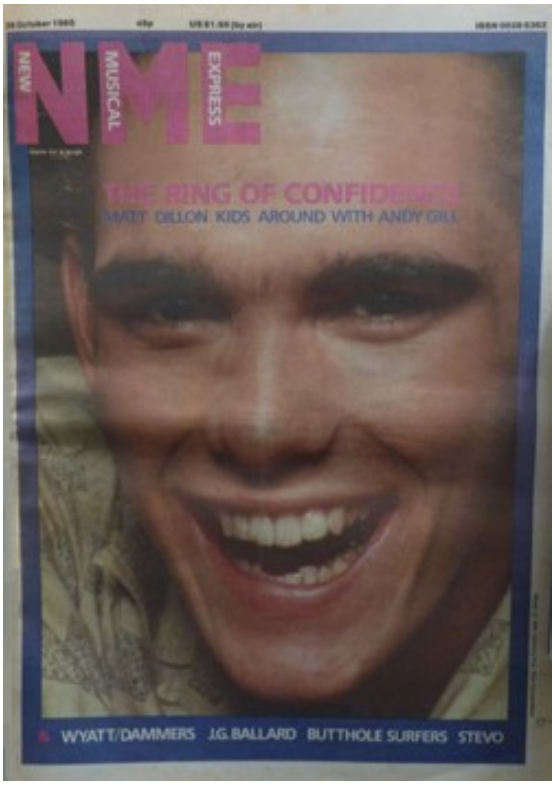
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Rocking The Botha - New Musical Express - 26 October 1985



Pop against apartheid revisited. DANNY KELLY discusses SWAPO single, 'The Wind Of Change' with producer JERRY DAMMERS and vocalist ROBERT WYATT. Photos: A. J. BARRATT

WHEN A POP STAR begins a sentence with "it's just been fantastic to work with..." you await the inevitable "Stevie Wonder", "David Bowie", or "Grandmaster Superflash Megatalent (Thank You, God III," and yawn.

But when that pop star is as undemonstrative a character as Jerry Dammers, and the sentence *actually* ends with "the students who are members of SWAPO", you sit up and take notice.

The special Special continues: "They were just so brilliant to work with compared with the usual prima donna and egos you normally find in studios".

Dammers is talking about his work as producer and arranger of a remarkable new single that's released this week. Called 'The Wind Of Change', and issued by Rough Trade, it features, along with the forementioned student chorus, a lead vocal by the peerless Robert Wyatt, plus work by Lynval Golding, Ben Medelsohn, Dick Cuthell, Annie Whitehead and JD himself.

The record has been made to publicise a campaign aimed at highlighting the continuing terror-random arrests, detentions, torture, disappearances and deaths - perpetrated by South African troops in the newly 'independent' state of Namibia.

Remember Namibia? A few years ago, as the outgunned military wing of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) grimly harassed the South African forces, Namibia - a country bigger than France but composed mainly of rock-strewn desert - was often in the

news. Lately, though, the unfolding agony of the continent's northern famine and the accelerated ticking of the bomb under Botha's fool's paradise have totally overshadowed its fate.

So, some facts: This year Namibia was granted notional independence from South Africa. What this amounted to in practice was the installation of an interim government that even Pretoria sneeringly refers to as 'The Pupppet Show'.



ROCKING THE BOTHA

Pop against apartheid revisited. DANNY KELLY discusses SWAPO single, 'The Wind Of Change' with producer JERRY DAMMERS and vocalist ROBERT WYATT. Photos: A. J. BARRATT

WHEN A POP star begins a sentence with "it's just been fantastic to work with. . .", you await the inevitable "Stevie Wonder", "David Bowie", or "Grandmaster Superflash Megatalent (Thank You, God) III," and yawn.

But when that pop star is as undemonstrative a character as Jerry Dammers, and the sentence actually ends with "the students who are members of SWAPO", you sit up and take notice.

The special Special continues:

Namibia is victim of the most intense military occupation on the planet today. Over 125,000 South-African Army and Police personnel oversee 1.5 million Namibians. That's one occupier for very 13 civilians! Imagine over three *million* hostile troops stalking the British mainland and, even allowing for Namibia's relative vastness, you're beginning to appreciate the scale of the operation.

And those forces, given carte blanche by the notorious Proclamation AG 26. have systematically terrorised all those inclined to oppose the Pinochio regime. Britain, though a signatory to the UN agreement that recognises SWAPO as "the sole and authentic representative of the Namibians people", turns a blind eye. No surprise this, as nine multinational companies (foremost among them Standard Chartered Bank, Consolidated Goldfield and, natch, Barclays) are in virtual control of the economy and Britain gets most of its uranium for military and civilian projects from Namibia.

In short, Namibia is under the cosh, up the creek and in the shit.

The Dammers/Wyatt/SWAPO disc aims to spotlight a specific area of Namibia's continuing pain - the detention and maltreatment of political prisoners. Dammers, whose 'Free Nelson Mandela' single predated that slogan's current popularity by over twelve months, is self-effacing about his role.

"I was fairly ignorant about Namibia, but when I was approached and the situation was explained to me, I could hardly refuse, could I? I'm nothing special, it's just that I happen to have access to the media, and if Robert and I can get some attention for the campaign, then

we've achieved something."

Robert Wyatt - whose contribution to the 'Last Nightingale' EP was one of the few vinyl supports offered the miners during their dispute - is well aware that music can only do so much.

"There was a euphoria in the '60s when Dylan picked up on Woodie Guthrie and it was felt that you could protest your way out of Vietnam. However, the result of that movement is Ronald Reagan so the power of song to move continents was, erm, overstated.

"That said, my friends in the anti-apartheid movement said that Jerry's record was a great boost and helped enormously in getting up interest when they were organising the protests against Botha's visit here. So that had a real and tangible effect and the South Africans do seem afraid of pop. They've even banned Stevie Wonder. Maybe to find out how effective political pop is, we should ask our enemies!"

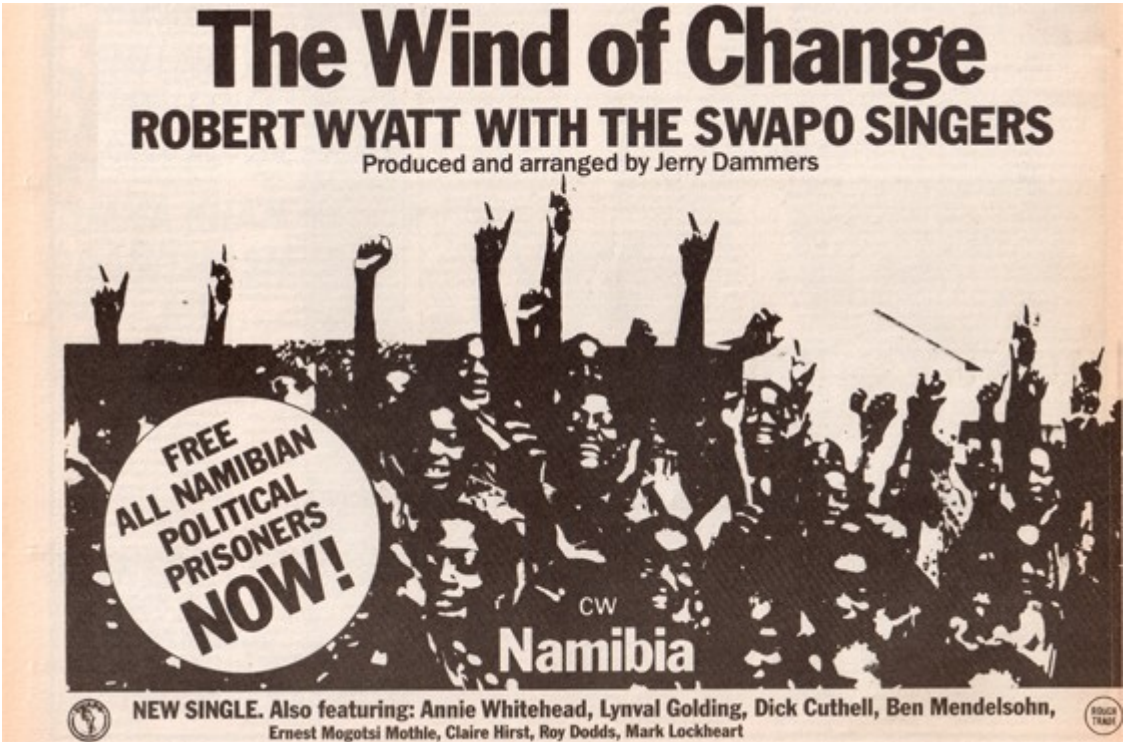
Equally, Wyatt does not fight shy of SWAPO's double edged sword - its military effort which accompanies and complements its political activities. Merely relying on Western goodwill to liberate and feed fits people, he argues, is insufficient for Namibia and the embattled Third World in general.

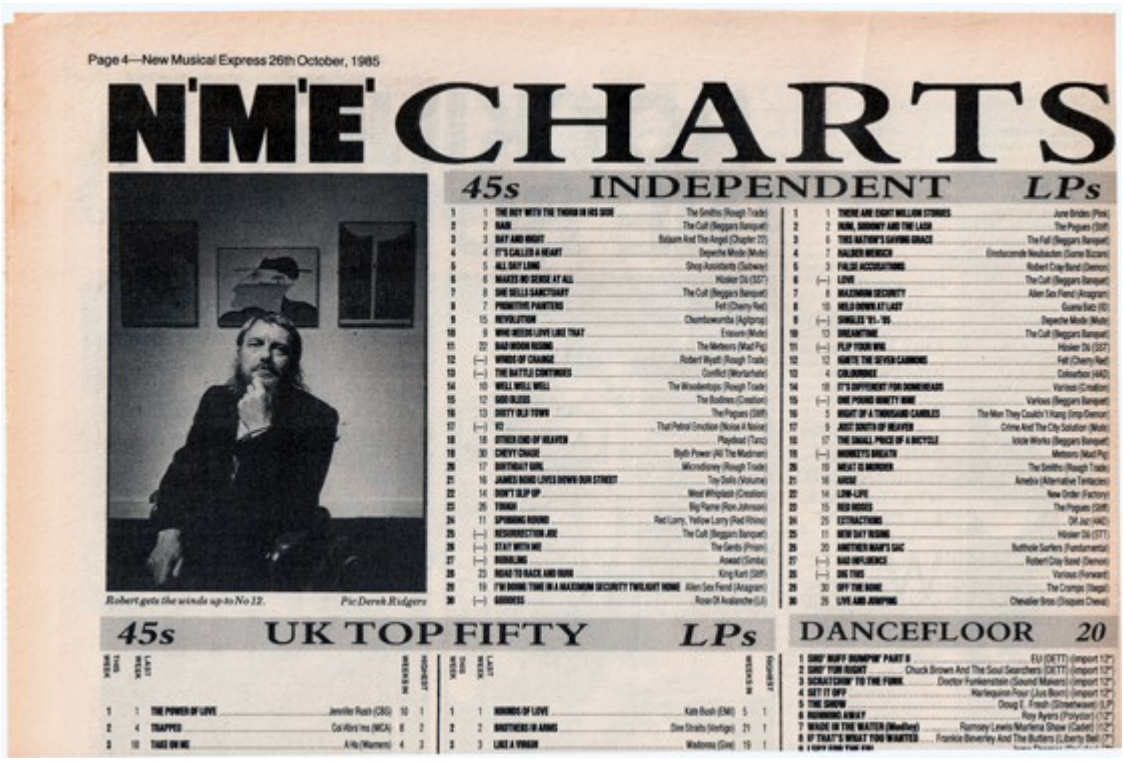
"The trouble with compassion, as anyone who's studied America in the last ten years knows, is what the Americans now refer to as 'compassion fatigue'. The liberals just got *bored* with sharing their resources, and didn't want to bother anymore. If history has taught us anything, it's that you cannot rely on the compassion of the rich and powerful."

SWAPO is habitually referred to in certain quarters - go on, guess - as a 'terrorist' organisation.

"If people want to use that word you have to question their motives. South Africa is a *State* terrorist organisation in the same way that Hitler's Germany was. Our response to Hitler was correct, and I've never heard Churchill called a terrorist!"

So there it is. You can buy 'The Wind Of Change' because it's a fine record, because it's got Robert Wyatt and Jerry Dammers on it, because you wish to support those rotting in Robben Island gaol or just because you want to shout, at this appropriate time and in the words of the fine Microdisney, "*we hate you South African batards!!!*"
But do buy it!





Page 4—New Musical Express 26th October, 1985

NME CHARTS

45s INDEPENDENT LPs

Robert gets the winds up to No 12. Pic Derek Ridgers

45s UK TOP FIFTY LPs

DANCEFLOOR 20

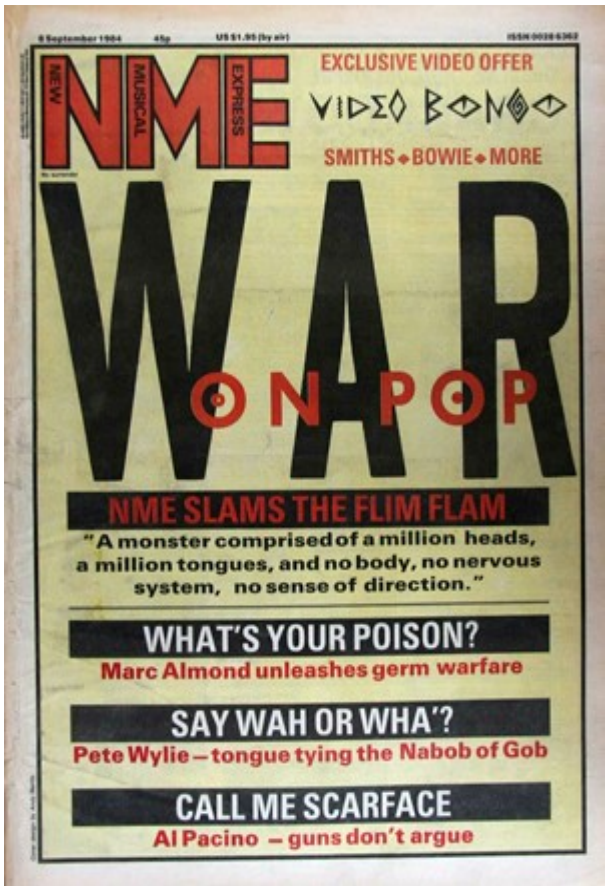
Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Robert Wyatt: Mongrel Musics - New Musical Express - 8th September, 1984





Nobody could have told me how Robert Wyatt's cover of Cuban pop star Pablo Milanes 'Yolanda' was going to capture my ear more tenaciously than any double-edged love song since Smokey Robinson's summer masterpiece 'And I Don't Love You'.

But certainly no-one could have warned me that Wyatt's work is done for the same reason as *Eddie Van Halen's.*

Eddie: "It all comes down to one thing: I hear this particular noise in my head. Then I drive myself and everyone else crazy trying to duplicate it."

Robert Wyatt: "It's always been my priority to just duplicate the noise I hear in my head. To be honest I still haven't managed to do it; I've been hearing it a long time and I've always found it a constant struggle, picking out instruments, testing microphones and stuff.

"But I want to SAY that because

sometimes these interviews get so um...far away from the basic effort you're engaged in. Which is to try and make a certain sort of pleasant noise for a certain length of time."

Both Eddie and Robert say, by the way, it's an obsession that can drive their respective spouses "up the wall".

Bristol-born Wyatt gained musical recognition as a school kid – and when *his* garage combo split, the half he went with turned into Soft Machine. He drummed for that bunch of jazz-rock pioneers till '71, when he formed Matching Mole. They had two LPs and a Chinese fire-drill of personnel under their belts when, in 1973, Wyatt's plummet from an upstairs window during a party left him permanently paralysed from the waist down.

Since then we've heard from a different artist; one, as he put it to Brian Case in 1976, "in the position of painters and writers who work on their stuff and then present it for response".

The stuff in question has included two rather diverse chart hits: versions of the Monkees' 'I'm A Believer' and the Costello-Langer meditation 'Shipbuilding'. Wyatt's new release is an EP, *Work In Progress*. Almost titled 'South Of The Border', it strongly reflects its creator's attraction to the Spanish language (he covers Chilean hero Victor Jara's poignant 'Te Recuerdo Amanda' as well as 'Yolanda'). Even Peter Gabriel's 'Biko' has been re-tuned to resonate with the need for North to embrace South.

"I'm told my accent isn't so good in legitimate Spanish," ventures the bright-eyed Mr Wyatt as he taps a Gauloise loose from the pack. "But remember Matt Monro, 'the singing bus driver'? Look, he's a *big* star in Spain where I now live. He does cover versions of every meaningful ballad under the sun – and he's found a whole new career on the Costa Brava. So maybe... " Wyatt grins.

He does that a lot, in fact. So where, I wonder, did I get this idea I was going to meet an eminent worthy, willing to share some air largely with talk of warring political ideologies? Could it have been 'Stalin Wasn't Stallin', off his previous long-player? *Is* Mr Wyatt – however unlikely it's beginning to seem – a sloganeering sort of agit-pop person?

"It varies according to the situation of the listener, actually," is his reply. "Like, I just finished speaking with these two Italian geezers for whom politics is really on the agenda – its vocabulary is inextricably linked with what they DO every day. Now, they think: is this song any use to us or not? What's this guy up to? And I'm willing to be tried and found wanting on their terms.

"Because – musicians make a living selling songs, we're no substitute for serious political action, private or public (*laughs).* Neither, of course, are newspapers. But the consequences of what we do or say are not enormous. People say 'Look at the enormous political influence of Bob Marley' but when Seaga still goes to the IMF, begging bowl in hand, I don't go for it. There's way too much arrogance about the supposed abilities of musical spellbinders to shift the balances of power.

"Against the real forces – people in tall buildings somewhere deciding who to punish by where they put their bucks – there's not much any of us singing our songs can do. It's just *(laughs again)* I see nothing else really interesting in life except trying to go for what I can in that respect."

But that involves musicianship much more than Clash-style sloganeering?

"Well, whatever any record's about you want it to sound good; first off it's always that. *I* don't want to listen to anything which isn't pleasurable to hear simply because someone else thinks I should. There are (*a smile)* bodies in that field but it's a different one altogether from where I am. And if people want to keep in touch with life and ideas I would hardly recommend following pop lyrics!



MONGREL MUSICS

ROBERT WYATT is a rare individual voice in British pop — and that's not just because he sings in Spanish! CYNTHIA ROSE meets the man who's been a Mole, a Believer and a Shipbuilder and now wants to follow in the footsteps of 'The Singing Busdriver'! Art shots by DEREK RIDGERS

"The work of a master story telle
"A great beginning, a fantast
middle, and a very satisfying en
"I couldn't put it down"

The latest chapter from
A FLOCK OF SEAGULLS
THE STORY OF A YOUNG HEA

A FLOCK OF SEAGULLS
THE STORY OF A YOUNG HEART

Produced by Steve Lovell
Includes the hit single
"THE MORE YOU LIVE, THE MORE YOU LOVE"
Album & chrome cassette available from Record Shops!

"The reason I'm happy to say quite simple and I unambiguous *words,"* he continues, "has grown out of sheer exasperation. That what I thought was clear enough in the past just wasn't. So now I'm trying to do something where you couldn't possibly not know whose side I was on in any situation. Life is so full of misunderstanding and ambiguities already... I'm not gonna deliberately set out to build some kind of mysterious chic around what I'm saying."

Um. I understand Spanish. But what about the definite mystery factor anyone who doesn't will encounter when you sing in that language?

"Oh," says Robert. "I love the *sound of* it, just musically, even when I can't understand it. I sang my first song in it a couple of years ago before I knew what the words meant, I basically went with it for musical reasons. *But:* loosely, cultural and political ideas do tend to travel round a network of people who speak the same language or languages. And with the Spanish-speaking world, that language barrier is partly at the root of wrong doings from the North. I think even within the Caribbean, it's language barriers which are the greatest bar to unity."

YOU STARTED out drumming and never ever sang, then you got into drone musics and scatsinging. Now the quality and colour of the voice seem almost your main instrument. Has this evolved from your beginnings in a fan-based approach? Were you drawn to it by an ear for that sort of tone and accent in sound?

"That's right actually. Because I like that fluidity and ambiguity very much. I haven't got a very big record collection – mainly what people have sent me really. And the music I tend to listen to does seem much less cut-and-dried, much less *finalised* than rock seems to have to be."

Listening to all your work as 'in progress', you seem to be trying to bring together things which people separate for their own purposes – which may be political. Things like leisure and politics, thinking and enjoyment...

"All those conflicts are built into everything you do – just listen to me! One minute I'm talking about being as clear as possible and the next minute about enjoying ambiguity. But in fact we're all subject to all those impulses and desires and influences and for me I don't have a clear division between aesthetics and politics or just practical realities.

"Because aesthetics is just a sophisticated word for stimulating the pleasure content of an experience – while cruelty, sadism and suffering eat away at people's capacity to enjoy life.

So, it seems to me that any point made against sadism or cruelty is an aesthetic point. I see them as directly related."

But right now there's this pervasive belief that you can *legislate* people's enjoyment – by and large that is all the music business does or tries to do at the moment. It's one thing very wrong with the Frankie phenomenon and God knows it's damaged any potential for dealing with the arts through television.

"It's very difficult, that. Because you can't set up a Utopian situation, you sort of jaywalk your way through the oncoming traffic and grab onto what bits and pieces you know in your heart matter or that you know you can make work.

"See, I've always tried to keep a distance from things I knew could chew me up and spit me out five minutes later. It's not some higher code... it's just commonsense survival logic. But it means I can say that I see clearly how the long term effects of the novelty industry of 'now' are not even the long term interests of the people being used by it.

"I noticed right from my beginnings with bigger record companies that the people who are slowly and steadily building a position for themselves *weren*'t the musicians. They were the people running the companies.



"So I've never had any reason to go along with any record company's way of doing things – or to believe it would be in my interest to do so. Even though it may *seem* that there is no alternative and even though people tend to go Yes! Yes! when they even see a contract."

Jovially, Wyatt taps another cigarette against the glass table. "I would say it's quite similar to prostitution actually," he grins. "You've got this two or three year period where you're meant to bloom and really by the time you find out what the game is you've lost any power you have because what *they* consider to be your 'bloom' has faded. And anyway, they've got a whole new bunch of innocents.

"The people running things just build and build and build- but the people they use become an ever-increasing scrap heap."

That scrap heap is something Robert Wyatt views from a greater distance than one would think from the regularity with which his name crops up in musical circles ("I don't really know many of the people I might seem to be in touch with" is how he puts it to me). Mostly, he says, it's because his priorities lie elsewhere - so when he goes out "It's often not to a musical event – I tend to go to things where no one knows what I do, whether they're musicians or not."

All around our limited number of figures like Robert Wyatt, individualism is presently going down – degenerating into an anarchy of instincts, a trivial welter of self-absorptions, a pathetic inability to reject those things which spell danger to real values. Yet Robert Wyatt has chosen this same moment to perfect the loneliest art – fighting every loss on behalf of life – and he's re-heard every tune he loves as a rallying cry to the collective spirit. Even, he says, jazz:

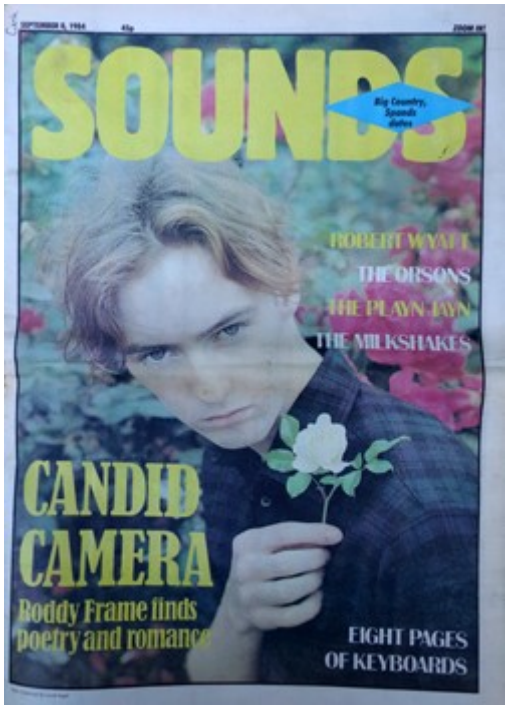
"Yes. Now I see it as much more related to other folk instrumental things. That any community anywhere can develop their own such dialect – and within it of course each individual has their own things to say.

"Jazz has made many things clear to me which have allowed me to learn from the music to which I now listen – the music which comes from all over the world."

Cynthia Rose

Life's A Wyatt ! - Sounds - September 8, 1984

LIFE'S A WYATT !



« YOU KNOW the old saying about rolling stones gathering no moss? Well, paraplegics gather plenty, believe me, » chuckles Robert Wyatt, propelling his wheelchair into the kitchen of his Twickenham house with alacrity. I grin in retort, but the humour is double-edged. It's meant to put me at ease, yet it makes me feel uncomfortable for Robert.

"Eat some of the grapes on the table will you?" he shouts as he prepares a cuppa. I glance around the living room. It's pleasantly cluttered with his wife Alfie's artwork, a large map of the world, records and tapes, postcards and knick-knacks from foreign lands. A plethora of anti-apartheid and agit-prop posters adorn the hall.

"Alfie's away in Paris at the moment interviewing a Turkish film director for *City Limits*," he continues to Tannoy. "So the mother-in-law is worried about my health. If she sees I haven't eaten the grapes she bought for me I'll be in trouble."

Robert reappears, cuppas intact on the plastic tray on his lap together with his evening meal. I was meant to arrive an hour ago and I think he'd given up hope of me coming, hence the pastie he's about to tuck into. Feeling nervous, I decline his offer of food and go out to the car to collect my material.

Out of the boot comes a carrier bag containing a copy of the first, still extremely lucid, Soft Machine album on Probe; a copy of Robert's latest 12"EP 'Work in Progress'; and the sleeve of Working Week's recent poli-jazz single 'Venceremos' to which he contributed; plus my address book. And back in I go through the shiny red door with its polite notice requesting no capitalist propaganda to be posted through the letter box, including the *Richmond Guardian* specially.

I've already explained to Robert the reason for my Lateness. I simply don't think I've done enough research to make the interview worthwhile. For example, until a couple of hours ago I didn't even realise he'd scored the soundtrack for Victor Schonfield's sickening *The Animals Film*. Ah well, we decide to go ahead anyway.

ONE CHATS to Robert Wyatt. Journalistic interrogation is far too harsh a description for what unfolds. Yet when all was said and done I felt the real story of his art had been left

behind unspoken, much like my carrier bag which remained under the table.

So it was a couple of evenings later I found myself back on the man's doorstep searching for my belongings. "Would you like a drink?" inquired Robert. How could I refuse? Inside Alfie, fresh from France, quickly dispensed four fingers of neat whisky. The liquid was turning into fire in my belly when I finally blurted out the question which had been nagging away.

Robert, I hope you don't mind me broaching this subject, but I look around your house with its maps, and I listen to your recent recordings, and they all deal with and point to the outside world. There is no direct comment on your own life in your work. Is this connected to your physical state?

"Mmmm. Well, the maps and things, I guess, are an ethereal method of travelling for me," he says gently. A long explanation follows during which he accounts for his interest in the planet's freedom movements in terms of individual responsibility, something I heartily agree with.

"Yes, but I remember before you were in the chair and we went to Venice your head was full of music only," ventures Alfie. It's a telling clue.

"I don't know, I suppose maybe it's all connected to…" His voice trails off, but I believe he was going to say 'the accident' which paralysed him from the waist down.

"I've never been to a psychologist to be analysed, so your interpretation is as good as mine," he concludes.
I went home — tipsy — thinking my interpretation was presumptious if, perhaps, partly true. Robert is the voice of white conscience in the 80s. Mind you, from the days of early Soft Machine when he, Mike Ratledge and Kevin Ayers were the darling wild boys of the psychedelic avant garde rock scene, touring with Hendrix and playing venues like New York's Museum of Modem Art, Wyatt always had a curiously affecting larynx.

"*I'm nearly five foot seven tall, I like to smoke and drink and ball,* "he sang on 'Why Am I So Short ?' on Soft Machine's debut album. The lyrics were the epitome of the Me Generation’s shallowness, yet he still made them sound somehow MORE.

If memory serves, Robert's lust for life went literally out of the window when, under the influence, he fell from a building and broke his back. The physical wounds healed and left him in a wheelchair, but the emotional scars didn't. I belive we are still listening to them now in his interpretations of songs such as Costello's 'Shipbuilding' and Peter Gabriel's'Biko'.

AS I'VE implied, Robert is self-deprecating in the extreme. He understands the biz's need for photographs but can't fathom why anybody would want to look at him. He speaks of the ghosts of a music scene past who still live in his area. Artists like Peter Green whose guitar set 'Albatross' soaring for nigh on two decades of radio play. But really, he says wistfully, there's nothing doing locally, just a few old retired roadies in the nearby pub.

Whenever Robert tarred himself with the same brush of history, and spoke as a ghost, I wanted to scream "Wake up! Assert yourself. You're not merely some kind of tolerated cripple. You have more to offer than most of the haircuts I interview."

I never did.

However, then I listen to 'Biko' on 'Work In Progress', or to 'Shipbuilding', and I find them inexplicably moving. They are the art of a man who is being positive in the only way he knows how — displacing his own problems by highlighting the plight of others. That's the dialectic from which the empathy in his voice rises. Or so I presume,
anyway.

"I haven't actually got a copy of this," says Robert with surprise, looking at the
gatefold sleeve of the premier Soft Machine elpee I've just dug out of my bag.

Would you like to keep the record?



Page 30 SOUNDS September 8 1984

ROBERT WYATT: Every dog has its day

LIFE'S A WAITING

ROBERT WYATT reveals his global plan to Jack Barron

"YOU KNOW the old saying about rolling stones gathering no moss? Well, paraplegics gather plenty, believe me," chuckles Robert Wyatt, propelling his wheelchair into the kitchen of his Twickenham house with alacrity. I grin in retort, but the humour is double-edged. It's meant to put me at ease, yet it makes me feel uncomfortable for Robert.

"Eat some of the grapefruit on the table will you?" he shouts as he prepares a cuppa. I glance around the living room. It's pleasantly cluttered with his wife Alfie's artwork, a large map of the world, records and tapes, postcards and knick-knacks from foreign lands. A plethora of anti-apartheid and left-wing posters adorn the hall.

"Alfie's away in Paris at the moment interviewing a Turkish film director for City Limits," he continues to Tannoy. "So the mother-in-law is worried about my health. If she sees I haven't eaten the grapes she bought for me I'll be in trouble."

Robert reappears, cuppas intact on the plastic tray on his lap together with his evening meal. I was meant to arrive an hour ago and I think he'd given up hope of me coming, hence the pasta he's about to tuck into. Feeling nervous, I decline his offer of food and go out to the car to collect my material.

Out of the boot comes a carrier bag containing a copy of the first, still extremely lucid, Soft Machine album on Probe, a copy of Robert's latest 12" EP 'Work In Progress', and the sleeve of Working Week's recent post-jazz single 'Venceremos' to which he contributed, plus my address book. And back in I go through the shiny red door with its polite notice requesting no capitalist propaganda to be posted through the letter box, including the Richmond Guardian specially.

I've already explained to Robert the reason for my lateness: I simply don't think I've done enough research to make the interview worthwhile. For example, until a couple of hours ago I didn't even realise he'd scored the soundtrack for Victor Schonfield's sickening *The Animals Film*. Ah well, we decide to go ahead anyway.

ONE CHATS to Robert Wyatt. Journalistic interrogation is far too harsh a description for what unfolds. Yet when all was said and done I felt the real story of his art had been left behind unspoken, much like my carrier bag which remained under the table.

So it was a couple of evenings later I found myself back on the man's doorstep searching for my belongings. "Would you like a drink?" inquired Robert. How could I refuse? Inside Alfie, fresh from France, quickly dispensed four fingers of neat whisky. The liquid was turning into fire in my belly when I finally blurted out the question which had been nagging away.

Robert, I hope you don't mind me broaching this subject, but I look around your house with its maps, and I listen to your record recordings, and they all deal with and point to the outside world. There is no direct comment on your own life in your work. Is this connected to your physical state?

"Mmmm. Well, the maps and things, I guess, are an ethereal method of travelling for me," he says gently. A long explanation follows during which he accounts for his interest in the planet's freedom movements in terms of individual responsibility, something I heartily agree with.

"Yes, but I remember before you were in the chair and we went to Venice your head was full of music only," ventures Alfie. It's a telling clue.

"I don't know, I suppose maybe it's all connected to ..." His voice trails off, but I believe he was going to say 'the accident' which paralysed him from the waist down.

"I've never been to a psychologist to be analysed, so your interpretation is as good as mine," he concludes.

I went home — tipsy — thinking my interpretation was presumptuous if, perhaps, partly true. Robert is the voice of white conscience in the 80s. Mind you, from the days of early Soft Machine when he, Mike Ratledge and Kevin Ayers were the darling wild boys of the psychedelic avant garde rock scene, touring with Hendrix and playing venues like New York's Museum of Modern Art, Wyatt always had a curiously affecting lyrical style.

"I'm nearly five foot seven tall, I like to smoke and drink and ball," he sang on 'Why Am I So Short?' on Soft Machine's debut album. The lyrics were the epitome of the Me Generation's shallowness, yet he still made them sound somehow MORE.

If memory serves, Robert's lust for life were literally out of the window when, under the influence, he fell from a building and broke his back. The physical wounds healed and left him in a wheelchair, but the emotional scars didn't. I believe we are still listening to them now in his interpretations of songs such as Costello's 'Shipbuilding' and Peter Gabriel's 'Biko'.

AS I'VE implied, Robert is self-deprecating in the extreme. He understands the biz's need for photographs but can't fathom why anybody would want to look at him. He speaks of the ghosts of a music scene past who still live in his area. Artists like Peter Green whose guitar set 'Albatross' soaring for nigh on two decades of radio play. But really, he says wistfully, there's nothing doing locally, just a few old retired roadies in the nearby pub.

Whenever Robert tarred himself with the same brush of history, and spoke as a ghost, I would scream "Wake up! Assert yourself. You're not merely some kind of tolerated cripple. You have more to offer than most of the haircuts I interview."

I never did.

However, than I listen to 'Biko' on 'Work In Progress', or to 'Shipbuilding', and I find them inexplicably moving. They are the art of a man who is being positive in the only way he knows how — displacing his own problems by highlighting the plight of others. That's the dialectic from which the empathy in his voice rises. Or so I presume, anyway.

"I haven't actually got a copy of this," says Robert with surprise, looking at the gatefold sleeve of the premier Soft Machine opus I've just dug out of my bag.

Would you like to keep the record?

"No! Basically what I would really like is an artificial amnesia pill," he responds with typical diffidence. I laugh, Robert Wyatt is very amusing at times. Why? I was going to ask what kind of memories the album brought back for you?

"No good ones at all, no good old days. Just trying to make a living, that's all," he explains, crossing his powerful arms over the bold slogan on his T-shirt which reads 'Cuba'.

"That sounds inverted unpretentious-cum-pretentious. But really I left school at 16 and couldn't do f**k all. And in those days everybody formed a rock group. They still seem to, actually."

I can remember going to see Soft Machine as a kid...

"We made a record, we made a lot of racket, I remember that," comments the musician, adjusting himself in the chair. Hugh Hopper, he used to be the bass player in Soft Machine didn't he? I ask, noticing the man's name as the co-composer of 'Amber And The Ambiences' on 'Work'.

"Yeah, he always wrote. It must be 20 years now since I've been singing his songs. He doesn't sing, but he writes really nice tunes, and he knows a lot more about chords than I do, which is handy.

"He started writing a bunch a year ago and he sent me cassettes of them. And I found one which just coincided with the request of a friend of mine, Chris (Searl?), who had just been working in Grenada. He was feeling really demoralised and he said 'Write us a song, Robert' and so I used Hugh's tune."

Are you in touch with the others? How about Mike Ratledge (Soft Machine's keyboardist)?

"I don't know what all those people are doing now. I don't get on very well on the whole with the arty end of showbusiness any more than with the blatant end of showbusiness. I don't see any difference except in the pretentiousness."

So what do you fill your time with, apart from declaring war on the Richmond Guardian's 'free' newspaper?

"Other than that, I'm just hanging on really, just getting by as they say. I don't know quite how but I'm still managing to earn enough making records and stuff to pay the bills. And my wife earns a bit painting."

Alfie is in fact responsible for the pastel swathes of colour on the cover of Robert's new EP. Apparently he first heard 'Biko', Peter Gabriel's song for the murdered black South African student organiser, not in its original form but as a version by Martin Simpson on the late Alexis Korner's show.

"Martin is what they call a folk singer, which just means you don't play with electric instruments as I understand it, because in a country which hasn't got any peasants I don't know what folk music means," reckons Robert with biting sarcasm.

"I didn't know it was Peter Gabriel's song. I knew he'd written one though. And I thought it would be great to do his version for the B-side of this one. So I bought the Peter Gabriel record and found out it was the same f**king song!"

WHAT, I wondered, was the reason for picking 'Biko'?

"Well, anybody who is in rock has to be interested in politics, you really haven't got the choice. I get impatient with people who tell you to leave politics out of it. You wake up every morning and you get politics shoved down your face of the right wing kind, the BBC and Fleet Street and everything else. And if you've got any pride at all you've got to resist it and work out your own version of what's going on.

"So I've developed a strong antipathy to the establishment media here. I feel insulted and patronised by it, and I always look for things which talk about what I consider to be their victims as material. For rock musicians, as with jazz musicians before, there has always got to be a lot of black consciousness. Rock and roll is a black American term from the late 20s, it wasn't invented in Hollywood in the 50s.

"But if you do start thinking about politics, and you compare the importance of the black contribution to our music, and the political and social and economic context that black people operate in the West, the contrast is embarrassing and disgusting. So that's why I look for songs that talk about that."

ROBERT'S ENTHUSIASM to put over the crisis facing the planet's financially and politically dispossessed people's acknowledges no national borders. He remains as passionate about what is happening in South America as much as Africa.

'Work In Progress' includes an interpretation, for instance, of Te Recuerdo Amanda', a song written by the Chilean folk-singer Victor Jara, another man who spoke his mind and was murdered by the authorities for it.

And in keeping with the sentiments of that tune, and Working Week's recent 'Venceremos' single, Robert is at present toiling over an album which will deal further with South American themes. It's heartening to think of him worrying about others, a little pocket of militant musical resistance in suburban Twickenham. Perhaps a quote from 'Amber And The Ambiences' is most apt. "Everyone needs to feel at home/Nobody wins who fights alone."

Robert Wyatt might be physically based in Middlesex but he lives for and in a much wider world. 'Work In Progress' is his artistic contribution to cleaning up an environment filthy with dirty tricks. That work continues.

"No! Basically what I would really like is an artificial amnesia pill," he responds with typical diffidence. I laugh, Robert Wyatt is very amusing at times. Why? I was going to ask what kind of memories the album brought back for you ?

"No good ones at all, no good old days. Just trying to make a living, that's all, » he explains, crossing his powerful arms over the bold slogan on his T-shirt which reads 'Cuba'.

"That sounds inverted unpretentious-cum-pretentious. But really I left school at 16 and couldn't do f**k all. And in those days everybody formed a rock group. They still seem to, actually."

I can remember going to see Soft Machine as a kid…

"We made a noise, we made a lot of racket, I remember that," comments the musician, adjusting himself in the chair. Hugh Hopper, he used to be the bass player in Soft Machine didn't he ? I ask, noticing the man's name as the co-composer of 'Amber And The Amberines' on 'Work…'

" Yeah, he always wrote. It must be 20 years now since I've been singing his songs. He doesn't sing, but he writes really nice tunes, and he knows a bit more about chords than I do, which is handy.

"He started writing a bunch a year ago and he sent me cassettes of them. And I found one which just coincided with the request of a friend of mine, Chris (Searl?), who had just been working in Grenada. He was feeling really demoralised and he said 'Write us a song Robert' and so I used Hugh's tune."

Are you in touch with the others? How about Mike Ratledge (Soft Machine's keyboardist)?

"I don't know what all those people are doing now. I don't get on very well on the whole with the arty end of showbusiness any more than with the blatant end of showbusiness. I don't see any difference except in the pretentiousness. »

So, what do you fill your time with, apart from declaring war on the *Richmond Guardia*n (a 'free' newspaper) ?

« Other than that, I'm just hanging on really, just getting by as they say. I don't know quite how but I'm still managing to earn enough making records and stuff to pay the bills. And my wife earns a bit painting… »

Alfie is in fact responsible for the pastel swathes of colour on the cover of Robert's new EP. Apparently he first heard 'Biko », Peter Gabriel's song for the murdered black South African student organiser, not in its original form, but as a version by Martin Simpson on the late Alexis Korner's show.

« Martin is what they call a folk singer, which just means you don't play with electric instruments as I understand it, because in a country which hasn't go any peasants I don't know what folk music means, » reckons Robert with biting sarcasm.

« I didn't know it was Peter Gabriel's song. I knew he'd written one thought. And I thought it would be great to do his version for the B-side of this one. Si I bought the Peter Gabriel record and I found out it was the same f**king song ! »

WHAT, I wondered, was the reason for picking 'Biko' ?

« Well, anybody who is in rock has to be interested in politics, you really haven't got the choice. I get impatient with people who tell you to leave politics out of it. You wake up every morning and you get politics shoved down your face of the right wing kind, the BBC and Fleet Street and everything else. And if you've got any pride at all you've got to resist it and work out your own version of what's going on.



ROBERT WYATT: Every dog has its day

"So I've developed a strong antipathy to the establishment media here, I feel insulted and patronised by it, and I always look for things which talk about what I consider to be their victims as material. For rock musicians, as with jazz musicians before, there has always got to be a lot of black consciousness. Rock and roll is a black American term from the late 20s, it wasn't invented in Hollywood in the 50s.

"But if you do start thinking about politics, and you compare the importance of the black contribution to our music, and the political and social and economic context that black people operate in the West, the contrast is embarrassing and disgusting. So that's why I look for songs that talk about that."

ROBERT'S ENTHUSIAM to put over the crisis facing the planet's financially and politically dispossessed people's acknowledges no national borders. He remains as passionate about what is happening in South America as much as Africa.

'Work In Progress' includes an interpretation, for instance, of 'Te Recuerdo Amanda', a song written by the Chilean folk-singer Victor Jara, another man who spoke his mind and was murdered by the authorities for it.

And in keeping with the sentiments of that tune, and Working Week's recent Venceremos' single, Robert is at present toiling over an album which will deal further with South American themes. It's heartening to think of him worrying about others, a little pocket of militant musical resistance in suburban Twickenham. Perhaps a quote from 'Amber And The Amberines' is most apt. " *Every one needs to feel at home/Nobody wins who fights alone*."

Robert Wyatt might be physically based in Middlesex but he lives for and in a much wider world. 'Work In Progress' is his artistic contribution to cleaning up an environment filthy with dirty tricks. That work continues.

ROBERT WYATT reveals his global plan to Jack Barron

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Robert Wyatt - OP Independent Music Magazine - The "W" Issue - May-June '84



ROBERT WYATT

by Rick Karcasheff

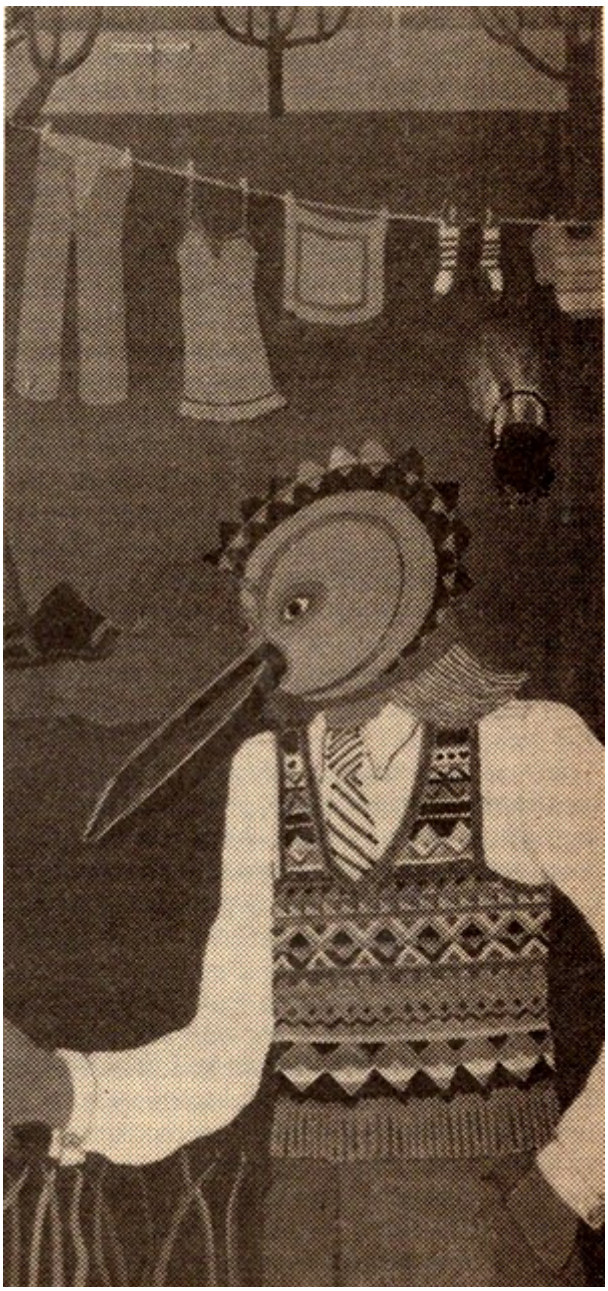
Among the many stellar figures of contemporary British music, there are none less heralded yet more deserving of attention than Robert Wyatt. In a musical career spanning nearly twenty years, he's indeed proved himself a rarity, being able to deliver many classics full of lyrical and emotional wealth and substance. Though his place has been secured by those familiar with the early British progressives, it's certainly time to give Wyatt exposure to any and all newcomers.

Robert Wyatt emerged into the public eye, mid-sixtiesish, with the band the Soft Machine (their name taken from the Wm. Burroughs novel), about the same time as hallucinogens, Syd Barrett and the original Pink Floyd, the Canterbury scene, the summer of love, more hallucinogens, the flower child, and an entirely new conception of pop music. The original Soft Machine—Mike Ratledge, Kevin Ayers, Daevid Allen, and Wyatt—had more raw talent than with which they knew how to deal. First Allen left and founded Gong, a traveling lunatic's asylum of radio gnomes and pothead pixies, and Ayers left soon thereafter, taking up with the likes of David Bedford, Mike Oldfield, and Lol Coxhill. Hugh Hopper joined the Softs during this early transitional phase, and thus many influences and creative forces were combined for the first two Soft Machine albums. These first two releases, appropriately titled *Volume One* and *Volume Two*, are quite eclectic, in varying degrees being pop, jazz, improvisational, electronic, loose and unstructured bits of rock, intellectual and/or pretentious, but above all, these first two efforts were musical milestones, trend-setting and totally transcending the creative limits that had been employed up to that point in rock music. Wyatt contributed heavily in the early years, drumming with youthful and free-spirited abandon, and singing more than he would on later Softs albums, his distinctive upper-register floating effortlessly above the curious and

powerful barrage of electronics and fuzz bass. Voice as instrument, voice as song.

It was about this time Soft Machine began delving more into instrumental aesthetics and Wyatt was asked to concentrate on percussives. An expanded lineup was in order for their third album, a two-record set titled Third. This release featured four extended compositions, each taking up the length of an entire side. Wyatt's one vocal, "The Moon in June," is unfortunately his swan song for the Softs. A near epic piece, with outstanding lead bass from Hugh Hopper and the usual classic organ work of Mike Ratledge, yet it's Wyatt's sadly affected voice that steals the show—a bit huskier than usual, less exuberant, and no doubt aware of the band's internal problems and eventual break-up (only to reform time and again). This version is a complete turnabout from the one specifically recorded earlier for the BBC radio program Top Gear; this "Moon in June" is so playful and alive, nearly intoxicated with life (also containing a reference to the consumption of spirits, a favorite Wyatt topic). The musical arrangement is much the same, but it is Wyatt who brings the warm humor, the ebullience, the wink and the grin. His voice sparkles with immediate identity and distinction, never sounding common or ordinary—only one voice like this.

Following *Third*, Wyatt did a totally instrumental lp with Soft Machine, *Fourth*, and also released a solo entitled *End of an Ear*. Highly unusual and quite different from anything ever attempted by the Softs, Wyatt even has a curious little note on the album jacket, describing himself as "an out-of-work pop singer, currently on drums with Soft Machine." I think it's safe to say that at this point, Robert Wyatt was a very unhappy musician.



Alfreda *B*enge

Which could have led to only one alternative—the formation of his own band, Matching Mole (which is a French derivative of Soft Machine —Wyatt must have left his heart in Canterbury). Matching Mole was certainly a starring vehicle for Wyatt, and their first album accented the softer and less abstract colors of life. The album's first track, "O Caroline," spent the better part of a year occupying the turntable. A more openly honest and forthright song would be difficult to come by. Wyatt convinces and moves with his expression of love professed and profound. He also began experimenting more with his voice, setting it against a minimal musical background, allowing it freedom to drift, a dreamy half-there lilting intonation, generous and open and reaching and arriving at a thoughtful conclusion.

The second Matching Mole album was not as acutely personal. Titled *Little Red Record*, this lp had an abundance of eccentric and offbeat humor, in proper combination with complex time signatures and instrumental virtuosity. Once again the first track sets the tone—"Starting in the Middle of the Day We Can Drink Our Politics Away" is an odd mixture of voice, vibrato, and the usual Wyatt wit. His drumming had

regained its fierceness and drive, and the entire band is sharp, inventive, and quite often offers glimpses of the directions in which Genesis (*Foxtrot*) and King Crimson *(Larks' Tongues in Aspic*) were to later go. Side two contains one of modern man's great religious statements, "God Song." Only Robert Wyatt could have given this song the sort of intense pride it deserves, a search for meaning and purpose, a questioning of fate and faith. Wyatt's delivery is uncertain and a bit tight: "Pardon me, I'm very drunk" (his solution, in most cases), yet refusing to bow down to an invisible god. All he asks for is an answer, and the manner in which he asks for it is unforgettable.

So much promise, things on the upswing, preparations for the third Matching Mole album, and then fade to black. In the fall of 1972, Wyatt fell four stories while drunk and was left paralyzed from the waist down. Thankfully, his creative spirit was left intact and, while in recuperation, he began writing material for what was to be his next solo album, *Rock Bottom*. This was released in June of 1974 to vast critical acclaim and general euphoria for Wyatt fans. It includes yet another Wyatt classic, the drone-ish and melancholy "Sea Song," (and still another reference to alcohol!), perhaps his most striking song. While dealing specifically with relationships, it could easily be seen as metaphor, a majestic reverence for life, of previously untapped human emotion now awakened by physical incapacity, almost a plea to let nothing go by, wistful and dreamlike, the sometime necessity of having to undergo pain and loss in order to gain a firmer grasp of life.

Another solo soon followed, *Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard*. Satisfying and simple, highly personal while remaining in the eccentric style of previous releases. In the meantime, Wyatt performed live and in the studio with Slapp Happy, Hatfield and the North, Henry Cow, Michael Mantler, releasing an occasional 45. This brief hiatus was broken by the release of two more albums: *Nothing Can Stop Us* Now (a collection of previously released 45s) and *The Animals Soundtrack*, a lowkey, mostly instrumental soundtrack to a film which depicts our cruelty to the animal world.

Wyatt has most recently worked with the Shiney Men, Ben Watt, the Raincoats, Scritti Politti, and Nick Mason and Carla Bley. He's an artist of the first caliber, a progressive music pioneer who's set artistic standards and then continually strived to surpass them, a curious and introspective musician who offers all who listen a rare glimpse into the heart and soul of humanity.

Recommended Listening List (song & album)
1. Memories—early demo, later turning up on Rock Generation -8
2. Dedicated to You, But You Weren't Listening—Volume Two
3. The Moon in June—Third
4. The Moon in June—Triple Echo (triple album anthology)
5. O Caroline—Matching Mole
6. Instant Pussy—Matching Mole
7. God Song—Matching Mole's Little Red Record
8. Sea Song—Rock Bottom
9. A Last Straw—Rock Bottom
10. At Last I Am Free—Nothing Can Stop Us Now
11. Calyx—Halfield and the North
12. Do Ya?—Nick Mason's Fictitious Sports
13. I'm a Mineralist—Nick Mason's Fictitious Sports

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Nothing to kill or die for - New Musical Express - March 10, 1984

NOTHING TO KILL OR DIE FOR

by Robert Wyatt

East Berlin in winter is no tropical island. Neither the beautiful broad boulevards running from the Brandenburger Gate through the historical part of town nor its vast modern squares such as Alexanderplatz were built to shelter Berliners from the bitter winds blowing across Central European plains.
But as I was in the German Democratic Republik for its third Rock For Peace Festival I spent most of the weekends indoors, inside the gigantic Palast der Republik. The walls of the palast's four floors were lined with stalls and exhibition stands, selling everything from metal jewelry and rock memorabilia, pottery, painting and wooden doves.
An enormous card addressed to the Pentagon and bearing a "Hands Off Nicaragua" message drew large crowds to sign it. There was no doubting as to who was the villain of the piece!

A very state of the art singer who was hot on the connection between capitalism and fascism flashed up big back projections to illustrate his songs. His images would edit together old and new — Guernica and Nicaragua — intercut with images of Hiroshima and so on. And each time shots of old Nazi leaders or new NATO leaders appeared they would be greeted with loud hooting from the terraces.
The disconcertingly named group Silly were anything but — sharp vocals, good subtle undertow in the drummer's loping wallops. A gent called Diestelmann, apparently the G.D.R.'s very own Taj Mahal, did a nice tribute to the late Alexis Korner. And Puhdys, whose brainchild these festivals were, proved to be immensely popular.drawing hundreds of only just teenagers to their feet. Sparklers were whisked out for the moodily lit numbers, that kind of thing.

Paradoxically Puhdys might attract the youngest fans but they are the oldest band. A very untrendy looking quartet of rock survivors, their all embracing show comes on like Pink Floyd doing an Xmas panto: giant inflatables, searchlights, chunks of heavy metal interspersed with programmatic synthesized minidramas, a John Lennon tribute featuring a pause for an appropriate slice of the original 'Imagine' — "*...nothing to kill or die for...and no religion too...*"
With so many groups all alien to me, coming in a very efficiently run relay marathon over the three days and all singing in a language I didn't think I would understand, I unsurprisingly got too wrapped up in the event itself to fix exactly who did what at a given moment. But I can't remember a better organized event or one whose message was conveyed with such impact.

That said, one song in particular stands out. called 'No Bomb' it was performed by Berluc, who have obviously been Pistols fans in their time. Despite this unlikely route into the G.D.R. charts they were rewarded with the biggest hit of '83 — this blistering little ditty sung half in English for the benefit of a "Mr. President of America".
All the groups, mostly German, but also Italian, polish, and Russian, incidentally, agreed to do at least one song each to justify the Peace Festival's name. Any worthy-but-dull clouds you might expect to hover over the event didn't materialize however. For all the performances.



The last night's show, when just about every group encored with its "peace song" was particularly impressive. Such a totally focussed sequence of rock theatrics, normally an organizer's nightmare, went without a hitch, drawing steaming performances and a highly charged audience reaction.
Such cooperation was indicative of the event and illustrative of its central theme. None of the dirty tricks marring Western rock festivals was evident. No long drawn out soundchecks or tuning sessions. Groups didn't need to get louder the more famous they got.

The peace theme, too, suffused the city for the weekend. I am told there's a permanent exhibition of anti-warmongering graphics on the walls of Alexanderplatz Underground station.
After hours, in the university students club where upturned plastic buckets served as seats to a tiny stage, you could hear Ian Dury and The Blockheads records filling the intervals between the live acts. Recalling Berlin cabaret the club's acts this weekend were mainly satirical punk artists with assorted puppets who, to drum machine accompaniment, robot danced and jive talked through tight routines.

Ironically, though, the audience here assumed they were bang up to date London style, not realizing the fashion time warp dated them in comparison to some of the button smart,short back and sides establishment types hanging around the fringes of the Palast.
Personally, I refuse to apologize for saying I had a great weekend in East Berlin. The concentrated atmosphere of careful people trying that bit harder was paradoxically a welcome contrast to the lordly self assurance projected across the Atlantic from the vaticans of our mighty pop industry.
In addition I'm certain all those Lennon tribute peace anthems of the weekend indicate a kid of immortality that would have made the great man himself feel good, "...but I'm not the only one..."
No, John, I don't think you are.

This article was also published in "Wrong Movements - a Robert Wyatt History" by Michael King.

Previous article Next article

The Wyatt Life - The Face N° 39 - July 1983

THE WYATT LIFE



After many years of critical neglect and seven months sunny exile on a Spanish beach, Robert Wyatt is back in favour. With the Costellopenned "Shipbuilding" firmly established in the charts and the hearts of the nation, Anthony Denselow drew Wyatt out of his introspective mood for some quiet thoughts on global music, PLU's and the new life of a former "classic Sixties drop-out figure"

Photo by Mike Laye

Robert Wyatt has tried many different approaches to his life and work. He has experimented with drink and melancholic brooding, he has tried periods of relative working normality when he has chatted openly to the press. He has even tried tackling England from abroad. His most recent approach seems to be a healthy combination of early introspection and later career awareness.

He and his wife Alfie have now decided on the curious policy of non recognition of PLU (people like us) which seems to effectively mean that while he continues to seriously consider his musical development he can hide out in Spain having nothing whatsoever to do with the obscene worlds of media and music business.

"It's not an act of hostility, in fact I'm quite grateful to the music scene," says Wyatt. "It's more against the kind of dreadful cultural narcissism that can occur when like-minded people get together in a scene. I'm scared of all the windows misting up and turning into mirrors."

In fact Wyatt's life has changed dramatically since he packed up and headed for the Mediterranean seven months ago. He had a single - "Shipbuilding" - bubbling so close to the top 30 that only the FA cup replay postponed a Wyatt airing on Top Of The Pops. He has suddenly become aware of the growing following he's been attracting in recent months and he has one of the year's finest albums as proof of his importance in a music scene constantly drifting towards the shallow end.

Wyatt sees himself as a "looker, watcher, selector and editor" rather than as a live performer. The singles that have been dribbling out on Rough Trade since the late

Seventies (collected on the new Wyatt album "Nothing Can Stop Us" released recently for the second time) are a truly oddball set of songs from staggeringly diverse cultural contexts. The album is perhaps best described as the first edition of Robert Wyatt's world view displaying a total lack of concern with ego and fashion, rather a fascination with world politics and the sort of universally powerful music that can only lamely be described as folk.

There's a version of the Cuban national anthem updated to talk about the presence American bases in Cuba that few in the West know about. There's a song from Violetta Parra, the Chilean responsible for getting that country's youth song movement off the ground. "Her songs are straightforward, unpolished, fragile and extraordinary," says Wyatt. "This one's a helpless cry for Chileans to rise from the grave and stand up for themselves."

There's Wyatt's heart-trembling version of Chic's "At Last I Am Free", the typically child-like Ivor Cutler song "Grass" ("Cutler says I sing it alright except that I sing it as though it has meaning," reports a surprised Wyatt); "Born Again Cretin" is inspired by Nelson Mandela's imprisonment in South Africa; Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" is about a racial lynching in the American deep South while Wyatt's rendition of the Red Flag speaks eloquently enough for itself.

"I suppose that I'm attracted to certain places but it's more often just the tunes that get me first," says Wyatt about his material. "There are many musical areas that I'm really into that I couldn't handle within my technical range, things like Middle Eastern Arab music and Oriental classical music. So this album doesn't reflect all the styles that I'm interested in, just those that I think I can add to."


THE WYATT LIF

After many years of critical neglect and seven months sunny exile on a Spanish beach, Robert Wyatt is back in favour. With the Costello-penned "Shipbuilding" firmly established in the charts and the hearts of the nation, Anthony Bessallow drew Wyatt out of his introspective mood for some quiet thoughts on global music, PLU's and the new life of a former "classic Sixties drop-out figure"

Wyatt has also included work from other people on the album. Along with Peter Blackman's rather plodding poem about the battle of Stalingrad (revolutionary in content, epic in style) is an excellent piece of music from a British based Bengali troupe called Disharhi. Wyatt heard them singing at an art against racism and fascism concert and liked them so much he just asked them onto the album. They sing (in Bengali) a trade union rallying song. "I was accused of being elitist for not translating the lyrics for the Parra and Disharhi songs," says Wyatt. "It's not elitist if you're a Bengali is it?"

"Nothing Can Stop Us" is a generous album; a collection of fine tunes, stimulating ideas and powerful emotions that says much about the function and inspiration of music (as it leaps between different cultural standpoints). Wyatt himself is weary of giving the album too much significance. "What we think of as global politics, global visions and global cultures are in fact so conditioned by our Eurocentric myopia that we still, despite our power and our increased dealings with other people from around the world, haven't come to terms with other cultures. I even make fun of attempting to make a comprehensive world view with the title of the album - which sounds quite revolutionary. It's a quote from an American government official of the Thirties who reckoned that America shouldn't make the same mistake as Britain by trying to govern the world. He said America should simply own it, nothing can stop us."

For its second outing to the record shops "Nothing Can Stop Us" includes the Langer/Costello/Wyatt collaboration "Shipbuilding", an intriguing partnership that will hopefully bear more fruit in the future. Clive Langer, apparently inspired by the way in which Wyatt sings the Billie Holiday song "Strange Fruit", wrote the music. Elvis Costello supplied the bleak Iyrics and Wyatt received the demo tape through the post one morning.

"It's been the happiest experience I've had as a producer/songwriter," says an unusually enthusiastic Elvis Costello of his encounter with Wyatt. "The song has been realised perfectly. It sounds completely like the intent of the lyric and melody, Wyatt has an amazing voice. I'd always wanted to hear Dusty Springfield record one of my songs and when she did 'Just A Memory' it was a great bland disappointment. I think that people

have been so overwhelmed by the melancholy of Robert's singing that the political comment in 'Shipbuilding' hasn't been immediately spotted. The lyric seems to filter through afterwards; the BBC probably wouldn't like it otherwise."

Wyatt seems to invest everything he sings with this haunting sadness (it will be interesting to hear Costello's version of "Shipbuilding" on his forthcoming album) but he shies away from any boasts on his role as a singer.

"Maybe it's melancholic because I don't consciously emote," he offers. "I'm aware that there are people - musicians - who say that I'm an influence on them but I really don't know enough about the current music scene. In fact there's no one idiom available to me that I feel comfortable with. Rock I find too musically dogmatic. I was brought up on the sort of jazz with fluid, ambiguous, drumming and walking bass lines and I guess it's that kind of breezy fluidity that I'm trying to put into singing songs. I still get infuriated with rigid blocks of verses and instrument breaks, but I'm working on it."

Wyatt is sitting in his Twickenham flat (a quiet backwater by the river that he still maintains despite the move to Spain) surrounded by objects reflecting his preoccupations in life. The walls of his brightly painted breakfast room are covered with Alfie's equally bright paintings and with ethnic art objects; the bookshelves are full of political, mainly Communist, literature. He has a music room where he can play piano (his toy organ has recently broken) and bits of percussion. He has a specially built ramp so he can run his wheelchair into the neat bird-haven garden.

The flat was bought for them partly by their friend Julie Christie and from money raised by a charity concert given by the Pink Floyd after Wyatt's tragic accident ten-years-ago when he broke his spine falling from a house window. "I didn't have to use all the money," recalls Wyatt, "because the album 'Rock Bottom', which I still think is great, was actually making me some money."

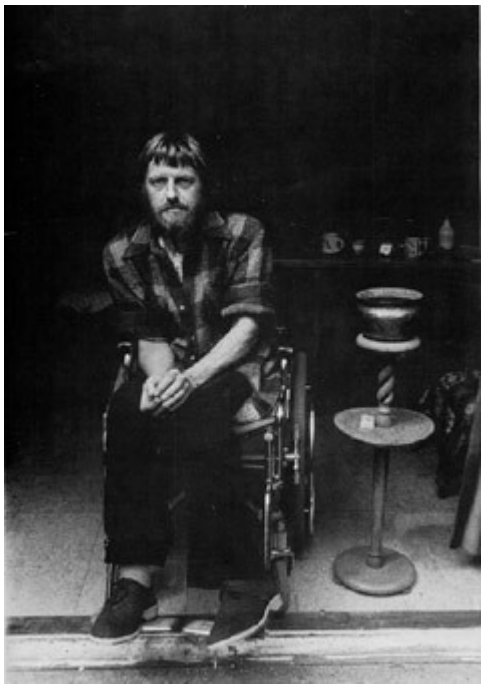
Given Wyatt's current popularity after years in the wilderness it's incredible to consider that his first musical tangles were back in the Sixties. As the drummer with Soft Machine (he was then only a closet singer) he toured the US supporting Jimi Hendrix, and built up quite a following in this country ("among the wrong sort of people") for his bare-backed drumming enthusiasm.

The son of a psychologist father and journalist mother, Wyatt was the perfect Sixties drop-out figure, the untrained and illeducated intellectual member of a jazz-rock fusion band. After Soft Machine disbanded in 1971 Wyatt started to sing, first on the "End Of An Ear" album, then with the band Matching Mole (recording that classic Wyatt song "Caroline") and on the other solo albums "Rock Bottom" and "Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard". AIl these records are now difficult to obtain.

While the early albums often reflected Wyatt's frustration with the traditional song format (another Matching Mole song was actually about verses and choruses) he has steadily developed the political quality of his songwriting and music choice. Wyatt is a paid-up member of the Communist Party and he feels that the CP helped him move away from the shock of his accident and from the narcissism of rock in the mid Seventies to a more considered philosophy.

"It helped me focus the jungle of my thoughts, but it's difficult to talk about politics and its relationship with music. I think Julie Burchill is the only person I know of who can articulate that. I don't think of music as intrinsically political (as some do) but I think it's quite pretentious to claim that you're not trying to say anything when you sing. All noise is communication and reminds you of words. Personally I see the political role of music in a totally different light. "Memoies Of You" for example (the B-side of 'Shipbuilding') may sound just like a nostalgia song but it's political for me because Eubie Blake who wrote it and who was 100 in 1983 was writing before jazz and somehow represents a much used but amazingly uncredited strand of American popular music. That he gets some royalties for that song is the only genuinely quantifiable political act I can make: the transfer of resources. Beyond that I have no control over a song and how it affects anybody."

Wyatt's greatest joy in life is to take the phone off the hook and tune his radio into a variety of exotic stations. When he hits Radio Moscow, then he's off in dreamland. He reads and listens to music from all over thc world, especially the early and obscure jazz that he grew up with, and recently he has been expanding his fascination with all things



> Zoom

Spanish.

Robert and Alfie live in "something bigger than a garage" right on the beach south of Barcelona. Alfie paints and Wyatt wheels himself around the beach, writes, reads, attends regular weekend Catalan piss-ups, and has been getting to hear as much pure Flamenco music as possible. He is lucky that Barcelona has a good spinal unit for he cannot stray away too far from medical surveillance. "Being in a wheelchair has been like a short cut to feeling old. You are forcibly removed from things like sexual panic. You worry about getting in and out of places. You start finding yourself sitting on park benches next to retired couples. You feel more fixed, less nomadic. You get tired quicker, and being a paraplegic, my body is actually aging faster than most people's. You cannot be spontaneous, you worry about the future and whether people will buy your records. I never thought that ten years ago."

Wyatt has again retreated back to Spain to consider his next form of musical attack. Apart from the singles and now one album, he has had little commercial output in years and he says he could never consider performing live. "I had to get drunk to do it before; it would mean having things like managers and microphones." He also made that excellent soundtrack for Victor Schonfeld's horrifically distressing *The Animals Film* largely because Julie Christie, the narrator, asked him to. He worked furiously for months for £100. Talking Heads demanded £500 just for the use of their music during the opening sequence.

At the moment Wyatt is carefully observing the policy of avoidance of PLU and he has yet to actually write a song in Spain. Those of us who have been mesmerised by Wyatt's dolorous singing will just have to wait. But hopefully another album will not take another decade in coming. "I can't do anything else in life declares stoically, "I have to keep doing this somehow."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Diving For Pearls - Melody Maker - June 4, 1983





ROBERT WYATT

Adam Sweeting talks to ROBERT WYATT about shipbuilding, pop music, the Eurovision Song Contest, and revolutionary ideologies. Pics: Jon Blackmore





Strange things happen, and one's just happened to Robert Wyatt . He'd been living in Spain for the last six months, well away from the vertiginous roundabout of British music, British charts and British fashion, when, unknown to him, Rough Trade re-released his haunting single "Shipbuilding".

Next thing you know, the record had begun to scale the singles charts at a healthy enough rate for Wyatt to be whisked back to England to ready himself for a possible appearance on "Top Of The Pops". The single rose to 35 on the BBC's chart last week, but with "TOTP" being shortened in favour of football, Wyatt's services were not required. So now he's staying over here to see what happens this week. "Shipbuilding" would be an unlikely enough candidate for pop payability at any time, featuring as it does Elvis Costello's mordant slant on the Falklands cataclysm, lit by the sort of luminous ironies few other writers are capable of.

Add Clive Langer's sweet-and-sour melody and Wyatt's tragically crucified vocal, and you're probably as close as you'll ever get to the subversiveness "pop" music is supposedly capable of. Then, put the icing on the cake by having the record ascending the charts in the couple of weeks leading up to a watershed British general election, one in which the residue of the "Falklands Factor" will play its part. Perfect!

The maverick Wyatt has looked harder than most at the relationship between music and its social surroundings and origins. He's a practising Communist, is well versed in political history, and takes a keen interest in the culture and development of the Third World. Flick through Wyatt's back catalogue and you'll find a bizarre trail of clues - versions of "Keep The Red Flag Flying" and "Stalin Wasn't Stallin' ", "Guantanamera" and a hit single with the old Monkees' song, "I'm A Believer". There isn't a category with Wyatt's name on it - best to see his work as a collection of hints, provocations and cries for help.

We meet at his flat in Twickenham, around which he has learned to travel deftly in his wheelchair. I ask questions, he talks, I listen - and, frequently, learn. Wyatt is friendly and quite cheerful, but I feel oppressed by the desperation which all his thinking and reading and listening seem to have led him to discover. Most people have too little time. I suspect Wyatt would gladly give them some of his.

Anyway, here are some edited highlights.

SHIPBUILDING

"CLIVE Langer and Elvis Costello had asked me to do the song, and it was sort of tailor-made for me really. My only worry was whether I could do it as they hoped. That was really the beginning and the end of my worry. I'm not going to go out and buy a thousand copies or anything like that.

"I was really pleased and amazed when Elvis offered me the song - I was really surprised, because the last thing I saw of him was the TV programme about him in Nashville, which was very brave of him, chucking himself in at the deep end there. What amazes me is his eclectic range of interests, because although my own is eclectic, it's very bitty. Whereas talking to Elvis, he seems to have an encyclopaedic interest in pop music itself. I was surprised he knew enough about me to ask me to do the song.

"In this particular case, Clive Langer wrote the tune and thought this was the sort of thing Robert Wyatt could do, and Elvis put some words on. They certainly realised I wouldn't shy away from singing political words. I find that things that happen like this out of the blue work better than me trying laboriously to construct projects on my own, very often. So there's no particular incentive for me to construct things of my own. I put most of my energy into the sort of passive pursuit of following the things I'm interested in, culturally and musically, and I'm never sure what's going to come out of them.

"A lot of very interesting things that have happened to me, I've found absolutely no way of expressing them or dealing with them at all, which is very frustrating. A lot of the things that happen to you just don't translate into songs, and I'm not really cut out to be a journalist as far as I can see. I've done a bit of writing occasionally, but nobody ever seems to pay you for it, so I knocked that on the head. The only people who pay you seem to be the ones on the verge of going bust."

ENTERTAINMENT

"I DON'T believe in this idea that music's 'just entertainment' - as if there was any such thing as 'just entertainment'. I think people who are apparently just singing something that's totally self-indulgent or apparently meaningless are making a very serious statement, and that serious statement is 'I exist, I want you all to like me'. That's a very urgent message.

"If somebody tries to dress nicely that's what they're saying, and for all you know their survival, psychologically, depends upon a sympathetic response to that. So it's terribly serious. I think everything that people do is serious, whether it's dancing, to attract somebody they like or just to have a good time, and I get very impatient with people who say you shouldn't try to be serious in escapist culture. It's all pretty desperate if you look at it.

"I think of flowers. People say 'Oh, a lovely relaxed flower garden there' - in fact it's not. If you think about what a flower's doing, he's saying 'If a bee doesn't notice me within about 24 hours I'm not gonna be able to carry on. Everything depends on a bee thinking I'm a really sexy flower and getting hold of my stamens', or whatever it is they do."

PAUL WELLER

"He knows more than I did at his age. For the record, I'm 38. I'm very slow, it's taken me a long time to see things the way I do now. I saw an interview with Paul Weller and he was talking about the people he was conscious of who were around. Not that they've been through more, but you sort of benefit from previous generations' experience. He's watched The Who and he's seen this and that, and he's capable of avoiding the pitfalls that some of us older people may have fallen into. It's quite inspiring really.

"But on the other hand, I'm very conscious that there is an unspoken ideology which is much stronger than conscious politics in rock 'n' roll, and that's age. There is an assumption there that the young standing on the shoulders of the old is in fact a law in rock 'n' roll, and it fits everything, it fits the marketing of it... so I'm very conscious that younger musicians would be uncomfortable that older ones would like them, 'cos each

generation seems to need to feel it's got a sort of autonomous culture.

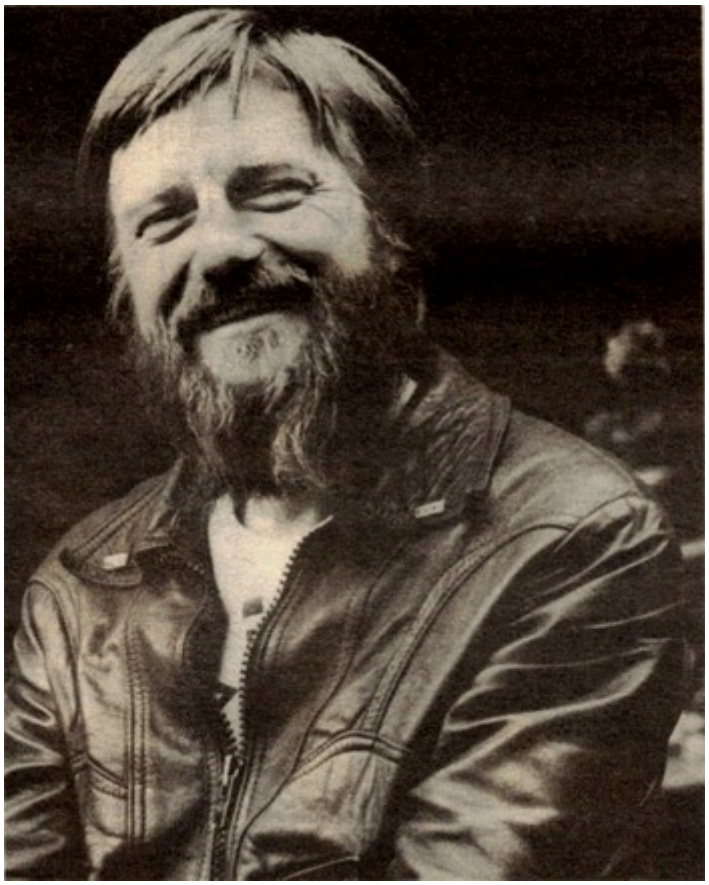
"There's always going to be a gap, because the stuff I was interested in when I was a teenager was stuff that was going on before those people were born, really. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. And the stuff you get into as a teenager stays with you longer than anything, I think. So I respect people like Weller, but it's from quite a distance, because I'm just not in that world.

"But there are times when you think 'Christ, I've got this voice, I've got this constituency if you like, an informal constituency of what I do, I must feel responsible'. I think it's perfectly reasonable that Paul Weller should think 'I've got a responsibility here, therefore I have a choice between whether I say something useful or whether I say something useless', so he gives himself the responsibility of saying something useful. He's not claiming to have any power, he's just saying 'if I have, and it seems as though I may have some, I'd better use it as well as I can'. That's fair enough. Because we don't really know what influence we have, it hasn't been worked out."

MOTIVATION

"I SUPPOSE what set me off is what keeps me going, and what set me off was not politics or pop music, but being brought up as a teenager to deal with people who called themselves avant-garde at that time, in painting and music and so on. Something very strange happens to avant garde, which is that the moment you've said it or done it it's not avant garde any more. And if, for example, you call yourself a performance artist you're giving the game away, and you're no longer a performance artist. The person to watch for is somebody who's not saying who they are - things aren't just what they're called.

"I'd have to qualify that by saying that I'm very rarely happy with the results. That's because I think being brought up not just with the avant garde in general but with the ideas of the Dada era in particular, there was this idea that manifested itself over and over again in rock music, that there was no point in doing anything properly, because when you sketch out an idea it's the idea that's interesting, so you don't hang about and fill it all in and dot all the i's. I'm not saying I should have tidied all my songs up, but the fact is there isn't much I ve done that's quite finished in the sense that some people's work is finished."



POP

"THE reason I did some sort of conventional pop songs was partly to move outside the consensus of people I was working with at that time, which would have said that pop music is a dull and deadend medium. And I thought 'hmmm, could you do a pop song?' So I thought well, let's have a look at a successful pop song, see how it works.

"If you talkto people who deal in long and really developed music, they'll say that one of the reasons that pop is bound to be a minor form is that you can't do much in two or three minutes. I found an interesting thing, that if you're trying to write a good tune it's very hard to make it last longer than one minute, and in fact three minutes is an incredibly long time. Almost without exception it's quite long enough.

"By the time three minutes is up you've heard each idea in the record probably at least three times, and far from being restricted, I found it just as intimidating to try to create three interesting minutes as anything longer.

"I didn't try and write one myself, I was just interested in taking apart a few good or successful pop songs from the inside and then reassembling them in the light of what I could do, just to see what made them work. And I ended up with what I suspected I would have, which is a lot of respect for the craft. People say 'well it's so limited', but so is making pots. Making pottery is not making Rodin's sculpture, you're looking for the wrong thing, but there is a difference between good pottery and crummy pottery."

AFRICA

"ALL this century, Africa has been supplying our culture with its revitalising juices. I don't think musicians should feel guilty about it, I think musicians are relatively innocent and so are their audiences, they're just looking for a different stimulus.

"Within this century, Picasso's revolutionising of the world of painting can be attributed in part to his discovery of African sculpture and wood-carving. He's celebrated as this innovative genius, while sculptors in Mozambique and Tanzania are still struggling away to sell their work to tourists. Picasso might have wanted to transfer the status of the world he'd inherited, of Europe, onto the Africans who'd inspired him, but artists don't have that much power.

"I think what's sad for artists ... if we live in a country which has got rich by crippling the potential of some other country, then even though we ourselves are personally innocent of this economic, political and military fact, we can't help but participate in an unfair situation when we continue to use others. In England, we still inherit a situation where we can get more out of other people than they can get out of us. I don't expect anybody else to take that on if they don't want to, but personally it worries me to the point of not really being sure that anything I do is really any use to anybody whatsoever.

"But then I fall back on my old standby of saying 'Well, I never tried to do any good anyway, I'm just an avant-garde artist'. Because after all, we're all selfish first - we're all saying This is what I do, this is my act, I hope you like it because if you don't I'm done for'. That's what we're all doing and I'm no different from anybody else in that, I'm not any more altruistic."

THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST

"WHEN it comes down to it, I'm more interested in politics under particular situations. I don't actually start off and end up with some sort of overview. Sometimes you get the politics in a very specific situation, like the Eurovision Song Contest. Where you really think about it is where nobody's overtly talking about politics at all. I think Eurovision is just bristling with political implications, on all kinds of layers.

"First of all, why a Eurovision Song Contest? It's slightly broaderthan that ridiculously tiny

and unrepresentative group of countries called the EEC which excludes Austria, Scandinavia, Spain, Portugal and all the countries further east, but not much. Then why is there this tradition that everybody sends rubbish that nobody in their own country of origin knows anything about? Who are the selection committee? Who are the juries? What's going on there?

"The reason I mention the Eurovision Song Contest is that Spain did something this year that as far as I know nobody's ever done before - they sent a great singer with a great song. They sent a girl called Remedios Amaya singing 'Quien Maneja Mi Barca'. Poor old naive Spain, trying desperately to impress the Europeans and trying desperately to get into the EEC, send a good singer and good song - a bit of electronic ska backing and her gypsy vocals and we're away. And of course it got no points at all, none whatsoever. Very unusual thing to happen.

"There's a very touching naivety in Spain and they really were hurt, they started blaming themselves, and you wouldn't believe the debates that went on in the press about 'we shouldn't have sent a gypsy, all Spaniards aren't gypsies', or 'she was barefoot, she should have worn good shoes' - oh, awful stuff. They were blaming themselves instead of saying 'what a cloth-eared bunch of gherkins we've got here'.

"But there were all kinds of other things going on there. Countries gave spectacularly bad marking to the countries where their immigrant workers come from. This may be coincidental, but it's amazing that West Germany, who presumably 30 years ago, had the opportunity arisen, would perhaps have given Israel no points at all, would now give Turkey, Spain and anywhere with gypsies in it no points at all - because the current xenophobia in West Germany is about Spanish and Turkish immigrant workers.



"Then you think well maybe the Israelis will appreciate this song, because it's part of the southern Mediterranean tradition that Remedios Amaya is coming from — you could recognise Middle Eastern folk influences in what she does. But nothing from Israel, because Israel is trying to be more northern European than the northern Europeans. They don't want to know about anything that sounds like gypsies, as far as I can see.

"And then Yugoslavia got nothing from Austria, and Yugoslavia is where Austria's guest workers come from. Not that it's all political, it's just that that's an element in it that's totally ignored, because it's just 'fun, fun, fun'. And as I say, it's not fun, fun, fun, it's Remedios Amaya crying on behalf of Spain for help. There's no such thing as light entertainment, it's all much more desperate."

KILLING PEOPLE FOR AN IDEOLOGY

"I DON'T think killing's the worst thing you can do to people. The usual slogan of liberation movements goes something like 'Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees', and really what I do is ... I will support certain people who have come to that conclusion if I've read their history and I agree with them that they have no alternative.

"The second question is whether that's necessarily effective — it's a moot point. Means become ends in politics and that's always a danger. Bu really what's so unfair about the image given to various liberation movements I sympathise with is that violence wasn't

talked about until they reacted to it - then they're called the violent ones. It's extraordinary the amount of perhaps hopeless, perhaps hopeful violence our Empire has caused as a reaction, and it seems to me that basically we must look for the cause of that in what we were doing there in the first place.

"To take some very obvious examples, if you remember that according to some Namibian liberation fighters that when the English took over the concentration camps from the Germans they got worse, then you begin to see what we're up against. I don't think anybody would seriously say that the French Resistance were wrong to keep up the armed sabotage against the Nazi occupation of France. In fact the people who get despised tend to be the collaborators, people who said 'well let's try and make it work under a Vichy government'. And I think certainly that people living in Namibia and El Salvador find themselves in that position."

THE BIBLE OR MARX ?

"MOST of us, whether we admit it or not, are probably brought up with the New Testament drummed into us at one stage or another. There's a lot of very clear moral advice in that which I find very few defenders of Christianity taking any notice of, and one of those pieces of advice is taking the mote out of your own eye. And I think that our responsibility is towards the casualties and deficiencies caused by how we ourselves operate, how our countries operate.

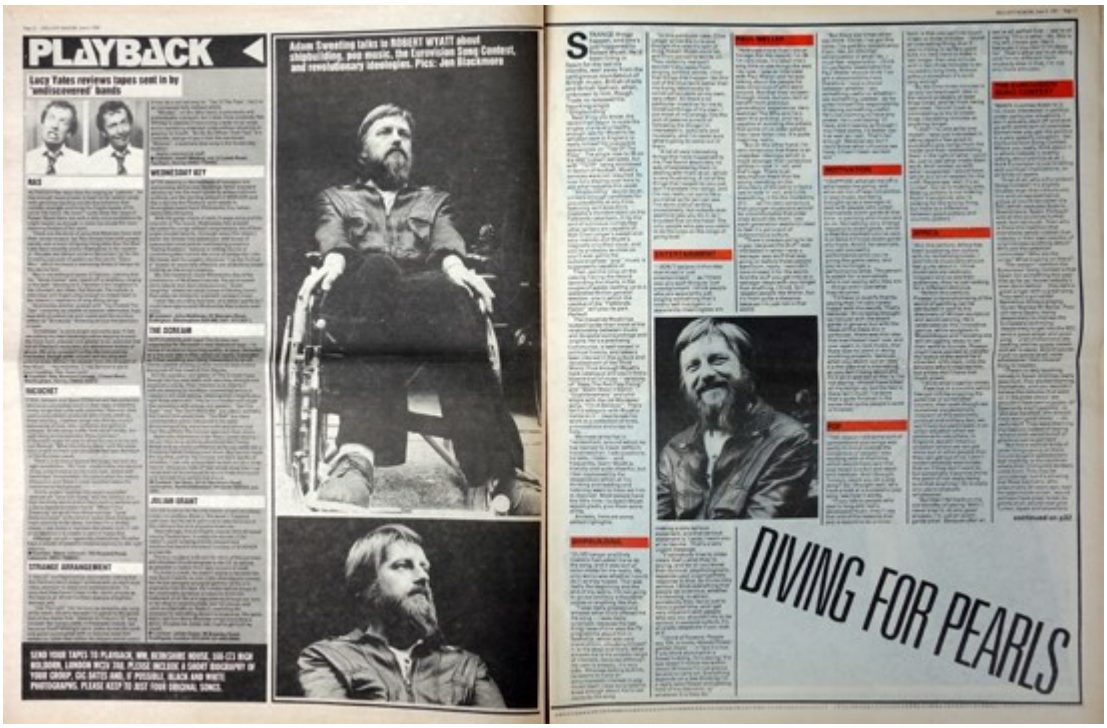
"To me, what seem to be the most unreasonable and totally unpalatable aspects of the so-called Socialist alternative that exist, the worst thing about them is when they try to imitate Western imperialism — technically, when they imitate the British Empire's global sort of spider web, or ideologically when you get people using Marxism as a sort of global idea ... The precedent for that is Christianity - the Pope does exactly the same about what he believes. The Pope is very compassionate about all the Indians being slaughtered in South America at the moment, but the fact is that the ideas that he represents are ideologically totalitarian.

"It's the Mediterranean religions of Islam, Judaeism and Christianity which first suggested this absolutely terrifyingly revolutionary idea of a single mono-God that was totally running the whole show, to whom we must all be servile. That's totalitarianism, that is. I think that having set these precedents, the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other, and becoming so successful at it, it's incredibly hypocritical the way we sort of wag our fingers at people who, in trying to be successful, use elements of these approaches to get their place in the sun.

"If we really think those ideas are bad, then we must debunk them here, because then we won't inspire other people to emulate us."

PARTING SHOT

"SOMEBODY once said to me that I'm very easy to talk to, but very hard to interview."


PLAYBACK

Lucy Tales reviews tapes sent in by 'undiscovered' bands

Adam Sweeting talks to ROBERT WYATT about shipbuilding, pop music, the Eurovision Song Contest, and revolutionary ideologies. Pics: Jon Blackmore

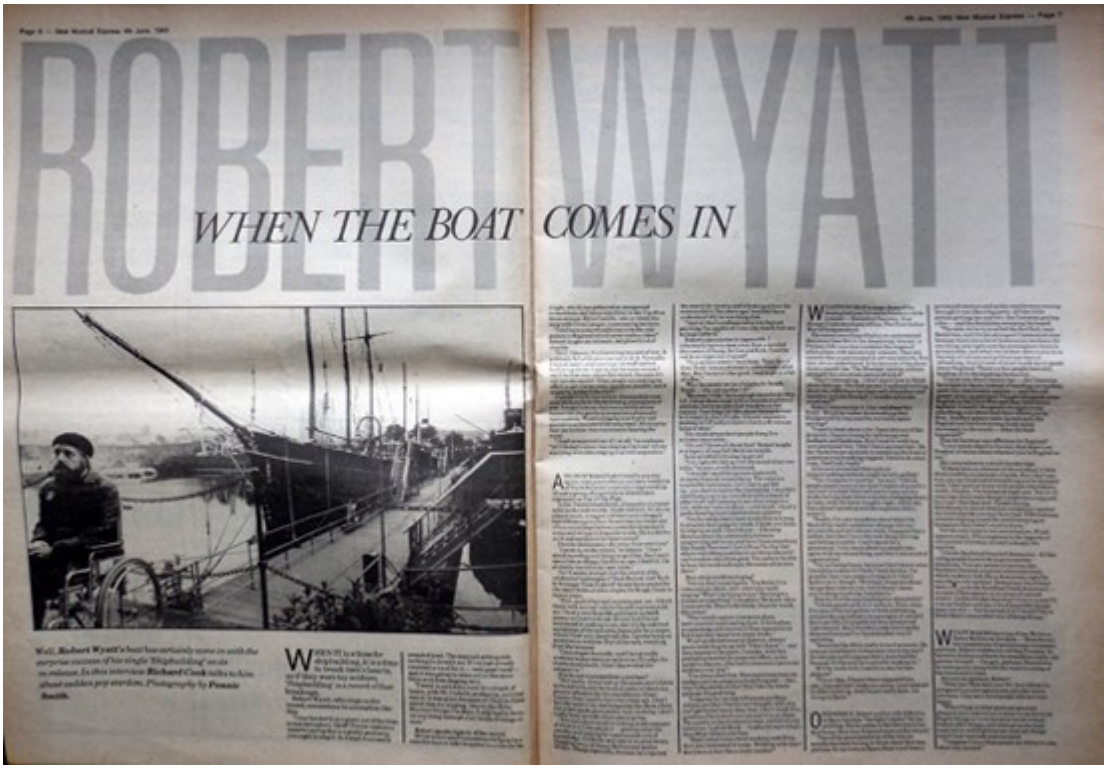
DIVING FOR PEARLS

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Robert Wyatt - When the Boat comes in - New Musical Express - 4th June, 1983



*Well, **Robert Wyatt's** boat has certainly come in with the surprise success of his single 'Shipbuilding' on its re-release. In this interview **Richard Cook** talks to him about sudden pop stardom.*
*Photography by **Pennie Smith**.*

WHEN IT is a time for shipbuilding, it is a time to break men's hearts, as if they were toy soldiers. 'Shipbuilding' is a record of that breakage.

Robert Wyatt, who sings on the record, remembers its conception like this.

"I was handed it on a plate, out of the blue, to mix metaphors. Geoff (Travis) sent me a cassette saying this is a pretty good song, you ought to sing it. So I tried it out and it sounded good. The musical setting was nothing to do with me. Elvis had already recorded a vocal for it – very good vocal – and it was going to come out in the same form with him singing on it.

"I went in and did a vocal in a couple of hours, with Mr Costello producing, and that was it. It was great because all I had to think about was my singing, like on the Mike Mantler

things I've done. I only had to focus on one thing instead of all kinds of things at once."

Robert speaks lightly of the record. He has interrupted his residence in Spain for a mere few days in order to appear in a video for the single, which has gathered an unexpected momentum and taken a position in the Top 30 on its re-release. Elvis Costello, who co-wrote the song with Clive Langer, is overseeing matters.

"I did have a secret ambition to be the only person in England who'd never made a video!" Robert laughs an intimate, delighted kind of chuckle.

"Still, I dunno, it's disarming in a sort of way. It suddenly felt a bit precious not to do it. Normally I've just spent years putting out stuff and not bothering about it again, but for some reason I can't be that way about this record. Because it's not just *my* record. Other people are making an effort to get it to as many people as possible and it would be wrong to be aloof."

Costello's lyric is a wintry, disconsolate view over dockyards in the darkening atmosphere of war. Langer's music fashions a subtle minor lament for the gentle syncopations of acoustic instruments. Wyatt's singing is as lonely and plaintive as the core of the Song itself. No surprise that the lyricist was overcome on hearing the vocal.

"I had no expectations of it at all," he confesses. "All I thought about was singing it in tune! All my worrying went into singing it as well as possible."

AND NOW Robert finds himself a pop star again, nine years after an unlikely rendition of 'I'm A Believer' crept into a depressed top 30 and a group of musicians in wheelchairs appeared on *Top Of The Pops*.

In his Twickenham home, pleasantly cluttered with books and records, bright and airy, he sits on a hard couch, a ragged old beret and a straggly beard framing his face. Sometimes he clasps one of his ruined legs between powerful drummer's arms and swings it from side to side. He is a bit too mild and careless to be 'interviewed'.

Does he deliberately shy away from attention?

"I seem to, on the whole," he admits. "I don't mind recording and doing songs I like. But I can't speculate on things like follow-ups. I doubt it. I'm probably too old to try new tricks."

Yet it seems strange that the creator of the celebrated landscapes of Rock Bottom and Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard should have settled for the small fruits of a few singles for Rough Trade in recent years.

"Well, most of my real interests are, um...I don't think rock is a real vehicle for self-expression for me. I lead a very busy life and I earn as much money as I have to to eat. It's not that I'm not interested in making music, but it's the enforced narcissism of the industry, especially for a singer, which I find very claustrophobic. I prefer being an anonymous watcher. Part of the mob, watching from the terraces.

"I'm a *singer*, basically, and I'm not really working in pop music as such even if I nudge the charts occasionally. I don't know what the category is."

Has he not retreated from a jazz base?

"Not really. If you look at the musicians I choose to record with and the kind of material there is a greater affection for the mainstream of jazz history than I used to have ten years ago. I don't feel the need to try and transcend the idiom which the avant garde presumably feels its doing. I don't really keep up with where jazz is going.

"I'm more interested in looking at the essences of what it is I like about it – peeling away the novelty and looking for a permanent core of knowledge. It's fairly *new* core in musical terms. Nagging away at Sonny Rollins and Archie Shepp...Shepp especially, because he's rejected the search for novelty and is looking at how the masters did it. Ten years ago I wouldn't have understood why he was doing that.

"And all that's craftsmanship way beyond anything I'm capable of. I can only watch that and be inspired by it."

Robert's jazz acumen is impeccable. I reluctantly have to steer away from a detailed

discussion of Shepp, Rollins and Kirk. Could he not be an organiser of sound?

"To a certain extent I have been. 'Team Spirit' from Ruth was an attempt to acknowledge all of that. But I'm not all that good. I tend to get in a bit of a flap."

Why the erratic series of singles for Rough Trade – why not another LP?

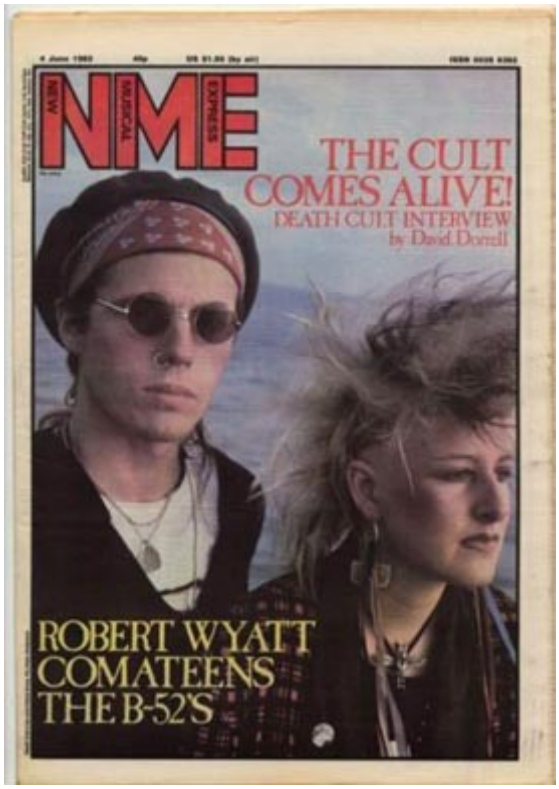
"Because I didn't have enough ideas for another LP. I chose those songs with a consistent political attitude, but even then that was down to the context. One thing I do like about the pop format is it comes in short chunks. It's very expensive making an LP and you have to have a 40-minute lump of ideas."

You could always have people doing five minutes tenor solos...

"Oh yes! I know all about that!" Robert laughs at a legacy of long Soft Machine records.

Is he satisfied with singing per se?

"Um, I get a bit fed up with the sound of my own voice," he says, a trifle downcast.



"I wouldn't mind doing some duets with Annette Peacock or something. The voice is a wonderful instrument, but I tend to get fed up...you start to realise the limitations. I wouldn't mind listening to my records in with a bunch of other stuff; but listening to ten of my songs in a row, with my voice on them – a bit much. I tend to prefer hearing instrumental music anyway.

"On the whole I don't hear words first in a song. I certainly don't judge by words. I think you listen to *singing* as such. I don't know – I develop theories about the relationship between songwriting and music and then I hear something like Randy Newman's 'Let's Drop The Big One' where everything matches everything else and I can't analyse why it's so good. You seem to be able to hear the words and enjoy the music all at once there."

How about wordless singing?

"I think that's even harder. You know it's a voice and you think, well, what's he *really* singing? What's he trying to say? Has he got a disease or something? (Laughter) We know what voices are for. They're for words. Or proto-words, like mmm!

"That would explain your point about instrumental music saying more. It formalises noisemaking and removes it from expectations. But I just don't know how music works."

Wyatt prods and noses at theories, always seems ready to give up with "I don't know" – and then returns to the point. I wonder, with this prodigious interest in cause and effect, in the mystery of music, if he had to overcome a personal snobbery over 'pop'?

"I've always had that. Most musicians from my background see songs as a launching pad – like, what's the chords on this? But I like the whole package of a good song.

"I suppose my two big influences are Mose Allison and Ray Charles cos I thought, well, you can't get better music than that. I don't think it's a question of how much you can put in to an idiom. The quality is due to selectiveness, control of your resources. Look at Monk – he played more simply than Mose Allison ever has.

"That's what's nice about working with Elvis. He's very interested in songs. Working with

him I don't have to feel like a closet vocalist!"

WYATT'S WORLD is large. Some of the books piled near his stereo bracket a wide interest – *Battlefont Namibia, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, The First Indian War Of Independence*.

His recent recordings display an understated discontent best felt in the despairing 'Arauco', a Chilean folk tune that numbers the wages of colonialism with melancholy concern. They are records that sound steeped in private sorrows. But they are so understated. Is he envious of the sheer clout a record like 'The Message' carries, a blunt strength his own music seems afraid of?

"That's interesting...I don't know how to think about that one. The best person I've found writing about the difference between self-alienation and rejection is Julie Burchill. I wonder what she would say?"

Robert worries over it. I try and dispel his frown. Would he rather do something that bludgeoned its way past his normally spare settings?

"I used to bash about a lot. I beat shit out of the drum kit. I learnt to sing by bellowing over feedback and fuzzboxes. But I tend to work in a very piecemeal way. I don't have an overview. On the whole I'm not as much in control as the kind of questions you're asking suggest. I tend to do what I can. That's all, really."

Is he ever concerned that such an inward-looking attitude might be only selfish?

"Yes, I suppose it could be," he says. "I think people expect more of me than I expect of myself. I can't tell you how relieved I am to come out of a studio having done three minutes of singing that's in tune, with the piano roughly right, where the bass player turned up and the engineer didn't erase it.

"Really, I'm very mundane about what I do. Most of my really ambitious ideas go into my private life and not into my work. I suppose that's selfish, but I don't have the rock thing of living and feeling in public. I can't speak for a generation. I only know about six people who agree with me on anything, and that's not much of a generation!

"I'm not being funny, because I don't know what I would have done if it hadn't been for this. I'm grateful that I can make a living at it. I don't believe in it, though. Obviously songs are about things that interest you, but it doesn't mean you're *doing* anything, necessarily."

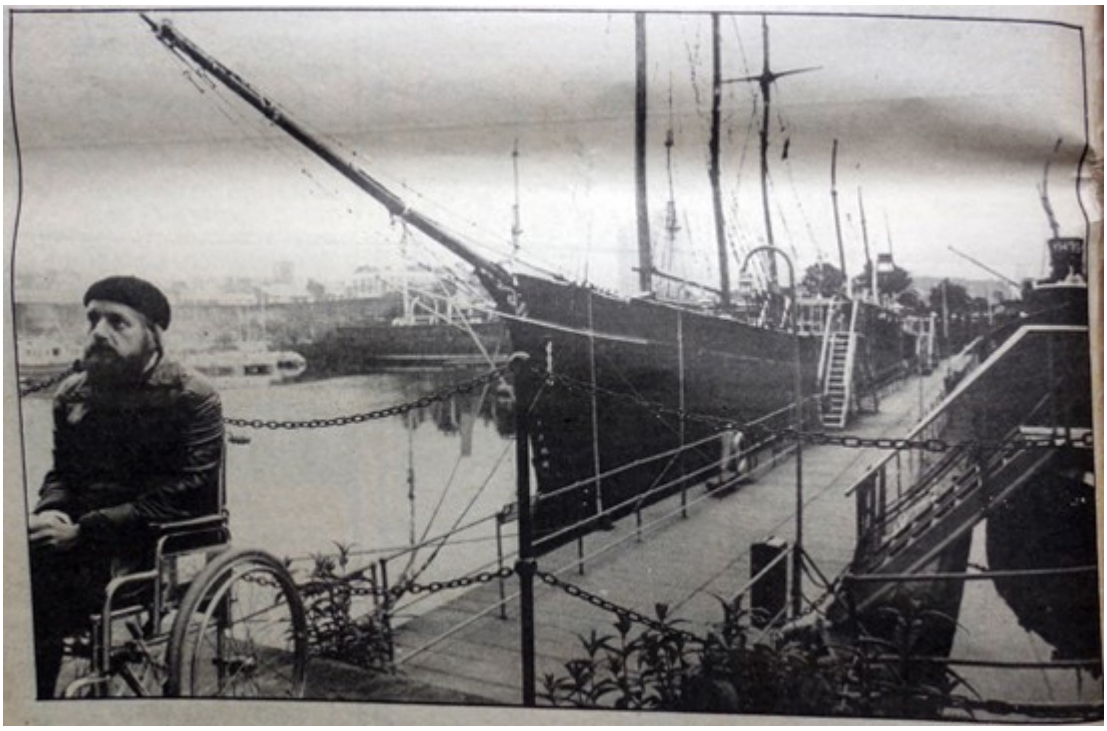
Does he find the pop marketplace distasteful?

"I think people pick on it unfairly. From what I've seen of the art gallery or book publishing circuits the pop industry is a paragon of virtue! I don't see why it's singled out as a cultural red light district. But I wouldn't jump into it at the deep end because I've found another way of operating.

"Someone like Elvis really loves it as music. He puts an investment of attention into it the way I do into jazz and I suppose that's more healthy because it's the area he's actually working in."

Will he work with Costello on any further projects?

"I've no idea. It hasn't been suggested but, um...I myself don't make any plans. I just respond to what comes up. And I'm not really here. I'm living in Spain."



OSTENSIBLY, Robert and his wife Alfie live in Spain because "the light's better" for her painting. But he seems to feel few ties to his first home. How does England seem on his return?

"One of the great pleasures of the last six months has been having to think about that less and less. In our town in Spain there's just been a provincial election and as the results were coming through it was like a big party. All the little parties getting one and two, the Commies getting a few – and the Socialists sweeping the board.

"The area we're in is called the Red Belt, near Barcelona, and it's the strongest Communist area because there are a lot of Andalucian workers, for one thing; and right now the atmosphere there is so enjoyable, and what we've been able to join in in the way of culture and politics has been so refreshing, that it's sort of cruel to ask me to speak about England. There's a few people here still holding on to the bucking bronco but...

"I went into this Commie bar – the Commies have bars in Spain instead of handing out leaflets, more like community centres – and this old geezer came up and said, I fought alongside some English in the Civil War and they were brave fighters. Usually the people struggle to say something nice when they hear where you're from. Another geezer came up and said, the English had the first strong trade union movement in the world – what the fuck happened?"

Does he harbour *any* affection for England?

"I very much object to the way that there's no freedom of choice about whether you're English or not."

His voice takes on a much harder edge. "If there was an element of choice about it then there could be an element of pride. But I don't see how you can be proud of something you're dumped with. I feel more at home with people who behave nicely, frankly. I'm homesick right now. Ten or 15 years ago there were things I might have enjoyed, but I can't feel that now. People saying Britishness is *this* or *that* has completely spoiled any kind of pride you may have had. If Britishness consists of going round the world sneering at foreigners then I don't want to know."

For the only time in our conversation, Wyatt appears angry. If his response to the legacies of colonialism is lowkey, it's still a deeply felt reaction.

"I think the dotted lines kill democracy. All the ruling people have to do is gerrymander situations. You can isolate situations like Northern Ireland, a typical colonialist trick, which makes it look like a democratic right for one side to rule another. Democracy has always

been a lie, even the founding Greek democracy – an oasis of free speech in an ocean of coerced misery. I acknowledge that that's how it is and I'll even go further and say a lot of beautiful things come out of it – but be proud of it? I would like to think there's some other way of doing things."

WYATT MAKES me a cup of tea. We have Sonny Rollins on the deck – 'Blue Seven', his masterpiece of spontaneous symmetry and heat. Robert cuddles his old dog Florence. In his worn clothes and beret he resembles a salty old painter himself – Gauguin, perhaps. Sometimes he scats gently along with the massive sweep of the tenorman's voice.

Are you an optimist, Robert?

"What me? How dare you! No, but I think it's arrogant to project pessimism onto the entire universe. I can see a lot of people who are very happy.

"When I look at what gives me greatest pleasure and inspiration it seems to be the most fragile things or even the most hated or least looked-after things; and what gives me least inspiration and frightens me most are things which look very safe and nurtured.

"I suppose I envy those people for whom it's the other way around."

Richard Cook

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

His Master's Voice - Strange Fruit - Freedom - Vol:43 No 22 - 13th November 1982

His Master's Voice
STRANGE FRUIT


anarchist fortnightly
Freedom 30p
POLICE
ON THE LINE

AS early autumn apples ripen in the orchards of Britain consider this strange fruit: a hippy singing songs of praise to Stalin and an ex-Stalinist writing an anti-CND article for *Readers Digest.*

The hippy is Robert Wyatt, ex-Soft Machine, Matching Mole and several solo albums including his latest *Nothing Can Stop Us* (Rough Trade). Issued at the beginning of the year it spent six months in *New Musical Express*'s Alternative LP chart, and Wyatt and tracks from the LP have been cited by various pop celebs as their favourite songs/singer in *NME*'s Portrait of The Artist as Consumer.

Wyatt is an extraordinary singer. His voice has pathos without sentimentality, deliberately singing with a 'nice boy' middle class English accent (like Colin Blumstone did with The Zombies and Paul Jones occasionally with Manfred Mann) at a time when most other singers used American intonation.

Two tracks on the LP - most of which were originally released as 45s - are outstanding: his interpretation of 'At Last I Am Free' and the haunting 'Strange Fruit' chronicling black lynching in the Deep South of the '30s.

But as for the rest ... 'Born Again Cretin' has inventive harmonys and arrangement but the lyrics! Whilst Nelson Mandela rots in prison you pricks are at liberty to read George Orwell (lyrics courtesy of Wyatt}. Or try 'Stalin Wasn't Stallin' for size! Talk about rewriting history! First done by the pinko San Francisco Golden Gate Quartet in the '40s it tells us how Stalin stood up to Hitler and called upon Britain and the US to give him a hand in crushing the fascist vermin. No mention of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. Then to rub your noses really in it, black poet (and not a very good one) Peter Blackman concludes Side 2 by reciting his 'Stalingrad', a turgid litany to the battle of the same name, how the world waited with bated breath for the outcome, etc ... No mention of the fact that the rapid German advance into Russia and initial Soviet setbacks were down to

Stalin's incompetence and paranoia; no mention of those returning Soviet troops in 1945 who disappeared into labour camps because they'd seen too much of the West; no mention of the fate of those White Russians forcibly repatriated, but told in Nikolai Tolstoy's *Victims of Yalta* (Corgi).

The only thing missing from the cover of the LP is an application form to join the British Communist Party and a free offer of an Uncle Joe Stalin poster in glorious Moscolour to hang in your kitchen.

Wyatt is a member of the CP, or was 18 months ago when he was interviewed in *Melody Maker*, who's deputy editor Allan Jones praised the LP to the skies (a bit unexpected that, as most of his articles recount the amount of beer and vodka he's drunk at gigs, or tell of his exploits in trying to look up Carlene Carter's skirt).

What is fascinating about the LP is how Wyatt's commitment hasn't affected his artistry. Commitment usually means earnestness walks in and art walks out (if you've ever heard the truly appalling 'The H Bomb's Thunder' by the London Youth Choir circa 1962 you'll know what I'm talking about). That his commitment includes something as perverse as praises of Stalin is frankly mind-boggling. Nor an LP to buy, but definitely to listen to, if you get the chance. But here's the rub; someone's been buying it, thousands have been sold. Have Malcolm MacLaren's punk anarchists thrown away their bondage trousers and bought boiler suits and joined the Spartacist League?

Frank Chapple used to wear a boiler suit early in his career as an electrician although he was never in the Spartacist League. No. He was a CPer in the days when the CP was a force to be reckoned with. (Recently released Cabinet Papers show Attlee and company seriously concerned about the possibility of massive Party directed industrial disruption in 1950 linked to their 'Peace' campaign over the Korean war.)

But Frank Chapple saw the Light of Day and went from being a left-wing conspirator to being a right-wing one. His chance came when Frank Foulkes and others got caught out fiddling postal returns to secure Communist national officers within the electricians union, the ETU. When Les Cannon - who exposed Foulkes - died, Frank took over as ETU leader and has been firmly in the saddle since 1966. He's now 61 and plans to retire early because, the Sunday Times business section speculates, he saw 'Joe Gormley stay too long as head of the mineworkers, depriving a credible right-wing successor from emerging, and so letting in the marxist Arthur Scargill.' It seems our Frank isn't going to make the same mistake. Besides being the next TUC president early retirement will perhaps also give him the time to write further articles for the *Readers Digest*.



I've mislaid his anti-CND article which *Readers Digest* have reprinted in leaflet form, but basically it boils down to a charge that the men from Moscow are helping to run the anti-bomb movement. He claims that various people in executive authority are Communists and that they are conducting an orchestrated campaign that is pro-USSR and anti-USA. Similar charges were, of course, laid at the door of the anti-bomb campaign in the '50s and '60s.

Up to a point part of what he is saying is true in that there is an anti-USA tendency in the anti-bomb movement, and objectively the USSR can take comfort from and do use the anti-nuclear campaign for their own ends. I wouldn't be at all surprised if the USSR wasn't covertly funding various Western peace groups - without those groups realising it. The USSR would be daft not to. But Crying in The Chapple misses the point: the fact that unawares they might be partly funded by Moscow doesn't invalidate their argument, any more than I would dismiss what Frank fulminates against simply because I read it in the *Readers Digest*, which various brethren over the years have claimed is a CIA front. Two can play spot the bogeyman, Frank! Who cares if the *Readers Digest* is a CIA front! So what?

Of course there are CPers in CND, but I'd suggest to Frank that the anti-bomb movement is of a different character to its '50s counterpart. It's more suspicious and critical of the Labour Party and not half-wedded to it as it was in those days. It's prepared to be more critical of the USSR (though not critical enough) and to give its support to the few genuine peace groups that exist behind the Iron Curtain, such as East Germany. I would also say that the post-1968 politics of personal liberation has to some extent affected its character.

There are many anti-nuclear groups that work sometimes in tandem with CND, sometimes separately, but are not part of it, doing their own thing and not accepting the word of latterday Peggy Duffs and Canon Collinses, which is perhaps one reason why the equivalent of the Committee of 100 has not emerged. It doesn't need to. Whether to break the law or not in pursuit of Direct Action is for many people not the moral dilemma that it was for many in those days. This in itself is perhaps some small advance for the anarchist worldview. Authoritarianism and hierarchy just don't go down too well in 1982, whether it's from the offices of CND or King Street.

When directives from King Street ruled Frank Chapple's life the Party was, as I've indicated, a force to be reckoned with. Today it is in decline, as it is in France and Spain

too. The end of obedience to Stalin heralded in the end of obedience to the Party itself. Kruschev unwittingly pulled the plug out with his famous 20th Party Congress speech in 1956 when he admitted to fellow Communists that Comrade Stalin had somewhat overdone it. Hungary followed closely on this revelation and the European Communist Parties were in a proper turmoil. Party members were no longer prepared to accept the Line and many resigned. Eventually individual Parties rebelled too, not being prepared to always accept the Tablets from Moscow.

Still, we shouldn't be too complacent. Chapple's right when he singles out the major threat to our freedom as coming from the Communist controlled countries, and, it has to be said, many folk who were involved in personal politics still somehow feel, when it's a toss up between the US and the USSR, that the latter is preferable and that Lenin was a good guy.

And fashions and feelings change. Who'd have predicted the Born Again Christian revival? Maybe Robert Wyatt is horribly on the ball. Maybe Stalin is next year's thing! His oriental counterpart, Mao - the world's biggest mass-murderer — happily co-existed in the minds of many of those post '68 dreamers. Strange fruit indeed. Me, I'd rather suck a banana than experience the rough end of a pineapple.

PETE CRAFTON

Previous article

Next article

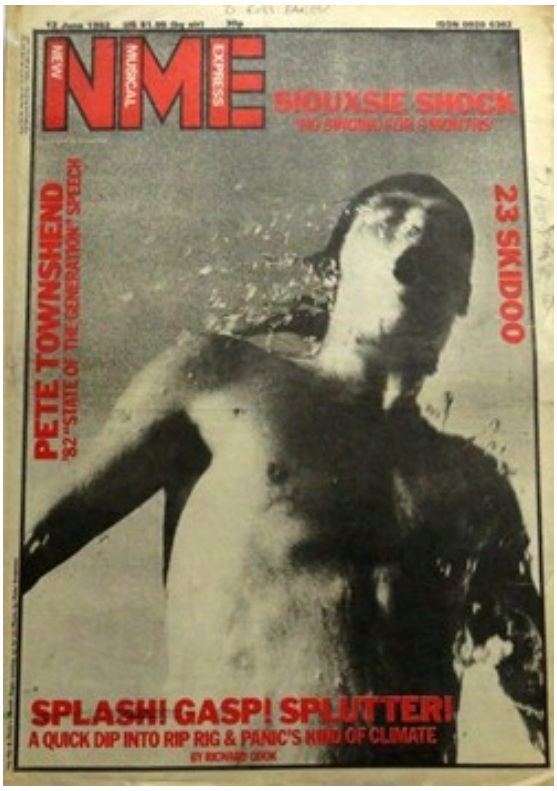
Back to the list

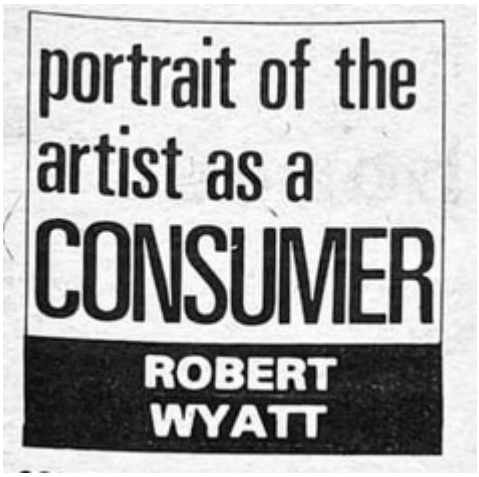
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

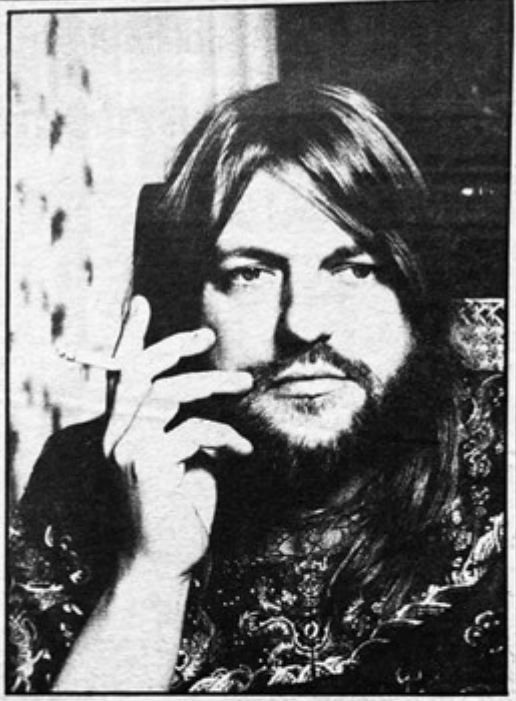
Portrait of the artist as a consumer - New Musical Express - 12 June, 1982





portrait of the artist as a CONSUMER

ROBERT WYATT



SONGS
Hopelessly Without You..... Carroll Thompson
You Bring The Sun Out..... Janet Kay
Love Don't Live Here Any More ..... Rose Royce
Every Little Bit Hurts..... Brenda Holloway
I Put A Spell On You..... Nina Simone
Love Me Tonight..... Trevor Walters

TUNE
Peace ..... Ornette Coleman
(from 'The Shape Of Jazz To Come' LP)

RECENT LP
Wynton Marsalis

DRUMMERS
"Max Roach to Connie Kay to Brian Abrahams — a quick rush through 30 years of jazz."

ARRANGERS
Melba Liston ("A trombonist who's worked with Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Quincy Jones and — a particular favourite — on Randy Weston's 'Tanjah' LP.")
Fela Kuti ("I know he's only got one arrangement, but it's so good it doesn't matter.")
Philip Koutev ("A Bulgarian choir arranger, kind of a Bulgarian folk version of what Gil Evans did for Miles Davis.")

SOVIET MUSICIANS
Alexei Koslov — jazz reeds player and arranger
Igor Brill — jazz keyboards
Folk & jazz from the Southern USSR
("I like Soviet jazz very much. It's unusual in that the musicians are often highly trained formally, but they also play very fiercly, deliberately avoiding formal straitjackets.")

FILMS
Ceddo..... Sembene Ousmane (Senegal, 1976)
Death Of A Cameraman..... Faliero Rosati (Italy, 1978)
The Outsiders..... Mrinal Sen (India, 1977)
India Song ..... Marguerite Duras (France, 1976)

SOME AUTHORS I LIKE
Jean Rhys
Franz Fanon
Jack Santa Maria

RADIO PROGRAMMER
Alex Pascall — BBC Radio London
("He does the *Black London* programme, which is a community programme that actually responds to what people want to talk about — a breakthrough in radio. He also plays records nobody else plays: Soca, Calypso and music for older black people in England — Nat King Cole and suchlike — which I like because I'm old too, I remember Nat King Cole.")

POLITICAL COMMENTATORS
Noam Chomsky
John Pilger
Jonathan (as opposed to David) Dimbleby

NEWSPAPER
Morning Star

> Zoom

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

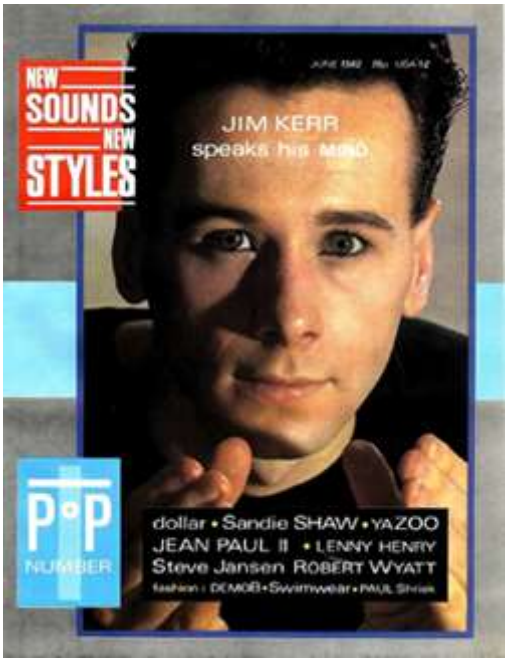
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt : Whistling in the dark - New Sounds New Styles - June 1982

ROBERT WYATT
WHISTLING IN THE DARK



Robert Wyatt, 36-year-old singer, composer, musician, communist, aficionado of Robbie Vincent's Radio London Soul Show and veteran of seemingly numberiess sessions, groups and albums, smiles sadly.

"I can't handle managers, agents, roadies... If I was a drummer I'd probably have all that. Rock hinges on business, lawyers, art departments, agents arguing with Melody Maker about whether you get the right or left-hand side of the page for the advert which must coincide with the tour which has to end in London as opposed to Scunthorpe because..." He sighs "It's all very distant and far away from me now."

We're talking over the kitchen table of the cluttered Twickenham flat (" a bubble outside time and space") that he's been more or less confined to since the accident in the early '70s robbing him of the use of his legs. Before that unhappy incident - the reckless drunken decision to exit a party via a drainpipe four storeys up - Wyatt was drummer with the original Soft Machine, did a bit of work with jazz musicians, and formed his own group Matching Mole.

But the accident put a stop to his drumming, and since then he's been largely freelance, making only a couple of solo albums (including his best : 'Rock Bottom') apart from occasionally contributing percussion, piano and voice to a variety of different people's musics. He's worked with Eno, Phil Manzanera, Carla Bley and Scritti Politti to name the better-known.

Some two years ago Geoff Travis of Rough Trade approached him suggesting he break a five-year solo silence and record some songs. Songs. That was all Wyatt could think of : specific songs, none of them his, all shortish, all unrelated but interesting in themselves, all suitable, it seemed, for singles.

Over a period of a few months in late '79 and early '80, Wyatt took this eclectic selection

into the studio, and altered them, as he says, "not to revitalize them, but just so I could feel comfortable with them". Eight of the ten or so tracks that were recorded were released as a series of four singles over the following 18 months. Then recently, they were compiled on an album 'Nothing Can Stop Us'.

The recordings were an exercise in reclamation: "more of a priority for me than innovation, these days." Wyatt plucked songs out of context because they were *good* songs, because they were good *political* songs, because he wanted to draw attention to them. 'Nothing Can Stop Us' contains a much more diverse choice than, say, that other current cover version album, BEFs 'Music of Quality and Distinction'.

There's 'Arauco' by Chilean songwriter Violetta Parra, Chic's inexplicably optimistic 'At Last I Am Free', a patriotic American '40s acapella number 'Stalin Wasn't Stallin", Ivor Cutler's nasty little tale of domestic cruelty 'Grass', 'Strange Fruit' about the black lynchings tn the deep American south of the '30s. Each has its own context and history; placed together they form a kind of jig-saw, incomplete but indicating connections, suggesting rather than affirming, asking questions rather than providing answers.

"I suppose," Wyatt muses, "there's an element of double-bluff in it. Subtlety can become obvious. So I'm playing games with obvious statements. Playing with the obvious because in a way it's the least obvious thing to do."

Like doing a version of 'The Red Flag' for instance.

"It's a very sad song. It's not a song about dreams fulfilled, it's a song about whistling in the dark to keep your spirits up. It is now, anyway."



Whistling in the dark to keep your spirits up. That phrase stuck in my head for a few days after the interview. Sitting in front of the typewriter not being able to write the bloody thing. Listening to politicians trying to whip us up into jingoistic fury over a few islands the Argentinians have had a claim on since the British expelled their governor back in 1833. Watching Gil Scott-Heron play a set so compassionate and optimistic that I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Whistling in the dark to keep your spirits up. At the moment that's all an oppositional culture can be. Perhaps it's all it *should* be.

Confined to his wheelchair, Robert Wyatt perhaps has to do a little more whistling than most of us. A typical day is focused around eating and the radio. He used to spend hours listening to distant stations on the short wave band but now listens mainly to programmes like Black London and Robbie Vincent's Soul Show. He has a consuming passion for black American music, all those "endless, uninterviewed studio groups working out great riffs. "

"It sounds like a stupid joke, but I really like dance music. I've never danced, in fact It's like the title of that Ornette Coleman album, 'Dancing in My Head'.'"

And then he cites an anecdote about a journalist being surprised that Coleman - a jazz improviser - should like disco music. "Why?" asked the incredulous hack. Coleman replied: "It's our **revenge**."

Wyatt doesn't drink, doesn't eat meat, can't get out much and doesn't like "the blockbusters at the local cinema" anyway.

"I spend a fantastic amount of time - I don't know how I do it really - just sitting there trying to work it all out."

He reads. Black revolutionary and existentialist Franz Fanon is his favourite writer, the Morning Star his paper. He goes out to see foreign films sometimes. "All these Indian and African film-makers whose names I can't remember."

"The rest of the time, I'm just sort of quietly panicking. Like everyone else I suppose."

At one point I asked which of his own albums was Wvatt's favourite.

"That's difficult. At the moment... I'll have to say 'The Animals Film' because it's still full of fresh challenges. But that probably won't be true in six months time."

Earlier Wyatt had commented: "I suppose I'm the exact opposite of Edith Piaf. I regret **everything**!"

'The Animals Film' is a soundtrack - just released by Rough Trade - for Victor Schonfeld's movie systematically detailing everything from minor cruelty to domestic pets through to the worst excesses of the meat industry. Having been shown an unedited version, Wyatt then spent all last summer composing the music to fit them. Taken out of context, the music is more "ambient" than immediate, but it's an eerily effective ambience, playing with the gentle, haunted mood that's so characteristic of Wyatt's music.

And next?

"I don't know. I only really tend to respond to being nudged into things."

In the mid-70s Wyatt did a lot of work with Brian Eno and Phil Manzanera on great, forgotten albums like Eno's 'Taking Tiger Mountain By Strategy', Manzanera's 'Diamond Head' and Wyatt's 'Ruth is Stranger than Richard'. Now, he's lost touch with that nexus of musicians, is isolated from the circles they move in.

He and Eno, apparently, used to do more talking than working. Both having passable falsetto voices, they joked about hiring themselves out as a "girlie chorus". They also used to exchange and formulate theories, some of which, he tells me in a piece of "sheer boastfulness", he's since seen turn up on interviews with David Bowie. (And musically in Eno's work with Talking Heads.)

Just as I'm leaving, clutching an album he's given me and a book he's lent me, Robert Wyatt comes out with this:

"I think I'd really like to be one of those ageing jazz musicians playing out the end of their careers, just doing the occasional gig at somewhere like the Pizza Express."

And then:

"I have to be allowed a certain indulgent escapism, it's necessary to my survival."

Necessary to everybody's, surely?

"Yeah, I suppose I'm in a caricature of the situation everyone's in."

And one more fragment of the percussionist's discourse. It says on the back of 'Nothing Can Stop Us':

"You may notice some technical inadequacies in some of my performance - a hesitant beat here, a dodgy note there - these are of course entirely deliberate and reproduced as examples of my almost painful sincerity."

David Rimmer

East / West - Collusion - #2 - February-April 1982

EAST WEST

by Hannah Charlton



Hannah Charlton looks at the story behind Bengali group Dishari's entry into the singles market - a collaboration with Robert Wyatt on Rough Trade.

Flipping through a stack of singles released over the summer of 1981, you might just pass a greeny-turquoise image of grasses with, high at the top, the small pink titles *Robert Wyatt/Grass* and *Dishari/Trade Union*. But this discreet cover disguises a quietly momentous record, Not only is it an unusual combination, but it also pinpoints a number of issues to do with cross-cultural productions, their presentation and understanding.

The first song is an Ivor Cutler composition, 'Grass', arranged and sung by Robert Wyatt with the beautiful tabla playing of Esmael Shek masking the underlying violence of the words. The second is a unique song called 'Trade Union' by an East End Bengali group, Here the words are paramount — if mainly to the Bengali community in this country. Rough Trade, with great open-mindedness and enthusiastic support for Robert Wyatt, released the record but perhaps underestimated the careful thinking involved in presentation, distribution, marketing to make the Bengali song much more than a novelty

under Robert's wing.

For the single is a two-sided affair, aimed at two audiences who share little contact — the Bengali community and Rough Trade record buyers. They listen to music in different places, they buy their records in different shops... and yet, here is a curious bridge which may lead to a bit more understanding about different musics and the way they function. We live in a pluralist music culture where many musics are out-of-bounds or deliverately not available to the public at large. An example of the latter is the music of feminist bands who play to women-only audiences. Sometimes these musics may be private in the sense that they have strong significance for a small number of people (early music, improvisation) and mostly they operate outside the confines of the music industry and press.

STRANGE FRUIT

The story of how this record came about goes back to 1979 when Robert Wyatt attended an AARF (Artists Against Racism and Fascism) event and was struck by Dishari's music. After meeting them he suggested that they record 'Trade Union' on one side of the last in a series of singles he has put out over the fast year. This series includes Robert's versions of 'At Last I am Free' and 'Strange Fruit'. 'Stalin Wasn't Stalling' (a '40s acapella number originally recorded by the Golden Gate Quartet) is coupled with Peter Blackman reciting his epic oeuvre of Stalingrad. So, by single number four, the inclusion of 'Trade Union' was not incongruous — preceding material having been so wide-ranging. It was also a great recording opportunity for Dishari.

COUNTING THE WAVES

Abdus Salique, the spokesman for Dishari, came to this country from East Pakistan in 1970. He had been involved in pre-independence left-wing politics and found it wise to leave. In London's East End he set up a small factory, added a newsagents and became involved in local Trades Council activities, always conscious of the needs of the Bangladeshi community in the area. Gradually he recognised the lack of a group. playing Bangladeshi music: 'When I came to this country, I was aware that there were lots of Indian and Pakistani groups but none from Bangladesh, which was now independent, I thought I should do something about it especially when there was a lot of trouble in 1978 in Brick Lane (National Front racist attacks). I don't play enough music to do something very creative but when I spoke with people they all asked me to do something. So I made this group, Dishari Shilpee Gosthi, which is a cultural organisation, with Esmael Shek the tabla player and Kadir Duvez the shahnai player and other musicians. A lot of people asked us to play and represent our country; we performed at many multi-cultural events, at a benefit at the Royal Albert Hall, on the TV programmes *Skin* and *Nationwide*, and at the Blair Peach memorial concert. Dan Jones, the secretary of the Trades Council, has been very helpful and I began to develop interest in Trade Union activities. Out of that I wrote the song to encourage my people to join the unions.'



'Trade Union' is certainly to the point — a mixture of folk song images and a blunt Eisler directness. Salique's translation of the song goes as follows:

> We came from a distant land (Counting the waves / of thirteen rivers and seven seas / With hopes of a better life. / We are the workers! / We labour in the factories and the workshops. / If we unite / We can grasp our rights in our hands. / Of course we must unite / If we want to defeat the racists / If we want to draw the teeth / Of those who suck our blood and exploit us. / We must stand together / Under the trade union banner.

With its rhapsodic opening, the keening shahnai, the changes in rhythm and tone, the song is quite formal in its ballad-like structure and musically is rooted in the Bengali folk music tradition. Its message is neither the personal sentimentality of Victor Jara nor the pulpit thumping of the anti junta music of Theodorakis. It's more in the vein of Joe Hill, Phil Ochs or Pete Seeger. It has an immediacy and a potent significance for the first and second generation Bangladeshis who lived through the racist attacks of the late '70s, who struggle to survive in the declining rag trade and who have nurtured the stirrings of a fight-back consciousness.

A LONER IN ASIAN MUSIC

An integral part of the story of Dishari is the experience of Abdus Salique himself. In 1979 he was faced with a deportation order for illegal immigration. The resistance to that order was massive and petitions from the Bangladeshi community and intervention from the M.P. Peter Shore and others meant a strong case for Salique. Here Rough Trade re-enters, because a vital argument for Salique's case was that he was due to make a record here and was therefore required in England. This helped to clinch it and the order was reversed. Salique intends to continue his political songs, hoping that an album can follow.

In many respects, 'Trade Union' stands out as something of a loner in the context of Asian music in general and Bengali music in particular. It is unlikely that Dishari would have been offered a recording contract by one of the big Asian labels involved in the thriving area of Asian film and pop music. Bangladesh is a younger, poorer nation and does not figure strongly and their music concerns itself with the relatively small Bangladeshi community in Britain.

Bengali music (the general cultural region of which Bangladesh is a part) has strong classical and folk traditions, with many songs derived from the poems of Rabindranath Tagore and folk songs in a pop style. But Salique stressed that his song was unique in that it dealt specifically with the problems faced by the Bangladeshi people here in Britain while the protest folk

songs ‘at home’ revolved around harsher Third World circumstances. Musical influences here mean that Salique, an avid *Top of the Pops* watcher, wants to make music relevant for the young Bangladeshis growing up here.

> ‘ I want to write and sing political songs based on the traditional folk songs but also to mix the traditional with new things. We live in Britain now and young people hear very different music around them. The Asian culture is very rich — we can create something new out of that, maybe using western instruments and styles.’

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Strange Fruit Stallin' - New Musical Express - 20th March, 1982



STRANGE FRUIT STALLIN'

ROBERT WYATT

Nothing Can Stop Us (Rough Trade)

ROBERT WYATT's first LP for seven years collects together his quartet of Rough Trade singles and throws in two bonus rarities — 'Born Again Cretin', from the *NME* C81 cassette, plus a singular, unreleased version of the socialist anthem, 'The Red Flag'.

Though there is little new material here, the LP justifies itself with a cohesion and emotional power that far exceeds those of its constituent singles. On his return to recording in 1980, Wyatt doubted that his passionate concern with world politics could find an effective musical voice — one that worked primarily as *music,* without compromising his beliefs. 'Nothing Can Stop Us' has, I hope, laid such fears to rest. While the singles explored ways of reaching this fusion, testing musical and political responses in a series of "sketches", the LP's achievement is to integrate their disparate successes into a whole that stands as attractive music as well as being intensely moving.

Of the less-familiar tracks, 'Born Again Cretin' protests the imprisonment of ANC leader Nelson Mandela to an almost Beach Boys-esque richness of vocal harmonies; while Wyatt's treatment of The Red Flag' is both simple and striking, relying chiefly on keyboards and his plaintive, multi-tracked falsetto. The chorus, incidentally, reminds us that the SDP, for all their talk of breaking moulds, have always been skulking around
in one form or other: "*Then raise the scarlet standard high/Beneath its folds we'll live and die/Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer/We'll keep the red flag flying here*." What was that again - the Socialist Defectors Party?

The remaining songs illustrate Wyatt's global concerns. 'Arauco' is a Chilean folk song that urges the people to stand up for their rights; 'Caimanera' comes from Cuba; Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit' mourns the victims of racist lynchings in the American South. Chic's 'At Last I Am Free', which Wyatt chose for its "lovely tune", becomes a fragile assertion of hope to balance the LP's more sombre moments.



Two tracks are given over to other artists. Dishari, a Bengali band from London's East End, back Wyatt on Ivor Cutler's 'Grass' and also perform their own Trade Union Song', a heady rush of tablas, shenai and impassioned vocals which impart a modern urgency to traditional forms. And Barbados poet Peter Blackman reads his poem 'Stalingrad', complementing Wyatt's a capella version of 'Stalin Wasn't Stallin' ', a garish *American* propaganda piece from the early '40s, originally sung by the gospelling Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet.

Though I agree with its sentiment, which acknowledges the debt we owe to the Russian people for breaking the back of Nazism, I think 'Stalingrad' is overlong, too formal, and distressingly male-centred in its language. The rest of the LP though, is about flawless: the tunes spare but haunting — a flutter of percussion, bass, keyboards and Wyatt's gentle, affecting vocals.

'Nothing Can Stop Us' bears witness to its maker's compassion and amiable humour as well as illustrating his formidable musical talents. More than that, I'm sure he'd agree, it demonstrates a too-rarely seen *communal* aspect to music — what Hannah Charlton's sleevenotes call a "cry of humanity" — affirming a common dignity and its own fleeting beauty against the torture and injustice it denounces.

It's also the kind of LP — 40 minutes of pure pleasure — you immediately want to rush out and buy for all your friends. And if I had as many as Robert Wyatt, who's one of the nicest blokes I've met in the music biz, well, I'd be broke before tomorrow.

This record is absolutely right on. Don't stop now, Robert.

Graham Lock

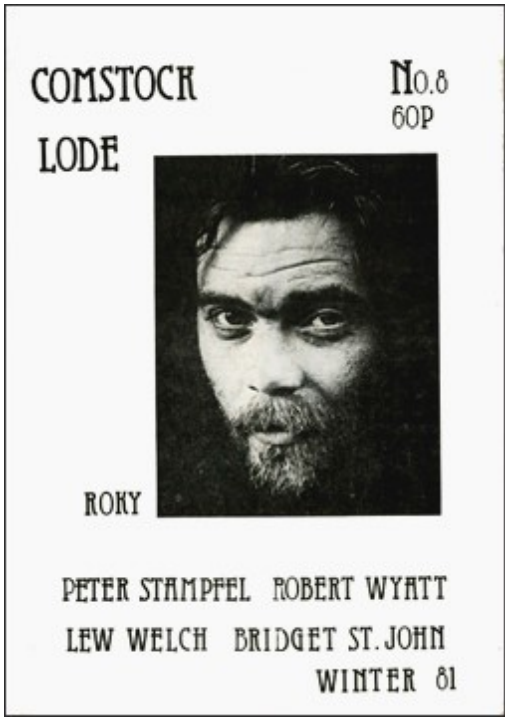
Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Robert Wyatt looks back - Comstock Lode - N° 8 - Winter'81

ROBERT WYATT LOOKS BACK



Robert Wyatt's career, especially the Soft Machine era, is well documented so I've left the interview in question and answer form - a narrative seems more appropriate to complete histories. Thus, although more or less chronological it's not designed to be the Robert Wyatt complete biog.

My thanks to Robert for being so forthcoming and friendly, to Alfreda for the meal and to Robert's mum for the photos. (She, incidentally, has some wonderful stories including the fact that she had to wash Mike Ratledge's underwear because he could never be bothered!).

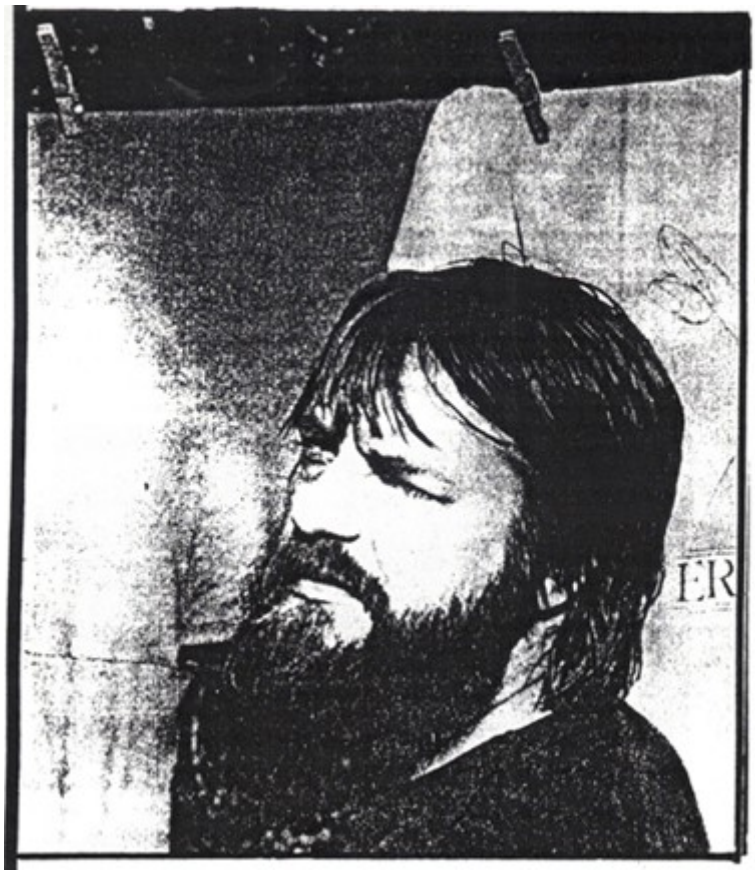
CL. Was there ever really a Canterbury 'scene' or was it just your lot (ie the Wilde Flowers mob plus friends?)

RW. Nothing was happening in Canterbury. This gives me the chance to kill about 18 birds with one stone. Maybe I should show you this book for a moment. I only found it the other day, it's a diary of what we were doing day to day in Canterbury .

I keep reading about the place and keep thinking I don't remember anything like that. (The book is produced and whilst in some ways it backs up what Robert feels about Canterbury it is nonetheless a fascinating document full of the minutiae(?) that make up his songs. It contains drawings, poems, songs, press cuttings etc. right back to when Robert worked as a male model. It also contains things like 'Daevid and Gilli dropped in on their way back from Paris' or 'Kevin off to Majorca again'. Most of it is ordinary diary stuff and in some ways does de-glamourise the whole Canterbury myth - but it does have Robert's original words to 'Moon In June' !).

RW. We went to an extremely dull grammar school, with no cultural activities whatsoever (so much for the image of the Simon Langton school being for artistic/gifted kids from wealthy/cultured families). I only met Mike (Ratledge) twice there. Once when he came up to me when he was a Prefect and said, 'I believe you have some Cecil Taylor records, could I borrow one?' Hugh Hopper I knew in the first year until he went into sciences and I went into arts. Also his parents were Conservative and mine were Labour and we just didn't talk to each other. Dave Sinclair was a year younger so we didn't talk to him - he played piano

at morning assembly.



I can't remember a single stimulating thing about Canterbury. I mean Richard Coughlan (Caravan's drummer) was a dental technician until Hugh rescued him. I think that the Caravan lot had more togetherness in a way - they still live there; Hugh still lives there too - he's the link really. He still feels part of all that. He's just produced a book called, 'Thirty Kent Churches', illustrated by his Dad. (and very nice it is too). I wouldn't have anticipated what happened, at all. Look at this (points to press cutting in the diary) 'Norman and Robert - two very individual young men'. Our first ever review. Now the highlight of that was that in 'Norman and Robert' I did my first ever public drum solo.

We had to play a Police Cadets ball in Folkestone and this drunken Police Cadet came up and demanded, 'Caravan with a drum solo.'' Norman, scouse trooper that he was, knew some quaint, two chorded version of 'Caravan' and I just hammered away. They were all so drunk they thought it was a great solo. That was the start of something or other. Basically all Norman did was play Jerry Lee Lewis songs, about twice as fast as any punk record. (Following the 'Norman & Robert' piece is a reference to Robert Graves the poet, a gentleman frequently cited as Robert's 'spiritual father').

CL. Do you still see Robert Graves?

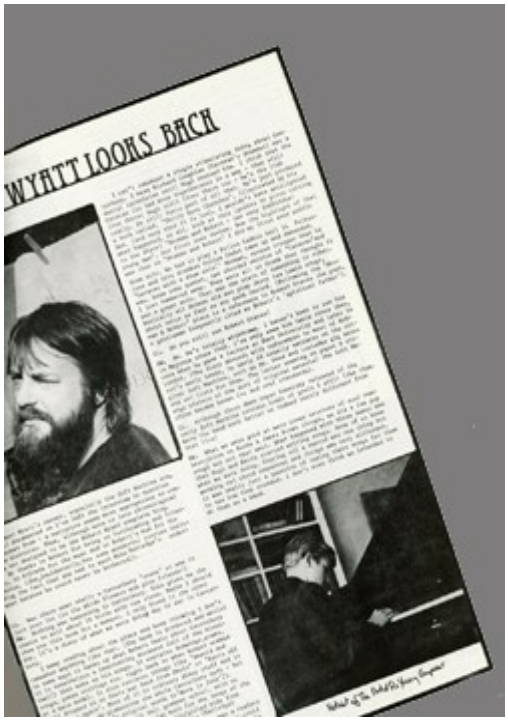
RW. No. He's totally withdrawn. I haven't been to see him in Majorca since 1960. I've only seen him twice since then, once when he gave a lecture at Kent University and later in London. (The diary abounds with references to most of Robert's early bands, by early 66 usually variants on the original Soft Machine, such as Mr. Head and includes gig dates and set lists for them. The latter seeming on paper a strange mixture of the sort of original material the Soft Machine became known for and soul standards).

CL. Although those demo tapes Gomelsky released of the early Soft Machine contain loads of goofs I still like them. Were the band much better or indeed vastly different from that live?

RW. What we were good at were cover versions of soul numbers; Solom on Burke & James Brown things, we did a few pop songs but not that well. What happened with those

demos was that Hugh and Kevin started writing songs. None of us knew what we were doing. Copying off a record was one thing but working out chord sequences and things was very different. It was really just a question of taping their songs for them to see how they sounded. I don't even think we intended to do them as a band.

CL. I really thought that by the time, you'd got to London and were playing UFO etc., that you'd dropped all the covers and were playing largely original material.



RW. The trouble is that the orientation of things like Pete Frame's family tree stuff is that it deals with groups who played gigs and made records. For example for me the most interesting musical events happened before the tree starts ie Daevid Allen, Hugh Hopper and me playing drones together in Paris, where Daevid lived. Daevid was very influenced by Terry Riley and the ESP free jazz records. We were using tape loops as well and it was that stuff that Mike heard and liked. That was how that developed. The thing with pop songs was quite different. That was back in Canterbury, everything was domestic, low keyed, people watched television and went to bed at night. Chronologically it makes no sense. We did experimental things for ages but we got fed up with them for a time and started doing the pop stuff just as an alternative. The actual development doesn't make sense chronologically unless you realize how weird brains are.

CL. To backtrack slightly, going to Paris when you were 16 or 17 to work with Daevid, must have been a big deal for you?

RW. Well, I left school at 16, tried art college for a few months and then just started wandering about. I went off to stay with Daevid in Paris, went down to Majorca. It's such a jumble, I can't make sense of it in retrospect. This is where the Tree is misleading - I don't even remember those groups as being the most interesting things that were going on. That's why the diary is a more real picture, it shows preoccupations. But even a lot of that stuff is dream world stuff. We were never very good, we didn't get work not because we were too far-out, just because we were bad. However, both Hugh and Kevin very early on did start writing what I thought were really good pop songs and it was because of that we did ultimately start doing their stuff. Our friends thought we were mad. They were all jazz fans. Hugh's songs particularly had really lovely harmonic structures but the lyrics were totally perfunctory. Later on when I got into writing words I took the liberty of putting new lyrics to Hugh's old tunes, as he wasn't doing anything with them. That's why the lyrics are different on the real Soft Machine albums from the demo record. Kevin was a great songwriter too but more self sufficient, what Kevin did would have happened anywhere, whoever he'd been with, whereas the music of Hugh and myself was much more interconnected.

CL. Did you like being associated with the Underground and playing UFO?

RW. I would like to have been more included in It rather than less. We felt like suburban fakes dressed up on Saturday and visiting the city. I never dared take LSD. I was in total awe of the audience at UFO, people like the OZ crowd. We used to come in on the train and pretend we were like them. Just because we played long solos people assumed we were stoned, which was great for our credibility. I didn't know much about it, Daevid had connections with a whole generation of people there, all these people with very advanced ideas, Daevid was the internationalist of the group, he got us into all of that. The rest of us were all provincial.



Rare shot of the original Wilde Flowers
L. to r. Robert, Hugh Hopper, Brian Hopper + Mrs Hopper.
(Photo never used at the time as Mrs. H. left the band)

CL. The Soft Machine as well as being associated with the then new Underground seemed as much part of or at least in the tradition of, the pre 66 underground.

RW. In my head it's true. What was disappointing about the late 60's was that all these incredible uncatagorizable cultural phenomena were being channeled into rock, fashion etc. It was really dull compared with the early 60's when, if you went to an event, you didn't know if it was a party, theatre, a group, jazz, an orgy or what it was. But that was me remembering what had excited me as a teenage fan. Sex and jazz and the Paris avant-garde.

What was interesting about dealing with the pop scene was that we came in contact as middle class aesthetes with East End sharks and Denmark Street hustlers with mutual fascination and incomprehension which has been vaguely captured in muchmore glamorous from by Nic Roeg in 'Performance', though nothing like as grand as Roeg. My background was the romantic/avant-garde tradition that I'd inherited from my parents and dealt with ideas and people who had never seriously involved themselves in the real world, a very arrogant group of people.



Portrait of The Artist As Young Composer

CL. One side aspect of all of this was your popularity in France.

RW. I was thinking about this only yesterday and came up with an explanation for the first time. I was thinking about how during the war Hugh Parnassier & the French jazz critics managed to allow jazz to survive under the Nazis by claiming that Jazz was first and formost a Franco-Belgian music and only secondarily a black American music citing Sidney Bechet and important pre-jazz composers, who were vital to jazz, like Debussy and Satie. There is just a great tradition in France of listening to music and dealing with the arts that is completely conducive to the creation of and the appreciation of, the sort of avant-garde set ups that we dealt in. Plus a whole avant-garde theatre tradition, Jarry was French after all. It's quite different from here, there's no sense of having to deal with the hit parade or anything like that, just didn't arise. You could really stretch out in front of a French audience, you almost had to apologise for it in England. There was also the whole American expatriot thing that centred on the Shakespeare bookshop on the Left Bank and bars like the Chat Qui Peche, where they had racks of jazz albums behind the bar that you could request if you bought a drink. Fucking paradise as far as I was concerned.

CL. To jump dramatically tell me about 'End of An Ear'.

RW. I was really depressed after we had done 'Third'. I was really into what Mike & Hugh had done and I'd tried to get it right and they hated 'Moon in June' and refused to play on it and I had to play it all myself except they came in and did a little organ solo with bass accompaniment. I felt really lonely and rejected. So I decided to do a solo album. They let me do one because they thought it was all going to be 'Moon in June' stuff, what I did was to stretch out. It was supposed to include Mongezi Feza but ended up with Elton Dean plus Marc Charig and my brother Mark played a little piano. It gave one a taste of what I could do. What was nice about that was I gave myself a chance to play piano, which I wouldn't have dared to do in public, in front of real people.

CL. Why did you leave the Soft Machine?

RW. I think really we just grew apart from each other. We only got together in the beginning because we were the only other musicians that each of us knew. It wasn't some heartfelt brudersbond (?). There were other things about the musical differences between the old Soft Machine and the then current band, but I've heard that stuff discussed much better by interested

outsiders, I don't really trust myself to do it. It's unfair to give me the opportunity to say what I think.



What I will say is that of the original people the most creative was Hugh. His compositions demanded unique treatment. Excellent though the Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter influenced things that Mike was writing were, they could have been written by Hancock or Shorter which was alright, but it was putting us on the fringes of other people's worlds rather than at the centre of our own. To be to, let's say Tony Williams what the Stones were to Muddy Waters was not really my ambition.

To be honest in the end I was kicked out. I could have stayed but ... In political terms I'd have been better off staying - the equipment, use of the name, guaranteed full houses, road managers etc. In a sense I've never regained the practical resources afforded by the name. Even the way I've told it is coloured by my point of view. The things they had to put up with - my vanity, my gross alcoholism etc. Let's just call' it quits.

I did temporarily leave a bit earlier than that and went on the road with Kevin Ayers and The Whole World. The thing I remember most about that is Lol Coxhill's incredible solos and travelling around Holland. All sorts of disgraceful things - Dutch groupies make LA ones seem like puritans.

It was only really temporary, the group was put together solely to perform Kevin's songs. It's always pleasant to work with him and things always happen around him. It was more like a holiday really. Dutch groupies... Actually, the only reason that whole thing is worth mentioning is that despite my methodist left wing puritanical image I love having a good time, sex and getting drunk and loud music.

CL. What about Gong?

RW. In between his various 'permanent' line-ups Daevid felt he could call on me to help out. He being the original person to get me in all of this anyway. Matching Mole was the next proper thing. I suppose I just hadn't got a group and felt it was time to form one. I kidnapped a few other musicians, like Bill McCormick who was already in Quiet Sun and Dave Sinclair who was about to leave Caravan. He shared my interest in 'simple songs'. I had a few songs I wanted to do and so did everybody else, so we got into a group and played each others tunes. I was really happy with most of that first album. However, we didn't have any money or equipment, that album was made in an abandoned CBS studio that was so cold that Dave Sinclair had to play with gloves on. We'd had no money in Canterbury in the old days but what was different was that we were playing in colleges and concerts and stuff and were expected to come up with a really professional performance as musicians in amateur circumstances. Whereas as teenagers we were playing in small pubs and places as virtual unknowns. It was a very jumbled time. But that's the story of every group you've ever heard of. The name was my idea, the pun was deliberate - they got it in France straight away. Dave didn't stay long. It was difficult to find musicians who want to do all the different things that we were doing. We did a concert in Brussels in which the context was just to improvise - he was very imaginative but he hated it. He just wanted to do songs. You can't do eight 'Oh Carolines'. What do you do? Oh Annette? Oh Jaqueline? Oh Sue? It gets a bit unconvincing. Really he felt very insecure at the very experimentalness of it. So we brought in Dave McCrae he was happy to try anything - a really proficient musician. He really enjoyed the danger of playing in an anarchic situation.

CL. How serious was the whole political side of the band?

RW. I thought that it had all been new but I recently turned up ten year old irate letters to the Home Office. Alcoholic scrawls about the prototypes of the SPG etc. I suppose I

inherited all that from my parents. What's happened recently is an attempt to coordinate all that. So with Matching Mole I was drawing on various things that were on the fringes of my. consciousness. The image of bearded guerillas coming down from the mountains is an exciting, romantic image but you can't really draw any conclusions from that. You have to go beyond that.

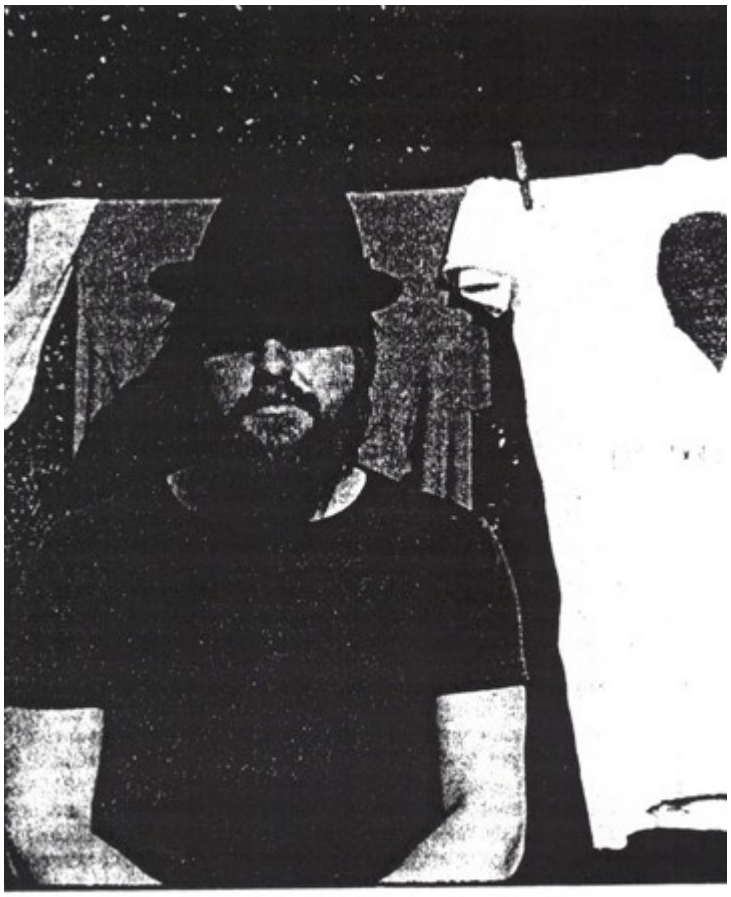
At one time I could have told you who the real music revolutionaries were, people like Charlie Haden, but it's far more difficult today. I don't think of musical and political revolution as the same thing anymore. Haden was wonderful, he ties in with the whole Spanish guitar tradition which really moves me.

To come back to Matching Mole that finished because I don't have the qualities of leadership, I don't want to run things. The onus was on me to run it because I was better known than the others, I became the focus of attention when we played. Not because I'm a nice shy person or anything, I just wanted to be a quarter of a group. Also drink problems, equipment problems, I just couldn't handle it.

I ended up escaping to Venice - thank God for abroad.' There was going to be a new Matching Mole with Gary Windo, Phil, and Francis Monkman. Francis had done a couple of things with us on the radio. We'd been writing lots of things, but the physical state I was in manifested itself, plus the accident and that effectively knocked it on the head.

* * * * * * * *

The accident did indeed effectively end Robert's live performing career. Since then there have been the 2 Virgin albums and the wonderful 'I'm A Believer' single (plus 'Yesterday Man' on the V compilation). He has performed a few times since then largely with the Henry Cow fraternity. Most of the last years of the seventies were spent coordinating non-musical activities. However, last year Rough Trade persuaded Robert to record again. As mentioned last time he has cut at least 3 singles, the first of which, Cainemara has been out for a while and is indeed marvelous. The second one, 'At Last I Am Free' is also out and equally fine. It seems unlikely that Robert will perform live again although he and Eno have seriously considered hiring themselves out as a girlie chorus to any band that needs one. Robert has always been a hero and - myth debunking and self-effacing notwithstanding - remains one.



Old Photos Courtesy Roberts Mum. New ones taken by Alfreda

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Of dogs and underdogs - Melody Maker - January 24, 1981



Of dogs and under-dogs

ROBERT WYATT had a clearer idea of what he was doing when he wasn't doing anything, but is getting on with it anyway. Brian Case reports ; Adrian Boot clicks the shutter

OUTSIDE in the garden, Robert and Alfie's dog Flossie and my dog Titch challenge a clump of hollyhocks. Once they get together, they become deeply unknowable, and tucket about with their ears treaming, baying at imaginary postmen and piddling on each other's possessions.

According to Robert Wyatt, Flossie is the ringleader, a poodle of infinite inventiveness, effortlessly recruiting my suggestible hound to her vision. I would not dispute this, since a few hours with her owner has much the same effect upon me, brain boiling, nose dry, and ears like pennants and all mailmen's ankles in jeopardy.

A man of ravenous intellect, Robert has theories the way rectories have mice, and many a Wyatt wig-bubble has found its way into the field.

Five years ago in Holland, Cecil Taylor buttonholed me to contest Robert's Theory of social Class & Avant-Garde Staying Power.

"You did the interview with that guy in the 'wheelchair? I liked what he said about breathing, but his social ideas were shit. But at last he has ideas."

Mel Tonne reacted as if I had piddled on his possessions when I laid The Theory Of The Limitations Of Scat-Singing on him, and spent half-an-hour in rebuttal, with oo-bla-dee illustrations.

Most of us have opinions, few have ideas, but Robert's prolificity embarrasses him. One New Year's resolution featured incogitance: at chance.

His latest single, a version of Chic's "At Last I Am Free", was in part a broadside in a debate.



PUNDIT

"One of the reasons I wanted to do it was because of a remark made by a pundit on telly. Someone asked him what effect discos had, and he said, 'Well, of course, the black ballad tradition's gone down the drain. They're all trying to boogie now'. I thought THAT JUST ISN'T TRUE! There is so much black boogie in the front line of the dance thing at the moment - but there's also as much as ever of the song and ballad stuff. This song is an example of that."

Humbug and bad ideas will not pass into the currency unchallenged, and I have an evergreen memory of Robert crouched over the radio, teapot suspended in indignation at the radical chic of a disc jockey. "Rock Against Sexism? He may as well propose *Omelettes Against Eggsism*!"

"The other reason why I wanted to do 'At Last I Am Free' is because I like the tune. There's a nice cycle of chords with a couple of nice melodic things that almost inevitably grow out of it. Just water it with a nice bass line or something.

"I'm very bad at words. I don't very often listen to words. I tend to listen to music from the

bottom upwards, rhythm section upwards. In this case, I listened to it and thought, what on earth is this? The chorus goes 'Now at last I'm free' — yes, well, that's a great feeling, that's good - but the verse is a bitter and miserable let-down. The gist of it is a betrayal, and the chorus is 'Hooray, made it!' I thought, COR - that's right up my street!

"My voice always comes out disappointed, to say the least. I've got that sort of sound. It's too lugubrious to be a hit. Nothing I could do would ever cheer anybody up, and I don't even sound fashionably down. So, if I sing 'At Last I Am Free' it wouldn't sound as if I meant it anyway, and that would suit the sense. I got Frank Roberts to do the piano, and I just did what I liked about it, and left the rest out."

AFTER a long period of musical inactivity, Robert is back recording again with a series of fascinating singles for Rough Trade.

"I've had a difficult year. Maybe I'm a malcontent, but at least when I wasn't working, I knew what I was doing. I could handle that.

"I can't graft all the experiences and thoughts that I've had since I dropped the craft on to what I remember of the craft. I know lots of things I didn't use to know, but they're not specifically about how to make better records. If anyone told me they'd been doing something for five years and felt really disillusioned and wanted to give it a break and go off and do something else, I'd say something like DON'T. Stick to whatever it is you can do, because you have to grow through whatever it is that you do ..."

To say that he has watched the manipulations of popular culture from his wheelchair implies the loftiness of the umpire. Nothing could be further from the truth, for Robert's irreduceable ideas came by way of gnawing concern, doubt and guilt to the cuticle, and are invariably presented without wishing to presume.

"The new English rock bands that took the headlines in "78 struck me as a nostalgia movement for the days when rock was dangerous music, or seen as a dangerous music. It has always had the reputation of so being, and that's always been one of the assumptions about it that you can knock to pieces if you try.

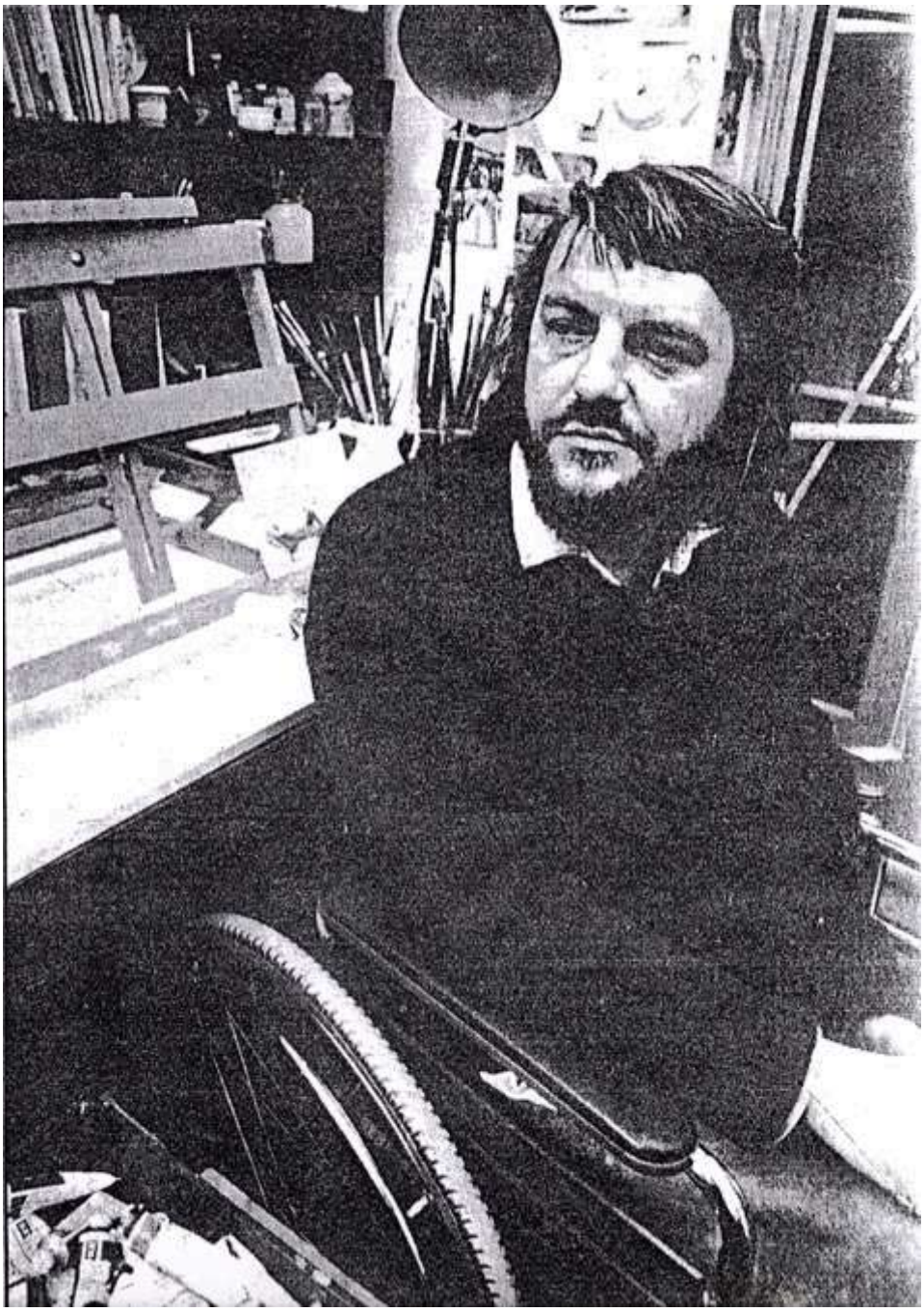
"Nevertheless, it's part of the self-image of people in rock that they're part of the rebel culture, and the industry loses its bearings when it's too obvious that this isn't the case. I used to belong to the consensus myth that if you played iconoclastic music, you were being iconoclastic. I hadn't realised the extent to which that just isn't true.

"The whole cultural set-up absolutely caters for that, and knows how to absorb it completely. It's part of it, it's no threat to anything — in fact, it's part of how the cultural business keeps churning.' There was something charmingly nostalgic about the idea that these punks were REALLY gonna do it, REALLY gonna blow the gaff! The pathos of it!

"A lot of the cultural things that I have become interested in remind me of the title of Mingus' book, 'Beneath The Underdog'. Very often when things reach rock culture and become famous underdog symbols, they've already come up one from the underdog to become acceptable." In the history of rock 'n' roll this is racist.

"In America you had all this raging, raving black music right through the Forties, which was in fact rock 'n' roll — the economy small groups that came out of the big bands with a tenor at the front, and a compere-cum-singer and two rhythm. The history of rock 'n' roll is a history of Saturday night working men's clubs in black America, and the Forties is the rock 'n' roll era.

«IT wasn't about famous people or eccentrics or heart-throbs until it coincided with a staggering, uncertain, ailing Hollywood industry not sure how its new star should look. It is always taken for granted as perfectly acceptable that Sam Phillips could say, 'If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars'. I'm not blaming Elvis and I'm not even saying white musicians are not equally creative - I'm just saying THAT'S the history of it, then look at the rock industry's propaganda for how it sees itself. Dangerous music!



AMERICA

"I sometimes think South Africa is the only really honest Western country because there everybody says, 'Right — the blacks' job here is to provide cheap raw material for our sophisticated industries'. America has some sort of pretence that this isn't so.

"I heard a popular historian on the radio this morning describing the five great stages of American popular music, and it went from Al Jolson, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley to the Beatles. Well - come ON, you know! I mean, those are the stages at which it reached the white, respectable, monied American public — when underdog characteristics became acceptable. But the real underdog is STILL playing janitors in the movies. It's going on unabated."

This is one of our long-standing points of agreement, and we sometimes derive a bilious satisfaction from comparing the time-lag between black and white cultures — "Disco! Ten years; New Wave! Twenty" — before bunging on a jazz record. This time, however, Robert ventures further into the process.

DESPAIR

"A very good example of all this — and it spreads despair because it seems so endless and historical — is the history of the waltz. You had the travelling gypsy musicians in middle Europe getting all the racist abuse, the settler's fear of the nomad coming into that as well — this unacceptable group doing this ' naughty music. In fact, they were living deeply moral and cautious lives. Romany law is fantastically strict in terms of sexual habits and relationships, very, very formal, has to be for the culture to survive.

"Anyway, to the European outsider, they looked loose, outrageous and dangerous to civilisation. Eventually, a respectable light composer took up their waltz, fitted those Oriental lines into the European piano structure, dampened it down and created the newly sterilised, sanitised waltz, and suddenly it was all right for nice people to dance to.



"Does this give the gypsies respectability? Nobody'd heard of the waltz till it was put on the map by respectable people, so that moment of triumph of the culture was about as useful to the gypsies as a lion's head is in the trophy room of the hunter. He's got there, but . . . THAT'S the process that we're dealing with in rock 'n' roll. It's what happens. Winner takes all.

"THE West happens to represent an amazingly powerful force in terms of revolutionising other people's lives. In the end, it's quite a relief to be able to say that my position isn't a moral one, it's aesthetic. That is to say I actually LIKE the idea of this great wealth and variety of ways there are for being people in the world.

"Even though we pretend the colonial period is over, we are steam-rollering the whole world into thinking that the ONLY way to be is something like us. We in the West seem to know when we NEED to assimilate somebody else's culture, and we are able to do that and create our plural society, and leave people nothing.

"I find the creation of this vast mono-culture alarming. Everybody in the world is trying to match up to this great impregnable fortress that Western civilisation has created with its vast technological and military backup, and air of moral and spiritual superiority. "It flattens and belittles everything.

"There's a great Bulgarian poem called 'The Shot That Wounds But Does Not Kill'. It's about a decoy duck, a duck that the hunter clips, takes to the marshes where it cries to its mates who come down and get shot. I'm not talking about the West exterminating people or cultures, but allowing them to survive with clipped wings. Like rock 'n' roll."

Previous article

Next article

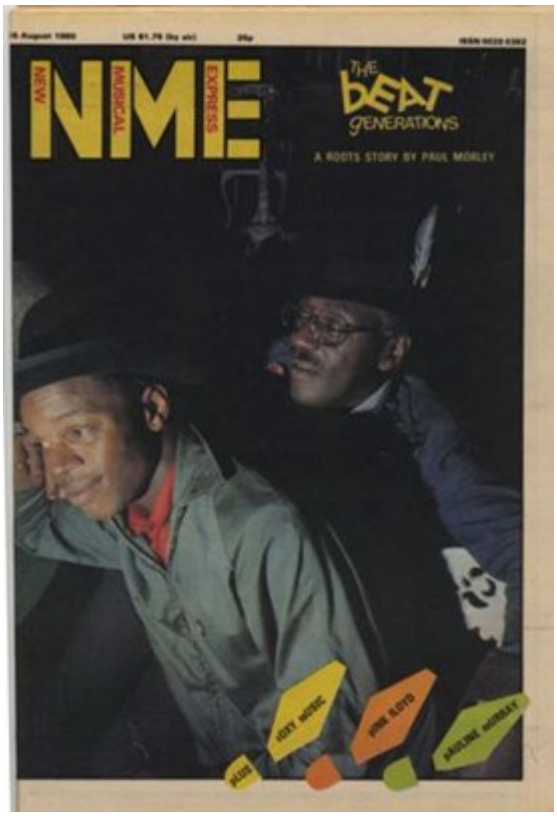
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Quiet Wyatt - breaks his silence - New Musical Express - 16th August, 1980





This man has just recorded four singles. The first is a Chilean folk song.

**The second's by Chic.
The third is a 1940s pro-Stalinist gospel anthem.
The fourth was written by Ivor Cutler.**

GRAHAM LOCK finds out why they're calling Robert Wyatt "the Red Robbo of Twickenham"

Photographs: ANTON CORBIJN

ROBERT WYATT gazes into the humid air. "I don't know... I think I've become political in spite of myself, my natural inclination is just to have a good time." He laughs. "I'd like to be a hedonist."
He pauses, frowning. "But there's another thing... I didn't feel the need to address myself to it before, but it's strange... it's... I was born in 1945, right, and there were certain assumptions in our generation, certain things that just weren't done any more, like elitism in the form of racism was so discredited after the war, it wasn't on.
"People thought that crap had been chucked out, that 'right' of the Western countries to treat the rest of the world like naughty Borstal boys. But now it's crept back in after what seems, retrospectively, like only a moment's pause.

"It's not only Conservatives, not only politicians, but the whole culture... like the unspoken racism of Radio Three which uses the phrase 'serious music' to describe European academic music and no-one else's.

"These assumptions are flourishing now and it's thrown me completely' cause I thought it was all over. I'd have been quite happy to go on and sing songs and fuck about you know. I'd much rather do that but the whole basis, the whole consensus I thought was there doesn't seem to be around any more and I got really... alarmed."

Wyatt fidgets in his wheel-chair. "And one reason I've joined the Communist Party is because I've realised that ideas which come through in culture, in music, by themselves have no effective power to change things for the better. They can indicate things, or bear

witness, but they can't change them."

He looks up into the sky, as if for help, then sighs. "And I'm still working on the only thing I can do — music — which is based on the assumptions I *used* to have, that art was a real force etc. And, frankly, I don't know how to harness the insights I've had *since* I learned to be a musician. I see everything in the light of politics now but as a performer I feel the first job of the musician is music and however much you might want songs to reflect your own preoccupations, there are in fact rules to music which insist that songs have their own set of values."

He frowns again, then shrugs. "This is part of the problem I'm having. I just don't feel comfortable making a living where that is a priority. I feel really trapped by it and there's no way out I can see. I literally don't know what to do, it's as simple as that."

He looks thoughtful and chews absently at his beard. In the fortnight that his wife Alfie has been holidaying in Spain, Wyatt has munched his beard down from a fine, flowing mane to a tatty, ragged fringe around his chin.

We're sitting in the garden of his Twickenham home to discuss his return to recording. A recent single, 'Arauco'/'Caimanera', the first of a projected series of four on Rough Trade, signalled the end of a silence unbroken since 1975's 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard'album.

The first surprise about these singles is their diversity : two South American folk-songs, Billie Holiday protest jazz. Chic, Ivor Cutler whimsy and, strangest of all, a multi-tracked acapella version of 'Stalin Wasn't Stalling', a World War Two pro-Stalin American propaganda song originally sung by The Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet. Wyatt even plans to include two sides on which he doesn't appear himself — 'Stalingrad' is a poem written and read by author Peter Blackman; 'Trade Union' is the work of Disharhi, a group of Bengali rag-trade workers and folk musicians from London's East End.



16th August, 1980 New Musical Express — Page 7

QUIET WYATT BREAKS HIS SILENCE

This man has just recorded four singles. The first is a Chilean folk song. The second's by Chic. The third is a 1940s pro-Stalinist gospel anthem. The fourth was written by Ivor Cutler.

GRAHAM LOCK finds out why they're calling Robert Wyatt "the Red Robbo of Twickenham".

Photographs: ANTON CORBIJN

CONTINUES OVER

The second surprise is the singles' political clout.

Wyatt: " 'Arauco' is by Chilean folk-singer Violetta Parra. It's a despairing exhortation to all the great Indien chiefs and the cultures and communities they represent to rise up and throw off the Christian colonialists. It's despairing because the exploitation's been going on for 400 years and there aren't that many Indians left.

"People say, 'Oh well, these things happen, people die out'. People don't die out, they're *killed* off.

"Pinochet (*Chilean military dictator*) is selling off their land to foreign big business which means that most Indians are almost certain to be wiped out or just turned into slumland factory fodder, used up in the poorest jobs in the mines. If you say, 'What's it got to do with us?', well, we've got a government who're one of the main providers of finance for them to do this.

"'Caimanera' is a version of 'Guantanamero' which is virtually the Cuban national anthem. I sing it... since there's been so much press for the thousands of Cubans who left Cuba I thought I'd sing a song for the millions who stayed."

This is the man who once sang the alphabet on a Soft Machine album.

ROBERT WYATT'S first work of note came as drummer/vocalist with Soft Machine, who rose to prominence in the late '60s, leaders with Pink Floyd of a (then) new wave of largely instrumental, art-rock bands who heralded the arrival of psychedelia and high seriousness in English rock. Now hailed as one of *the* pioneer jazz-rock fusionists, Wyatt tends to deflate such claims with a grin and a ready anecdote.

"At times it was really embarrassing. You'd get these kids coming up after a gig and saying 'Oh, great to have intellectually stimulating music here, last week it was terrible, Geno Washington and the Ram Jam Band and everybody just dancing', and, believe me, if we could've played like Geno Washington and for his audience, we'd have done it, no question.

"We just weren't that good, we *couldn't* do it. Our audience was always, well, snobs really. I suppose it serves us right for playing such silly music. The great thing about the late '60s audiences was that they were all stoned which is why we could all play so many hours of crap and get away with it."

Less modesty or cynicism than myth-debunking humour, Wyatt only stops this joking about his past work when we touch on an aspect that still fascinates him — the relationship between intent and effect.

Discussion centres on songs like 'Oh Caroline' and 'Signed Curtain', which Wyatt performed with Matching Mole, the group he formed after leaving Soft Machine. The latter song is especially infamous, with lyrics that comment on its structure and function: "*... and this is the chorus or perhaps it's the bridge or just another key change. Never mind, it won't hurt you, it just means I've lost faith in this song 'cause it won't help me reach you*".

Here was a deliberate attempt to subvert pop conventions?

"Yes, I think so." Wyatt sounds extremely dubious. "I wouldn't call it iconoclasm, I'm not like Magma, trying to change the world by reinventing the language but... I think I was being sarcastic about how seriously people take songs and I was also very exasperated ...

I was also trying at the time to write a real love song and I thought 'What actually *is* it you're doing? Other people are gonna know how you feel but it doesn't do anything. So what you're doing is something else — just singing a song. And you're trapped in it. You can't actually sing about something else, a song in the end is gonna be about singing — whatever it seems to be about'.

"I felt trapped and so... I think I was just trying to be clever."

Wyatt laughs. But just as he can't help throwing in his self-depracating jokes for fear of seeming heavy, he also can't resist following his ideas through.

"You see, even if you're trying to comrnunicate something, the effect is that what you're left with is an art object which will be admired for its own sake rather than as having pointed something out. An object that entertains people. And if it's not a nice song, if people don't like listening to it, it won't even function like that."

And this, claims Wyatt, holds true despite the artist's intention, despite any formal innovations.

"The artist doesn't have that power... he'll be used by the community any way the community wants to use him because meanings aren't inherent in any object, they're invested in it by observers. Political content can appear and evaporate in the most unlikely places." That mischievous smile reappears. "I mean, I wonder how Blake would feel if he knew that 'Jerusalem' had become the national song of the Women's Institute?"

WYATT REMAINS consistent to his theories of the artist's social impotence, claiming that his new singles were chosen primarily because they were "great *tunes*". Nevertheless, their content — a heady mix of political statement and oblique personal reflection — corresponds uncannily to the possibilities and confusions with which he is currently struggling.

His next release will be 'Strange Fruit'/'At Last I Am Free'. 'Strange Fruit', originally sun by Billie Holiday in the '40s, was a response to a group of lynchings in the South. Noticing the mass of anti-racist stickers, posters and leaflets that adorn the walls of chez Wyatt, I ask to what extent his choice of that song was affected by this preoccupation with anti-racism.

"It does strike me that people talk as if things are past, Americans particularly, lynchings in the South, killing off Indians etc. But if we talk about the forces that are responsible, they're still at work, they're still largely the same people.

"If you take South Africa, I think — were it not for the growing resistance of the Africans — then the USA, England, Western Europe would be quite happy to turn it into another dust-bowl. We know the USA is actively helping the anti-SWAPO forces, as are the English and the French. That kind of racism is at *least* as bad as it was in the days of Southern lynchings."

'Strange Fruit' best exemplifies Wyatt's contention that the singles are "like sketches, very undecorated, just documenting a few songs I like". All are mostly solo work, the sound bare and slightly raggedy — here, bass, keyboards and Wyatt's high, plaintive vocals rise and fall with sombre deliberation.

"At Last I Am Free', the Chic song, Wyatt chose because it was "a lovely ballad"."

Although it has no obvious political or personal references, certain lines in the song seem to strike a poignant note in the context of Wyatt's current problems with music. It's just speculation but you could read it as his farewell song to his illusions about rock'n'roll: "*At last I'am free, I can hardly see in front of me.*"

AFTER Matching Mole had made two albums, Robert Wyatt got drunk at a party one night in 1973, walked out of a fourth-floor window, fell to the pavement and smashed his spine. He's now paralysed from the waist down and is confined to a wheelchair for life.

For a while after the fall, Wyatt maintained his involvement with music. Though unable to use a full drum-kit, he could still handle a wide range of percussion, play keyboards, sing. His comeback album — a second solo (the first, 'The End Of An Ear' from Soft Machine days, has just been reissued by CBS) with the bravely punning title of 'Rock Bottom' — remains the '70s most moving and most neglected masterpiece. A work of real depth, its theme of fall and recovery has an emotional and musical cohesion equalled only by 'Astral Weeks'.

Many people saw the album as being directly about the accident but Wyatt denies it.

"Actually I'd written most of it before the accident. I think the coherence it has is musical, there were a consistent set of ideas I was dealing with through the whole 40 minutes.

After a second album, 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard', and two intriguing covers of 'I'm A Believer' and 'Yesterday Man' Wyatt stopped recording. Why?

"My other interests came to the fore. I think what happened was that I couldn't lead the life of a musician — things like travelling just proved too difficult — and it's very hard to be one if you can't lead that life, 'cause it's not something you *are*, it's part of a set-up — gear, roadies, managers, tours, repertoires. Without all that, I found it harder and harder to keep up a momentum. And the romantic notion of the importance of it all faded quite

rapidly. The things I was starting to think were important weren't related to my job. I mean, the people I talk to now, what I do for my fun... like, I go to see films about what's going on in the world and rock 'n' roll seems so... tiny."

Paradoxically, since being stuck in a wheelchair Wyatt's awareness of the world has expanded dramatically. He's now a voracious reader and regularly tunes in to radio stations from all over the globe. It's no wonder then that he's experienced this gradual disenchantment with rock'n' roll, this shift of values, and entanglement with political matters. But why *return* to recording now?

Wyatt shrugs, a little despondent. "It takes years to build up a craft, so really I had to turn back to this business 'cause I can't do anything else." He pauses, squirming in his chair and frowning again. "Getting back into rock music ... I feel it's like some strange nightmare where I'm going back to school or where I'm trying to get into the clothes I wore when I was 15. It just doesn't fit any more, it's weird."

Is this what you meant when you said recently that returning to the music biz was like a defeat?

"It isn't a defeat 'cause I'm still alive. But I'm surprised I'm doing it again. I thought I was going somewhere else — I don't know where, honestly — it'd be interesting to know, if I weren't in this chair, where I would be...

"I tried at the Labour Exchange for a job. The only job they had was painting chess pieces just down the road and Alfie and her mum said 'You can't do that, you're selling yourself short, you're a musician'. I think really I've been made to feel guilty about *not* doing it. But I've got to earn a living and, like, that's my job."

ONE RESULT of Wyatt's search for a more politically effective mode of action than rock music was his joining the Communist Party some two years ago. While he's willing to talk about it, he requests — for 'fear he'll be accused of preaching — that I make clear I *asked* him to. So why did you join, Robert?

"Well, the reason today I think I joined is... er... fundamentally I think most of our troubles are caused by the institutionalised unaccountability of the major Western capitalist countries and their expansion and their appropriation of the resources of a large part of the world for their own benefit. And, er, to justify capital's growth at the expense of Namibian mineworkers or whoever, the people in power rely on a particular bit of myth, of mystification, which is a notion I call the 'divine right of the few' — the idea that it's right, it's nature's way, for certain people to have and others not to have.

"The notion of this 'divine few' should strike a bell with everybody who's ever had to deal with the fact that they're not a genius, or male, or white, but it's called lots of things — "maintaining standards', 'law and order', anything to hide the fact that this divine deserving elite actually give *themselves* the right to preserve and expand themselves at the expense of others.

"And ... er... the history of Communism seems to me the history of the attempt to expose that hypocrisy."

Typically, after this thumbnail critique of capitalism *and* trashing every other left-wing grouping in the country, Wyatt admits to a little uncertainty.

"I have doubts at times, like Afghanistan, but then I look at all the people who've been *anti*-Communist — Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Pinochet, Nixon, Thatcher, Botha — and I think, well, Communists must be doing *something* right."

Well, maybe. The pity of it is that Wyatt feels his enthusiasms for politics and music to be not a fruitful tension but at an absolute impasse. And his fear that the politics will — to simplify drastically — somehow taint the music in the eyes of his audience can lead him into a defensiveness that is almost comic, as when he explains the choice of Ivor Cutler's 'Go And Sit Upon The Grass' as one of his future singles.

"I like it because it pokes fun at people like me. It says '*do not mind if I thump you when I am talking to you, I have something important to say*'."

You see your songs as thumping people?! ask, incredulous.

Wyatt ponders. "Well, I like to poke fun at myself because there's this awful thing that seems to happen if you talk about anything other than music and 'fun'... the danger is you'll into a sort of left-wing Cliff Richard.

"And that," laughs Robert as he wheels off into some left-wing shadows, "is an appalling thought to have hanging over your head."



Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Up from rock bottom - Melody Maker - March 15, 1980

Writing letters to political prisoners, listening to Radio Havana, thinking about music . . . Robert Wyatt hasn't been inactive during his five-year absence from the studios. VIVIEN GOLDMAN finds out why he's finally decided to record again.



JOKING apart, when you're drunk you're terrific; when you're drunk I like you mostly late at night, you're quite all right. But I can't understand the different you in the morning when it's time to play at being human for a while. We smile... So until your blood runs to meet the next full moon, your madness fits nicely with my own — your lunacy fits neatly with my own. We're not alone." —
"Sea Song" by Robert Wyatt.

« Don't be too hard on your old self », was his advice to me on the phone. I was castigating myself for some idiocy long past. « Try and be friendly to your old self, » he said encouragingly. « After all, even if it seems really stupid to you now, you were doing the best you could at the time. »

This little homily could well have been – sounded as if it was – learnt from life. Robert Wyatt says that it's only recently he's begun to miss the things he used to be able to do before his accident seven years ago. Robert fell from a window during a party at Lady June's flat in a mansion block of flats in Maida Vale.

« I was very drunk, » he remembers. « I didn't fall out, I climbed out… it seems the best way to leave the party at the time. Yes, I did a lot of punch and then a bottle of whisky and so on. Which was quite good, because if you're going to fall out of a window and you're drunk, it doesn't hurt quite so much. Soldiers and bullfighters do it all the time… people who are smashed getting smashed. »

The particular window Robert fell from while trying to evade a typical party tangle is sealed up now. I thought that was symbolic, until I found out that all those windows are sealed up now ; some painter's mistake. Perhaps is still symbolic.

One other thing that’s stuck : Robert’s relationship with his wife, artist Alfreda Benge. She was at the party, and it’s a sticky web of emotions – guilt, loyalty, but above all, a simple bond of friendship – that welds them together as a creative unit.

Oddly enough, during the past five years, in which robert has been passive/receptive – not making records, at any rate, while absorbing information from all over the place like a deep-sea diver gulps oxygen – Alfie’s own visual output has been declining. Perhaps now that Robert’s broken the five-years silence, Alfie’s paintings will increase, too.


Up from rock bottom

Writing letters to political prisoners, listening to Radio Havana, thinking about music ... Robert Wyatt hasn't been inactive during his five-year absence from the studios. VIVIEN GOLDMAN finds out why he's finally decided to record again.

As a music/visuals team, they're matched only by Don and Moki Cherry; like Moki, Alfie's sleeves for Robert's two solo albums provide such a deep-pile context for the music that it's almost impossible to think of one without the other floating into your mind.

Robert's lyrics tend towards surreal dream worlds. Sometimes they seem surreal simply because they're so colloquial and direct you'd think nobody would sing those kinds of words in a song. Calling the first album you make after being stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of your life "Rock Bottom" indicates a surreal/straightforward wit that's awesomely matched by Alfie's eye: a cross-section of a seascape, with a little Robert's top half popping out of the water's surface, waving a big bunch of balloons in one hand — you can almost see the bright lollipop colours speckle the sky, though it's a grey and white pencil drawing — but beneath the water line, there's no matching pair of little Robert legs. Just fronds, or tentacles of passing octopi. Presumably it's Alfie bending over backwards on that tiny island.

Behind her, more balloons float gaily towards a boatpuffing across the horizon. Someone standing on the deck is bound to see the balloons and want to grab one down from the sky, but they might never know that the little man who held them is out there in the water; and even he doesn't seem to know whether he's waving or drowning.

Alfie's illustrations go colour for Robert's next, "Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard". Two curious animals — actually people, heads shrouded m masks of gaudy ritual birds and beasts — examine their reflections in mirrors. Each mirror shows the same red sun, each sun sliced across by a razor-blade cloud. But the bird-man in the fairisle jumper sees a solitary gull swooping and diving across the green field in his mirror, while the beast-woman with the beads and hippy print dress gazes impassively into her mirror, at a solitary small woman figure trudging across her green field.

Behind the uncommon pair, a washing-line hangs between trees, stringing miscellaneous items of household ware and underwear across a gypsy encampment: a brown cauldron on a tripod goes hubble-bubble by a comfy armchair, a book lying half read on the flat earth beside it. A green gnome's teapot on a grey tree-stump, a deckchair, a little green TV, even

an ironing-board near the hole in the ground. A blue ladder sticks out of the hole, so that Things can easily climb in and out; there's even a small green wiggling Thing squirming across Alfie's wild world, heading in the direction of the bird's house slung from another tree. Ideal Home in the wilderness, peopled by beasts that can't see each other, only themselves. What's worse, only their inmost souls. No breathers for commercials.

THIS may be a dubious recommendation, but no record makes me cry as much as "Rock Bottom". Robert concedes that "it's one of the only things I've done I would listen to myself. It's one of the only records of mine I've got, I think."

Each track reminds me of Robert's musical self-description: "Long, doleful, when-will-this-end songs." "Rock Bottom's" full frontal pain — at least as intense as any Lennon in his Primal Scream period - sears so deeply that it doesn't seem idle to assume he's referring at least partly to his accident.

"This sounds so silly - I can't really remember," says Robert. "Somebody said, 'Oh, this is a cry of pain from the accident.' It doesn't sound appropriate to me at all to the kind of accident I had. This is taking it too far. You make records instead of saying things. It's up to anybody who listens to put the lid on it. I reserve the old romantic right of ambiguity in art, 19th century though it may sound."

About "Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard", Robert says: "I'm more fond of that, but in the way a mother might be more fond of her mongol child than the one with all its limbs intact. It's got so much investment of ideas and thought in it that don't hang together, don't make a complete record..."

He specifies the "fan worship thrill" of working with now-dead African trumpeter Mongezi Feza, hearing Mongezi's rhythms hook into Gary Windo's horns, "jazz, not jazz-influenced." Bill McCormick and Laurie Allan were the bass-and-drums-respectively rhythm slice, and Robert was on piano - "I got a vague inkling of how enjoyable it must be to be a pianist in a jazz group."

Both "Rock Bottom" and "Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard" are deleted by Virgin Records, heaven only knows why. There are, apparently, plans to bring out a compilation of the two; why a compilation and not a double album re-issue I equally cannot imagine. I certainly wouldn't fancy wielding the anthologist's knife over either of these immaculate assemblages.

"THIS is the first verse, this is the first verse... and this is the first verse. And this is the first verse — and this is the chorus. Or perhaps it's the bridge. Or just another part of the song that I'm singing. And this is the second verse, second verse. It could be the last verse. It's probably the last one. And this is the chorus or perhaps it's the bridge. Or just another key change. Never mind; it just means I've lost faith in this song, 'cos it won't help me reach you... — **"Signed Curtain", by Robert Wyatt.**

Robert Wyatt listens with interest to everyone ; he can be almost painfully self-effacing, as if being in a wheel-chair had entirely removed the onus of aggression — as in, "look at me, I'm an assertive rock star" — from his shoulders. Robert says: "I've always been one to shirk responsibilities if there was the opportunity to, and this meant there was a certain number of things I couldn't possibly be expected to do any more, which was quite a relief." He's not being facetious.

There was "Rock Bottom" and "Ruth Is Stranger" - and then the five-year silence. Why?

"I tried to do a couple of singles, and suddenly my preoccupations started to go out of synch with my job. I couldn't relate things I was thinking about to my particular mode of expression. Virgin Records gave me a lot of freedom and opportunity to do what I wanted to do. I've never been prolific, and I couldn't keep the momentum going.

"It probably wouldn't have shown if I'd been in a group. The group momentum keeps the thing going—at any given point, one or two people within the group are the ones with ideas, pushing. The others become interpreters, and then someone else takes a turn. It's much harder to sustain output on your own.

"Having said that, I must have written about 2,000 postcards in the last four years — the most exciting creative project of my life! I wrote them because it's nicer than writing letters. so the postmen have got pretty pictures to look at, and if they really want, they

can read it.

"They're not absolute opposites, being creative and being receptive, but there's an emphasis on one or the other. And I became more interested in music than in making music. That's always been my problem - I've never enjoyed playing instruments, I've always enjoyed listening to records. I'm really a fan of music, so I get involved in listening — and, from that, observing and being interested without being obliged to make it.

"My feeling about music now is... I get in a panic about how much there is to hear and not enough time, so it's going to get wasted, all that unappreciated beauty. Which is the opposite of ten years ago, when I was thinking: "How can I express myself?'
"Going back in the studio — I didn't do it because I thought that singing about things that mattered to me would make the world a better place. I think Linton Kwesi Johnson was quite right when he said singing about things doesn't change them. Changing things changes them. Singing is singing. Just as in art, I'm interested in songs by people who have preoccupations I sympathise with, and acknowledging some songs that I like and the ideas and thoughts they represent."

The result so far is three out of a projected five 45s, possibly to be sold in a set — Robert Wyatt's Paper Bag, perhaps, a humbler collection than PiL's 12-inches in metal, but no less cogent.
They're all cover versions, "because I can't think of anything to say coherently at the moment," says Robert, modestly ignoring the fact that his selections are a pretty good statement in themselves.

Each single is a compact two-step of ideas. The Spanish-spoken one, with a Violetta Parra song on one side about the extermination of the native Chilean Indians, askks questions of American imperialism. It says that there are elections coming up, the implication being: what's the point when most of the indigenous population's already been exterminated? The flip's a version of "Guantanamera", familiar to us all as MOR elevator muzak, here restored to its original, fiery rebel spirit.

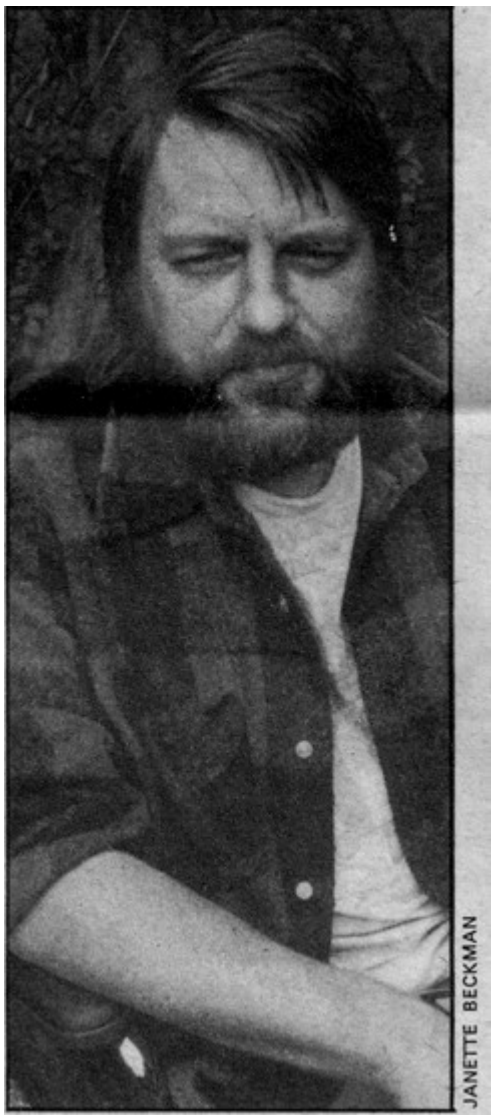
Then there's the Stalin single-one side is a version of "Stalin Isn't Stallin'", originally recorded by an acapella gospel group, the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet. Robert heard it on Alexis Korner's Sunday morning radio show. Alexis said that the record was deleted, like the sentiments expressed in it, and sent a cassette to Robert on request.

"It was made, I think, during the war or after it, and it's a straightforward rally-round, anti-fascist solidarity internationally in a war against Hitler, in which it's pointed out that the war against Hitler and against fascism in Europe, the turning-point and the major victories, were won through amazing sacrifices by the Russians.

"The turning-point was the Battle of Stalingrad, and — this is an embarrasing fact for the West — it wasn't bombing the shit out of Hiroshima, it wasn't the English and the Americans charging round the desert, it was 20 million dead Russians. And, of course, dead Poles and dead Jews. It's a jolly little song to celebrate Joe Stalin, who represented the power that changed the direction of the Second World War, so saving the rest of Europe from domination by Hitler...

"I think the underlying exercise I see running through thoughts of Stalin in the West now is to replace the idea of the all-time 20th century monster of Hitler with the all-time 20th century monster of Stalin. On account of the fact that at the end of the war he didn't stop killing people, for example. He seemed to get a bit carried away... to be honest, I don't want to get heavy. I just thought it was amusing to realise that the song had been done and how impossible it was going to be to find a composer, because he wouldn't dare say he'd written it anyway, when it comes to royalties."
Historical interest aside, the record's swinging finger-snapper, with fourpart Roberts going ooh-ooh in the background, and a touch of percussion to spank along the pace. The flip's a poem by Peter Blackman, father of the Steel & Skin steel band Blackman, about the fall of Stalingrad.

Robert saw Blackman read at an Art Against



Racism and Fascism show. "As that song on the other side points out, England and America were for five extraordinary and unlikely years anti-fascist countries, because they weren't being the fascists. I didn't know anything about Peter Blackman, and when he read this poem I was very moved. He's not young, he belongs to quite another generation, the Thirties Left movement, and he's stuck to it where others haven't. He hasn't made a career out of either being Left wing or a poet."

Blackman is a short, dignified man who carries himself in his casual polo-neck like a general in full honours. When he walked into the recording studio, it was the first time he'd had the opportunity to record his work. But he wasn't in any rush. He was cautious, wanting to know and under-stand more about Robert's preoccupations and intentions.

Robert displayed great deference and respect to the older man, who recites with what Robert describes as "unapologetic pride".

As to where Robert stands, he says: "I'm actually a caring member of the Communist Party, so I'm in a paradoxical position being in the record industry. But I think that things that are serious and things that people enjoy can be the same thing ."

Which leads on to the other recorded single, an initially bizarre coupling of Billie Holiday's classic, "Strange Fruit" — about seeing the corpse of a black man lynched by the Ku Klux Klan swinging from a tree in the American South — and Chic's "At Last I Am Free". As when Robert made a parallel cover hit — the Monkees' "I'm A Believer" — all the ambiguities and tensions disguised by the original straight pop format stand naked.

I chose that song because when I first heard it I was a bit pissed and it made me cry. I was interested in that, because though Rodgers and Edwards are acknowledged songwriters, they're not famous for writing songs that make you cry... I don't think it necessarily moves me the way it moved them when they were writing it. But anyway, there was a bonus in Ihc fact that it was in my range."

Which is... ?

"Well, I don't know — I'm still waiting for puberty and my voice to break and all that sort of thing. Then I'll start covering men's songs, that men sing. Just technically, I find myself singing along more with women singers.

"Yes, a Billie Holiday song. It's a bit inappropriate, like asking a Jew to sing from the Koran or something. Cross-cultural references, it's not my song... I thought it was relevant now, but instead of talking about Southern America, we're talking about South Africa. And I thought, we're just going to go on doing this — we were doing it before I was born, and it's going to go on after I die, and there's nothing I can do about it. But you can't help noticing."

While Robert's fans thrill to the fact that he's working publicly again, and Robert himself seems to be measurably more cheerful lately (although he's racked with nerves about each succeeding move), his pleasure's tinged with other, more ambiguous emotions.

"Going back to work is in some ways a defeat. Because I've now come to the conclusion that I can only do what I used to do in the first place. I'd like to think that after the last four or five years I could now see further, do more, and so on. But this isn't the case — I find I'm reduced to this built-in introspection and narcissism of being A Creative Person,

and it's very hard to harness the amazing things I've seen or heard. Suddenly all the Windows disappear and are replaced by mirrors.

"Everyone believes in something, and I used to believe in Art, in truth with beauty. That if it looked good and sounded good and felt right, then that contained the main truth you need to know and intuition would guide you from then on. If it feels good, do it. I don't seen any evidence of that now. I can see that the cruellest and most repressive peoples and societies can sometimes produce the most beautiful and astounding art — in fact, they need to.

"If another analogy is that art is make-up then the more of it you need the more dubious your real life is. But I do need to at least pretend to believe in something. And religion's out of the question. I've found that talking to people who had political knowledge and experience provided the stimulus that I'd been missing, that I really needed, and I clutched on to that."

Robert always seems to assume Personal guilt and responsibility for the history of Western Colonialism, which can be seen from his selection of songs for the singles. He claims that the aesthetic — is it a nice tune? — comes before the moral in his selection process.

"Art to me is everything that isn't true, if you want to be glib about it. It's quite useful to actually care about something... but I do come, on my mother's side, from a long line of Kentish fascists, and on my father's side I come from a long Une of missionaries going out to various parts of the world to intimidate the locals into submission to make it easier for Western European colonial expansion. Although they'd deny it.

"That doesn't make me kind or like people I wouldn't otherwise like. I just feel angry that I was born a receiver of stolen goods. My immediate parents were breakaways from family tradition... but no amount of masochistic search for my own evil cultural roots would make me actually want to have a relative like Woodrow Wyatt."

PARADOXICALLY, many people think one of Robert's greatest musical contributions is the way he sings; not with a classic Good Voice, just straightforwardly, in a middle-class English accent. This, despite the fact that one of the main reasons he left the Soft Machine is because they didn't like the way he sang.

Hearing Robert talk about drumming — obviously, he can't use a full kit any longer, but he's a sturdy and sensitive percussionist — is one of the few moments that the word "tragedy" pops into your head while you're talking to him.

"I don't feel I can get out of myself when I'm singing. And what I remember about playing music was the way, sitting in front of a drum kit, you somehow got out of your mad skin into the outside world — a wonderful feeling of release which I don't get from singing at all."

Robert's Everyman vocal technique — I'm just an ordinary bloke, why am I so sad? — he puts down to this: "I go blank when I sing, which I think makes it sound sad. That's my sincere-sounding technique. Just go blank and try and get the notes right."

He has evolved some flamboyant but not flashy vocal styles over the years — babbling rushes of overlaid noise, colloquial speech patterns eliding over lines of melody so you sing an up-and-down incantation.

As for the much-celebrated Englishness: "It wasn't patriotic in any way. I got the idea from listening to other people — Pink Floyd, Kevin Coyne, Noel Coward, George Formby, Stanley Holloway, Vera Lynn — but, apart from George Formby, I didn't relate to their material. I'd committed myself to syncopated music, and I don't speak a syncopated language.

"It's just that hearing tapes of me trying to sound like Steve Marriott trying to sound like Wilson Pickett, or Stevie Winwood trying to sound like Ray Charles, or Joe Cocker trying to sound like Ray Charles, made me realise there had to be another way if I was going to get anywhere in this business."

There's a classic John Peel session from years ago where he sings a song and Changes the words to say how nice it is at the BBC, where they let you play almost as long and as loud as a jazz group or an orchestra on Radio 3, and he continues to sing about the coffee machine in the hall...

"Yes, I also got into writing words where some of my preoccupations were purely technical,

and they'd come out as human-being-not-interested-in-technique things, and others to do with expressing myself would come out calculated.

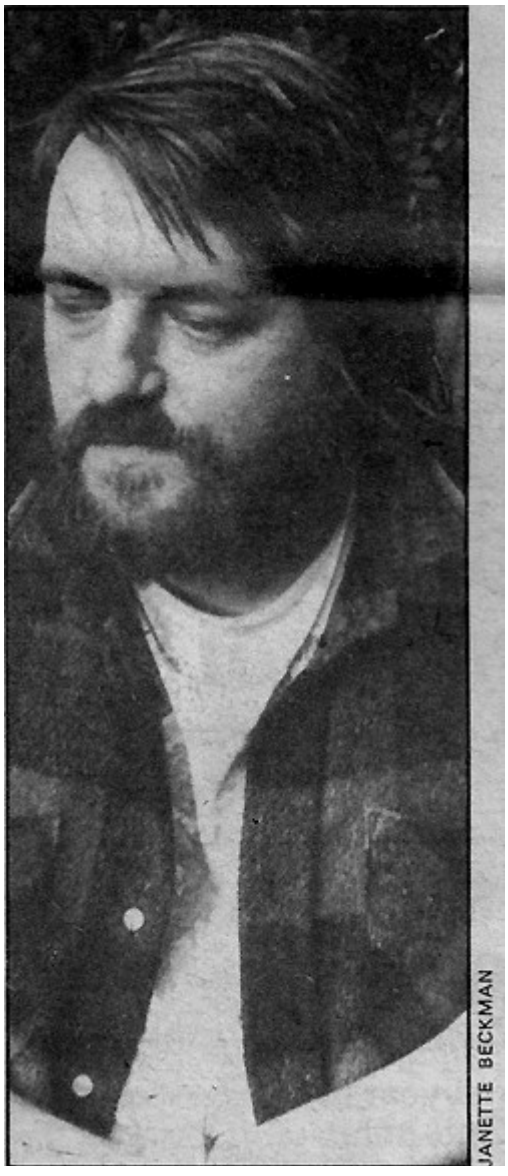
"I got fed up with songs where the main accents would make you emphasise the words in a way you wouldn't if you were just saying them, and I got interested in the technique of writing songs where the melody line fits the way you'd say the words if you were just talking.

"I'd say things you'd say in conversation, not even serious conversation, just things you'd say to make a noise. And that meant singing about things that were true as far as I understood it. And if you're muddled, the only things you're certain are true are that there's a tea-machine in the corridor and it works or it doesn't. This is true, it's not wishy-washy bullshit. It may be low-profile, but it's true. Then I abandoned that, and later I was quite happy to sing things that didn't match the rhythm of the words at all."

*"**I**'M the one face down in the mud on the ground, I'll be stuck here for ever unless you come over and kick me... I'm the best of all you have got. I beat the lot. I take the cake. Believe me, if it's tough you want, then it's tough you've got. I mean, if this is only a question of toughness. Then survive me, or deflate me, pronto..."*
"Team Spirit", by Robert Wyatt, Bill McCormick & Phil Manzanera.

The house, bought for the Wyatts by friends after Robert's fall, is in a finely-preserved street in a residential, riverside area of West London. The Wyatts live on the ground floor. It's a circumscribed world for Robert in his wheelchair, and so it has to be a complete world.

The flat's full of rich, glowing colours, the layout and design catering for the fact that Robert needs effortless access to as much information as possible.


JANETTE BECKMAN

I once suggested that Robert should get himself an invalid car, and up his independence and mobility a hundred fold. Robert laughed and said No — he'd just go off in a daydream, and be bound to crash. Alfie merely commented: "No, not Robert, he's a born passenger..."

So Robert's world has shrunk from that of the globe-trotting rock'n'roller, free-forming it on the French Riviera or in Ibiza, touring across the States supporting Jimi Hendrix ("I thought he was a real gentleman").

Interesting correspondence lies around Robert's desk. Letters from Africans in detention, with whom he's carried on lengthy correspondences which started out as sending a Christmas card and blossomed.

Robert maintains a series of letter exchanges from his desk, and spends a great deal of time listening to the radio; not just the BBC, for his dialtwiddling has led him to uncover long-range frequencies that keep him in touch with far global corners. It's a form of obvious compensation for immobility, but by subscribing to an enormous amount of magazines and literature and listening to people talk from all over the planet, Robert, sitting in his chair at home, is probably more in touch than he ever was in his mobile existence.

When people are around, the only external indication of Robert's frustration is the way the former drummer is constantly drumming

— cigarette packs, lighters, anything that's
lying around is fiddled with and tapped, so that every conversation is punctuated by non-stop syncopation.

"I wanted to get out of this place, especially when I realised after the last election that the country was just full of Tories — I wanted to separate myself, and I couldn't do it physically, so I started tuning into the short wave radio... to anyone who was considered the enemy, with immediate strong bonds of sympathy pouring out to them.

"The result was that I spend my time hovering between the radio of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Radio Moscow. And Radio Havana, on 41 metres short wave, from ten to 11 in English, which means missing the first part of John Peel. That's a sacrifice, seriously — but I'm prepared to make it, so entertaining is Radio Havana. I found out there's more to life on the short wave than the enemy, and it's very Eurocentric to call anyone who isn't us the enemy."

Vivien Goldman
Photos: Janette Belkman

Previous article

Next article

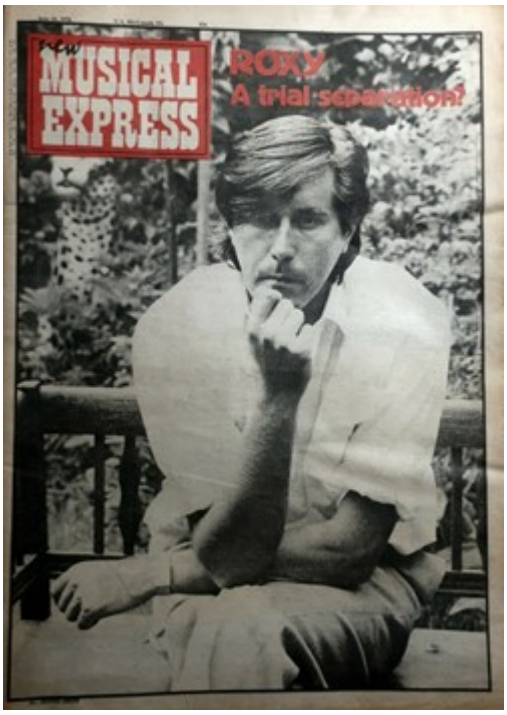
Back to the list

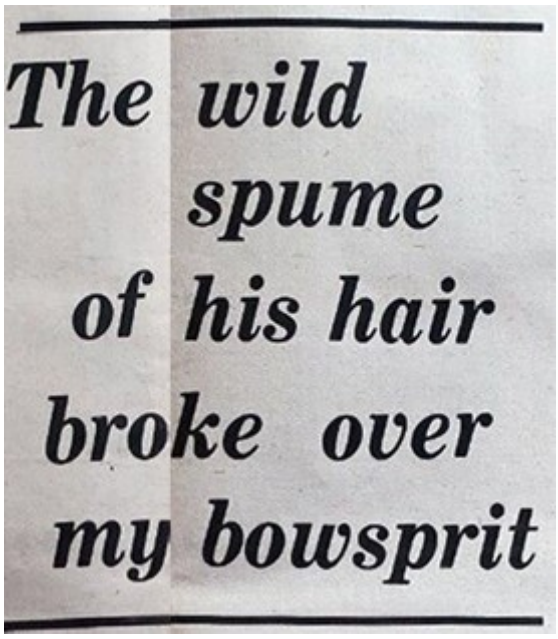
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The wild spume of his hair broke over my bowspirit - New Musical Express - June 26, 1976





"HANG ABOUT", says Robert Wyatt, and consults his notebook. " Er - oh yes - hmm - ah, there's that ".

Whatever he's got jotted there acts like jump leads on the cortex , because abruptly Robert is off and spouting single-hitched and I'm clinging to my harpoon line and wondering will I ever see Nantucket again.

Unless the critic can put the public's money where his mouth is, he's not much use to the jazz musician." That's for starters. I'm just bracing my 'waders for a bit of a retaliatory tug on the line when the' behemoth flaps his fluke.

"Jazz history so far has been a history of white people creating that idea of a traditional, middle period and avant-garde out of an organic thing that has developed out of its own. You can feel that there's a magnetic pull on jazz to satisfy the white critics need for some parallels to what he knows of the culture he was brought up in. Those classifications are a very European thing. Jazz instruments are basically the instruments of European music, with notable exceptions like the invention of the drum kit. It's based around the same thing, like the keyboard , piano thing. You can see what I mean in Charlie Parker's remarks like "I dig Bartok and all them geezers - very naive in a way".



As Robert speaks, he dashes at his hair, clears the fronds from his face, fails to anchor it behind his ears. It's like a waterspout in a headwind. I catch a glimpse of him through the curds of spume and he's off again.

"What's happened in the last few years is that there's a small black middle class. A black musician can now actually make a living without having to appeal to the white intellectual - up to now it's been a white intellectual preserve because he's been the only person interested in his potential - people like Lomax doing the field recordings...

For the jazz fan who's followed Herbie Hancock there's no musical sense in 'Headhunters' - I mean 'Headhunters' after 'Empyrean Isles'? But you see, jazz fans come from such a totally different cultural set-up. There's a bizarre thing there - fans are often highly educated, anti-dull values, anti-middle-of-the-road, anti-bourgeois but they're dealing with the culture of a people who haven't got a bourgeoisie to react against. It's hypocritical to want them to stay in our camp."

I squinted through the geyser of wig-bubbles and took the strain. "Are you saying we've dumped our cultural armature and our need for rebel heroes on the blacks, and that now they've stopped catering?"

"I think it's simpler than that. It's just a question of economics. Herbie getting into the charts — it doesn't mean anything to a white cultural gent because he's got so many representatives of his own culture who've done that. Not just in the music charts, but top of the political charts, economic charts. It's not an issue for us punters. There's no pride in it.

"But all these players we like and talk of with reverence for going through shit and sticking to what they do — if we really admit how alienated they were, we've got to be happy for them when they make it. If it means they're not going to play things we want to listen to. then tough shit."

"I can't see the crossover bands as up from slavery," I said. "They've just changed owners. If the white jazz fan paid their wages before, now it's an even more exploitative white capitalism calling the shots. A genuine black grass roots movement towards equality being

sidetracked into boutique blackness. Who got shafted by 'Shaft'?"



Robert laughed, sportively splashed a wave at my bowsprit. He knew the gambits of the stern New Englander.

"Take Cecil Taylor," he said. "He's from that very small minority, the posh black. He feels culturally comfortable — apart from his inner flame — secure in the knowledge that a despised avant-garde has a right to live. That's what sustains him."

"What about Albert Ayler then? He wasn't middle class." "Well, he didn't keep it up for very long did he? He was the first to do the funky chicken, for chrissake. He lost the confidence."

'New Grass', Robert was right. My frail craft was matchwood. I secured the line around my beret and trod water. "What about Coltrane then? He kicked aside enough plateaux of achievement and economic security to presuppose Hampstead parents in the background. Yet he was Deep South working class."

"I dunno," said Robert, but he did. "Coltrane seems to me of all of them the most functionally avant-garde, which is to say his notions were actually the most useable for future generations. He was so geared to what was absolutely necessary for the musicians to

know that he couldn't have felt he was on a minority, dilettante mission. You hear him and you know: this definitely has to be done. The community really needed what he had to offer. A lot of people do things that are wonderful but nobody else can make much use of them."

Rollins, he felt was contained wholly within jazz; Coltrane spread beyond. We indulged in a splash fight over that, a mere rockpool rumble before the great dive down into the depths of Coltrane's contribution.

"There were very specific problems that other kinds of music had too — a universal needs thing. Very crudely, if you base the solos on the chord changes per bar thing and then speed the pop song up to twice the speed for Bebop, then you've got changes going past too fast to sustain, the mood thing, the feeling of the richness of the chord. Coltrane simply opened out the bars so you could breathe.

"See, all the chords in Bebop were meant to be played much slower. It used to be film stars crooning those chord changes, that's what they were originally designed for. Coltrane found a way to breath again and not abandon any of the harmonic exploration either.

"I'm talking about it as someone who was involved in the first era of improvising rode things, and we got more practical text book usefulness off Trane than off the Beatles. He anticipated the inevitability of jazz-rock, the ostinato bass things, the dreaded modal business, anticipated largescale needs."

"And knowing he was onto that potent a panacea overrode his class origins," I gasped, dashing Robert's hair out of my eyes.

Even back on terra firma I haven't been able to quite dispel his theories and certainly none of his spell. Glasgow, Bristol and the East End Jewish community have supplied most of our jazzmen — here, the musician and the fan share a common class hostility. Monk's themes savour the taste of each chord, cast an indelible mood. Miles, not Trane, pioneered respiration in the solo through the modal scale.

. . . and I felt the tape line tauten on my cassette recorder as ROBERT WYATT plunged forward into the waves.

By BRIAN CASE



I FEEL a tug on the line Robert is off again. Through the doorway I can see Alfie, Robert's wife, kneeling on the carpet pinning a paper pattern to a length of cloth. Making him a chart of the ocean beds from Tierra del Fuego to Nova Zemblya.

"I was just reading a Blue Mitchell interview in *Downbeat*. He talks about going on the road with John Mayall. Now, he'd done all that with bands like Basie's and the Duke, but here, there's thousands of kids really fuckin' enjoying themselves! He'd never seen an audience like it! In the atmosphere he couldn't put a note wrong — in other words, play a lot of old rubbish, didn't have to play very well — they just MEANT something to that audience. He'd never been in a situation where it meant so much to that many people — the size, the sheer romance and enthusiasm of it!

"So Blue Mitchell goes home and starts making funky records. It's so understandable. I mean, if you spent years in places like Slugs playing to a muted, respectful response for peanuts — and then to be invited into this set-up, lots of kids, lots of bread and they're doing their nuts over you — what are you gonna say? I mean, apart from his music being important to him, his LIFE'S important to him! He's gonna feel his life isn't all it could be. Course he is. He's gonna feel like a nun who's had her first fella. No, I can't believe it's wrong."

"Except the music's boring."

"No, I don't think if he's really that good he'll do it for that long. You've got to give people two or three years to do their homework. Jazz musicians aren't like classical — he has to make his mistakes in public, and perform — no matter how fallow a period it is — to make his living. Not many can afford to woodshed. You can't be too precious in that economic climate — you gotta keep banging the stuff out. Meanwhile, that doesn't mean you're not growing and getting bored with the boring things, you know.

"Compared with classical, jazz has coped pretty well with the rock thing. The post-Cage and Stockhausen gang have made a pathetic showing. They've got so many hang-ups about excitement being a dangerous thing that you lose your taste. I've done a couple gigs Pieces for Chamber Orchestra and Rock Musician.'

"They got such a nervous way of coping with the constant two fingers of popular culture, like 'Oh yes, frankly I'd really like to conduct Shirley Bassey one day.' No idea. This is not the charm of somebody who's secure in one idiom and being broadminded about another — someone like Yehudi Menuhin, bit of Indian, bit of George Harrison — there's a lot of authentic charm there. The geezers I'm talking about really can't make that leap to sexy timekeeping."

"Sounds like a new curate getting in with the Angels." Like no no, Buzz — Palm Sunday is nothing to do with circle jerks.


Again and again he leaps from the waves . . .
Pic: JOE STEVENS

"I'm not in despair about the effect rock culture is having on jazz musicians,'' Robert affirmed, setting the achievements of Zawinul and Jarrett against "the latest funk-bore album by Al Mouzon" and balancing in the black. "I don't think that need to be part of the excitement can be harmful. Not in the long term."

"YOU HAD the roar of the greasepaint, Robert, the smell of the crowd — how do you cope with working in a room after that?"

For new readers, Robert Wyatt drummed for" Soft Machine, lost the use of his legs in an accident and is confined to a wheelchair. Did I say confined? Tarnation — he's off again!

"I think it's overcrude to say you need a live audience. I'm in the position of writers and painters who work on their stuff and then present it for response."

"Nothing shapes the work in progress but you?"

"Right. Plus your anticipation of the response and I do think that matters. Everything you do is in the hope that it matters, and a surefire way of knowing that is if other people pick up on it. One of your motives for doing anything creative is catered for, which is escape from loneliness. You've got all these things in your brain and you're lonely with them so you put them down and the end of the process is when someone picks them up.

"I miss the excitement, the buzz of expectation, the live thing about touring in Europe, but I've still got it in that they still buy records and write letters. If you fuck the next record up it's gonna hurt and embarrass a lot people. Anyway, your first audience has gotta be you, that's gotta be the first person who claps."

Has changing your instrument changed your musical ideas?"

"Hmm. It's a bit worrying in a sense because although drumming makes more noise, it's a pretty humbling thing for a musician to play. You're judged really as a catalyst. While you're drumming, someone else is dealing with the harmonic and melodic set-up. There's no way you could think it's all you. The communal thing is very useful — everything you do has to be met by something somebody else is doing, so that's good for the brain and keeps your ego in check. The nicest thing was that you could stop a lot and think 'I won't do all this stuff just because I'm sitting here and want something to do with my hands.

"Maybe it's a reflection on my drumming, but I used to think how nice things used to sound when I stopped playing. If you stopped filling everything in, leaving enormous spaces, the stage didn't in fact blow up, disintegrate. You can listen almost as an outsider the way no-one else in the group can. It's good for you NOT to make assumptions about how important you are."

Robert picks up his notebook again. "Now I'm dealing with the voice and the piano. I made notes about this: The Problems of Singing. Um — oh yes — I remember. The voice is accidentally something that pop music uses, so the impression is I'm doing more poppy things than I was before, but that's not the case. Singing is a lot to take on, harmonically, because I'm illiterate compared to the amount of available knowledge. I rely on intuition for what's a good note and what isn't — just hearing a chord and seeing what notes go with it I rely on my ears.

"Instrumentalists have this constant tactile reference for the instrument which actually extends them. In other words, a horn player is given ideas by the availability of notes. A singer has to hear everything before he can sing it, he can't do a run in fourths like an instrument, so he's behind generally in innovations. Its a lot more uphill for him, but he avoids the easy inevitability of his fingers falling on that next note — see, you can often almost tell what instrument a tune was composed on. The instrument itself encourages idead."

"So there's no way your technique will outstrip your ideas?" Me, using the voice.

"No" said Robert. "It's a good thing to keep him relevant. But singers have been sort of relegated and composers can't be bothered to write for them. If he's really ambitious in his harmonic ideas, he'll use something else. If he wants to communicate, get across, he'll choose a singer.

Everybody's got a voice, it's the one instrument that everybody plays. The embarrassing thing for me is the connotations — like if I sing 'Love,' they'll judge it by whether I mean it. I plead that's unfair. I dont want to be judged on whether I send shivers through their spine when I sing 'Love.' I'm interested in the notes."

"So why not do wordless singing?"

"The trouble with that is you find yourself going Uh Uh Uh and Oo Oo Oo. What's brilliant' about words is they do make all the noises of the mouth that you'd never think of. You've got all these consonants and vowels and dipthongs and stuff. You try and think of them without words and you're down to a vocabulary of four noises. Words liberate sound. They're a great textural help."

Words, I thought, reeling in the tape. Yards and yards of Robert improvising, arguing, joking, speculating, correlating, endlessly inventive.

I never found the harpoon.

Brian Case

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY:

Soft Machine 3 (BS 66436)

Soft Machine 4 (CBS 64280)

Matching Mole (CBS 64850)

Matching Mole's Little Red Record (CBS 65260)

Robert Wyatt . . . 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard', (Virgin 2034)

Wyatt . . . 'Rock Bottom' (Virgin V2017)

Michael Mantler . . . The Hapless Child' (Watt 4)

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

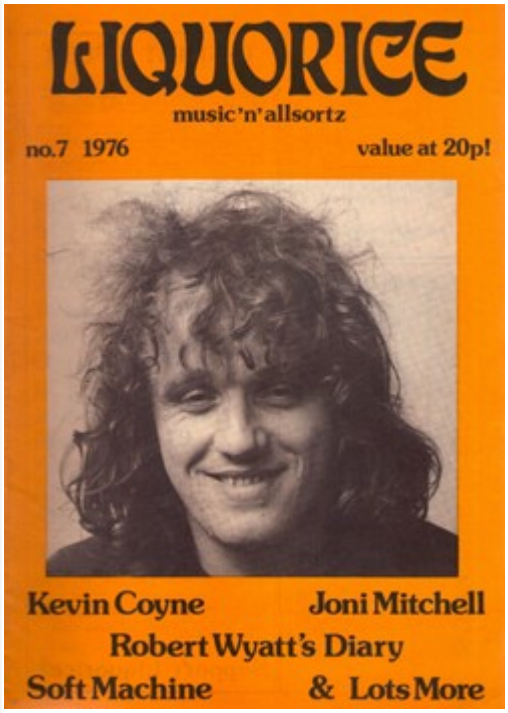
Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Flowers That Grow On The Compost Heap: a cock-eyed optimist's diary by Robert Wyatt - Liquorice - no.7 - 1976

Robert Wyatt and his Optimist's Diary

The Flowers That Grow



Even sooner than I expected, the 'rock generation' is churning out its John Waynes, Ronald Reagans and Shirley Temples. Steve Harley (who gets the 'purple prose' effect by painting blue meanies red) has revised the classic conundrum: "Nothing I say is true, therefore this statement is false, therefore... etc". He wags his finger at us, saying that Solzhenitsyn tells it like it is. So we turn eagerly to the Venerable S. who tells us, again with the emphatic wag of the trigger-finger, not to listen to arrogant, inexperienced young idealists. As circles go, this is one of the most vicious I've ever come across!

So almost everywhere I turn I seem to hear two generations warning us all against some bogey-man who is draining away our spiritual resources, leaving us morally bankrupt etc. They both regret some supposed lost age of innocence: the Young in a panic because even all Bruce Springsteen's publicity men can't put Bob Dylan's relevance and charisma back together again; the Old in an equally petulant panic because all those dirty coloured people (including miners who are after all only really white men between showers) who used to dig up and cut down our raw materials for us, seem to want a bit more than a pat on the head for their services these days.

The irrational impulse behind the Moan of the Rock Generation could be summarised: "It's no fun getting my Christmas stocking any more now the grown-ups have spoilt it all by revealing that Father Christmas was just daddy with a funny hat on".

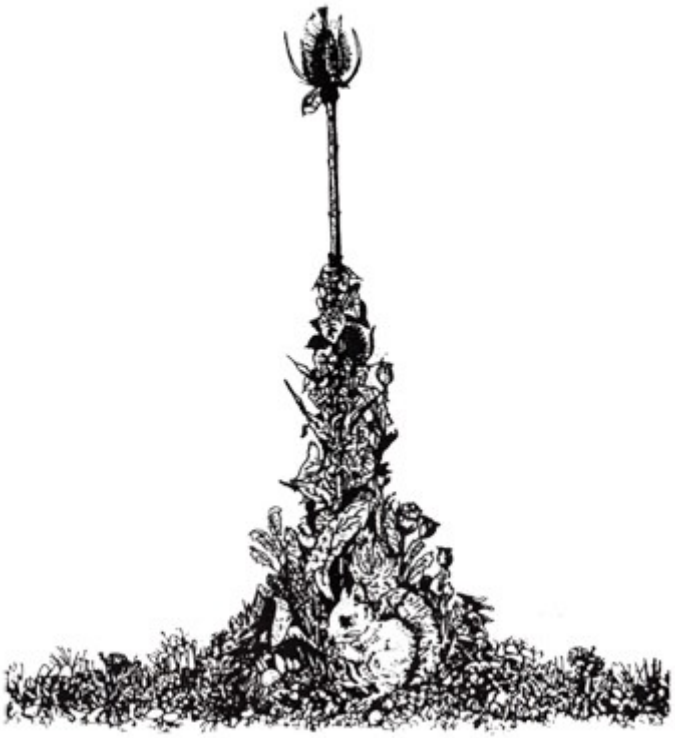
On The Compost Heap:

While the Great Parental Moan could be summarised: "Now my children have grown up, there is nobody to bring in the coal and do the household chores for us. It's not the same with the new maid, you have to pay her - mercenary bitch...". The result of this bizarre confluence of ' Ideaology backlash' victims is that we now find pop-stars and moderates (or right-wing extremists as they used to be called) desperately holding hands to defend the tattered remains of their spoils with only a tiny hand-ful of possessions (like their country retreats, their farmland, their newspapers, their banks, their church and their B.B.C.) to remind them of their former glory. It's a pathetic picture.

And what have all us commies, niggers, hippies, agitators and permissive whores to say for ourselves after all this trouble we've started? I decided to keep a Cock-eyed (no dirty puns intended) Optimist's Diary, in which I would record a random-ish sample of any events, however minor or apparently foolhardy, which gave hope to somebody, somewhere.

A.J.P. Taylor, an active participant in the General Strike That Never Happened, remarked recently, while reflecting on the miners' supporters defeat of the Tories in the '74 elections; "So we won, after all." To A.J.P's outrageously unfashionable cheerfulness, I dedicate the following brief selection from my diary...

a cock-eyed optimist's diary



1 Amnesty International, formed 15 years ago to put pressure on governments who use solitary confinement and torture as standard political tools against 'subversive' reformists etc, have obtained the release of everybody on their original lists, and continue to grow in influence, respected everywhere for their non-partisan approach; one of their most recent success stories being the release of Leonid Plyushch from Dniepropetrousk prison mental hospital.

2a Survival International help fund the Andoke tribe in Colombia, enabling them to pay off 'debts' to the all-powerful rubber-agents, and to become independent enough to purchase their own tools for rubber-collecting, and sell 'direct'.

2b S.I. get some medical protection for the Yaomami tribe of Southern Venezuela and Northern Brazil, suffering from previously unknown illnesses and infections brought in by white civilisation.

2c S.I. help Murvi-Muinane Indians withstand incursions of neo-Colombian society into the native environment.

2d S.I. help towards an integrated project for socio-economic development of the endemic people, with provisions included for animal conservation, on Siberut Island, West Sumatra, Indonesia.

2e S.I. try to assist relations between man and wildlife living at subsistence level in Greenland, Botswana and India, where the interests of man and wildlife sometimes seem to conflict.

2f S.I. help establish new alternatives in food acquisition for the endemic people of Siberut, and help to reduce the impact of white commercial interests related to timber extraction.

2g S.I. influence Paraguayan attitudes to their indigenous Indian population, away from the attitudes of social inferiority inflicted on the Indians because they are not identified as Christians, and help to create an atmosphere of concern for the future of all Amerindian groups.

3 South Africa's Progressive Reform Party demonstrated growing white disillusion with apartheid by winning an important by-election with a barrister who recently defended black students on "terrorism" charges.

4 Meanwhile back in Britain sex discrimination is banned in employment advertising. It's only a start but it's in the right direction...

5 Baroness Wootton and Gerald Gardiner Q.C. give remarkable T.V. interviews demonstrating that maturity and responsibility don't have to make people corrupt and/or cynical.

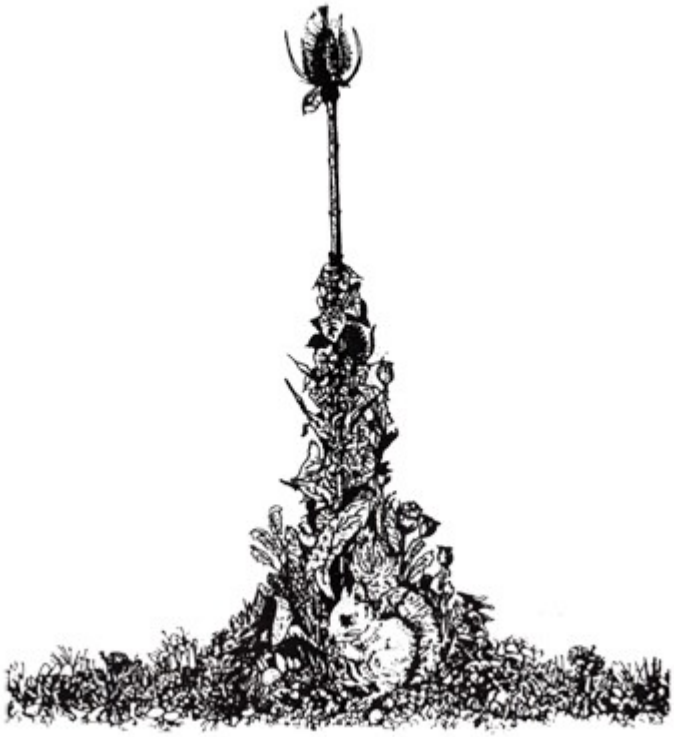
6 Prisoners help the blind: there's a recently established Braille unit at Aylesbury prison.

7 A new government report comes out firmly in support of Free Pop festivals. "Pop festivals are reasonable and acceptable forms of recreation", says the report, "not inherently objectionable or dangerous events".

8 It looks like the fall in the pound could be just what's needed for an export boom! British steel, for example, has flourished recently with such competitive prices.

9 The housing scheme in Blackburn seems to have really worked: they have a policy of renovating the better-built old houses and small shops, keeping neighbourhoods intact wherever possible.

10 Meanwhile - outside Liverpool - Runcorn is being studied by United Nations representatives as a model of new town building. The houses are small-scale, 'human' sized, in fact; buses have their own road; and there's plenty of grass - kids are allowed to play on it, too!



11 And the new Council homes in London's dockland at St.Katherine-By-The-Tower will be traffic-free, landscaped, and will also provide areas for children to play.

12 An export boom is forecast for Britain by Sir Frederick Catherwood, chairman of the British Institute of Management. He gives five reasons: a/the undervaluation of sterling; b/the new pay deal; c/growth of major export markets; d/secure membership of the B.E.C.; e/growing Trade Union realisation of the need for export-led growth.

13 Garfield Todd, former Prime-Minister of Rhodesia, released from prison at last. Now he can campaign more actively on behalf of the others...

14 British population decreased by around 9OOO last year. This should dispel any remaining fears of eventual overcrowding.

15 Get-rich-quick private abortionists lost 4O% business in early '76 compared with the same period last year. And the number of foreign women coming to Britain for abortions - the staple diet of teh private sector - dropped by well over half, as more liberal abortion laws were introduced in France and Germany.

16 Unemployment is down throughout Europe. An indication of the more optimistic mood of West European governments came when the Italian finance minister said he hoped it would be possible to end Italy's comprehensive import controls scheme earlier than its planned duration of three months.

17 Czechoslovakia's G.N.P. increased by 38% during the last five years. They have no unemployment.

18 Recent British Government legislation stops farm labourers being thrown out of cottages when too old or too ill to work.

19 FREGG (campaign for Free Range EGGs) getting organised against
the cruel (not to say tasteless) battery chicken system. Also an indication of the healthy fashion for small-scale home-grown food.

20 HABITAT studying cheap 'alternative technology' for use around the 'poor' world (most of the planet), taking easily available local resources into account. This 'self help' group, started in Stockholm, has been displaying its ideas in a special international gathering in Toronto - itself a model of trouble-free city planning for more affluent conditions. Speaking of which...



by Robert Wyatt

21 The Government of New South Wales is to be the next administration to legalise the private use of marijuana. Laws on soft drugs, homosexuality, prostitution and victimless crimes like vagrancy and drunkenness are all to be liberalised.

22 The notoriously high number of heart attacks in North Karelia being checked: project financed by Finnish government and the World Health Organisation has started to succeed partly by changing diet habits: more vegetables, less fatty meat.

23 A series of articles in a special report in the Grauniad on behalf of a secular, democratic Palestine. Case well and reasonably put.

24 The success of Bob Marley among others has paved the way for relatively large-scale acceptance of modern West Indian music in Britain.

25 3rd year pupils at Stewards Comprehensive School in Harlow, Essex, learning and performing Ghanaian dances taught by director of creative studies, Felix Cobbson. They may go to the Festival of Culture and Arts in Lagos, Nigeria, next year.

26 A government white paper on the working of the Children and Young Persons Act of 1969 contains first steps towards phasing out all remands of young people to adult prisons - and will, says the white paper, come into effect as soon as possible.

27 According to 'Psychiatry in Medicine' (Vol.7), the growing number of women doctors make better G.P.s than men: they tend to be more conscientious and thorough, as well as less irritable. And they are preferred by black and other ethnic groups.

28 Hunter Davies' book on Creighton Comprehensive School points out the unprecedented potential of the comprehensive system.

29 George Davis released to ecstatic welcome home in Bow.

30 Workers representing the 2OOO people of United Biscuits plant at Isleworth took their place alongside shareholders for the first time at the company's annual meeting in Edinburgh. The firm's participation policy was based on effective, cost-conscious, profit-oriented management, who recognised that they were more likely to be successful by embracing participation which leads to greater involvement and breaks down barriers.

31 No "War trials" bloodbath in Vietnam: old Southern soldiers going to polling booths with everyone else.

32 The film 'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest' received loads of awards and has been on general release and shown in cinemas that normally only show 'uncontroversial' films.

33 Meanwhile (what a useful word that is) back in the U.S.A., Seminoles and Choctaws, remnants of a once-powerful South-Eastern group of Indians, start on the slow climb back to prosperity...

...music, curtain, lights...

- I'm glad to say this diary has no end -

USEFUL ADDRESSES

Friends of the Earth Limited, 9 Poland Street, London W1V 3DO.

Free Range Egg Scheme, 39 Maresfield Gardens, London NWS.

Survival International, 36 Craven Street, London WC2N 5NQ.

The Royal society For The Protection Of Birds, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire. SG19 2BR.

Amnesty International/British Section, 55 Theobalds Rd, London WC1,

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Mantler paints it black + Gorey stories - Melody Maker - April 17, 1976



Mantler paints it black

MICHAEL MANTLER/EDWARD GOREY: "The Hapless Child And



Other Inscrutable Stories " (Watt Records).
Music by **Michael Mantler**, words by **Edward Gorey**, with **Robert Wyatt** (vocals), **Carla Bley** (piano,clavinet, string synthesizer), **Terje Rypdal** (guitar), **Steve Swallow** (bass), **Jack DeJohnette** (drums). Produced by **Carla Bley**.

EDWARD GOREY is a New York cult figure, a 50-year-old eccentric wrapped in fur coats who specialises in desperately grim illustrated novels, mostly set in slightly surreal Victorian scenarios - genteel English landscapes where all ought to be well, but, where terrible things tend to happen to the noblest of families.

Michael Mantler is an ex-**Cecil Taylor** trumpeter turned composer who is married to Carla Bley. Together they run **Watt Records**. Now, all of Mantler's pieces have been distinguished by a harrowing bleakness. Pastel colours, it seems, don't figure in his palette. His favourites are apparently, dark red, grey and black.

One of Mantler's passions is creating a contemporary impressionist music to convey the nature of particular literary artists. Already, he's covered Samuel Beckett on " No Answer" (with some success) and is currently dealing with Harold Pinter. But a Mantler-Gorey collaboration seems singularly apposite. Since each is as miserable as the other, the resultant album plumbs new gloomy depths. I suppose it's a telling comment on my own character that I like " The Hapless Child" very much.

Some story synopses are required. The title tracks tells the tale of a child called Charlotte Sophia, whose mother, believing her husband killed in action in Africa, dies of a broken heart. Charlotte is put into a boarding school where she's punished for things she hasn't 'done. Her favourite doll is torn limb from limb. She runs away, collapses on the street, is robbed and sold into the service of a drunken brute who forces her to make artificial flowers in a dark basement. Her eyesight fails. The brute goes mad. Charlotte runs out into the street where she is struck down by a car driven by her own father, who has returned from

Africa, not dead after all. The child dies in his arms.



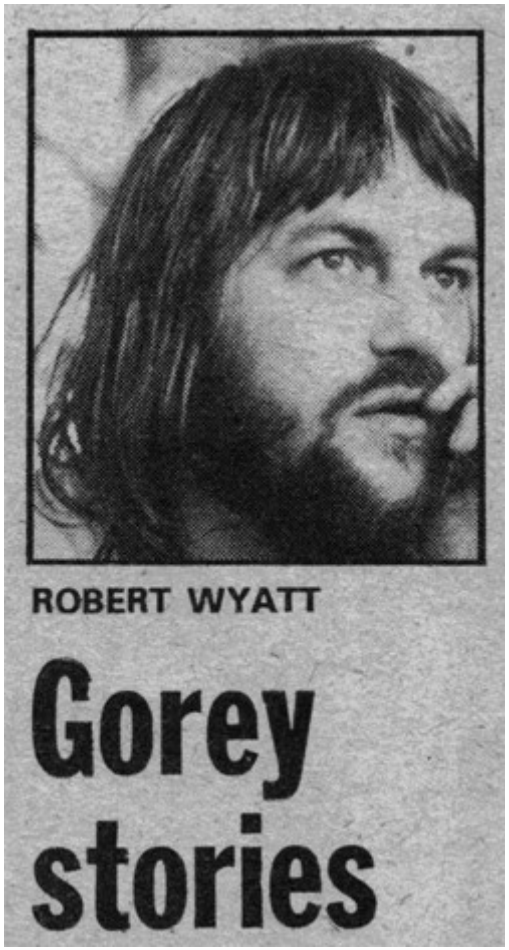
ROBERT WYATT: his most creative vocal work

Heart-rending stuff, you'll agree, though not as terrifying as the story of Millicent Frastley, an unfortunate little girl sacrificed to "The Insect God." Or as mysterious as " The Sinking Spell," an enigmatic visitation that sinks from the heavens. The only light relief, of sorts, is found in " The Doubtful Guest " - the adventures of a rather engaging, plimsolled monster

who attaches himself to a family and wreaks mild havoc. Since all the lyric matter is comprised of complete Gorey stories, some written in verse form, some not, a singer of very special talents is required, and Robert Wyatt, it must be said, does amazingly well with material that, to me, still looks completely impossible to sing. I might even go as far as to claim this as the most creative vocalising Wyatt has yet put on record - and that, as you know, is saying much. But it isn't just the dexterity with which he sings, or the brilliant voice overlaps on, say, " The Object-Lesson," it's also the very *naturalness* of his singing that makes him the perfect choice here. Robert's voice, with lisp and accent intact in their transference to song, doesn't employ the usual mannerisms that are supposed to convey emotion in rock music. And nasty stories delivered completely dispassionately are the most unsettling nasty stories of all, believe me.

Meanwhile, Terge Rypdal's guitar, which is concerned almost exclusively - with conveying choked emotion (at least in the context of his own albums) rambles throughout "The Hapless Child" like a chorus of women wailing on the edge of hysteria. And obviously the rhythm tracks laid down by Bley, Swallow and the ridiculously accomplished DeJohnette, are thoroughly sound. Add up those factors and " The Hapless Child" emerges as an extremely impressive album, probably an important one. At the same time, it's scarcely a record to play at parties. Music by, and for, depressives. There are probably enough of us around to put " The Hapless Child " in the chart.

S.L.



ROBERT WYATT

Gorey stories

AS Steve Lake remarks elsewhere in this issue, in his review of " The Hapless Child And Other Inscrutable Stories," the collaboration between composer Michael Mantler and Edward Gorey, the author and illustrator of the singularly macabre stories upon which the aforementioned album is based, is most apposite.

Who better than Mantler - the man who set to music Samuel Beckett's How It Is - to translate the vivid pictorial landscapes of Gorey, a renowned New York eccentric and cult figure who delights in creating situations infected with surreal menace and paranoia.

According to Carla Bley, who eventually took over the project and produced the album, Manlier had for some time been considering adapting the screenplay of Alain Resnais' Last Year In Marienbad (or possibly his Hiroshima Mon Amour).

She was In Europe touring with the short lived Jack Bruce Band when Mantler decided finally upon the Gorey stories.

Within a month of discovering Gorey's work Mantler apparently, had selected six specific stories and composed all the music and recorded the demos which he then handed over to Bley who set about forming an ad hoc band for the final recordings.

Jack DeJohnette (drums) and Steve Swallow (bass) were she says, automatic choices. The original selection for the vocal part was Jack Bruce, who had worked with Manlier on " No Answer " (the Beckett adaptation).

Carla had by this time however, left the Bruce band and for various reasons it was decided that another singer should be brought in. She had heard and been impressed by Robert Wyatt's " Rock Bottom



AS Steve Lake remarks elsewhere in this issue, in his review of "The Hapless Child And Other Inscrutable Stories," the collaboration between composer Michael Mantler and Edward Gorey, the author and illustrator of the singularly macabre stories upon which the aforementioned album is based, is most apposite.

Who better than Mantler — the man who set to music Samuel Beckett's How It Is — to translate the vivid pictorial landscapes of Gorey, a renowned New York eccentric and cult figure who delights in creating situations infected with surreal menace and paranoia.

" and he was considered to be the natural choice in the absence of Bruce.

Wyatt, whose vocal performance on " The Hapless Child" is not only one of the most compelling features of an extraordinary album but also the most impressive vocalising he has ever committed to record, admits candidly that he was completely alarmed when he was originally asked to contribute to the project.

" It was so bloody complicated," he says of Mantler's score, "and I honestly didn't think I was capable of singing the part." He has, however, captured perfectly the sense of perpetual fright and surprise which is a characteristic of Gorey's victims.
He was drawn immediately to Gorey, he admits, because he finds him to be such a humourous writer.

It comes as no surprise, finally, to discover that Mantler's current project is based on Harold Pinter's play Silence, or that Robert will be singing one of the principal roles. The record is almost complete, adds Bley, who will also be taking a vocal lead. The only problem lies with the availability of Alex Harvey, who will sing the part of the third character in the play.

Alex is currently working on a new S.A.H.B. album and is set to tour Europe in the next few weeks. " If he can't make it before then," says Carla with a hint of desperation, "I don't know what we'll do ... it'll put the entire project back ten years."

According to Carla Bley, who eventually took over the project and produced the album, Mantler had for some time been considering adapting the screenplay of Alain Resnais' Last Year In Marienbad (or possibly his Hiroshima Mon Amour).

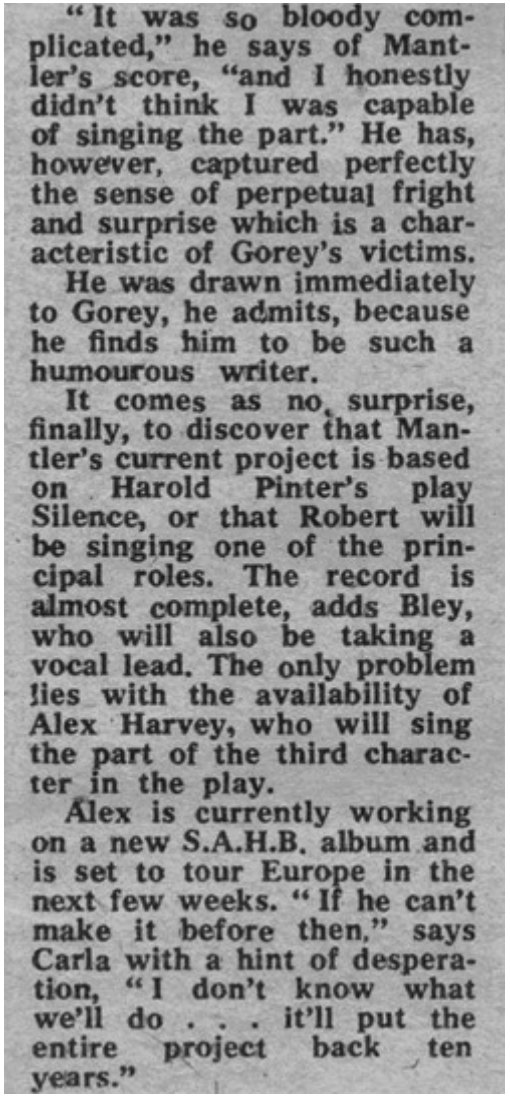
She was in Europe touring with the short lived Jack Bruce Band when Mantler decided finally upon the Gorey stories.

Within a month of discovering Gorey's work Mantler, apparently, had selected six specific stories and composed all the music and recorded the demos which he then handed over to Bley who set about forming an ad hoc band for the final recordings.

Jack DeJohnette (drums) and Steve Swallow (bass) were, she says, automatic choices. The original selection for the vocal part was Jack Bruce, who had worked with Mantler on "No Answer" (the Beckett adaptation).

Carla had by this time, however, left the Bruce band and for various reasons it was decided that another singer should be brought in. She had heard and been impressed by Robert Wyatt's "Rock Bottom" and he was considered to be the natural choice in the absence of Bruce.

Wyatt, whose vocal performance on "The Hapless Child" is not only one of the most compelling features of an extraordinary album but also the most impressive vocalising he has ever committed to record, admits candidly that he was completely alarmed when he was originally asked to contribute to the project.



"It was so bloody complicated," he says of Mantler's score, "and I honestly didn't think I was capable of singing the part." He has, however, captured perfectly the sense of perpetual fright and surprise which is a characteristic of Gorey's victims.

He was drawn immediately to Gorey, he admits, because he finds him to be such a humourous writer.

It comes as no surprise, finally, to discover that Mantler's current project is based on Harold Pinter's play Silence, or that Robert will be singing one of the principal roles. The record is almost complete, adds Bley, who will also be taking a vocal lead. The only problem lies with the availability of Alex Harvey, who will sing the part of the third character in the play.

Alex is currently working on a new S.A.H.B. album and is set to tour Europe in the next few weeks. "If he can't make it before then," says Carla with a hint of desperation, "I don't know what we'll do . . . it'll put the entire project back ten years."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

The real Back to Africa movement stars here - Street Life - March 30-April, 2, 1976

The real Back to Africa movement starts here

by Robert Wyatt



The original idea was for Robert Wyatt to write a tribute to Mongezi Feza, the black South African trumpeter who died at the end of last year; in the event, it seemed that the best tribute to Mongezi would be to talk about his friends and compatriots who are still alive and playing in Britain, and who are also subject to the pressures which killed him. An interview with Louis Moholo, a tribute to Mongezi, a celebration of music that "Britain doesn't know it's got ... "

WHILE preparations were being made to have the body of trumpeter Mongezi Feza flown back home to South Africa for burial (there were some difficulties withe S.A. Customs officials!), some of his friends recorded a memorial performance ("We asked Island records if they could just let us have any spare room with a piano for a few hours") soon to be released on the Ogun record label. Dudu Pukwana on alto of course; pianist Chris McGregor on a brief visit from his place in France; bassist Johnny Dyani, also fresh from working on the continent (he stayed long enough to record another tape with Pete Lemer and Laurie Allan before returning to the relatively appreciative audiences of Scandinavia, etc.) and drummer Louis Moholo. Louis was just about to leave for Venice to play with Keith Tippett and Peter Kowald when he talked to me about the years with Mongezi Feza, and the situation is survivors find themselves in.

These, include Julian Bahula, bassists Victor Ntoni and Ernest Mohle, guitarist Lucky Ranky, and Louis himself, of course. He's been playing with Mike Osborne, with alto player Peter Bennink (Han Bennink's brother) and Evan Parker, Various groups in Holland, Germany,

Switzerland. There are plans for a group with Gary Windo and a couple of bassists . . .

"I would say that we're practising in England, but working on the continent . . . Britain doesn't know what it's got."

So, what brought these musicians so far from home in the first place? Knowing that Louis has relatives in South Africa whom he hopes to see later on in the year, I had to avoid asking him any questions of a 'provocatively' political nature, for the obvious reason that I don't want to make his life any more difficult than it is already.

"In order for us (Mongezi, Dudu, etc.) to play together with Chris (McGregor) in South Africa Chris would come to a gig wearing a cap and hide his white skin by pulling his cap right down almost al over his face! But this trick was impossible the other way round — you couldn't hide us in places where whites were playing. We managed to dodge around, playing together, but we knew we wouldn't get away with it for long. Early on the S.A. Government were not that much hip to jazz — they never thought anything of it, you know — but later they caught on. If they had have caught on earlier that would have made it harder — it was getting worse when we split. Just like in the States in the old days — some white cats would be using a black musician, but he would be playing behind a curtain!

"Everybody hears 'kwela' (the folk / dance music of the African townships) on the radio, but it's the 'kwela' the white man likes — you see? It's got nothing to do with us, in a way. Hugh Masakela's music is still really kwela deep down — the one that the people know — I like the way he treats his kwela.

"But if you come in the radio studio with the original kwela then the guy in the studio will say, 'No . . . No, . . . Not That . . .!' .

"The first group we played in professionally was (tenor player) Ronnie Beer's. I remember . . . we played with him and I was arrested — my pass was fucked up, you know — and I went to jail. At the same time there was a festival in Johannesburg; by luck, Chris came to Cape town. He heard Ronnie Beer preparing for the festival and asked: 'Where is Louis?' I was in jail, that was it. But Chris started finding out if there was any fine . . . One afternoon my name was called — and I was out! Into a car, off to rehearsals, and on to the Johannesburg festival.

"I stayed in Johannesburg waiting for Mongezi and a bass player friend to finish some work with Chris' band — the three of us were going to play together back in Capetown; but then Chris said he wanted to use me in his new band, which was going to play at the Juan-les-Pins festival, on the French Riviera! So I took the opportunity.

"We had Mongezi, Dudu, Johnny Dyani and a tenor player called Nick Moyaki. We were playing mainly Dud's charts — he was composing about six tunes a day! Also we were very influenced by the voicings and sound of Duke (Ellington).

"After a couple of gigs in France and Zurich, Nick decided to go back to South Africa. A few months later he died from a brain tumour. The rest of us decided to stay in Europe a while.

"When I was in Copenhagen I fell in love with some Danish chick and there was a black American guy who wanted this chick. He'd pass remarks — I should smell his hair, for example . . . He'd smell mine and suggest I use Brylcreem you know, to show the girl that I was from the jungle. That was in the Sixties. But now . . if you fall in love with an American or West Indian woman, she may be going to get your African surname — much better! It's now seen as a link, going back, for the children. This is quite recent — it's a new thing, all the American cats changing their names to 'Kenyatta' and things like that. It's good in a way because 'Williams' or whatever is a slave name — from slave owners.

"But at first when we — Johnny Dyani, Dudu, Mongs — when we wanted to sit in (with American musicians), have a play, the guys would say 'Where do you come from?' 'South Africa.' 'What?' 'I come from South Africa.' Then the guys just wouldn't be interested, they'd figure, South Africa is the jungle, right? There couldn't possibly be any jazz happening there! We'd be pleading: 'Please, can we just have a sit in?' Then, in the end, five days later they'd say: 'O.K. have a blow.' and then you'd blow their arses off, you know?

"And they'd become very interested, like: 'Oh-oh-What's this —?' They'd be asking you what your name was, trying to be friendly, and you'd say: 'My name is Louis Moholo.' 'Louis Who?' and "where d'you get that name from?' They'd think I was an American into that trip of changing surnames — that maybe my name was really Louis Hamburger, and that I'd

changed it to be hip! They'd say: 'You can't play that good — not from South Africa!' It took them a long time.

"But now they recognise people like Dollar (Brand). I think that our musicians now (like drummer Timy Hkwe Bulana, or pianist Tete Mbambisa, or Ezra Ngqukana, Man Kunku, and Duku Makasi, who play tenor, bassist Harry Miller) could sit in with anyone . . . that, at least, has been dealt with.

"The truth is, though, that we really want to play in South Africa for our people.

"It would be nice to go back home and make them laugh a little bit; and cheer them up a little bit . . . you know?"

The real Back to Africa movement starts here

by Robert Wyatt

The original idea was for Robert Wyatt to write a tribute to Mongezi Feza, the black South African trumpeter who died at the end of last year; in the event, it seemed that the best tribute to Mongezi would be to talk about his friends and compatriots who are still alive and playing in Britain, and who are also subject to the pressures which killed him. An interview with Louis Moholo, a tribute to Mongezi, a celebration of music that "Britain doesn't know it's got . . ."

WHILE preparations were being made to have the body of trumpeter Mongezi Feza flown back home to South Africa for burial (there were some difficulties withe S.A. Customs officials!), some of his friends recorded a memorial performance ("We asked Island records if they could just let us have any spare room with a piano for a few hours") soon to be released on the Ogun record label. Dudu Pukwana on alto of course; pianist Chris McGregor on a brief visit from his place in France; bassist Johnny Dyani, also fresh from working on the continent (he stayed long enough to record another tape with Pete Lemer and Laurie Allan before returning to the relatively appreciative audiences of Scandinavia, etc.) and drummer Louis Moholo. Louis was just about to leave for Venice to play with Keith Tippett and Peter Kowald when he talked to me about the years with Mongezi Feza, and the situation is survivors find themselves in.

These include Julian Bahula, bassists Victor Ntoni and Ernest Mohle, guitarist Lucky Ranky, and Louis himself, of course. He's been playing with Mike Osborne, with alto player Peter Bennink (Han Bennink's brother) and Evan Parker, Various groups in Holland, Germany, Switzerland. There are plans for a group with Gary Windo and a couple of bassists . . .

"I would say that we're practising in England, but working on the continent . . . Britain doesn't know what it's got."

So, what brought these musicians so far from home in the first place? Knowing that Louis has relatives in South Africa whom he hopes to see later on in the year, I had to avoid asking him any questions of a 'provocatively' political nature, for the obvious reason that I don't want to make his life any more difficult than it is already.

"In order for us (Mongezi, Dudu, etc.) to play together with Chris (McGregor) in South Africa Chris would come to a gig wearing a cap and hide his white skin by pulling his cap right down almost al over his face! But this trick was impossible the other way round — you couldn't hide us in places where whites were playing. We managed to dodge around, playing together, but we knew we wouldn't get away with it for long. Early on the S.A. Government were not that much hip to jazz — they never thought anything of it, you know — but later they caught on. If they had have caught on earlier that would have made it harder — it was getting worse when we split. Just like in the States in the old days — some white cats would be using a black musician, but he would be playing behind a curtain!

"Everybody hears 'kwela' (the folk / dance music of the African townships) on the radio, but it's the 'kwela' the white man likes — you see? It's got nothing to do with us, in a way. Hugh Masakela's music is still really kwela deep down — the one that the people know — I like the way he treats his kwela.

"But if you come in the radio studio with the original kwela then the guy in the studio will say, 'No . . . No, . . . Not That . . .!'

"The first group we played in professionally was (tence player) Ronnie Beer's. I remember . . . we played with him and I was arrested — my pass was fucked up, you know — and I went to jail. At the same time there was a festival in Johannesburg; by luck, Chris came to Cape town. He heard Ronnie Beer preparing for the festival and asked: "Where is Louis?" I was in jail. that was it. But Chris started finding out if there was any fine . . . One afternoon my name was called — and I was out! Into a car, off to rehearsals, and on to the Johannesburg festival.

"I stayed in Johannesburg waiting for Mongezi and a bass player friend to finish some work with Chris' band — the three of us were going to play together back in Capetown; but then Chris said he wanted to use me in his new band, which was going to play at the Juan-les-Pins festival, on the French Riviera! So I took the opportunity.

"We had Mongezi, Dudu, Johnny Dyani and a tenor player called Nick Moyaki. We were playing mainly Dud's charts — he was composing about six tunes a day! Also we were very influenced by the voicings and sound of Duke (Ellington).

"After a couple of gigs in France and Zurich, Nick decided to go back to South Africa. A few months later he died from a brain tumour. The rest of us decided to stay in Europe a while.

"When I was in Copenhagen I fell in love with some Danish chick and there was a black American guy who wanted this chick. He'd pass remarks — I should smell his hair, for example . . . He'd smell mine and suggest I use Brylcreem you know, to show the girl that I was from the jungle. That was in the Sixties. But now . . if you fall in love with an American or West Indian woman, she may be going to get your African surname — much better! It's now seen as a link, going back, for the children. This is quite recent — it's a new thing, all the American cats changing their names to 'Kenyatta' and things like that. It's good in a way because "Williams" or whatever is a slave name — from slave owners.

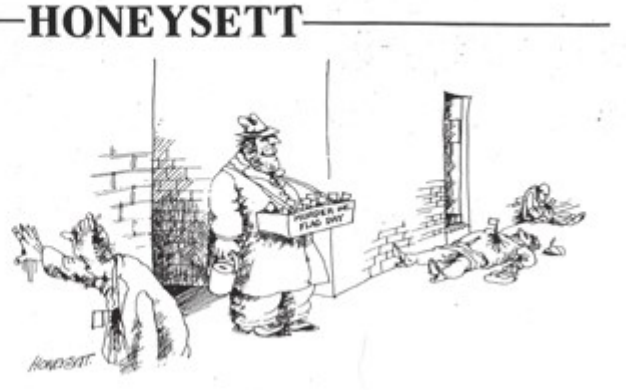
"But at first when we — Johnny Dyani, Dudu, Mongs — when we wanted to sit in (with American musicians), have a play, the guys would say 'Where do you come from?' 'South Africa.' 'What?' 'I come from South Africa.' Then the guys just wouldn't be interested, they'd figure, South Africa is the jungle, right? There couldn't possibly be any jazz happening there! We'd be pleading: 'Please, can we just have a sit in?' Then, in the end, five days later they'd say: 'O.K. have a blow.' and then you'd blow their arses off, you know?

"And they'd become very interested, like: 'Oh-oh-What's this —?' They'd be asking you what your name was, trying to be friendly, and you'd say: 'My name is Louis Moholo.' 'Louis Who?' and "where d'you get that name from?' They'd think I was an American into that trip of changing surnames — that maybe my name was really Louis Hamburger, and that I'd changed it to be hip! They'd say: 'You can't play that good — not from South Africa!' It took them a long time.

"But now they recognise people like Dollar (Brand). I think that our musicians now (like drummer Timy Hkwe Bulana, or pianist Tete Mbambisa, or Ezra Ngqukana, Man Kunku, and Duku Makasi, who play tenor, bassist Harry Miller) could sit in with anyone . . . that, at least, has been dealt with.

"The truth is, though, that we really want to play in South Africa for our people.

"It would be nice to go back home and make them laugh a little bit; and cheer them up a little bit . . . you know?" □



Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Evolving Hymn: Illustrated by Her - Words by Robert Wyatt: Paintings by Alfreda Benge - Street Life - N° 6 Vol. 1 - January 10-23, 1976

The Evolving Hymn: Illustrated by Her

Words by Robert Wyatt: Paintings by Alfreda Benge



Oh Natural Selection, Evolve A While With Me

"Honour thy mistake as a hidden intention" — Brian Eno.

THE EVOLVING HYMN

Oh God, He so comprehensive. He see every sparrow what fall. 'There go another sparrow', He say, 'or war it a thrush? It's hard to tell from up here'. He very well meaning, He on everyone side (but reluctantly plump for the winner-take-all approach).

'Oh Natural Selection
Oh Natural Selection
Oh Natural Selection
Evolve A. While With Me'



We can drink our politics away, starting in the middle of the day we can drink our politics away.

"What we feel we have to solve is why the dregs have not dissolved" — Peter Blegvad.

SIGNED CURTAIN

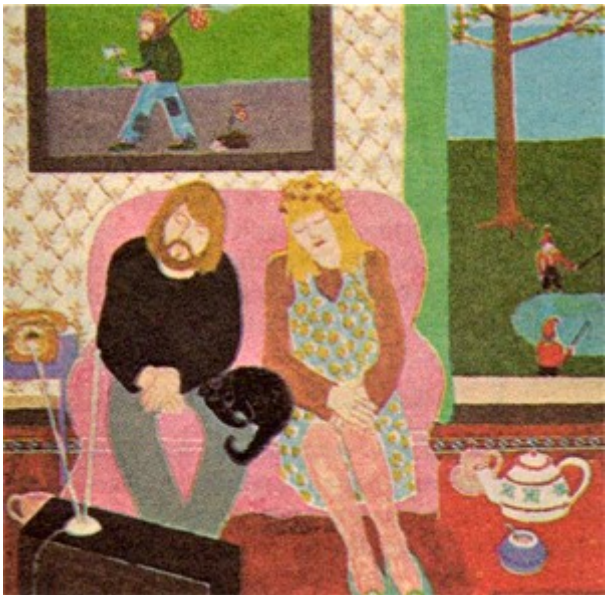
This is the first verse, this is the first verse, this is the first verse, this is the first verse, this is the first verse, this is the first verse and this is the chorus, or perhaps it's a bridge or just another part of the song that I'm singing.
This is the second verse, it could be the last verse, this is the second verse, it could be the last verse, this is the second verse, it's probably the last one; and this is the chorus, or perhaps it's a bridge or just another key change.
Never mind, it doesn't hurt, it only means that I've lost faith in this song, 'cause it won't help me reach you.

"... He passed on to the Statue of Corrupted Endeavour to await the arrival of Autumn" — Edward Gorey.

GLORIA GLOOM

Like so many of you, I've got my doubts about how much to contribute to the already rich among us. How long can I pretend that music's more relevant than fighting for a socialist world?

Someone watching us knows I'm bad. Black plastic along blue black wall, small square (for faces) where dead men can look through. Run along and see the prison bath; throw a stone along an empty road; you and your friend will be found.
Outside the daydream I've woken up to watch you sleep.


In the garden of England, dead moles lie inside their holes

SEA SONG

You look different every time you come from the foam created brine (it's) your skin, shining softly in the moonlight. Partly fish, partly porpoise, partly baby sperm whale, am I yours, are you mine to play with? Joking apart, when you're drunk you're terrific when you're drunk, I like you mostly late at night — you're quite all right. But I can't understand the different you in the morning, when it's time to play at being human for a while. Please smile!
You'll be different in the Spring, I know you're a seasonal beast like the starfish that drift in with the tide, with the tide. So until your blood runs to meet the next full moon, your madness fits in nicely with my own, with my own, your lunacy fits neatly with my own, my very own. We're not alone.

"Don't go madam ... we get better" — Ronnie Scott.

LAST STRAW

Seaweed tangled in our home from home reminds me of your rocky bottom. Please don't wait for the paperweight; err on the good side, touch us when we collapse.
Into the water we'll go head over heel; we'll not grow fat inside the mammary gland. Into the water we'll go head over heel; a head buried behind me deep in the sand.

' I like that Daddy, it doesn't make me boring" — Chloe Mason.

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD HITS THE ROAD

Orlandon't tell me oh no! Don't say, oh God don't tell me ... or dear me, heavens above, oh no, no, I can't stand it ... stop, please, oh deary me, what in heaven's name . . . ? Oh blimey, mercy me, woe are we, oh dear . . . oh stop it .". . stop it ...
You've been so kind I know, I know, so why did I hurt you? I didn't mean to hurt you. But I'll keep trying and I'm sure you will too.

"I have to go now because I have to climb a mountain" — Hugh Hopper.

TEAM SPIRIT

Kick me Hardy; without one sweet push from your shine covered boot I don't think, I just know I'll be grounded for ever more; over turn me, you can hardly miss me, I'm the one face down in the mud on the ground. I'll be stuck here forever unless you come over and kick me Hardy. I'm the best football you have got, I beat the lot, I'll take the cake. Be masterful, be my hero and believe me Hardy,
if it's tough you want then it's tough you've got. I mean, if this is only a question of toughness, survive me Hardy or deflate me straight away. Beating the shit out of me takes the hell out of you. If I'm nothing without you then why stick it out? You can pass me over, but I'm the only chance you've got. If you asked me, here's my advice: use me to go hell for leather and back.
Kick me Handy; without one push from your shine covered boot I don't think, I just know I'll be grounded for ever more; over turn me, you should just be thankful (that) when it comes to the crunch I'm the best of the bunch. At the end of the day you could easily say that I come in handy. I'm the best football you have got, I beat the lot, I'll take the cake. Be masterful, be my hero and be grateful Handy.

"Loneliness is a gift from heaven" — James Thurber.



Into the water we'll go, head over heel

LITTLE RED ROBIN HOOD HITS THE ROAD

In the garden of England, dead moles lie inside their holes; the dead end tunnels crumble in the rain underfoot (innit a shame?). Can't you see them? Can't you see them? Roots can't hold them, bugs console them.
I fight with the handle of my little brown broom, I pull out the wires of the telephone, I hurt in the head and I hurt in the aching bone. Now I smash up the telly with remains of the telephone, I fighting for the crust of the little brown loaf — I want it, I want it, I want it ... give it to me. I give it you back when I finish the lunchtea.
I lie in the road, try to trip up the passing cars; yes, me and the hedgehog we bursting the tyres all day. As we roll down the highway

towards the setting sun I reflect on the life of the highwayman yum yum.
Now I smash up the telly and what's left of the broken phone.

"... you and I, we could give up our jobs and go, we could leave all our commitments here, if we wanted to. I think. Well. I think we could. I think we could . . . well, maybe." — Fred Frith.

MUDDY MOUTH

Relatively used to coping with the darkness underground, Cub and Brownie blink as they emerge. Overhead the stars are piercing, glaring on their new home — wasted jungle, crowded with dead trees. What do cubs and brownies do at night after a boring day? Shine their boots and practice tying knots? No of course not! After school they play hide and seek, chase each other, clutching in the dark.
What do Ann and Handy do after a long, exhausting shift? Clean the spades and clear away the dirt? No of course not! Usually they lie down in the mud close together, just to save on heat.
Work is split up, but it gets harder every day, it's never done. Call it peaceful. Call it grinding the time away. Say that ditches aren't homely. Call it boredom. Either way Ann decides to potter off. How's that for brains?
Deep in the undergrows, Handy sighed with relief. He'd come alone in the dark — he'd come again at dawn, if not before the morning cockrise. Meanwhile in the bushes above, behind the toepath which goes along beside the canal leading to the sea, which in turn leads on to all the major oceans — Indian, Atlantic, Pacific, I can't remember the names of the others off-Handy cided to leave. He'd come apart at the seam — endangered life and lawn order before, the more since he lies (even under oaf Handy lies) when he feels caught between righand wrong. I think he might have been wrong this time, which in turn left him with few alternatives to relieving himself by hand, alone in the dark, wanking in the bog.

"What a cunt he turned out to be" — Laurie Allan.

STRUBBLIN' STRIFE



How long can I put it ?

Strubblin' strife, strubblin' strife, Ola Ya Ya Mama, Ola Ya Ya Mama. Me been a senstibule, considulate, fabaloofly greeny, often a parsley. Me Goota Goota, not say 'Freg' — No! No! No! Not sing him 'Freg'. Oh my Goddy Goddy, Deary little God-God.
Hooooooooooooooooooooooo
nabbin my winksey?
Who heeeeeeeeeeeee da breake ma pamererarm?
Crackle Crackle.
De Bay-con. De Sossinks.
Gone astray, gone astray. If you Goddy light I gone astray. De road turn blue, de road turn green, where my cow gone, where she been? De house turn black, de house bend and break, de house squash my Unhappamily. O no! Oh No! My Unhappamily.
Oh God, He so comprehensive, He see every sparrow what fall. 'There go another sparrow', He say, 'or war it a thrush? It's hard to tell from up here'. He very well meaning, He on everyone side (but reluctantly plump for the winner-take-all approach).

'Oh Natural Selection
Oh Natural Selection
Oh Natural Selection
Evolve A While With Me' "I'll smoke to that" — Brian Case.

ALL SONGS by Robert Wyatt. 'Signed Curtain' is from the album 'Matching Mole'; 'We Can Drink Our Politics Away' and 'Gloria Gloom' from 'Matching Mole's Little Red Record'; all published by Soft Machine Publishing Company/MCPS. 'Sea Song,' 'Last Straw,' 'Little Red Riding Hood Hits The Road' and 'Little Red Robin Hood Hits The Road' are from 'Rock Bottom'; 'Team Spirit'and 'Muddy Mouth'are from 'Ruth Is Tranger Than Richard'; all published by Virgin Music (Publishers) Ltd. 'Stubblin' Strife' and 'The Evolving Hymn' are new songs, as yet unrecorded. They will be published by Virgin Music (Publishing) Ltd.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

When In Rome... - Sounds - July 12, 1975

WHEN IN ROME...

... you have to adjust to Italian politics, especially when you're putting on a free rock concert. Virgin chief Richard Branson found out the hard way when three of his group appeared at a Rome concert last weekend. STEVE PEACOCK is wise the event.



SOMEWHERE between 40,000 and 60,000 people (methods of head counting at free concerts are pretty rudimentary) were milling in Rome's Piazza Navona last weekend, but the music had stopped. Henry Cow and Robert Wyatt don't normally take a half-time interval.

Somebody had trod on the power cable that stretched halfway across the square from the stage and pulled it out of its connection on the wall of a public building. (Methods of supplying electricity at free concerts can be pretty rudimentary as well.)

The power was reconnected, and the set was finished. Gong followed, and members of Gong and Henry Cow joined together for a finale. Virgin people, says chief Virgin Richard Branson, have long had a large and enthusiastic following in Italy. The crowd was large and the reception enthusiastic.

Graspers

I enjoyed the Cow/Wyatt set, which was much the same as their recent New London Theatre concert but played with a mite less intensity. Robert was less than overjoyed, mainly because he couldn't hear himself sing. He didn't join the finale. I enjoyed Gong less, though more than I usually enjoy them. Since David Allen's retirement they have become more shaped, perhaps more formal. But Steve Hillage looked uncomfortable in the role of front man and they sounded more stylised than stylish. Their ovation was loud and warm. Italy has named one of her main music papers Gong, said Branson proudly. Another is called Muzak. After Mike Oldfield? He sighed - maybe he'd heard it before.

However, the critic in me was off-duty most of the time in Rome. The music played was important, but mostly for the fact that it was played at all. The last time Italy saw non-Italian bands on stage was in March when Lou Reed and String Driven Thing played Milan. Missiles were hurled at the performers, promoters were branded as opportunist graspers, robbing the people to line their own nests, and a fire hose was turned on the riot police.

The notion of music performed for no charge, so prevalent in Germany and France in recent years, resulted in Italian promoters shutting up shop (certainly as far as international tours went). Rome's first major concert in a year was organised and partly financed by a coalition of the political Left and what it used to be acceptable to call the Underground. There was no charge to the consumers, but Richard Branson didn't exactly get in for nothing.

A COUPLE of months ago, a representative of the Left / Underground organisation Stampa Alternativa asked Virgin if they would be interested in supplying groups for a concert in Rome. In some senses it would be a test case (the Communist Party in Italy had approached Stampa's Ellio Donate to organise a series of concerts for them from September) and it would also be a celebration of Rome's continuing movement towards the left. Last month's gains for the Communists in regional elections all over the country emphasised that movement. Stampa raised about £1,000 towards the costs of the concert: Virgin agreed to provide the groups, and although the concert would be a co-promotion between Stampa and Muzak magazine, it would be underwritten by Virgin and its Italian licensee, Dischi Ricordi, to the tune of £1,500 each. The total cost would therefore be £4,000, which would cover the expenses, and pay what Richard Branson describes as "a small fee" to the musicians.

Idealism

At this point it might be an idea to underline some differences between Britain and Italy - particularly to explain the seemingly incongruous relationship between hippy/left idealism and a capitalist-dominated, often extraordinarily selfish rock business. In Britain, the idealism of the late Sixties appears to have faded into apathy inspired as much by idols with feet of clay and eyes on the tax havens as by direct opposition.

If there was ever any foundation for the idea that stamping your feet to rock bands as you waved a funny cigarette was a political act, it certainly ceases to have that implication when rock music and exotic cheroots are de rigueur at smart Hampstead dinner parties, and record company executives wear denims and keep a stash in the cocktail cabinet while they wheel and deal just like the boys in shiny suits.

Also the very idea of declaring yourself communist in a country run by what is, by European standards, a slightly right of-centre coalition in everything but name, where mild Lefties like Tony Benn are attacked as dangerous Commie firebrands, is enough to get you certified as loony, or merely laughed out of polite society.



● HENRY COW: *in Rome's Piazza Navona last weekend during the free concert*

Italy is different. Since the war, no political party has won a big enough share of the nation's vote to have an overall majority and the country has been governed by a coalition of centre parties, led by the Christian Democrats. The Communist party despite a large share of the vote, have been in opposition all the time. Whatever their share of the vote, they have not had a share in the Government.

That is still the position, but all the signs are that things must change soon. The first serious crack in the centre coalition's grasp on power came last year when the country voted against the Government's strongly-held beliefs and decided in favour of divorce - quite a radical step in a country which houses the Roman Catholic church's chief command post. Then, in last month's regional elections, the Communist party increased their share of the vote to become the strongest party in most of Italy's major cities. National elections aren't due until 1977 but the Left is now trying to force them forward.

The swing to the left has been dramatic: it is partly because of disenchantment with the ruling government and a reaction against its failures (high unemployment and inflation, inefficient social services, and so on), but there is another very important factor. The voting age has recently been lowered to 18. And we're back with rock music again.

A good percentage of the people who took up the jubilant chant "Roma E Rossa" outside the Communist Party headquarters in Rome's Piazza San Giovanni after the elections was probably also present among those who applauded Gong, Robert Wyatt and Henry Cow in the Piazza Navona last weekend. The apathy and cynicism which overtook Britain's underground / left / youth movements as the Sixties ended has not yet taken hold on Italy. Or perhaps radical ideas have taken on a new life. Certainly, it seems that a lot of the people who espouse radical politics in Italy are also those who listen to rock bands. And they are not people - who would take kindly to the British habit of accepting a role as Kids who are out to be Entertained with new Product. Hence the revolt against rock capitalism which stopped rock concerts for a year, and hence the banners under which rock music came back to Rome in the shape of a free concert last weekend.



● ROBERT WYATT: with Dagmar of Henry Cow in vocal attendance

Marijuana

NOW WE'RE doing the funky paradox: we left Richard Branson with a reasonable deal - a free concert, organised by the Left in defiance of capitalist promoters and associated business interests, but subsidised to the tune of £3,000 by capitalist record companies.

Virgin may demonstrate enlightened capitalism at work, but it is capitalism nonetheless. Dischi Ricordi is a large, independent Italian record company, also functioning as part of and in support of a capitalist economy. The irony of the situation seems unimportant as long as the compromise works. Rome gets the music free and presumably the record company gets its promotion and goodwill - or whatever. Just like Hyde Park, right?

Five minutes before Branson left to catch his flight to Rome, and some while after the groups had set out, a message arrives at Virgin from Dischi. It claims that Stampa Alternativa and Muzak are using the event to publicise causes with which Dischi does not wish to be associated - principally, a campaign to legalise marijuana in Italy. Dischi says it will not pay its share of the costs. Branson replies that it's too late to hack out now and boards his flight.

In Rome, he does his best to persuade Dischi Ricordi's executives to reconsider; to keep to their side of the bargain. He threatens to pull the bands out and effectively cancel the concert, but he knows quite well what he'll do if they still refuse. Virgin will pay their share as well, and Branson will return to London £3,000 lighter instead of the anticipated £1,500.

Justification

That's exactly what he had to do. The Italian record company remained adamant in its refusal to support the concert while it embraced the legalise marijuana slogan. Branson was angry, but admitted that Dischi had a point. The drugs thing was only part of it. Branson and Virgin happen to be in sympathy with that anyway, and once planned to organise a similar event in Britain.

What gave Dischi greater justification for pulling out was that the organisers appeared to be trying, to make political capital out of the event by disregarding the financial contribution the record companies were making. Speeches were made and leaflets were distributed in which it was claimed that the event proved that rock could flourish for free, without the help of capitalist businessmen. They implied that the cost of the concert had been covered by what

the Left had raised and contributed.

Branson wasn't exactly thrilled with that one either, but he tried to persuade Dischi that, having promised the money in the first place, they should cough up and then hold a press conference to explain their side of it and point out that the concert needed the capitalist money to take place. He failed.

DOING THE funky paradox, part two: "I'll feel a bit silly going up there and singing 'Arise work men and seize the future' - they've already done it," mused Robert Wyatt. Not quite, they haven't.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Ruth, Richard, and Robert... - Melody Maker - June 14, 1975

Ruth, Richard, and Robert...

ROBERT WYATT is reclining comfortably against a generous supply of pillows and cushions like a bearded Buddha, surrounded by evidence of domestic tranquility and convenience.

His lady, Alfie, makes tea, Florence Mutt dozes peacefully at the foot of the bed, and Mr Wyatt, with considerable skill, evades questions about his most recent artistic endeavour, "Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard".

It seems, initially, that Robert is suffering from some kind of post-natal depression after delivering this, his second album, in under a year, and he's using the conversation to excise some personal doubts which have been undermining his confidence in both himself and, by implication, the new work.

" I just don't seem to function as a professional musician," he begins. " I haven't seemed to establish any kind of working procedure or recording procedure or writing procedure.

" It seems to me that I know less and less what it is I'm actually attempting to do as I get

Robert Wyatt's new album 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard' seems certain to get a favourable reception— yet its creator seems unwilling to talk about it. ALLAN JONES tries to pin him down...



older... You know, I watch lots of singers turn out album after album, and I marvel at their continued interest in their own voice.

" They seem to sustain a remarkable interest, which is really quite sensible, I suppose... It's just that the more my interests in music develop, the more they seem to develop away from my own personal potential."

His own voice, he says, horrifies him. He'll try treating it in various ways to extend its possibilities (" it's one of my favourite ways of keeping myself awake"), but it's still a personal relief whenever the focus is directed away from his voice to another instrument.

" It is strange, really, because in theory it is my favourite instrument, because it's the only one that everybody's got. You use it all day in conversation and it's a very interesting instrument. We've all got our own version of it."

Of the way he's manipulated his voice on say, " Solar Flares " (on the new album), he says, yes it was encouraging to discover he could create something satisfactory without relying entirely upon the assistance of other musicians.

It's at about this point in the conversation, when one is being lulled into a false sense of security, that one suddenly realises that all this is something of a diversionary tactic.

One wouldn't, perhaps, have imagined Wyatt to be unduly apprehensive about the impending reaction to " Ruth Is...," even though it does come as successor to the brilliant " Rock Bottom."

THERE may be something of that in Wyatt, but it would be closer to the truth and no exaggeration to suggest that he would rather talk about anything (from Andre Breton to Barry White as he does later) than about his own work.

Phil Manzanera described him as being in a particularly anti-guitar mood at the time of recording " Ruth Is ..." (not that " Rock Bottom " could be described as paradise for a Robin Trower freak). Even as casual a remark as this sets Robert off at another tangent.

" I look at the pop polls, you know, and I see awards for top guitarists and singers . . . and then I see trombones, trumpets, oboes, flutes, ocarinas, and they're all listed under Miscellaneous Instruments... And I think to meself, in me own quiet way, 'Oh, really? That's interesting. So much for the last few hundred years of music.'

Robert scratches his head, lights another cigarette and settles back. " It was," he begins squinting through the smoke," harder to cope with this album psychologically because I was almost convinced that I'd never record another one. There was no immediate motivation.

"Then I thought, well, it really is time to start another album. It seemed my job in a sense. I'm a fake Communist, you see, and I believe that everybody has a job in the community, on whatever level they're working."

He looks as if he'd rather be someplace other than this as he explains.

" And I think my, er, job is to record tunes... sometimes. Unfortunately, I can go a year or more without feeling any compulsion to commit myself to a particular bunch of tunes or any particular set of treatments...

" Before ' Rock Bottom ' I hadn't had a chance for a long time to record, or do anything at all, so a great deal of frustration accumulated and with that album it was like turning on a tap and letting it all run out.

" Since doing that I've resumed my inhibited self-conscious state of mind, whereby I find it difficult to do anything at all." A disarming smil does nothing to alleviate the seriousness of that pronouncement.

STILL, we can't linger. " Rock Bottom," he concedes was — in that it was a most private selection of songs and insights of a particularly autobiographical nature — the least self-conscious of his records.

" The thing is that 'Rock Bottom ' relied more on my voice than anything I'd done before, and anything which relies on the voice is communicated very directly to other people, and they react to it very personally.

" An idea played on the voice, therefore, automatically becomes, or seems, more personal than the same idea played on another instrument...

" The idea, basically, was just to make a nice record, not to explain to the world what a terrible time I was having. For me, the words and the ideas... there's simply no possible excuse for making them public unless there are some nice tunes to go with them. So, the ' meaning ' is actually less important to me than making something pleasant to listen to. "

Long silence. But, Robert,- isn't that REALLY only your old self-consciousness coming back after the act?

" Yes. But even so, I've always thought that the whole bit about self-expression is a little misleading. I don't hold any particular faith in the notion of expressing yourself and thinking that you can actually communicate to other people something which is private and personal.

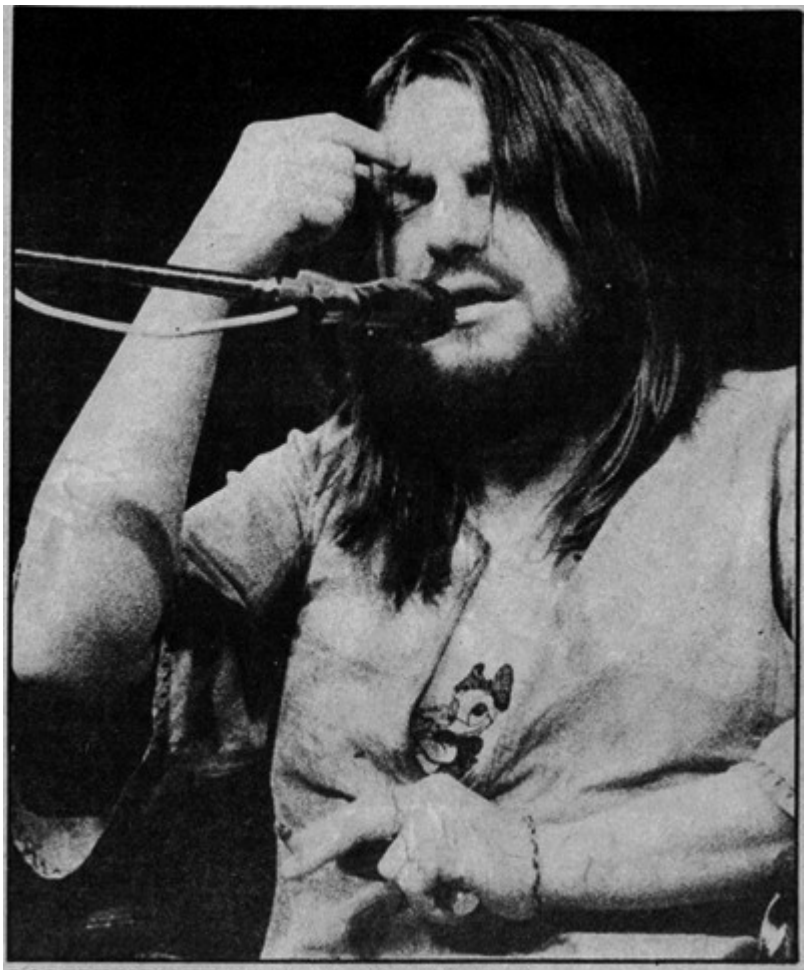
" I think that you can make objects which other people can respond to and appreciate. And that might be quite closely related to what you had in mind when you created the actual object.

" But I still don't really have much faith in the idea, or even the necessity, of really expressing yourself, of saying, ' f------, I'm all bottled up. I must tell the world how I feel '."

Surely, though, the songs on " Rock Bottom " particularly aren't moving merely because the author has a facility for writing an attractive tune and having the taste and perception to choose musicians sympathetic to interpreting those compositions? The act of creation, after all, isn't that facile.

" No, it isn't. You're right. It's a question of vanity, really. Something I don't like to admit. I suppose it's a question of vanity. If you have the opportunity to use words, and make them more than just noises, it's an ability which you have to attempt to use as widely as possible...

" I try to make my songs work on every possible level, quite consciously. Most of the songs on ' Rock Bottom ' were written while we were thinking of ideas for the third Matching Mole album."



ROBERT WYATT: ' I'm a fake Communist '

WE SEEM to reach something of an intermediate conclusion here. And having accepted " Rock Bottom " as the important statement that it is, or was to Wyatt as an artist (as important as was, say, " Plastic Ono Band," or even " In My Life" to Lennon, " Man Who Sold The World " to Bowie, " Blonde On Blonde" as a loose example, to Dylan), the way is open to broaden the conversation.

Let's take, to 'begin with, Wyatt's lyrics, which have always, at their best, revealed a quality out of the mainstream of rock writing. In one sense parts of " Rock Bottom," indeed, owe something to the Surrealist precept of automatic writing, but go one stage further than surrendering personal autonomy to the dream flow and exercise a finely-developed sense of poetry within his writing.

He agrees his writing owes little to the rock mainstream, and that he's quite consciously avoided this.

" Like, I've never thought of myself as being a mouthpiece for the, er, ' Youth Culture,' I've always been on the fringe of what's happened in rock. I'm basically no more worried about identifying with the problems of a street punk than I am with the problems of old-age pensioners. I feel no allegiance to any of those gangs out there."

Robert has previously expressed his disappointment at the lack of widespread creative energy within rock at the moment.

While new directions and possibilities are being explored and investigated by individuals and groups outside the rock mainstream (Henry Cow/ Slapp Happy in one context; Cale, Harper and, say, Eno in another), the majority of people concerned with the music are still waiting in eager anticipation for the arrival of a new rock messiah (the new Dylan/Stones/ Beatles).

This situation leads, via a thought provoked by Eno, to the suggestion that any further developments of significance will evolve from the cooperative efforts of a group of artists sharing a common responsibility.

A situation which would have as its antecedents the Zurich-based Dadaists or the Paris-

based Surrealists, movements which Wyatt regards with affection and admiration.

He considers this thesis with some enthusiasm, but remains a little reluctant to draw a comparison between the group of artists in English rock who share similar ambitions and perspectives and the Dadaists and Surrealists, whose strength and velocity was derived from the interaction of individuals operating within a common identity.

That rock develops at a pedestrian pace is not unrelated to the fact that "music is a more unwieldy business," he thinks.

" Conceptually, it moves that much slower. Music, perhaps, as a form, has a much more functional job.

" In order to work on any large scale, music has to overwhelm or titillate the senses. And, in other words, someone could come along with an incredible way of manipulating your ears, like Sly Stone, and there's no way you can discuss, in the same terms, the conceptual basis of something like ' Stand,' which is a great record.

" You know, this is all very interesting, but there are other things going on at the moment which we haven't taken into account, which are basically political.

" In other words the avant-garde we're talking about still belong to a quite cogent tradition of an elite of academic artists in an affluent society.

" But the general growth of Socialism in various forms around the world has probably made the existence of those elitist power groups more impossible.

" They're unwanted in a way. I've discussed this with Henry Cow, who consider themselves to be very politically motivated.

" The whole idea of small groups of iconoclastic artists were based on the idea of groups of establishment artists reacting against them. We're in a situation now where we're unlikely to have either.

" We're at a point where the dams have burst, and the mutual invasion of popular culture and academic culture are so interswamped, and there's something going on that is really too big for any of us individuals to see or put in any context."

THE ADVENT of recording procedures, the availability of tape recorders of reasonable sophistication is, to a significant extent, precipitating a growing momentum, he feels. The recording idiom is changing to the extent where there are opportunities for artists to involve themselves in music.

" People can see possibilities of developing music which has not been suggested by other forms of music at all, but ideas from completely different persuasions."

It's a process which he finds is undermining the monopoly of " the monster bands " (ie, ELP and their cohorts). From his comparative isolation he can allow himself a freedom of perspective on that situation.

" My ideal state of life would be one of total inactivity, I suppose. I don't approve of these people charging about all the time.

" I mean, I suppose Elton John feels he has to be seen everywhere... It concerns me that people view with impatience anybody when they're not actually coming out with New Product.

" There are periods in everyone's creative life which aren't productive in themselves but which are part of a continual creative process...

" I don't think musicians have been singled out for special treatment on that point...

It can be alarming, though. It gives a strange impression that people disappear when they haven't got a new album out.

" There again, I don't feel it's a problem special to musicians... I mean, I don't feel particularly that no one understands me. The bloke next door to me here, he's not a musician and no one understands him either.

" He doesn't seem too worried about it, so why should I?"

Allan Jones



Ruth, Richard, and Robert...

Robert Wyatt's new album 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard' seems certain to get a favourable reception—yet its creator seems unwilling to talk about it. ALLAN JONES tries to pin him down...

ROBERT WYATT: "I'm a Nice Communist"

Top Union official dies

BEVERLEY AND AYEDIS ZILDJIAN THE SOUND OF SUCCESS

Boosey & Hawkes

What's happening at Pountney's Hounslow Hair Salon ?

Previous article

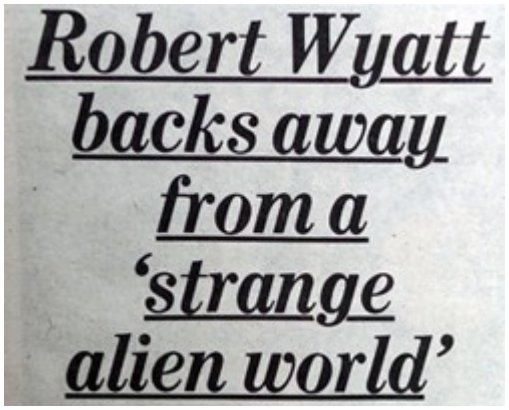
Next article

Back to the list

Wyatt singles are out - Sounds - May 31, 1975



> Zoom





By Steve Peacock

YOUR NAME is Robert Wyatt and your 'comeback' album was hailed as everything

from a triumph to a master-piece by critics the length and breadth of the land. It was an uncompromising sort of album called 'Rock Bottom'.

You had brewed it for months, if not years, and it had turned out right. People assumed that this was the way you had decided to go in the future, but you are far from sure.

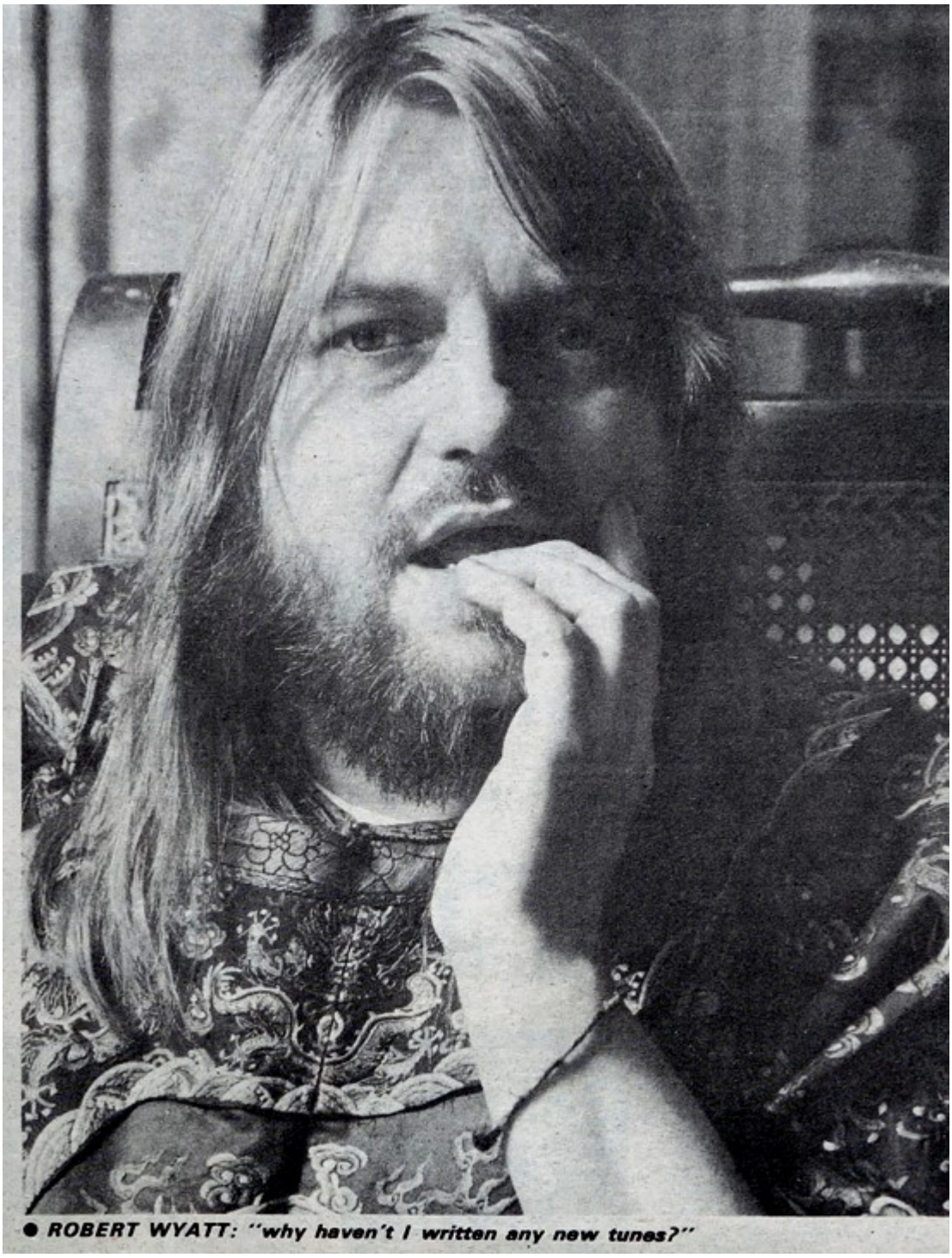
Monkees

Since that album, you also released a single, a version of the Monkees' hit 'I'm A Believer': it was a modest hit for you. You recorded a follow up — a heavily re-worked version of Chris Andrew's 'Yesterday Man' - but decided not to release it. It came out on a sampler album.
'Rock Bottom" came out last Summer: it is now Spring again and persons at your record company are dropping little hints. Like they tell you the Manor studio is free for a couple of weeks. Umm ...

YOU STARTER for ten is this: do you confess to not having a new tune to your name and ask Dave Edmunds to produce the album? Or do you ring up a bunch of friends who you think might sound nice if persuaded to play together, and see what happens? Discuss.

"WE EVOLVED an interesting variation on Eno's Oblique Strategies," says Robert Wyatt. (We've converted this to an oral examination.) "Things like *you go and make the tea*", he indicates Bill MacCormick across the room, "*and we'll turn the bass up two dbs*".
But, says McCormick, they ratted on the deal: they didn't use that take.
The interviewer then switches on his infernal machine and remembers he hasn't got a first question. He confesses this. Wyatt obligingly begins to interview himself: "Why haven't I written any new tunes? It's a long story. Shall I admit that I can't think of any? Yes. Hmmm." Cut.

TAKE TWO: Was he frightened at the thought of having to commit some music to tape again, in the wake of critical and public reaction to 'Rock Bottom'? Long pause. "Yes ... very." Long pause.
"I suppose if I took trouble to do anything with this one," he is talking of 'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard', the new album. "it was to make sure that it wasn't really related to what had gone before. I deliberately did some things and made some noises that I wouldn't have done on 'Rock Bottom' because they would have been inconsistent. In other words, I didn't worry about consistency from track to track on this one. I think more than ever before I just did each track as a separate thing."



● ROBERT WYATT: "why haven't I written any new tunes?"

Accumulate

How did he get together the musicians for the album? "Quite simple — it took about 10 minutes on the telephone."
Yes.
The people were Fred Frith (not Fripp), Bill MacGormick, Nisar Ahmed (George) Khan, Gary Windo (not Window), Laurie Allan, Brian Eno and (for 'Sonia' only) John Greaves and Mongezi Feza. 'Sonia' was recorded as the B-side of 'Yesterday Man' and Robert's secret hope was that it would get flipped over and become the 'Green Onions' or the 'Let There Be Drums' of the Seventies. Mongezi Feza - Superstar!

"It was more or less a question (this is for the album sessions at the Manor) of getting together four or five musicians who I liked the playing of ... I suppose I could have done 'Rock Bottom Parts Two and Three ..."
But that's hardly the point. "That whole thing that surrounded 'Rock Bottom' about 'he's found a new way of working", just isn't the case. I haven't found a new working system. I

haven't got back into anything. 'Rock Bottom' included a lot of old material. Probably having had the pressure off for so long allowed stuff to accumulate."
And even that's not really the point.
What makes Robert Wyatt go, into the studio to make a record? In brief paraphrase, he looks around his record collection, decides what, he'd like to hear and if the record doesn't yet exist then he goes in and tries to make it. That's also oversimplification.
'Ruth Is Stranger Than Richard' started life as Robert's desire for a record by "a-mid Fifties middle-of-the-road modern jazz group with great big booting tenor solos". It developed from that, of course. If that explanation sounds — how you say? — a trifle glib, then let's ask if the pressure of other people's expectations frightens him a little bit.

Caustic

"What's happened is that I've stopped writing because the things I would write naturally aren't necessarily the kind of things I'd want to listen to."
And he makes records because he wants to listen to them.
"I am very caustic about the things other people do, but I'm also pretty caustic about my own things in the sense that a lot of the things I could do I won't do because there doesn't seem any point in doing them just because I *can* - I feel it's not worth it. I find the idea of just going on and on making noises just because that's your job pretty alarming ... and undignified.

"It's not a very healthy attitude in the sense that I never get anything done...
"I think of lots of things, but I only write a tune if it seems absolutely necessary — I won't write it unless it seems quite obvious that no-one else is going to do it. But ideas circulate in a community, and you usually find if you get an idea and don't do anything about it, then someone else will.
"It's just a feeling that if I did just pour out what comes naturally to me, then it would be all right but nothing special — the things that I'd really be proud of myself for doing are beyond my reach. I just wait for the tings I feel I *have* to do, and then rush to a tape recorder..."

Yes, yes but wait a minute: how does "I'm A Believer" fit into all this? Part one, it was fun; part two he was asked to do it my Simon Draper at Virgin; and part three he was interested in tinkering about with the inside works of a standard pop song: "to find out how people are able to write things that last three and a half minutes and are complete miniatures... it's some thing I've never been able to do - I either write things that last a minute or they're long. I've since discovered that all pop songs only last a minute and what they do is play them two and a half times, and the second time round they put in a guitar solo. Only I did it wrong and had a violin solo."



● ROBERT, Florence Mult and Alfreda Benge.

But after getting onto the chart with 'I'm A Believer' and experiencing the world of 45rpm records at close quarters, he decided to withdraw to the red corner. "Frankly, *Top Of The Pop* appalled me, and the different things that are expected of you in situations like that... it's the singles world really, the business thing. People say this has to be changed, or that has to be changed because so and so won't play it. The rules are so strict, and I just haven't got the necessary humility or whatever to fit into that. I could see it becoming what I did — I would make singles — and I didn't want that to happen. I didn't want to get trapped in that strange, alien world.

Horrors

"Deep down I might be competitive, I suppose, but consciously anything competitive gives me the horrors, and always has done. Suddenly, it was all a matter of comparative ratings and would this one do better than the last one or would it do better than that other one ... I'd lived without charts for so long, established myself in a sort of no man's land where as long as I had enough money for cigarettes and tea I was happy...

"And *then*, the other thing was people telling me to put rubbish on the B side in case it detracted from interest in the A side. Apparently, that's quite a common thing, but to me that's the Unacceptable Face Of Capitalism."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Looking' Back - The Soft Machine Part 2 - New Musical Express - February 1, 1975

LOOKIN' BACK: The Soft Machine. Pt. 2

by IAN MacDONALD



IN LAST week's issue, Part One recounted the history of the Softs from their schooldays to the break-up of the group following the recording of their debut album in 1968. This week we take up the story with the reformation of the band in 1969.

FROM FEBRUARY to early April '69 Wyatt, Hopper and Ratledge rehearsed daily at Wyatt's mother's house in Dulwich, South London. April was the month in which they were scheduled to record their second album and the material they were organising was intended primarily for the studio, not the stage - in fact, none of it was performed "live" before the album was finally cut.

This - and the wholly new complexity of their more recent music - contributed to the slight stiltedness of the final takes on "Volume 2", although this drawback is almost totally occluded by the poor quality of the recording itself.

The Softs, still smarting from their New York experience, had resolved to handle the production themselves, a decision which nearly proved fatal. Almost everything that can go wrong in a studio went wrong - and the band possessed little of the experience required to conquer these problems.

Ratledge, for some reason obsessed with avoiding a repeat performance of his astonishing handling of the Lowrey organ on the first album, insisted on laying all his basic tracks down on a concert grand; acoustic piano being one of the hardest instruments to mike up, the band not unnaturally got it wrong - with the result that the piano tracks, already too reverberant, "leaked" onto the tracks adjoining them, causing all kinds of insoluble puzzles in the final stages. Likewise, the horn tracks (by Brian and Hugh Hopper) possessed little resonance and were duly dominated by the keyboards.

But despite all this - and a truly terrible edit in the opening bars of "10.30 Returns To The Bedroom", necessitated by sheer lack of time for Wyatt to rehearse the devilishly difficult vocal part - "Soft Machine Volume Two" remains almost as much of a rock classic as its predecessor.

Side One features the results of Wyatt's months of work on a heritage of fragments taped by Hopper over a period of three or four years - and it's brilliant. The lyric wit and harmonic sophistication outclass anything in its vicinity, and the group's suave handling of Ratledge's first venture into irregular time ("Hibou Anenome And Bear", erroneously attributed to Hopper), is a delight in itself.

On Side Two a pair of quasi conventional songs (Ratledge's high-stepping farewell gesture to the departed Ayers, "As Long As He Lies Perfectly Still", and Hopper's hauntingly enigmatic "Dedicated To You But You Weren't Listening") precede Ratledge's ten-minute session of 7/8 gymnastics, "Esther's Nose-Job" - a composition which would provide an ever expanding flag waver with which to close the group's sets over the next two years.

BUT THERE WAS no time for them to get the results of their labours into any perspective.

Sean Murphy had just taken over in the management department (although Mike Jefferies controlled the royalties situation on the first two LPs, and the group are still involved in prolonged litigation alleging that they never received a penny from either of them). The show was finally on the road and an endless succession of gigs stretched to the end of the year.

The band, using a regular set comprising (in running order) "Moon In June", Hopper's "Facelift", Ratledge's unrecorded "Eamonn Andrews", Hopper"s "Mousetrap" (the latter parts of which - including the beautiful sequence "Backwards" - form the second part of "Slightly All The Time" on "Third"), and "Esther's Nose-Job" (plus "Hibou, Anenome And Bear" as the encore), toured continuously for six months - until Hopper, who had recently taken to playing his bass from an almost supine position in an armchair stage left, declared himself bored and desirous of fresh stimuli.

Wyatt and Ratledge, brooding on possibilities and only too conscious of the imminence of a second break-up, happened to catch The Keith Tippett Group at The Marquee one night in October. Particularly impressed by Tippett's red-hot front-line trio of Elton Dean (alto/saxello). Marc Charig (tpt/flugel-horn), and Nick Evans (tmbn). they enticed the gentlemen into the world of rock with promises of fame, fortune, and centrally-heated groupies.

Dean recommended tenorist Lyn Dobson (who also played sitar, flute, and harmonica) - so that within a couple of days The Soft Machine was a seven piece and off on a singularly gruelling two-month tour of France.

It's one of rock's biggest frustrations that this line-up never recorded together (aside from one rather lacklustre date-on *Top-Gear*"), because the fact is that, playing adventurous charts scored 50-50 by Ratledge and Hopper, the expanded version of The Soft Machine was not only the best-ever line-up in the band's history, but one of the most amazing "live" rock experiences then going.

By the time (February 1970) that the group had got around to recording "Third", Evans and Charig had been dismissed for reasons of financial necessity (and the' original trio's

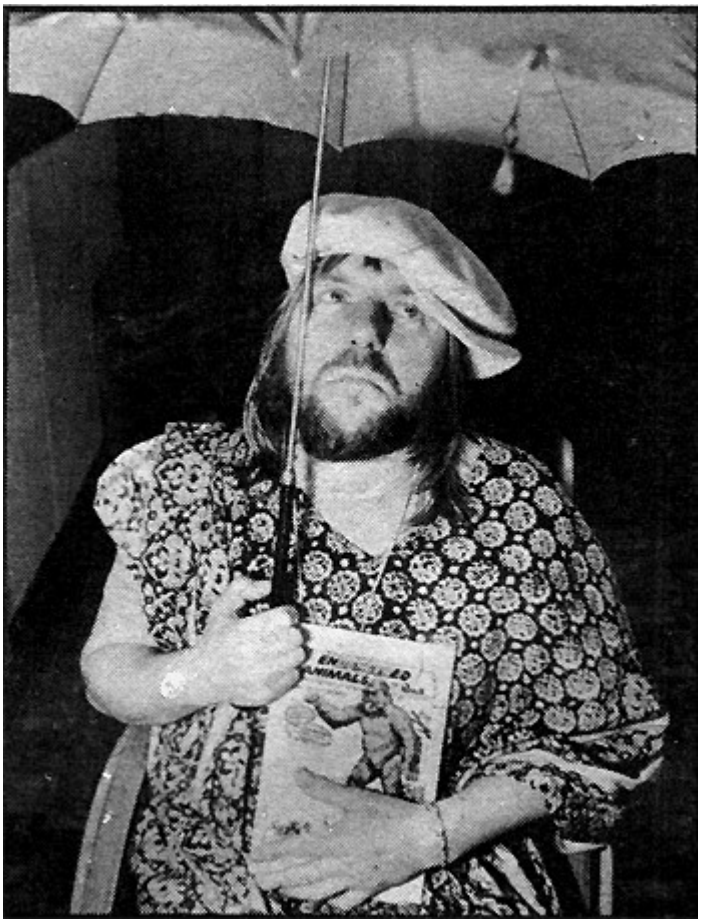
pessimism over the role of brass instruments in performing complex scores at the increasing velocities dictated by audience enthusiasm - which was justifiably running very high).

Dobson was the next to go, his anarchic vitality incurring the distaste of the refined and cerebral Ratledge, but not before he'd contributed to the collage of "live" takes of "Facelift" that forms Side One of "Third".

Moreover, Ratledge's "Slightly All The Time", elegantly influenced by the spacious ease of contemporary Miles (eg., "Miles In The Sky", "Filles De Kilimanjaro"), hardly represented the uproarious thunder of the seven-piece - and his new extended composition, "Out-Bloody-Rageous", carried the fascination with time-signatures and "loop" figures into forbodingly sterile areas.

Only Wyatt's "Moon In June", recorded almost entirely by himself and in the face of frankly-expressed disapproval on the part of Ratledge and Dean, was a real advance - its final five minutes, based on another of the Softs' trademark, the "drone", being worth the price of the double-album alone.

Disturbed by the power-games going on around him, Wyatt subsequently disappeared off to record a solo album and relieve the pressure of his stoppered creativity. This was "The End Of An Ear" and the pun, in retrospect, becomes more serious that it at first appeared.



The End of an Ear at the Proms





SO THE focus of attention has now turned to the Softs-who-got-the-chop, like (top) Robert Wyatt, raiding the charts in a wheelchair; (centre) Hugh Hopper . . . well, maybe one day when "1984" is finally recognised by the discerning public; and (bottom) Daevid Allen, chief pothead pixie in Gong.

THERE WAS considerable Cultural Significance embodied in "Third" - "rock coming of age", etc - and the Establishment and jazz critics zeroed in with polysyllabic fervour.

When the BBC invited the band to be the first representatives of rock at the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts, matters (at least as far as Wyatt was concerned) were beginning to get silly.

Increasingly, his popular vocal excursions were being cut back by the demands of more and more fiendishly-technical instrumentals from the pens of Ratledge and Hopper. In addition to this, Dean, was determined to swing things into out-and-out jazz, pushed the music even further from the original conceptions by introducing vehicles for free-form blowing (eg., "Fletcher's Blemish" on "Fourth").

It was only a matter of time before Wyatt would be elbowed out, but an initial trial separation - with him reinforcing the rhythm-section of Ayers' contemporary group The Whole World - didn't work out and he returned to the fold in time to contribute the mysteriously mixed down drum tracks to the totally voiceless "Fourth" (released February 1971).

This was the first of the Softs' albums to appeal to a jazz/rock crossover audience - although many mainstream rockers felt betrayed by sidelong excursions into abstracted vagueness (Hopper's nevertheless extraordinary "Virtually" suite), torrentially melodic solos from the alto of Dean, and Ratledge's most complex (and most successful) composition yet. "Teeth", in which ever-changing time-signatures joust with spikey lines that unravel with a linear steadiness and an ascetic disinclination to repeat themselves.

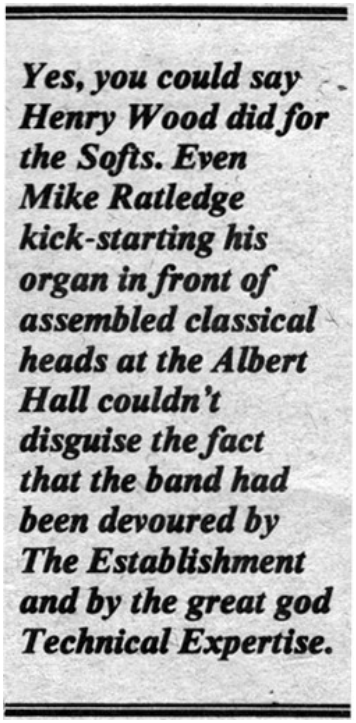
The music was still healthy enough (although contrasts-available from employing the Wyatt drums and tonsils were almost entirely foregone) and the band's name was further exalted. In due course they were invited to play the Newport Jazz Festival where Ratledge found himself on the same bill as his idol McCoy Tyner and Wyatt found himself to be having trouble with reality.

Soon after this he decided things had gone far enough and quit to form Matching Mole in September '71.

STUDIO TIME for the recording of "Fifth" was booked for November - which didn't leave much time for the recruitment of Wyatt's replacement.

However, Dean had been playing the odd gig with Nick Evans in a free-jazz unit called Just Us, the drummer of which was the fiery, multi-directional Phil Howard, whom all admired. Well, *musically*, anyway.

The results of the new combination were explosive, both in musical terms (Side One of "Fifth" is the last really potent statement The Soft Machine ever made) and in personal affairs: Howard and Ratledge clashed egos disastrously and, there and then in the middle of recording, the former was fired.



Nucleus drummer John Marshall was brought in, initially as a session-man, and the group struggled raggedly through Side Two.

In a review in *Let It Rock*, a would-be contemporary cynic saw the departure of Wyatt and the recruitment of two technically dazzling jazz drummers in succession as proof that the music was getting too complex for a mere rocker to cope with Unfortunately this doesn't pan out from actual listening.

Wyatt was far more adept (because far more self-tutored) at getting around Ratledge's 9/8s and 1 l/4s than either Howard or Marshall; Howard transfigured the metrical exactitudes envisioned by Ratledge into a dizzying blitz of crisscrossing polyrhythms - a firestorm at the centre of which was ye olde 4/4, even if only in terms of pulses felt subliminally - whereas Marshall, schooled in the tepid funk of Nucleus, went a step further and actually *played* 4/4, gathering the irregular folds, so carefully disarrayed by the composer, into chunky neatness.

Wyatt's leaving coincided with more than merely the rhythmic simplification of the Softs, however. With him he took most of the group's humour and a large slab of their profundity too.

The four or five months following the release of "Fifth" saw the progressive dissolution of the band's inner ties and trusts.

The honeymoon musical partnership of Dean and Ratledge (symbolized by the presence of the latter on the former's solo album, recorded just prior to "Fifth") was over for good. Dean seething at the rejection of Howard. Hopper, in turn, was beginning to feel somewhat out in the cold and when (in May '72) Dean finally quit to be replaced by another ex-Nucleus man. Karl Jenkins, what had at first only *seemed* like a freeze-out became Antartica a-go-go.

The deal now was technical expertise.

Ratledge had it, Jenkins and Marshall agreed that they had it too; only Hopper, uncomfortably attempting to find a way of playing irregular bass-riffs against Marshall's powerful common-time, had no claim to the diploma the others had awarded each other. Immaculateness was not the sole *raison* of his *etre.*

"SOFT MACHINE Six", recorded in the final months of '72, featured a mass of compositions by Jenkins and Ratledge (including many variants of the Nucleus Hip-Riff-and-Funk ideal) and only one Hopper number - the experimental "1983", based on an electronically-embellished and very lengthy musical loop.

Recorded in the wake of the summer '72 sessions for " 1984" (which eventually came out *after* "Six"), it was intended to be a kind of trailer for Hugh's solo-album. It turned out to be the only vital section of a rather flat and foursquare double-album and, shortly afterwards. Hopper left to pursue his own concerns.

Yet' another jazzer moved in as replacement - bassist Roy Babbington - and the music got smoother and more scintillatingly-played and finally wound up losing its soul somewhere in a glittering galaxy of electric pianos and synthesizers. "Seven", recorded in late '73, documents the downfall.

Recently, the band recruited guitarist Alan Holdsworth, presumably to win some some popular appeal.

"Eight" is imminent for release - but the focus of attention has long since shifted to the Softs-who-got-the-chop: Daevid Allen and his fanatic ally-subscribed Gong, Kevin Ayers and his urbane gestures towards becoming a teen idol. Robert Wyatt and his multi-faceted musical personality that continues to grow richer and purer simultaneously... maybe Hugh Hopper too one day, when "1984" is finally recognised for the minor master piece it is.

BUT THE Soft Machine, the band Mike Ratledge slowly wrested away from its founders in pursuit of his immaculate vision - well, not even its Gallic followers seem too pleased with it these days.

The key lies in a revealing remark Elton Dean made soon after leaving the group.

"Mike and Hugh's idea of getting it on," he said, "is to play aggressively." Ratledge's own half-serious definition of the Softs as "a brute musical experience" adds further clarification.

For, almost since the Softs re-formed in 1969, Ratledge in particular has appeared to be

interested in music as a form of symbolic logic - ie., echoplex pianos playing interlocking phrases = beauty or peace; fast 7/4 and distorted organ = excitement; fuzz-bass roars = drama.

An abstract design for emotive sound.

And, while this objective approach doesn't of consequence preclude expressivity (qv.. Bach, Stravinsky, Bartok for music frequently at its most moving and most impersonal at the same time), Ratledge's viewpoint is ultimately a mechanistic one in which all those frail, wobbly, imperfect, and imprecise human experiences (like intuition, inspiration, doubt, love) finally default to symmetry.

It's doubly significant, thereby, that Wyatt's first move away from the Softs, the "Matching Mole" LP of early '72, is an album primarily about misery. Musically shakey, it devastates anything by the corporate cool smoothie The Soft Machine has become in the last two years sheerly in terms of emotional engagement.

The Softs haven't lost their artistry. Ratledge is as original and unique as ever, if his fellow band-members hardly sparkle in their present combination.

What they *have* lost is their commitment. The Establishment got 'em just as soon as they agreed to play the Proms.

Softs connoiseurs will remember, I'm sure, that that performance came close to disaster when Ratledge's trusty old Lowrey refused to work at the begining of the set. Eventually a kick persuaded it otherwise.

There's a moral or three in there somewhere.

Part One

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Looking' Back - The Soft Machine Part 1 - New Musical Express - January 25, 1975

LOOKIN' BACK
The Soft Machine

by IAN MacDONALD



"It's a Now sound, swings like jazz, rocks like rhythm-and-blues, heavy with fuzz-box distortion, off-the-keyboard with electronic atonalities - the sound of music updated by the music of sound".

So wobbled the sleeve garf for "The Soft Machine", a rather extraordinary debut album that was somehow never available in Britain (probably because of the sleeve garf). But don't be put off by the spiel - the Softs were just about the first British group to experiment in any real sense with "progressive" music, and their impact, though low-key, was nonetheless profound and lasting.

In the first of a two-part series, IAN MacDONALD (who really GETS OFF on this stuff, kids) Looks Back on the Rich Kids who Dropped Out and Made Good.

CLASS OF'61 at the Simon Langton School, Canterbury - an exclusive, private establishment for the sons of local artists and intellectuals. Very free, emphatically geared to the uninhibited development of self-expression. A hotbed of teenage avant-garderie.

On my right - in the sixth-form and waiting impatiently to go up to Oxford to study philosophy and psychology: Mike Ratledge. Occasionally he and class-mate Brian Hopper get together to play their own adaptations of Hindemith's organ sonatas, arranged for piano and clarinet. The big boys.

On my left - two years below Mike and Brian - another Hopper. Studious Hugh, bespectacled and prematurely-balding science student. At the moment he plays a bit of sax (in emulation of his older brother) and a bit of guitar; nobody's yet suggested that bass might suit him better.

And, in the same year but in one of the arts classes: Robert Wyatt, aged 16, painter and dabbler in various instruments. He ran into Hugh back in the first year, but they went their different routes through the funfair of academe and have only recently become mates, mainly through a common interest in music.

A year below *them*, one David Sinclair is taking piano lessons - but he's far too young to associate with the likes of Robert and Hugh.

IT'S ALL pretty idyllic in retrospect - visiting each other's houses (but mostly congregating at the 15-room Georgian mansion owned by Robert's mother, writer and broadcaster Honor Wyatt) to play the new jazz releases - Mingus, Coleman, Taylor, Monk - and to enthuse over contemporary mainstreamers (Stockhausen, Luigi Nono), painters (Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock), and writers (Burroughs, the Beats).

However, like most people's formative years, it was hard edged under the general soft-focus.

At the point isolated above, Wyatt, unable to stand the academic strictures of school life any more, fled during his 'A'-levels and enrolled in a sculpture course at the Canterbury College of Art. When this revealed itself to be no escape either, he had a brush with suicide and before taking off to Spain, where he arrived, penniless and unable (then) to speak the language, in early '62.

Luckily, he ran into drummer George Niedorf in a club. Niedorf took him under his wing for a few months and, when Wyatt decided the time had come to re-dig Canterbury, he invited George back. (Niedorf subsequently lived for some time with the Wyatts, teaching Robert drums in lieu of rent.)

But far more significant a result of their meeting was the bringing together of the Canterbury crowd and an eccentric Australian friend of Niedorf's - Daevid Allen.

Allen, who'd left his hometown Melbourne in 1960 at the age of 21, was a walking physical embodiment of your actual day-to-day avant-garde. He knew and had worked on slides with Burroughs; in his adopted second home, Paris, he'd been experimenting with things called "Tape-loops" in the company of the then-unknown Terry Riley; but, heaviest of all, he'd taken ACID - arriving at the norm of a life-style few young people would catch up with until 1967.

He was, in fact, a fully-fledged Freak - and, as yet, The Beatles hadn't even recorded "Love Me Do."

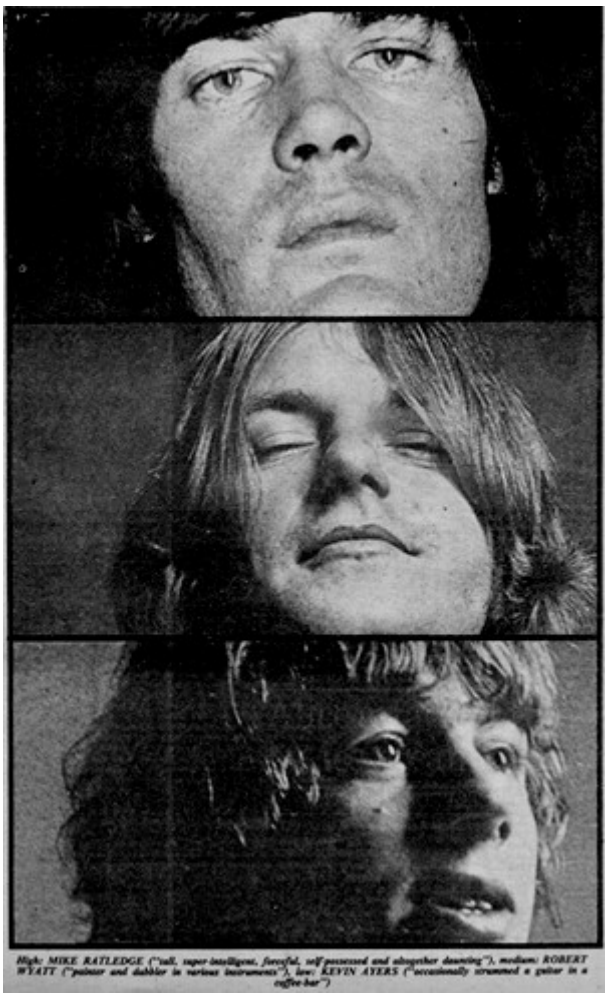
Allen immediately invited Wyatt and Hugh Hopper over to Paris where he lived in a houseboat with his missus, poetess Gilli Smyth, at the Quai D'Orsay. Acid and mescaline were doled out to a soundtrack of Allen's own *musique concrete* and - pow! - two more recruits to ye olde youth-cultural revolution.

Wyatt went home with long hair; Hopper stayed on, completely fascinated by tape-loops of which he made thousands in the next few years.

Back in Canterbury, musical matters were already well under way.

High: MIKE RATLEDGE ("tall, super-intelligent, forceful, self-possessed and altogether daunting"), medium: ROBERT WYATT ("painter and dabbler in various instruments"), low: KEVIN AYERS ("occasionally strummed a guitar in a coffee-bar")

The band, which changed almost daily, was called The Wilde Flowers and featured in its line-up (which extended up to 1967) the Hopper brothers, Wyatt, and all four original members of Caravan. As soon-to-be-Softs left, soon-to-be-Caravans joined - the resulting genealogy being far too complicated to go into here (for the curious, issue 28 of *Zigzag* features an exhaustive family-tree of the Canterbury groups compiled by Pete Frame and Al Clark - though naturally it's now a little out of date).



High: MIKE RATLEDGE ("tall, super-intelligent, forceful, self-possessed and altogether daunting"), medium: ROBERT WYATT ("painter and dabbler in various instruments"), low: KEVIN AYERS ("occasionally strummed a guitar in a coffee-bar")

The Wilde Flowers' first gig took place above a pub in Whit-stable. "They try for an Indian influence," ventured a nonplussed but genially-disposed Canterbury Gazette. "Their Rolling Stones haircuts make the fans go crazy."

(The Stones had just released "Come On" at the time.)

But if it hadn't been for the international recognition-sign of Long Hair, it's doubtful whether the singer on that gig would ever have come into contact with the Canterbury mob at all.

Kevin Ayers lived in Herne Bay - only ten miles away, but hard to get to - and, though he strummed a guitar in a coffee-bar occasionally, he had no intention of pursuing a musical career until Wyatt sought him out one afternoon on the advice of a passing stranger. (Whose words were: "Oh, I thought we had the only long-hair in Kent - ours is over there in the bar if you want to check him out.")

AT FIRST, the Flowers followed well-developed Canterbury biases: a bit of jazz, a touch of rock, mostly blowing on Cannonball Adderley numbers.

Daevid Allen's arrival tipped the balance towards rock and free-form improvisation; Hopper, trained to respect repetition as a valid ingredient through his experience with loops, inveigled everyone into riffing on James Brown numbers; Dave Seeger, a rock 'n' roll singer who dropped in for a few months to have a rave, taught Hugh the bass-lines to the collected works of Chuck Berry and Little Richard.

It took a long time for the elitist hangover from Simon Langton to dissipate sufficiently for the others to condescend to trying out some of Kevin's songs. But - just as Ayers and Allen, collaborating on material, were about to swing the thing round to out-and-out rock 'n' roll - a letter arrived from Oxford.

Mike Ratledge, it said, was bored with university; he wanted to blow some.

This played right into the hands of Hugh, Brian, and Robert, who - studying the contemporary scene in London - had decided that all-guitar front-lines like the Stones and The Yardbirds were definitely passe; the thing, they reckoned, was to get into a kind of Mose Allison/Georgie Fame/Graham Bond bag.

Organs and saxes. Jazz-blues.

Yikes!

Ratledge arrived just as the Hoppers left to do Other Things (Hugh to join Pye Hastings and Richard Coughlan in the next version of The Wilde Flowers; Brian to go into insurance), and his impact was hefty. He was tall, super-intelligent, forceful, self-possessed, and altogether daunting.

And he wasn't impressed with Ayers' songs.

Nevertheless, the new regime settled down to rehearse with an appropriate new seriousness and the music that emerged sounded about as much like Graham Bond or The Yardbirds as Reginald Dixon sounds like Larry Young.

They began to play gigs more professionally, began to hire themselves out for parties — gaining the first elements of A Reputation.

At this time the name of the band was changing almost by the hour. The Bishops of Canterbury was the handle they were using the night I first saw them in '66; Ayers' preference was Mr. Head. Allen preferred Dingo Virgin and the Foreskins (or Four Skins, as when a bloke called Larry Nolan temporarily raised the roll-call to five by joining briefly on guitar towards the end of the year).



An early Wilde Flowers line up. L. to R: Hugh Hopper, Richard Coughlan, Brian Hopper; front: Robert Wyatt.

One day Ratledge decided on the final choice.
(Though legend tells of a close finish with another Burroughs book, "Nova Express". Either

way, Allen phoned Burroughs to ask his permission and got it, along with the novelist's blessings.)

Now all they needed was the wherewithal to move to London and Get With The Scene, Daddy.

The problem was solved by two occurrences.

First, Wyatt's mother sold the mansion and moved to Dulwich where she was able to rent out cheap rooms to most of the band. Second, Allen and Ayers - holidaying in Majorca as usual - ran into a spaced-out American millionaire called Wes Brunson who, convinced they must be the next Beatles, forthwith sold his shades factory in Tulsa and generously financed the group out of the proceeds.

(He later freaked out and joined the Children of God, but not, I'm assured, as a result of finally *hearing* the Softs perform.)

ONCE ENSCONCED in the capital, the quartet set about hunting out gigs.

Allen, who knew Hoppy and the Indica people, hustled a regular spot opposite the nascent Pink Floyd at Tottenham Court Road's UFO - though the Softs' first gig in London was a disastrous appearance at the Zebra Club where they were booed off (some compensation being admitted in the surprise recruitment of four French *au-pairs* as groupies-in-residence).

Ayers, meanwhile had conceived a bizarre plan to sell his songs to The Animals (then well in decline) and, through his subsequent investigations, encountered the management partnership of Chas Chandler and Mike Jeffries. Jeffries promised Ayers that he could get "a fantastic deal" from Mickie Most if the group would let him select chart material for them. The offer was cordially declined - but Jeffries somehow became the Softs' manager, and eventually they later came to regret the fact.

At first, however, it all looked reasonable enough. Jeffries encouraged the band to use Ayers' songs - and even Ratledge could appreciate that what Kevin was doing was more likely to pay the bills at this stage.

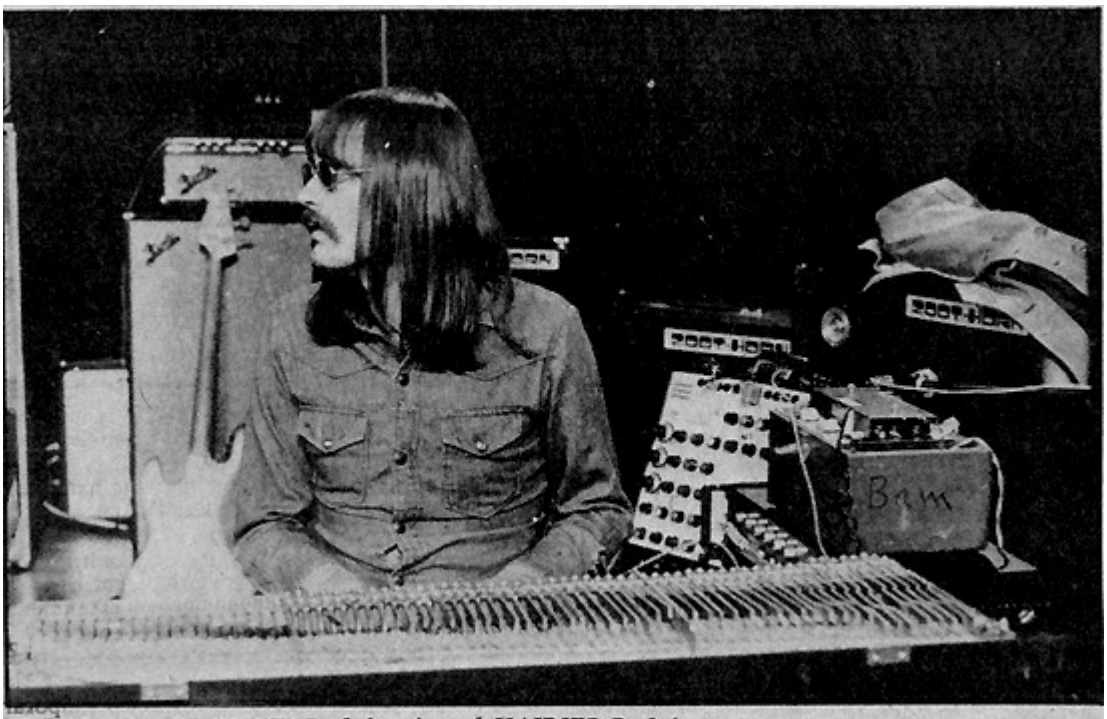
A three-day session at De Lane Lea was arranged. Giorgio Gomelsky was to record the band rehearsing Ayers' material and to offer his creative suggestions.

At the end of the final day Jeffries smilingly declined to pay the studio costs and Gomelsky, gathering the tapes in his arms, stormed out of the studio. Five years later selections from these tapes - which weren't even demos - appeared on the French BYG label as sides of "Rock Generation" Vols. 7 and 8. Only Softs fanatics were pleased.

Meanwhile, nomadic American nut-case Kim Fowley had picked up on the New Wave of 67: a dual gig by the Softs and the Floyd at The Roundhouse. Trying in vain to secure the latter, he moved in on the former - only to discover Jeffries and Chandler already there.

His comradely offer of production help was, however, accepted by the band (even though all they knew of him was a mention of his name on the sleeve of "Freak Out"), all of which led to his special breed of disassociation gracing the B-side of the Softs' first and only single, "Love Makes Sweet Music".

Again recorded at De Lane Lea, the first mix of the A-side featured rhythm guitar by Jimi Hendrix, another Jeffries-Chandler signing, who happened to be down the corridor in the next studio doing his debut single, "Hey Joe". The two groups dropped in on each other's sessions and became friendly - to the point where Hendrix invited Wyatt, Ayers and Allen to do the back-up vocals on "Stone Free". Finally, however, both swap-over appearances were rejected in favour of alternative takes.



Ratledge. A much OLDER Ratledge. A much HAIRIER Ratledge.

The Fowley-Ayers collaboration "Feelin' Reelin' Squeelin' " went out in midsummer as the most uncommercial A-side in the world - until, one week later, Polydor flipped the side and The Soft Machine soared to the lofty eminence of number 28 on Radio London's Fab Forty. (For connoisseurs: the name "Ellidge" on the credit listing is Robert's real name; Wyatt is a stage-name coined from that of poetic Elizabethan ancestor Sir Thomas Wyatt - and, in any case, Ayers wrote both sides.)

NOTHING MUCH came out of the single and Polydor appeared less than manic over the prospect of an album, so the Softs followed the advice of their cherished *eminence grise* Henry Henriod and departed upon the hour for France in the company of The Real Mike Chapman, a large stentorian figure prone to the endless declaiming of his "flow-etry" over the P.A. during rock concerts (as per 14-Hour Technicolour Dream *chez* Alexandra Palace at which the Softs and Floyd performed).

In St. Tropez the band became involved in Alan Zion's production of Picasso's play "Desire Attrape Par La Queue", a "total environment" happening featuring (amongst other attractions) Taylor Meade, Ultra Violet, and the on-stage beheading of live chickens - some years in advance of Alice Cooper, if that's anything to chalk up. It was an incontrovertible *success-de-scandale*, providing the Softs with the core of their subsequently huge French following, and drawing out the local gendarmerie to break up the event and the home-made geodesic dome housing it.

When, however, they attempted to get back into the U.K., Daevid Allen's visa was allegedly discovered to be expired, his passport out of date, and his hair too long. The other three left him at Dover and headed for Edinburgh to play the festival as accompaniment to Simon Watson-Taylor's production of Jarry's "Ubu Enchainee", a gig secured for them by Mark Boyle whose Sensual Laboratory provided the house-lights at UFO.

Watson-Taylor declared the Softs the most "pataphysical" band he'd ever seen (qv. any translation of Jarry) and, the next time they played Paris, the group were ceremoniously created Official Orchestra Of The College Of Pataphysics and given an award by the Minister of Culture.

AFTER THE much-sung Christmas On Earth concert which polished off the year, Hendrix invited the Softs to go with him on his opening U.S. tour. (At this juncture - the group still regarding themselves as a quartet *manque* - guitarist Andy Somers, late of the discontinued Dantalion's Chariot, was invited to join in Allen's place; he spent a couple of months rehearsing with them and then disappeared off to the States with Zoot Money in search of Eric Burdon.)

It was the Softs' first taste of the big time and the itinerary was murder: two sets of two-

month non-stop gigging, divided by a couple of weeks off to sleep in. Hendrix naturally, occupied 99% of the audiences' attention - but, at the Chicago Opera House at least, the Softs managed to stop the show on their own account.

Between the two halves of the tour, Ratledge went back to London. Ayers and Wyatt remained in their chairs, exhausted. The strain was already pulling the group apart.

For the second lap (the bill beefed-up by the addition of Hendrix proteges Eire Apparent) the pressure was somewhat lowered in terms of set-length - but this time all the gigs were killers. In New York at Madison Square Gardens they lost their nerve at the foot of a bill featuring Hendrix, The Chambers Brothers, Albert King, and Big Brother And The Holding Company. "Nightmarish" is how Wyatt recalls the result.

The final gig was at the Hollywood Bowl. The group merely got through it. The next move they discovered was immediately back to New York to do their debut album under the auspices of famous Black producer Tom Wilson.

Wilson, contrary to popular rumour, *was* in the studio most of the time, but didn't appear to fully understand the Softs or their music. "We'd do a take," remembers Wyatt, "go back into the control-room - and he'd be on the phone to some girl."

At the beginning of the single week the recording lasted, the group straggled into the studio and loosened up with a "live" take of "Why Am I So Short?" plus an extended blow later entitled (for no apparent reason) "So Boot If At All".

Wilson listened wryly. "I don't know," he informed them when they'd finished, "how I'm going to record this."

In the event, he simply left the band to their own devices. The first take of "Why Am I So Short?" went onto the album, as did the first takes of most of the other numbers. Post-production work mainly consisted of pan-potting everything ceaselessly from channel to channel - an effect that wears thin after approximately one minute.

Nevertheless, it was a great album - a judgement born out by its enormous import sales over the years.



This was it. Snazzola, hah? A long time before "Led Zeppelin III", too

Wyatt arranged most of the material, coming up with a version of an old Brian Hopper song called "Hope For Happiness" which allowed Ratledge ample space to demonstrate his bizarre sound and tremendous flow of ideas - whilst Ratledge and brother Hugh (now roadying for the band) co-wrote "Box 25/4 Lid" in a hotel opposite the Lincoln Memorial for inclusion as the album's closer.

An extensive musical analysis of the Softs has yet to be written - and this isn't the place - but, when it is it'll have to focus heavily on the very surprising improvisatory ability displayed by the band-members so early in their careers. "So Boot If At All" is certainly one of the all-time classic rock ad-libs.

Naturally, the group there upon broke up.

AYERS returned to Majorca to write songs. Ratledge flew to London and began to compose some of the highly complex scores the Softs would perform in a year's time.

Wyatt stayed on in New York at the Chelsea Hotel, writing "Moon In June" and getting to know the city.

As winter advanced, he left for Los Angeles, there staying with first Hendrix and then Eric Burdon, writing all the time and recording two demo albums by himself. The first featured "Moon In June" in an extended form, the second fragments of old material by Hugh re-arranged and provided with lyrics - the pith of which eventually turned up as Side One of "Soft Machine Volume Two".

Finally Probe resolved to release the first album. It sold fast.

They called Wyatt asking him to get the band on the road again. No band.

He phoned Ratledge, who guardedly promised to give the matter his consideration. He tried to contact Ayers - but the only thing anyone knew about him was that he'd flogged his bass to Mitch Mitchell and thereafter disappeared.

Then - Brainwavesville! Hugh Hopper still wandering the States, was contacted a day before he'd promised himself to sell his bass and buy a motorbike.

The new trio congregated in Wyatt's room in his mother's London house in February 1969, and began to rehearse.

Part Two Next Week (We did it again)

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

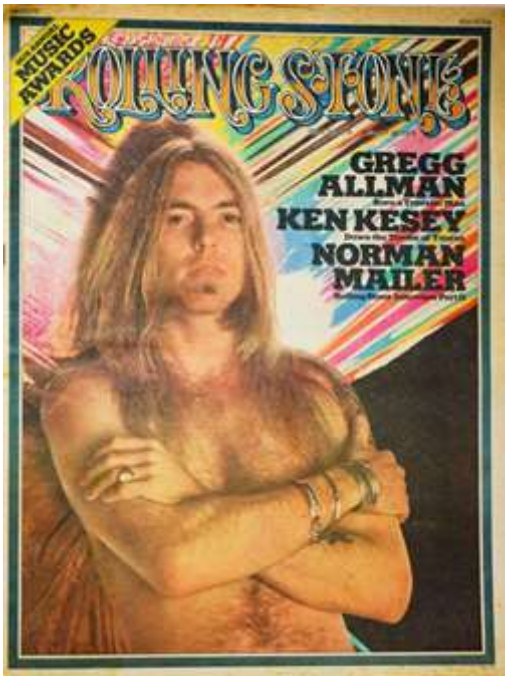
Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soft Machine Man: Up from Rock Bottom - Rolling Stone No 178 - January 16, 1975

Soft Machine Man: Up from Rock Bottom

BY CHARLES NICHOLL



LONDON—There was something surreal about Robert Wyatt's recent appearance on *Top of the Pops*, BBC Television's weekly ritual enactment of the Top 20. "A ramshackle charm" was a phrase he used about something, and it seemed right for him. He stuck out like a sore thumb amid the satin and tat—the veteran from psychedelic London, now a cripple in a wheelchair, smoking incessantly and joking elliptically, the drummer's hands restless in their redundancy.

He was there to sing a single, his first, already a minor hit—"I'm a Believer," the Neil Diamond-penned Monkees hit. A far cry from the jazzy experimentals of the Soft Machine, though the voice is the same: frail and witty and very South London. "There are as many good pop songs as there are good jazz solos," he said. " 'I'm a Believer' just seemed to fit my throat. At 29, it was his first appearance on nationwide TV.

The rise, fall and rebirth of Robert Wyatt is a warming story. Wyatt was a drummer, vocalist and founding force of the original Soft Machine, the late-Sixties cocktail of jazzy influences ("simple riffy Mingus" is Wyatt's label), acid innovations and great British whimsy. Wyatt was celebrated for his bare-chested drum solos, his fondness for liquor and his rendition of the lines "I'm nearly five foot seven tall/I like to smoke and drink and ball."

Chas Chandler looked after the Soft Machine until "one day he came rushing in saying, 'I've just found this fucking genius who plays guitar with his teeth!' " Hendrix took the front seat, but the Softs were supporting on his 1968 U.S. tour, their first album already popular. In 1969, Wyatt made a solo album, *The End of an Ear*, and in 1971, after their fourth album was recorded, he split from the Soft Machine, "We just weren't friends anymore." Then he formed Matching Mole ("*machine moelle*" is French for . . .?). Matching Mole was preparing its third album and a tour when, in June 1973, Wyatt attempted to leave a party by climbing down the drainpipe. He fell three stories and woke up the next day with a broken spine and little chance of walking, or drumming, again. The general assumption was that he'd flown out of the window on acid. "No," he told them, "it's good old alcohol, you know — the legal one."



He mended his life for a year, married an artist called Alfie, and now he's back in circulation, dispensing "ramshackle charm" around the Television Centre, negotiating the python-sized studio cables with his nifty back-wheel balances. He is back with something to sing about, and his new solo album, *Rock Bottom*, produced by Pink Floyd's Nick Mason, is a song and a half, a plaintive voice over lush, enigmatic arrangements, the whole thing lyrical with lost movement and a childlike clearness.

Wyatt's music is unmistakable. What is more important is that his music is a focal point for a nucleus of musicians busy trading ideas, intergigging and cross referring. It's not quite a new wave yet, but it is a thoroughly ongoing eddy. Wyatt's lineup at his recent Drury Lane concert is a good example: Mike Oldfield on guitar, Dave Stewart (Hatfield and the North) on keyboards, Laurie Allen (associated with Gong) and Nick Mason (Pink Floyd) on drums, Hugh Hopper (ex-Softs) on bass, Fred Frith (Henry Cow) on guitar and Mongezi Feza on trumpet. These bands and soloists are constantly interweaving, and a distinctive tone is emerging. Interestingly, like a city sound—Mersey and Philly, Boss-town and Motown,

Muscle Shoals and Ville Platte—these artists are linked by a record company, Virgin Records.

So the moment was auspicious as well as nicely surreal when the five million pairs of eyes tuned into *Top of the Pops* were momentarily puzzled by this bearded gentleman in a nightshirt, swaying around in his wheelchair and singing in a funny voice about how disappointment haunted all his dreams. In a career dedicated to small acts of cultural sabotage this was perhaps the coup de grâce. But Robert Wyatt maintains, of course, a healthy skepticism about pop history and its making. "I don't know why everyone worries so much whether it's a good period or a bad period for music," he says. "I'm having a great time. I never have liked these epoch-making records anyway!"

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

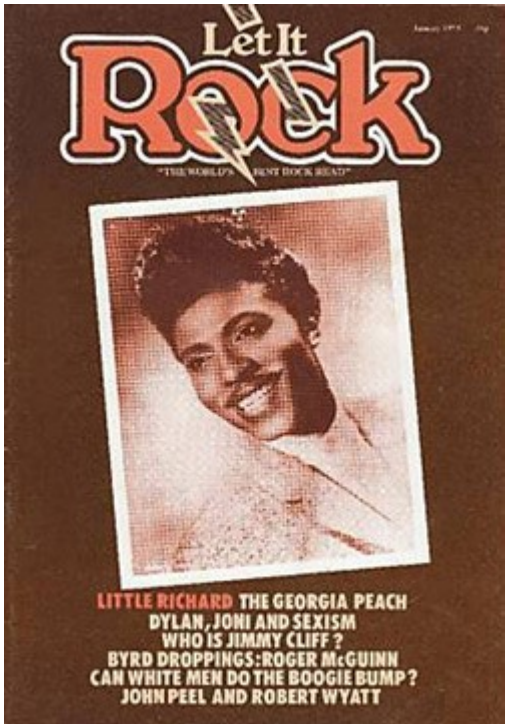
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

My Top Ten by Robert Wyatt - Let It Rock - January 1975

MY TOP TEN BY ROBERT WYATT



First of all I have to make the point that I'm 29. I think everybody's stuck in their own age group to a certain extent, where their taste is concerned. People that I know tend to believe that the music of their adolescence is the most inspiring ever, and find music from before their own generation a bit boring, and music after it a bit trivial-childish.

Nearly everybody thinks that, although they rationalise it in other ways. The other point is I'm choosing ten records I like, but actually there are fourteen records that I like, so I've had to leave out four. The third point is that I've lost most of these records so I might have details of the titles wrong.

1

'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat' by Charlie Mingus is from an album called *Mingus Ah Um* on CBS (I think). This isn't offically a song - I don't know of any words for it - but it's very singable like a lot of Mingus tunes. However complicated his tunes are, when you know them, you can sing along with them. Also I can almost play it as well as sing it because, like many of Julie Tippet's songs, it's nearly all on the black notes on the piano. The Improvisations on this, which are by Shafi Hadi and Booker Ervin on saxophones, respect the tune - are extensions of the tune. People like Gil Evans and Mingus stand out from other jazz writers and arrangers because they integrate the improvisations of their musicians into their writing.

I should think it's easier for a musician to do that playing with Mingus than with most people, simply because Mingus tunes are so beautiful anyway.



Next bit I've chosen is the **'Piano Quintet' by Shostakovich**. The string quartet part of this quintet, as far as I remember - as it's some years since I've heard it - play bowed muted strings; a very haunting sound. I like the idea of a string quartet anyway; in fact I enjoy the idea of a string quartet more than I enjoy a lot of string quartet music. In this case, perhaps, I liked it because the cello is often used rather in the way the double bass is used in jazz-i.e. not bowed but plucked; relatively simple rhythmically, as far as I remember. It's an incredibly melodic piece, which you must admit is a great achievement for someone who is, after all, only a brainwashed communist.



'Friday The Thirteenth' by Thelonious Monk. The particular version I have in mind is from the Town Hall Concert he did - the first main Town Hall Concert - where the arrangements were done by someone called Hal Overton. I think when Monk dies there'll be a rash of colour supplement potted biographies, little television programmes-arts programmes and so on, about him. 'The zany loony of the bebop world' is what they'll call him, no doubt. They won't do it till he's dead of course, in case he makes lots of money, which they probably think would be bad for him. In my opinion he's one of the greatest writers of tunes that I've ever heard, within my range of appreciation. The thing about this particular concert is that Hal Overton's arrangements are really imaginative. He's taken old recordings of Monk playing these tunes and written them out, including the solos Monk played, and orchestrated them for a large band. So you have the spontaneity of the improvised ideas strengthened by Hal Overton's inspired orchestration. 'Friday The Thirteenth' I particularly like because its got a secondary bass line which is sort of out of synch with the tune itself, and it sort of tilts the whole tune at a strange angle (If that sounds like Pseuds' Comer, I'm sorry , but that's what happens when you try and explain what you like about music).



'Epilogue' by Miroslav Vitous, from the album Infinite Search. Miroslav Vitous is technically in a class with Barre Philips, Stanley Clarke and Barry Guy. But as composer of music for the bass he is my favourite since Charlie Haden. Maybe his slavic origins have something to do with his particular melodic inclinations. On Infinite Search, the double bass - an instrument usually used in a subservient role - is the group's 'lead' instrument. The group - Herbie Hancock, John McLaughlin, Jack de Johnette and Joe Henderson - support Miroslav's lines with the accuracy, speed and imagination you associate with a first-class tennis match. Although the individual musicians are accustomed to working together in a live context, they are also accustomed to drowning out double-bassists, on the expedient premise that the loud instruments lead, the quiet follow. The recording studio can liberate musicians from this 'hierarchy by volume'. In this case, the effect of such energetic players pulling their punches to leave space for Miroslav to set the direction in each piece creates a fine, translucent texture, like a spider's web. Tennis matches, spider's webs - the whole world in a song, what more can you ask?

5

'Blues For Pablo' by Gil Evans and Miles Davis. This is from an LP originally called Miles Davis Plus Nineteen, which was Evans' first attempt to arrange a complete series of inter-related mini-concertos for Miles, who plays mainly flugelhorn in a bigband context. It's harder to play the flugelhorn than the trumpet, which tends to make even flugelhorn virtuosi like Clark Terry, Art Farmer and the great Johnny Coles play more carefully , thoughtfully than many trumpeters. As the title suggests, there is a certain similarity between the music of southern Spain and the early blues of the southern States, which Gil Evans exploits beautifully without using the obvious link instrument, the guitar. In fact Gil Evans was, as far as I know, the first 'jazz' arranger to supplement the traditional 'ethnic' dance band instruments with French horns, flutes and other instruments usually associated with the European orchestral tradition. Incidentally 'Blues For Pablo', like the other tracks on this record, is only a couple of minutes long, which demonstrates Gil Evans' roots as an arranger for 'pop' dance bands, and makes each individual piece nice and tight (if I'd been a radio DJ at the time I'd have pushed them as worthy competition to Sandy Nelson and Duane Eddy on the instrumental singles market).

6

'Sex Machine' by Sly and the Family Stone. Sometimes, when I've got nothing else to do, I sit and speculate about Sly Stone's innovations in the recording studio. He used to be a disc jockey and as anyone who admires the work of Kenny Everett knows, DJs have a unique opportunity to muck around with tape recorders and create a sort of surreal continuity with their between-record link pieces - to make a musical entity out of an otherwise more-or-less random series of records. Also a successful American DJ has to be fast, slick, tasteless and dramatic - a great education for a musician. One major difference between Sly Stone's courageous production stunts and, say Frank Zappa's, was that the basic band recording always had the immediacy and excitement of a good live gig. Larry Graham in particular, is a spectacularly useful bass-player and singer.


His Top Ten

MY TOP TEN

BY ROBERT WYATT

7

'Flying' by the Beatles. A lot of people didn't like the Magical Mystery Tour film because it was amateurish (the cameras didn't dart in and out ot the lead singer's nostril's like they do in professionally made music films) or pretentious (they were actually trying to do something interesting): or something. Belonging as I do to the gullible hippy generation whose critical faculties are irredemably blunted by drugs, sex, and bad PA systems, I

thought it was great. The LP of the same name was even better, because they filled it out with their recent amazing singles. The most magical and mysterious piece on the record though, for me, was Flying' which essentially seems to consist of a twelve-bar blues, except that all the chords are major, and the singing 'white'. So white actually, that it sounds like the 'Volga Boat Song', part two.
The effect is um what can I say oh you know the usual string of misleading, inadequate adjectives, um, how about 'this record is very nice so I like it'. P.S. I though the Beatles much more daring and inventive than most of us 'progressive' groups of the late sixties (apart from the Pink Floyd). Something to do with endless studio time replacing endless live gigs, I should think.



'Leaning On A Lampost' by George Formby. Yet another Daring, Wacky Northerner Apart from being Daring, Wacky, and Northern, George Formby was a shit-hot ukulele player, not half so stodgy as his many imitators - he'd have made a good rhythm guitarist. Apart from which this is a useful record to play to anybody who still thinks that Bob Dylan invented good lyrics. While I'm at it I'd like to mention Frank Crummil. Ahem, "Frank Crummit". Thank you.



''**Hold On I'm Coming' by Sam and Dave**. I vividly remember as if 'twere yesterday the day I saw the amazing Stax circus come to town. And best of all I
remember Sam and Dave striding on stage from either side and meeting in front of Booker T's gang all hammering away like it was the encore already-very exciting. Once again how can mere words convey etc. etc.
Goldie does a version of this song which apparently accentuates the title's erotic possibilities - more power to her, er, elbow and everything, I say; but nevertheless I doubt if her version matches the original in terms of pure musical excitement. On the other hand, there's probably no such thing as pure musical excitement-apart from The Old Grey Whistle Test of course.
The way Stax records were recorded made them perfect for discotheques rather than posh stereo systems etc, on which, like many good dance records e.g.
west-Indian dance records, they sound comparatively stark and dry. Conversely, many so-called "well-produced" records, when pumped out over a busy dance
floor, are about as helpful to dancers as a carpet of wet cement. I mention this because it's puzzling trying to work out why things are or have been popular, if you don't take into account the original context. I'd like to continue in this vein and discuss the amphibious life of the sea lion but I know enough about joumalism to know that you're supposed to stick to the point. So here's my last record.



'Get Out Of My Life Woman' by Lee Dorsey/Allen Toussaint. These two made a series of great singles, and if anybody's got a spare copy of the LP of this title they made together, I'll give anything except perhaps my right arm for it. I gather Lee Dorsey's not working as a singer any more, runs a garage or something. Never mind we've still got John Mayall. Toussaint belongs to the great tradition of musicians
from New Orleans with names thought up by a French Stanley Unwin. Some of my favourite of these voodoo-swamped names include Bechet, 'Slow-drag' Pavageau, Alphonse Picou, Barney Bigard, Joseph 'Zigaboo' on drums on this particular record but

whoever it is ought to be famous. He saved my bacon, anyway, by showing me a way to combine the triplet feel of the earlier swing bands with the more violent military-band-derived eighth note feel favoured in moderb rock circles. Now I hastily leave you to ponder the exact meaning, if any , of the phrase 'modern rock circles'.

La version française de cet article est parue dans le N° 8 de la revue Atem.

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

I played Robert Wyatt at 78rpm and I saw God - New Musical Express - October 26, 1974


I played Robert Wyatt at 78rpm and saw God

There's something extra special about green suede boots. A certain devil-may-care attitude, a touch of fearless dandyism combined with a sense of the earthy and an instinct for style that just don't quit.

Robert Wyatt weareth green boots. They go very nicely with the blue plastic stop-watch around his neck.

Nick Mason, Very Famous Drummer and Producer De Luxe, peers eloquently through the plate-glass barrier between the Shop Floor and Ground Control at CBS studios. On the other side, Gary Windo (fetchingly ceilinged by a little white cap) and Mongezi Feza are adding the horn lines to Mr. Wyatt's Next Teenage Smasheroonie.

"Great," opines Wyatt from his mobile command-post at the doorward end of the console. "It does a bit, doesn't it?" replies Mason.

Wyatt groans elaborately. "You and your Pink Floyd in-jokes."

THE SONG is another golden great from the sizzlin' sixties, Chris Andrews' 'Yesterday Man'.

Where Andrews' original was aggressively petulant, Wyatt's is wistfully surreal. He performs on assorted bits of percussion (including a bass-drum whomped by hand) and what sounds like a harmonium, but plays around the beat while the main rhythmic push comes from Windo and Feza.

A modestly clad young man with an air of amiable vagueness that instantly pegs him as a member of Henry Cow wanders in, identifies himself by the highly improbable name of John Greaves, overdubs a positive humdinger of a bass line, inquires how long it takes to get from here to Liverpool Street, and wanders out again.



"Yeah, but could Pan's People dance to it?" inquires Windo.

It looks as if they may have to, because after a minor fracas with Top Of The Pops resident plenipotentiary Robin Nash, Wyatt will probably not be gracing their studios for some little time to come.

It seems that Nash considered Wyatt's appearing in his wheelchair to be somewhat "distasteful," both to the audience and to the production team.

Wyatt retorted, with ample justification, that if being in a wheelchair didn't hang *him* up, he saw no reason why it should offend anybody else.

Exeunt fuming in opposite directions.

Meanwhile, there is a groovy little ditty entitled 'Sonia' to go on the B-side, and for this one Wyatt whips it out on a specially-prepared mellotron programmed with sound effects, tuned percussion, voices, xylophones and a whole circus of other foolishness. As he gets to work on the track (which already features him on piano and percussion) jaws sag and people run serious risks of falling off their chairs.

"He could do a show by himself with two or three of those," murmurs his wife Alfie.

"Can we hear the other one again?" asks Windo.

Mason spins around in his chair, face frozen in well-simulated disgust. "What do you think this is?" he asks icily. "A bleedin' discotheque or something?"

As the studio disintegrated once more into cackles of brain-damaged hilarity, we fade out into a different time phase; two weeks previously in Twickenham, playground of the Elder Deities. We'll give Wyatt one paragraph's start to make it back to his residence in time to admit the writer.

Okay, Robert - go!

WHILE WE'RE WAITING, let's sling in a few thoughts on Mr. Wyatt's album, Rock Bottom, which is being received in the nation's record stores with the proverbial storm of indifference.

First of all, it's an easy album to listen to and a hard one to come to terms with. (Jeez, two clauses ending in prepositions. If my English teacher could see me now.)

As Ian MacDonald pointed out in his original review of the album, rock-star-as-paraplegic is a whole different ball game to the flood of spiritual hypochondriacs currently laying their bummers on paying customers, especially when Wyatt has triumphed over his particular slice of adversity, leaving others (like John Lennon, Lou Reed and pre-Beach Neil Young) staggering under comparatively featherweight burdens.

I don't want to pull any sanctimonious Oxfam there's-a-lesson-to-be-learned-by-all-of-us routines, but nevertheless, the point does have to be made.

Not to dwell overlong, either, on the face that the music and lyrics are a prime vindication of tile theory of lateral thinking as applied to rock music (i.e. many of the conventional criteria of what constitutes a "good rock lyric" or a "good rock melody," are effortlessly short circuited).

There, now. I've gone on for five paragraphs when I only meant to write one, and poor old Robert's waiting for me two weeks ago in Twickenham - so into the conveniently located

time/space reducer (cleverly disguised as an ordinary London taxi) and ...

LO AND BEHOLD, here we are at the Wyatt residence, a large, airy house - reputedly donated by admirer Julie Christie - and here's Mr. Wyatt himself to open the door.

The living-room window is adorned with a Communist sticker (you just knew that he was a dirty Red, didn't you? Now he'll definitely never get back on Top Of The Pops).

Beaming and kaftan draped, he skids around the kitchen organising coffee ("We don't have any sugar, so is condensed milk all right? You don't look like a hippie, otherwise I'd offer you honey"), before transferring the discussion to the Principal Living Area, which, he claims, "has a totally spurious and extremely temporary air of tidiness."

He produces a reminder list for himself of things that he specifically wanted to talk about.

A remark made by the author to the effect that he never listens to the radio because he likes to programme his own listening sparks Wyatt off on one of his ready-made topics.



"But the logical extension of that is why not get a piano so that then you can programme your own notes. It's like singing, everybody thinks that it's a case of some people have a voice and some people haven't.

"*Everybody's* got an equally good voice. Just like everybody's got two arms and two legs. It's just a matter of using it.

"People who get praised for doing it are the people who actually bother. It's incredible cheek, actually. There's nothing easier than putting on layer after layer of any instrument that you find lying around."

Take that, Mike Oldfield. Still, that does presuppose that you can actually *play* the goddamn things in the first place.

"No, not assuming that you can play it. In fact Dave MacRae had a much harder time putting down mellotron than I did, because he knows much more about possibilities.

"I'm so delighted if I can get a note which sounds nice that I don't get too flash with it.

Dave can do so much that it's almost a drawback. The people who make the best rock records are the people who can't really play that well at all."

"It must be very tantalising for someone like Keith Jarrett, because he can do so much. It's like an athlete: there's such a real joy in doing it. His fingers are so fast that his brain can't keep up half the time.

"People with a fantastic amount of facility have a hard time controlling it for a specific musical event. In fact, amazing soloists tend to play different versions of Their Solo in everything they play, jazz guitarists have a much harder time playing solos that are relevant to a particular tune than, say, George Harrison would, who can't move that fast.

"This is my theory, which is my theory and which belongs to me.

"Now what else is on my list ... there's a few things that I'd kick myself for if I didn't mention ...

"ONE OF WHICH is the growing antipathy among NME readers - and writers - towards boring old snobs left over from flower-power, such as myself, being given precedence over ... no, not precedence, but ... taking music away from the people or something ... if I'm wrong I'll apologise ... actually, I think I *am* wrong.

"Anyway, I'd just like to say that I heard Noddy Holder this morning, and I think he's one of the best singers I've ever heard. He's one of the only singers I've ever heard who's constantly done amazing vocals on everything since the first record his group did. I think he's an absolute ... fantastic singer.

"Now, what else does he think?"

What else does he think?

Heavens to albatross, gentle reader, the foregoing represents about four minutes of a four-hour conversation. The ideas-per-minute quotient of a Wyatt conversation rivals that of Groucho Marx in his prime. You'd need a "Wyatt Remembers" type paperback to do justice to it all.

Anyway, lemme just sling in a few random excerpts from our extraavapperama:

"Oh, another thing that I think is ... see, Alfie liked the Sparks single straight off an' I didn't and she suggested that a lot of blokes miss the point that rock's based on. All us blokes claim Mick Jagger, or whoever it might be, as our sort of male hero, but in fact the basic reason that a lot of these geezers get famous is because they're sex symbols for girls.

"The male rock fan takes over in terms of who's supposed to be good and who isn't - and I was wondering about this tendency towards sourness on the part of all blokes when they talk about rock-and-roll and the disillusion that they feel about rock-and-roll.

"It's because they don't like to admit that a large number of the heroes actually became heroes not as earthy rock-music-for-the-people people but simply because *an incredible number of girls fancied them*.

"I reckon you ought to have Elke Brooks and Lyndsey De Paul and people doing singles reviews, because as far as I can remember it's been all blokes doing 'em. A lot of singles are to do with male sex objects, so it's very odd that it's largely men writing about it."

Two more minutes and counting ...

ANOTHER BIT, mainly about that Drury Lane gig of a month or so back. Gonna do any more?

"No. I knew it was gonna be quite good, because Laurie Allan, Hugh Hopper and Dave Stewart are basically my dream rhythm-section. I felt that no matter how bad it was, those people and Fred Frith and so on would be able to pull something out of the hat.

"There's some misleading things put out about me, actually, about my dislike of live performances. All I'm talking about is me and what suits me.

"I get things together in live performances that I wouldn't get together normally and there's certainly a certain magic to it if it's working right, but the sheer cost and the whole organisation of getting a live group working and the solid responsibilities of getting other people paid - there's just so many things that can go wrong that the percentages are all against you.

"But people like me aren't basically quick thinkers and we work best without people ... staring at us.

"I've got a sort of computer mentality - not that I actually do much composing. If I wasn't watching telly I'd be composing most of the time, and this is how my brain operates.

"Performance is something else altogether. Performance is taking on people who've come out for a lift after their day, so that they feel good for a couple of hours, and there's therefore a temptation to get into the exciting bits.

"Whereas most of the music I like is ... pretty boring, actually! Performing live gives you a cheap thrill consciousness."

ONTO THE ALBUM, and its graphic depiction of Wyatt's life before, during and after the accident.

"The accident didn't in fact haunt me or in fact have half the effect on me that people might suppose. It was a useful bunch of symbols of what I think life's like anyway, but even then I'm not really concerned with whining.

"You've got to think of *something* to sing, and something that comes off the tongue quite easily, so obviously you draw on what's around you, just like a person who's going out to sketch. The sketch is just the sketch.

"What they are interested in is their control of their fingers. The subject that they use is really quite incidental.

"It's just one of the tools, part of the stimulating stuff that sets things off. Nothing to do with the quality of what comes out.

"It doesn't matter if at the end you know nothing more about houses or trees. The words are just tools for me to make pleasant sounding songs out of."

Charles Shaar Murray.

Previous article Next article

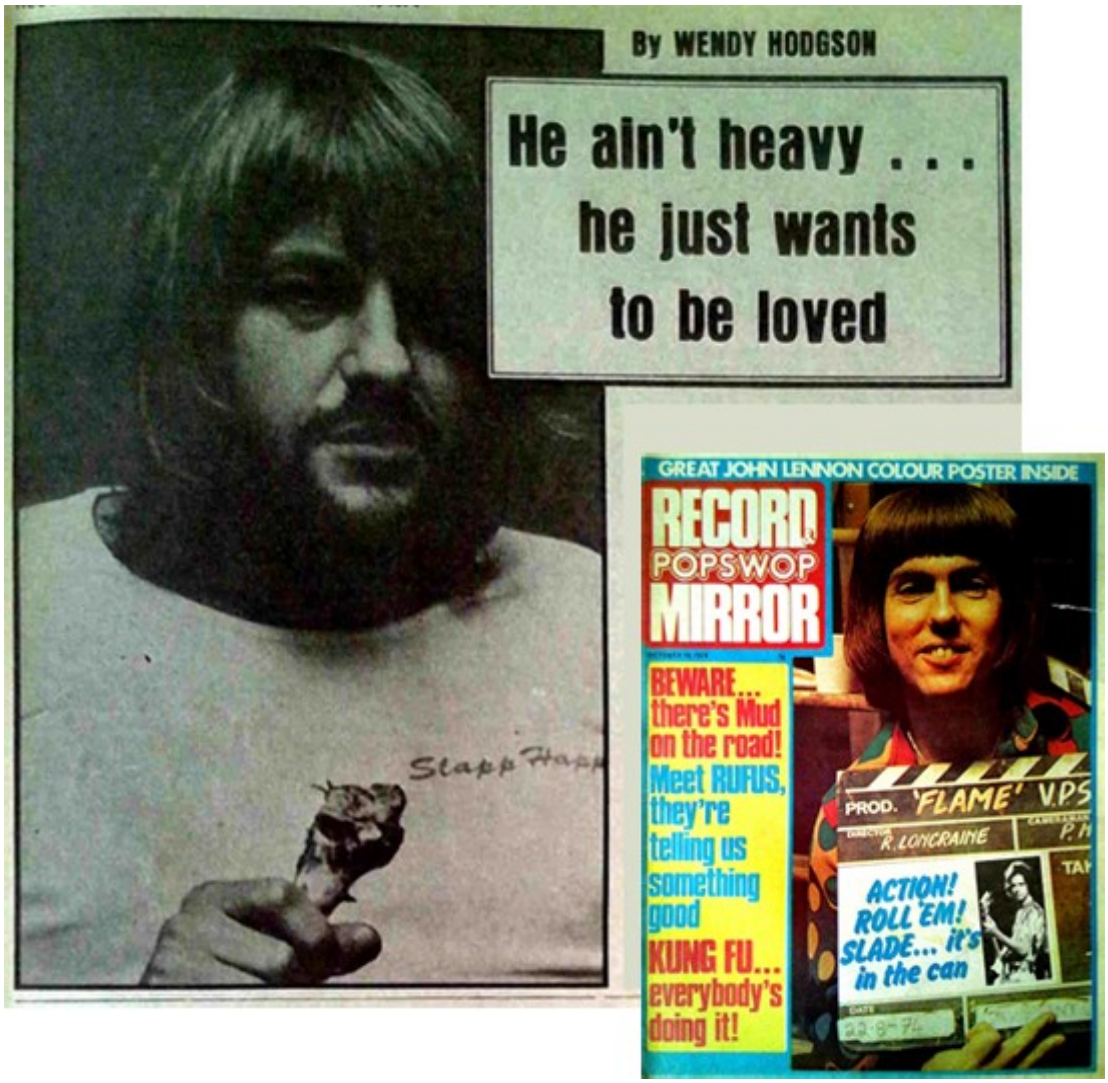
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

He ain't heavy... he just wants to be loved - Record & Popswop Mirror - October 19, 1974



By WENDY HODGSON

A SHATTERING accident or an unfortunate misadventure usually makes peoples more philosophical about life. Robert Wyatt is the exception. Last year he fell from a window breaking his back and paralysing his body from the waist down, but he hasn't changed. He says: "I'm still the same silly git that I ever was!"

Just before this catastrophe, Robert had packed up drumming with Soft Machine and stopped gigging with Matching Mole. He was pondering what steps to take next, when fate

took over with a seven-month bout in hospital. "It's almost as though it had been planned for me now, as I sit back looking over my past," he says.

Within less than a year Wyatt has courageously blasted his way back with a single that has greatly surprised many people - particularly the heavy followers whom he appeals to. In case you haven't heard, it's the old Monkees hit I'm A Believer.

This is Wyatt's first attempt at the commercial market. His dramatic change in style was to get away from his usual five - minute, long material to a shorter, boppler type of record.

"I'd like, to try and make some more commercial records" he begins. "But there are so many people who do it expertly anyway that it's a bit cheeky for me and my recording company to think we can hold our own. For me it's an excuse to try out something different."

Loyalty

And with this comes the assurance that Wyatt will not be burning his boats behind him. "I know what I do best", he exclaims. "It's nice to have the opportunity to reach the other side of the pop scene, but I'm also very concerned with the loyalty of my fans who've been with me for years. I don't want to lose these people or their loyalty. Of course If I had to chose then I'd rather keep entertaining those who I've been appealing to for so many years. If I can reach more people then of course that's fine".

He admits, that in the beginning he was worried about his fans disapproving of the record and particularly worried how more Influential people like DJ's would take it "I thought that if Tony Blackburn was going to play the single then John Peel would stop playing it, but in fact he hasn't stopped playing it. As far as I can gather everyone's been nice and encouraging about the single."

Of course there are some people totally baffled by Wyatt's unusual move, and think he should be doing something more challenging instead of time wasting.

"The first time I saw myself on Top Of The Pops I thought the kids must be wondering "What's that great bear and bunch of hippies doing on our nice clean programme". But In fact these are just friends of mine whom I'm borrowing from my favourite groups. They help me out when they're not too busy."

Everyone puts him into a class of his own, looks up to him, admires him, calls him intelligent and rates him as a superior musician. Robert Wyatt radiates his vivaciousness and easy - going nature to his guests until eventually you feel you've known him for years. He is oblivious of the class in which his fans have put him. He says "I'm grateful for the people who take me serious but I get worried when they start saying I belong to some superior gang.

"I think a lot of people in this business pretend they're communicating some serious message in their lyrics. But really they're saying "Look what a nice intelligent and interesting person I am I want you all to love me very much. I'm probably like that a bit, but at least I know it. I say read the lyrics carefully but don't get taken into them.

"Although I'm not a pop musician. I'm also not a serious heavy musician. Some musicians may try to do something more complicated, serious or involved than straight pop music. I must say that I don't. I'm more interested In Spike Milligan or Monty Python's Flying Circus and people who play silly buggers. In a way I take myself seriously but I try not to be solemn about it".

Lucky

They may refer to him as 'the master-mind' or the 'intelligent musician' - but he's certainly a man full of surprises. The heavies may think they know all about him, but in
actual fact there's far more to this super guy than meets the eye.

He reads about today's charts and confesses: "All I read is complaints all the time, but really I don't think people realise how lucky they are. Eno pointed this out to me by saying listen to Alvin Stardust's records and see how good the guitar breaks are. They're very,

very good. This is where many people would he surprised - although perhaps not so now that I've released an old Monkee record! I tend not necessarily to like bands but particular musicians. For instance I think the Sweet have a first-rate drummer. I like Lindsey De Paul and Christ. If I could sing like Noddy Holder I'd be happy.

"All I've ever done is to try and keep with my audience and play what I thought to be nice stuff to play".

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Wyatt: up from Rock Bottom - Melody Maker - October 12, 1974



by Steve Lake

Robert Wyatt, 29, a gentleman never renowned for his dress sense, leans forward in his chair and

Involuntarily, I gasp. Glitter! Not a profusion, admittedly, but unmistakably there… Robert Wyatt is wearing rhinestoned carpet slippers, folks. Can this be?

hoists the hem of the kaftan/nightshirt affair he's wearing up by two or three inches.

Can yesterday's jazzer really have "gone glam"? He nods his head shrewdly.

"You can tell Gary Glitter – he might as well forget it, because by the time I'm finished, he's going to look hopelessly functional and tame.

Come Christmas time, when me beard's a bit longer, I plan to sport a string of fairy lights, from ear to ear. And I'm also considering the possibilities of a flashing neon street-sign for me wheelchair. How can Glitter compete with that?"

How indeed?

Don't you realise, I suggest to him, that the average reader is very probably a mite confused by the sudden change of direction that your career has taken lately? After all, from the heads-down seriousness of the drum chair with the Soft Machine to Top Of The Pops appearances crooning Neil Diamond tunes is hardly the most predictable of paths.

Wyatt thinks deeply for fully four minutes or so, scratching his head, face screwed up in concentration.

"Good," he says finally, and promptly clams up again, pouring himself a fifth sherry.

"What I would like to say to your readers," he volunteers, "is 'Why are you reading about somebody boring like me when there's a history of the Ronnie Scott Club by Max Jones elsewhere in this very same issue?'"

(See what I mean?)

Actually, "boring" is one thing the Robert Wyatt story is not. For despite his own embarrassment about his entire recorded output prior to the Virgin Records' "Rock Bottom" album, his achievements, personally and musically are pretty extraordinary.

Think about it. While Britain, in late '67, was recovering from an overdose of imported Flower Power and every soul band in the land had suddenly become a "head" outfit (viz the changing of Zoot Money's Big Roll Band into Dantalion's Chariot), the Soft Machine, unquestionably the most articulate of all the post-UFO crowd, were elsewhere.

Building up a heavy "cultural" reputation in France, initially, where they played the legendary St. Tropez gig, warming up the audience before Picasso's play, "Le Désir Attrapé Par La Queue."

The self-deprecating Wyatt finds it inconceivable that anybody should feel nostalgic for the first Softs. "We were just a bunch of posers, who couldn't play as well as Mingus or any of our heroes."

All the same, the said "posers," after, admittedly a line-up change or two, became the first (and to date only) rock band to be invited to play the Proms, were accepted by the British jazz scene (toured with the front line of the Keith Tippett Group in the 1969, played a residency at Ronnie's in '70), and radically changed rock music throughout Europe, being the inspirational source of a zillion Continental jazz-rock outfits. (Wyatt: "I can't say that I feel particularly proud about that.")

And Robert's extra-Soft Machine activities were mostly the kind of gigs that will constitute rock legends in years to come.

Can you imagine what an astonishing buzz it must have been to play a significant role in Keith Tippett's mammoth Centipede venture, for example…

And Wyatt was featured on Syd Barrett's "The Madcap Laughs," arguably the most controversial singer-songwriter album yet.

Robert recalls the sessions: "I thought they were rehearsals! We'd say 'What key is that in Syd?' and he'd say 'Yeah.' Or, 'That's funny, Syd, there's a bar of two and a half beats, and then it seems to slow up, and then there's five beats there,' and he'd go 'Oh, really?' And we sat there with the tape running, trying to work it out, when he stood up and said 'Right,

thank you very much'."

Then came Matching Mole, recording a brace of fine albums… in short, a career a lot of musicians would be proud of. Not Wyatt.


Wyatt: up from Rock Bottom

by Steve Lake

INTERNATIONAL

CHARLIE RICH Fully Realised

"I regret almost every second of my professional life. There's hardly a minute on any of those old albums that I can listen to without wincing. Y'know, there's so many bright ideas there, but there's more confusion."

Early last year, Robert Wyatt managed to fall out of the third floor window of a Maida Vale flat during the course of an exceptionally exuberant party. He broke his back, and put himself out of action for 12 months and is now rather more restricted in his mobility, being confined to a wheelchair.

Curiously, the net result of what must have been a very traumatic period of his life is that Robert seems more in control of his artistic situation than before, despite being unable to play drum kit, which was, previously, pretty much his raison-d'être.

Now forced to concentrate more on singing, at which he was always exceptionally adept, Robert's also got further into keyboards which had hitherto been a hobby, and something he wouldn't have considered doing on stage "unless I got very, very drunk" as he once put it.

Now his keyboard playing is improving, rapidly.

"My keyboard playing, I think, is going to improve just in time to take over from my voice. Limb by limb I'm disintegrating. I can't play drums any more, and, as I smoke 60 cigarettes a day, the singing's obviously going to dry up in a couple of years, and as the alcoholic poisoning takes over I won't be able to write songs any more, and I'll be left a pathetic zombied figure sitting in front of a piano.

Shortly after no doubt, the paralysis will reach my hands, and finally when all my faculties are gone, I'll become a critic and join you on the Melody Maker."

Still, with the top half of Robert Wyatt currently operating at something close to peak performance, the wide spread of activities in which he's immersed himself this year is singularly impressive. First, there was a contribution to Phil Miller's song "Calyx" on the debut Hatfield and the North album, and later, a series of gigs with an augmented version of that delightful ensemble, in which situation Robert sang some vocals and percussed enthusiastically on timbales, cymbals and conga.

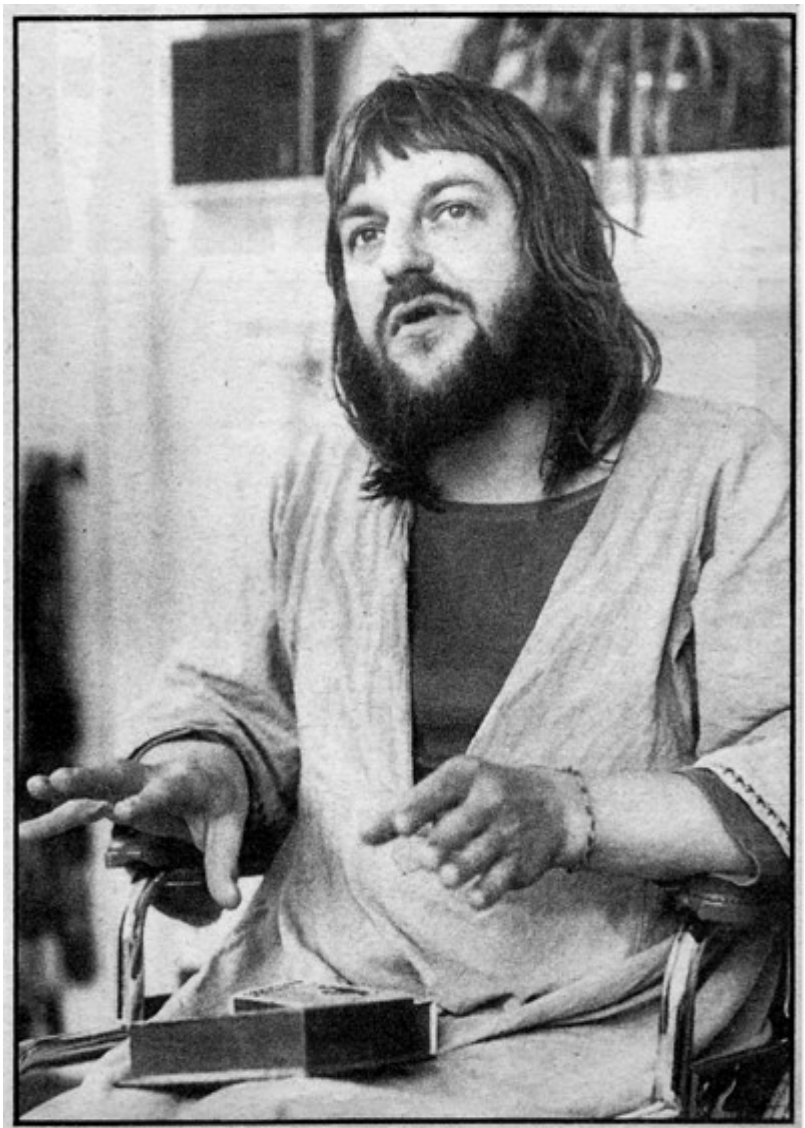
A role, in fact, he was to repeat at the celebrated Kevin Ayers Rainbow gig in June, alongside the likes of Eno, John Cale and Nico.

A nervous solo gig at the Mal Dean benefit at the ICA Cinema followed, since which time Robert's released the "Rock Bottom" album to unanimous critical raves (and some chart success), done some sessions for the new Eno album, got an enthusiastic audience off at a filled-to-capacity Theatre Royal "solo" gig, and, latterly, taken to doing telly shows to promote "I'm A Believer," this year's best single so far.

Top Of The Pops was apparently a rather harrowing experience, despite stalwart mimed support from Nick Mason, Dave MacRae. Andy Summers, Fred Frith and Richard Sinclair, while a second attempt for Granada's new Forty Five show, incorporating the soundless services of the complete Hatfield plus Frith, fared more comfortably.

So, from all this running around, can one deduce that there's a possibility of a Robert Wyatt Band hitting the M1 in the not-too-distant future?

"No." (pause). "No, absolutely not. I'm not being responsible any more for half a dozen other people's food and rent, and the constant compromise of having to present whatever I've got simply because roadies haven't had anything to eat for two weeks.



ROBERT WYATT. Picture by Barrie Wentzell

If I stop working now, I can just sit about for a year if I want and have a think, something that you're never free to do with a band. You have to continually present very substandard stuff for purely economic reasons of keeping the band together."

Live gigs per se, with a band or otherwise, are going to get the chop. There's some he says, that you can't turn down, the Mal Dean benefit being one of them, but outside worthwhile causes, bread alone won't entice Wyatt back on to the boards. Basically, it seems that Robert is keen to eliminate the element of chance almost completely from his music.

He declined the Hyde Park freebie this year, for example, where he was to have performed with Henry Cow and Slapp Happy, because there was insufficient time for rehearsal and he wasn't interested in jamming, and he's reluctant to get into improvised singing duets with Richard Sinclair when he works with Hatfield. "I can work out my bit, you see, if I know what notes and chords the group are playing, but I don't know what Richard's going to sing.

It might be effective, sure, but I think music can be a lot more than just effective. I think they are right notes and wrong ones. I'm not into chance operations at all. In fact, I'm not interested in any kind of procedure for its own sake.

I'm not interested in groups for their own sakes. I think they're all just mechanisms people apply to themselves in the hope that the result will be beautiful music.

"I'm interest in them only if they work."

Is this a changed viewpoint, though? After all, improvisation played a large part in the music of the Softs and Matching Mole, and all that experimentation with Symbiosis seemed very much a raving exploration of free music for its own sake.

"Ummm… Well, I've always had this problem right from the time I started playing music. Right back to schooldays, actually, and the Wilde Flowers. I've always worked with two kinds of musicians —some that were into improvisation as a process, and some that weren't. And I've always kind of played the devil's advocate to all of them. Y'know, talking about Cecil Taylor to Dave Sinclair and taking the exact opposite stance with some jazz musician.

All I'm saying really is that any kind of procedure can become a prison, and when that happens, watch out. It can happen just as easily in free jazz as in any other kind of music.

Y'know… Learning to play your instrument faster than anybody else in the world might liberate you… It liberated Charlie Parker, for example. But on the other hand, you've got someone like Keith Jarrett, who, for all his virtuosity can't quite reach the heights that Monk used to."

Strange, really. For all Robert's enthusiasm for contemporary fashion and an all embracing love for music that can take in Steve Harley, Roxy, Boz Scaggs the Pointer Sisters and whole post-Canterbury mob without any apparent discomfort, there's nothing that really gets him going like his old jazz heroes.

"Yeah, that's the truth. Often when I'd just been to a big deal rock concert somewhere I'd wind up down at Ronnie's listening to five middle-aged guys blowing their hearts out and realise that, yes, I actually liked this a lot more.

For all me name dropping, it's the old record collection, Mingus and Miles that's got it all for me. Why don't you turn to the Ronnie Scott feature, readers?"

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The bizarre beatitudes of the B side by Robert Wyatt - New Musical Express - October 5, 1974



SINGLES REVIEWED THIS WEEK BY ROBERT WYATT

The bizarre beatitudes of the B side

JOHN LENNON : "Whatever Gets You Thru The Night"(Apple).

Lennon's decided to put out a "no-nonsense rock single". Everything's played and recorded with real class — including Junior Walker imitations and the less predictable rhythm banjo. The words are pretty permissive for Lennon (ie, no finger-wagging) and could well have been written by one of the more affluent folk artists. As many people seem to feel that the world needs more no-nonsense rock singles, I expect this'll be very ... popular.

DANNY WHITE : "Cracked Up Over You"(MCA).

Recorded in 1966. I can't imagine anyone on the Radio apart from David Symonds or John Peel playing this unfortunately. It's the kind of thing the Stones, Kinks, Pretty Things etc, used to cover on their B sides and LPs before the all-our-own-chunes rule took over English Rock (which, funnily enough, was around the time musicians started to realise that about the only way they were going to get a sizeable chunk of the profits made on record sales was to call themselves composers).

THE CHI-LITES : "Too Good To Be Forgotten" (Brunswick).

There will never be any peace (until God is seated at the conference table). How's that for an all-embracing record review? No? Actually it's the title of the B side, and I am momentarily

nonplussed.

THE SOUL CHILDREN : "Love Makes It Right" (Stax).

This really begins as a spoken monologue on the B side, and that's a great idea for a single, though the intended dramatic effect would be more apparent if you didn't have to turn the record over half way through. Nothing much happens I must admit, after that; but the overall effect reminds me of Gladys Knight, and I really like it.

THE RIGHTEOUS BROTHERS : "Give It To The People" (Capitol).

Once it gets under way this could almost be the Walker Bros. Or indeed the Moss Bros, but I don't mind that. Their individual voices sound as impressive as ever, especially on the B side, "Love is Not a Dirty Word".

THE UNDISPUTED TRUTH : "I'm A Fool For You" (Motown).

Yet another frustrating record on which all the bright ideas are displayed in the first 15 seconds, after which sheer tunelessness renders the excellent performance and great musicianship er ... pointless. I wouldn't complain normally except that I really think Norman Whitfield could make more amazing records if he er ... um ... I don't know ... got Fred Frith to write the string parts or something. (Whoops! Still, that's a good excuse to turn to some altogether more British Artists).


PLATTERS

SINGLES REVIEWED THIS WEEK BY ROBERT WYATT

The bizarre beatitudes of the B side

KENNEY JONES : "Ready Or Not" (G.M.).

This really does what I suppose Music's meant to do: make you feel good. This particular combination of voice and instruments sounds really warm and friendly, the B side (performed by "KENNEY JONES AND A POP GROUP" complete with nice drum bits) is good as well. As its effect doesn't depend on novelty alone, I expect "Ready Or Not" to sound even better every time, so here's hoping it becomes one of those records "They" play several times a day on de radio.

SONG OF THE WEEK

GARY SHEARSTON : "I Get A Kick Out Of You" (Charisma).

Here's the exception which proves my "no dead composers" rule. This wistful rendition of the Cole Porter classic, and Hugh Murphy's imaginative production, should make anyone think again about turning away from our Commonwealth cousins in our mad scramble to join the Eurovision Community. I mean if it's a knock¬out contest between special import rates on Gary Shearston versus cut price Charles Aznavour, frankly our

antipodean comrade wins hands down. (Tiny reservation: why change words like 'gal' to 'bird?').

ROXY MUSIC : "All I Want Is You" (Island).

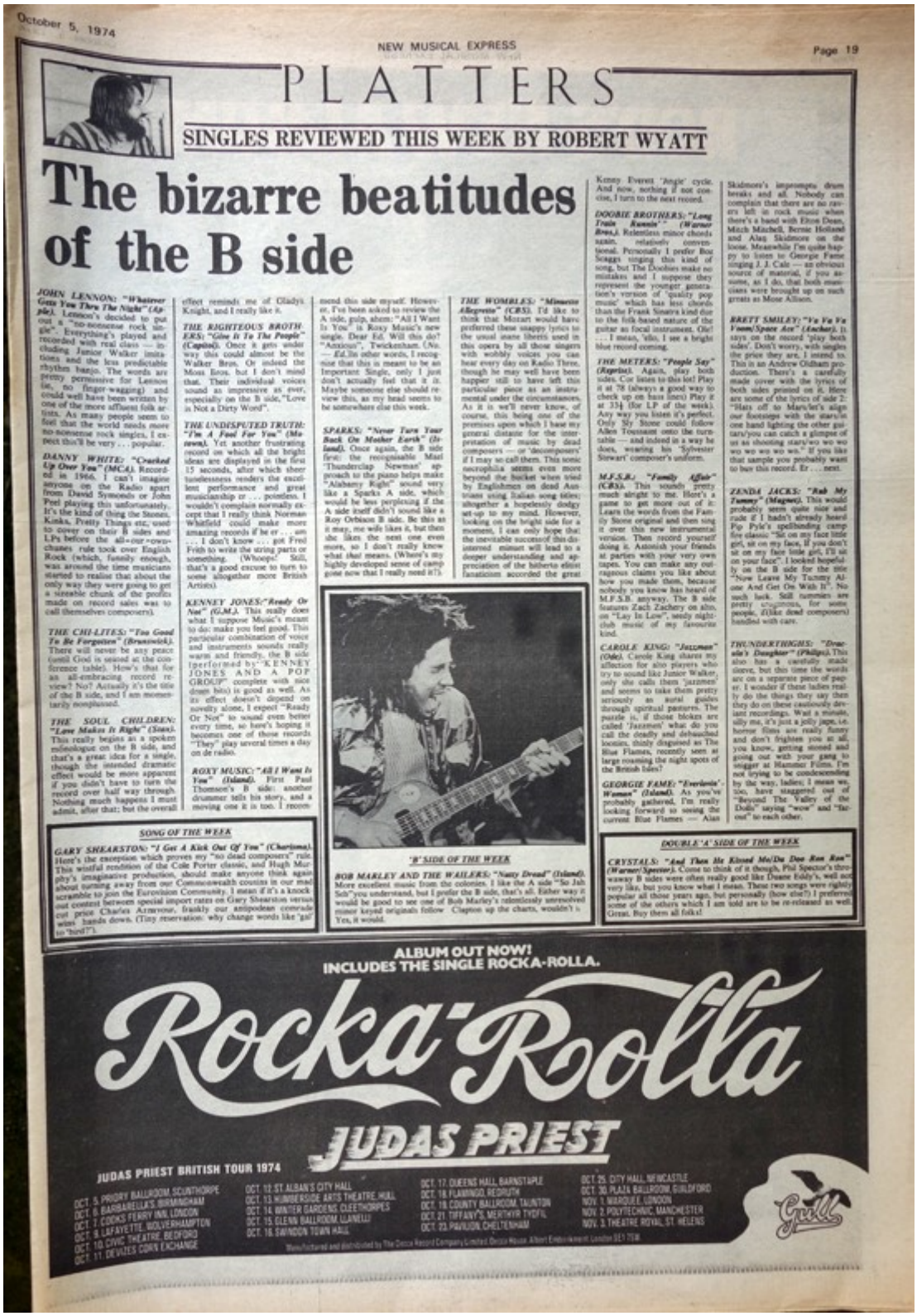
First Paul Thomson's B side: another drummer tells his story, and a moving one it is too. I recommend this side myself. However, I've been asked to review the A side, gulp, ahem: "All I Want Is You" is Roxy Music's new single. Dear Ed. Will this do? "Anxious", Twickenham. (No. — Ed.) In other words, I recognise that this is meant to be an Important Single, only I just don't actually feel that it is. Maybe someone else should review this, as my head seems to be somewhere else this week.

SPARKS : "Never Turn Your Back On Mother Earth" (Island).

Once again, the B side first: the recognisable Mael 'Thunderclap Newman' approach to the piano helps make "Alabamy Right" sound very like a Sparks A side, which would be less perplexing if the A side itself didn't sound like a Roy Orbison B side. Be this as it may, me wife likes it, but then she likes the next one even more, so I don't really know what that means. (Where's my highly developed sense of camp gone now that I really need it?).

THE WOMBLES : "Minuetto Allegretto" (CBS).

I'd like to think that Mozart would have preferred these snappy lyrics to the usual inane libretti used in this opera by all those singers with wobbly voices you can hear every day on Radio Three, though he may well have been happier still to have left this particular piece as an instrumental under the circumstances. As it is we'll never know, of course, this being one of the premises upon which I base my general distaste for the interpretation of music by dead composers — or 'decomposers' if I may so call them. This sonic necrophilia seems even more beyond the bucket when tried by Englishmen on dead Austrians using Italian song titles; altogether a hopelessly dodgy set-up to my mind. However, looking on the bright side for a moment, I can only hope that the inevitable success of this disinterred minuet will lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the hitherto elitist fanaticism accorded the great Kenny Everett 'Jingle' cycle. And now, nothing if not concise, I turn to the next record.



October 5, 1974

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS

Page 19

PLATTERS

SINGLES REVIEWED THIS WEEK BY ROBERT WYATT

The bizarre beatitudes of the B side

JOHN LENNON: "Whatever Gets You Thru The Night" (Apple). Lennon's decided to put out a "no-nonsense rock single". Everything's played and recorded with real class — including Junior Walker imitations and the less predictable rhythm banjo. The words are pretty permissive for Lennon (ie., no finger-wagging) and could well have been written by one of the more affluent folk artists. As many people seem to feel that the world needs more no-nonsense rock singles, I expect this'll be very . . . popular.

DANNY WHITE: "Cracked Up Over You" (MCA). Recorded in 1966. I can't imagine anyone on the Radio apart from David Symonds or John Peel playing this unfortunately. It's the kind of thing the Stones, Kinks, Pretty Things etc. used to cover on their B sides and LPs before the all-our-own-chanes rule took over English Rock (which, funnily enough, was around the time musicians started to realise that about the only way they were going to get a sizeable chunk of the profits made on record sales was to call themselves composers).

THE CHI-LITES: "Too Good To Be Forgotten" (Brunswick). There will never be any peace (until God is seated at the conference table). How's that for an all-embracing record review? No? Actually it's the title of the B side, and I am momentarily nonplussed.

THE SOUL CHILDREN: "Love Makes It Right" (Stax). This really begins as a spoken monologue on the B side, and that's a great idea for a single, though the intended dramatic effect would be more apparent if you didn't have to turn the record over half way through. Nothing much happens I must admit, after that; but the overall effect reminds me of Gladys Knight, and I really like it.

THE RIGHTEOUS BROTHERS: "Give It To The People" (Capitol). Once it gets under way this could almost be the Walker Bros. Or indeed the Moss Bros. but I don't mind that. Their individual voices sound as impressive as ever, especially on the B side, "Love is Not a Dirty Word".

THE UNDISPUTED TRUTH: "I'm A Fool For You" (Motown). Yet another frustrating record on which all the bright ideas are displayed in the first 15 seconds, after which sheer tunelessness renders the excellent performance and great musicianship of . . . pointless. I wouldn't complain normally except that I really think Norman Whitfield could make more amazing records if he or . . . am . . . I don't know . . . got Fred Frith to write the string parts or something. (Whoops! Still, that's a good excuse to turn to some altogether more British Artists).

KENNEY JONES: "Ready Or Not" (G.M.). This really does what I suppose Music's meant to do: make you feel good. This particular combination of voice and instruments sounds really warm and friendly, the B side (performed by "KENNEY JONES AND A POP GROUP" complete with nice drum bits) is good as well. As its effect doesn't depend on novelty alone, I expect "Ready Or Not" to sound even better every time, so here's hoping it becomes one of those records "They" play several times a day on de radio.

ROXY MUSIC: "All I Want Is You" (Island). First Paul Thomson's B side: another drummer tells his story, and a moving one it is too. I recommend this side myself. However, I've been asked to review the A side, gulp, ahem: "All I Want Is You" is Roxy Music's new single. Dear Ed. Will this do? "Anxious", Twickenham. (No. — *Ed.* In other words, I recognise that this is meant to be an Important Single, only I just don't actually feel that it is. Maybe someone else should review this, as my head seems to be somewhere else this week.

SPARKS: "Never Turn Your Back On Mother Earth" (Island). Once again, the B side first: the recognisable Mael "Thunderclap Newman" approach to the piano helps make "Alabamy Right" sound very like a Sparks A side, which would be less perplexing if the A side itself didn't sound like a Roy Orbison B side. Be this as it may, me wife likes it, but then she likes the next one even more, so I don't really know what *that* means. (Where's my highly developed sense of camp gone now that I really need it?).

THE WOMBLES: "Minuette Allegretto" (CBS). I'd like to think that Mozart would have preferred these snappy lyrics to the usual inane libretti used in this opera by all those singers with wobbly voices you can hear every day on Radio Three, though he may well have been happier still to have left this particular piece as an instrumental under the circumstances. As it is we'll never know, of course, this being one of the premises upon which I base my general distaste for the interpretation of music by dead composers — or 'decomposers' if I may so call them. This tonic sol-ruphilia seems even more beyond the bucket when tried by Englishmen on dead Austrians using Italian song titles: altogether a hopelessly dodgy set-up to my mind. However, looking on the bright side for a moment, I can only hope that the inevitable success of this disinterred minuet will lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the hitherto elitist fanaticism accorded the great Kenny Everett 'Jingle' cycle. And now, nothing if not concise, I turn to the next record.

DOOBIE BROTHERS: "Long Train Runnin'" (Warner Bros.). Relentless minor chords again, relatively conventional. Personally I prefer Boz Scaggs singing this kind of song, but The Doobies make no mistakes and I suppose they represent the younger generation's version of "quality pop music" which has less chords than the Frank Sinatra kind due to the folk based nature of the guitar as focal instrument. Ole! . . . I mean, 'ello, I see a bright blue record coming.

THE METERS: "People Say" (Reprise). Again, play both sides. Cor listen to this lot! Play it at 78 (always a good way to check up on hair lines) Play it at 33½ (for LP of the week). Any way you listen it's perfect. Only Sly Stone could follow Allen Toussaint onto the turntable — and indeed in a way he does, wearing his 'Sylvester Stewart' composer's uniform.

M.F.S.B.: "Family Affair" (CBS). This sounds pretty much alright to me. Here's a game to get more out of it: Learn the words from the Family Stone original and then sing it over this new instrumental version. Then record yourself doing it. Astonish your friends at parties with your very own tapes. You can make any outrageous claims you like about how you made them, because nobody you know has heard of M.F.S.B. anyway. The B side features Zach Zachery on alto, on "Lay In Low", seedy night-club music of my favourite kind.

CAROLE KING: "Jazzman" (Ode). Carole King shares my affection for afro players who try to sound like Junior Walker, only she calls them 'jazzmen' and seems to take them pretty seriously as aural guides through spiritual pastures. The puzzle is, if those blokes are called 'Jazzmen' what do you call the deadly and debauched loonies, thinly disguised as The Blue Flames, recently seen at large roaming the night spots of the British Isles?

GEORGIE FAME: "Everlovin' Woman" (Island). As you've probably gathered, I'm really looking forward to seeing the current Blue Flames — Alan Skidmore's impromptu drum breaks and all. Nobody can complain that there are no ravers left in rock music when there's a band with Elton Dean, Mitch Mitchell, Bernie Holland and Alan Skidmore on the loose. Meanwhile I'm quite happy to listen to Georgie Fame singing J. J. Cale — an obvious source of material, if you assume, as I do, that both musicians were brought up on such greats as Mose Allison.

BRETT SMILEY: "Ya Ya Ya Yoom/Space Ace" (Anchor). It says on the record 'play both sides'. Don't worry, with singles the price they are, I intend to. This is an Andrew Oldham production. There's a carefully made cover with the lyrics of both sides printed on it. Here are some of the lyrics of side 2: "Hats off to Mars/let's align our footsteps with the stars/in one hand lighting the other guitars/you can catch a glimpse of us as shooting stars/wo wo wo wo wo wo wo wo." If you like that sample you probably want to buy this record. Er . . . next.

ZENDA JACKS: "Rub My Tummy" (Magnet). This would probably seem quite nice and rude if I hadn't already heard Pip Pyle's spellbinding camp-fire classic: "Sit on my face little girl, sit on my face, If you don't sit on my face little girl, I'll sit on your face". I looked hopefully on the B side for the title "Now Leave My Tummy Alone And Get On With It". No such luck. Still tummies are pretty ticklish, for some people, (Like dead composers) handled with care.

THUNDERTHIGHS: "Drunkard's Daughter" (Philips). This also has a carefully made sleeve, but this time the words are on a separate piece of paper. I wonder if these ladies really do the things they say then they do on these cautiously deviant recordings. Wait a minute, silly me, it's just a jolly japs, i.e. horror films are really funny and don't frighten you at all, you know, getting stoned and going out with your gang to snigger at Hammer Films. I'm not trying to be condescending by the way, ladies; I mean we, too, have staggered out of "Beyond The Valley of the Dolls" saying "wow" and "far-out" to each other.

SONG OF THE WEEK

GARY SHEARSTON: "I Got A Kick Out Of You" (Charisma). Here's the exception which proves my "no dead composers" rule. This wistful rendition of the Cole Porter classic, and Hugh Murphy's imaginative production, should make anyone think again about turning away from our Commonwealth cousins in our mad scramble to join the Eurovision Community. I mean if it's a knock out contest between special import rates on Gary Shearston versus cut price Charles Aznavour, frankly our antipodean comrade wins hands down. (Tiny reservation: why change words like 'gal' to 'bird'?).

'B' SIDE OF THE WEEK

BOB MARLEY AND THE WAILERS: "Natty Dread" (Island). More excellent music from the colonies. I like the A side "So Jah Seh" you understand, but I prefer the B side, that's all. Either way it would be good to see one of Bob Marley's relentlessly unresolved minor keyed originals follow Clapton up the charts, wouldn't it. Yes, it would.

DOUBLE 'A' SIDE OF THE WEEK

CRYSTALS: "And Then He Kissed Me/Da Doo Ron Ron" (Warner/Spector). Come to think of it though, Phil Spector's throwaway B sides were often really good like Duane Eddy's, well not very like, but you know what I mean. These two songs were rightly popular all those years ago, but personally (how dare?) I prefer to some of the others which I am told are to be re-released as well. Great. Buy them all folks!

ALBUM OUT NOW!
INCLUDES THE SINGLE ROCKA-ROLLA.

Rocka'Rolla

JUDAS PRIEST

JUDAS PRIEST BRITISH TOUR 1974

OCT. 5. PRIORY BALLROOM, SCUNTHORPE
OCT. 6. BARBARELLA'S, BIRMINGHAM
OCT. 7. COOKS FERRY INN, LONDON
OCT. 9. LAFAYETTE, WOLVERHAMPTON
OCT. 10. CIVIC THEATRE, BEDFORD
OCT. 11. DEVITES COIN EXCHANGE
OCT. 12. ST. ALBAN'S CITY HALL
OCT. 13. RIVERSIDE ARTS THEATRE, HULL
OCT. 14. WINTER GARDENS, CLEETHORPES
OCT. 15. GLENN BALLROOM, LLANELLI
OCT. 16. SWINDON TOWN HALL
OCT. 17. QUEENS HALL, BARNSTAPLE
OCT. 18. FLAMINGO, REDRUTH
OCT. 19. COUNTY BALLROOM, TAUNTON
OCT. 21. TIFFANY'S, MERTHYR TYDFIL
OCT. 23. PAVILION, CHELTENHAM
OCT. 25. CITY HALL, NEWCASTLE
OCT. 30. PLAZA BALLROOM, GUILDFORD
NOV. 1. MARQUEE, LONDON
NOV. 2. POLYTECHNIC, MANCHESTER
NOV. 3. THEATRE ROYAL, ST. HELENS

Grull

Manufactured and distributed by The Decca Record Company Limited Decca House Albert Embankment London SE1 7SW

DOOBIE BROTHERS: "Long Train Runnin'" (Warner Bros.).

Relentless minor chords again, relatively conventional. Personally I prefer Boz Scaggs singing this kind of song, but The Doobies make no mistakes and I suppose they represent the younger generation's version of 'quality pop music' which has less chords than the Frank Sinatra kind due to the folk-based nature of the guitar as focal instrument. Ole! ... I mean, 'ello, I see a bright blue record coming.

THE METERS: "People Say" (Reprise).

Again, play both sides. Cor listen to this lot! Play it at 78 (always a good way to check up on

bass lines) Play it at 33 ½ (for LP of the week). Any way you listen it's perfect. Only Sly Stone could follow Allen Toussaint onto the turntable — and indeed in a way he does, wearing his 'Sylvester Stewart' composer's uniform.

M.F.S.B. : "Family Affair" (CBS).

This sounds pretty much alright to me. Here's a game to get more out of it: Learn the words from the Family Stone original and then sing it over this new instrumental version. Then record yourself doing it. Astonish your friends at parties with your very own tapes. You can make any outrageous claims you like about how you made them, because nobody you know has heard of M.F.S.B. anyway. The B side features Zach Zachery on alto, on "Lay In Low", seedy nightclub music of my favourite kind.

CAROLE KING: " Jazzman " (Ode).

Carole King shares my affection for alto players who try to sound like Junior Walker, only she calls them 'jazzmen' and seems to take them pretty seriously as aural guides through spiritual pastures. The puzzle is, if those blokes are called 'Jazzmen' what do you call the deadly and debauched loonies, thinly disguised as The Blue Flames, recently seen at large roaming the night spots of the British Isles?

GEORGIE FAME: "Everlovin" Woman" (Island).

As you've probably gathered, I'm really looking forward to seeing the current Blue Flames — Alan Skidmore's impromptu drum breaks and all. Nobody can complain that there are no ravers left in rock music when there's a band with Elton Dean, Mitch Mitchell, Bernie Holland and Alan Skidmore on the loose. Meanwhile I'm quite happy to listen to Georgie Fame singing J. J. Cale — an obvious source of material, if you assume, as I do, that both musicians were brought up on such greats as Mose Allison.

B'SIDE OF THE WEEK



BOB MARLEY AND THE WAILERS: "Natty Dread" (Island).

More excellent music from the colonies. I like the A side "So Jah Seh"you understand, but I prefer the B side, that's all. Either way it would be good to see one of Bob Marley's relentlessly unresolved minor keyed originals follow Clapton up the charts, wouldn't it? Yes, it would.

BRETT SMILEY: "Va Va Va Voo/Space Ace" (Anchor).

It says on the record 'play both sides'. Don't worry, with singles the price they are, I intend to. This is an Andrew Oldham production. There's a carefully made cover with the lyrics of both sides printed on it. Here are some of the lyrics of side 2: "Hats off to Mars/let's align our footsteps with the stars/in one hand lighting the other guitars/you can catch a glimpse of us as shooting stars/wo wo wo wo wo wo wo wo." If you like that sample you probably want to buy this record. Er... next.

ZENDA JACKS: "Rub My Tummy" (Magnet).

This would probably seem quite nice and rude if I hadn't already heard Pip Pyle's spellbinding camp fire classic "Sit on my face little girl, sit on my face, If you don't sit on my face little girl, I'll sit on your face". I looked hopefully on the B side for the title "Now Leave My Tummy Alone And Get On With It". No such luck. Still tummies are pretty erogenous, for some people, if (like dead composers) handled with care.

THUNDERTHIGHS: "Dracula's Daughter" (Philips).

This also has a carefully made sleeve, but this time the words are on a separate piece of paper. I wonder if these ladies really do the things they say then they do on these cautiously deviant recordings. Wait a minute, silly me, it's just a jolly jape, i.e. horror films are really funny and don't frighten you at all, you know, getting stoned and going out with your gang to snigger at Hammer Films. I'm not trying to be condescending by the way, ladies; I mean we, too, have staggered out of "Beyond The Valley of the Dolls" saying "wow" and "farout" to each other.

DOUBLE 'A' SIDE OF THE WEEK

CRYSTALS: "And Then He Kissed Me/Da Doo Ron Ron (Warner/Spector).

Come to think of it though, Phil Specter's throwaway B sides were often really good like Duane Eddy's, well not very like, but you know what I mean. These two songs were rightly popular all those years ago, but personally (how else?) I preferred some of the others which I am told are to be re-released as well Great. Buy them all folks!

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Oldfield joins Wyatt return - New Musical Express - 24th August, 1974



Oldfield joins Wyatt return

ROBERT Wyatt, the one time Soft Machine and Matching Mole drummer, makes his first major stage appearance for a year - since the accident which paralysed the lower half of his body - when he leads a band at a Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, concert on Sunday, September 8.

Among the guest stars booked for the date are Mike Oldfield, whose "Hergest Ridge" album is released this week (see Page 20); trumpeter Mongezi Feza; Julie Tippetts; sax-player Gary Windo; Pink Floyd's Nick Mason; Dave Stewart (ex-Egg keyboard-man), drummer Laurie Allen and Fred Frith, who played viola on Wyatt's recently-issued and highly-acclaimed "Rock Bottom" album.

Julie Tippetts, better known as Julie Driscoll, a 1968 hitmaker via "This Wheel's On Fire," will appear in a solo spot.

Wyatt himself has a new record out on September 1. It's a single -"I'm A Believer" - a re-working of the old Monkees' hit and is produced by Nick Mason.

FRONT COVER:
(foreground) Robert Wyatt with Mike Oldfield (left) and Julie Tippetts (right); middle-distance (l/r) Gary Windo, Laurie Allan, Mongezi Feza; (back l/r) Dave Stewart, and dummy Nick Mason.



Robert Wyatt

Oldfield joins Wyatt return

ROBERT Wyatt, the one time Soft Machine and Matching Mole drummer, makes his first major stage appearance for a year — since the accident which paralysed the lower half of his body — when he leads a band at a Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, concert on Sunday, September 8.

Among the guest stars booked for the date are Mike Oldfield, whose "Hergest Ridge" album is released this week (see Page 20); trumpeter Mongezi Feza; Julie Tippetts; sax-player Gary Windo; Pink Floyd's Nick Mason; Dave Stewart (ex-Egg keyboardman), drummer Laurie Allen and Fred Frith, who played viola on Wyatt's recently-issued and highly-acclaimed "Rock Bottom" album.

Julie Tippetts, better known as Julie Driscoll, a 1968 hitmaker via "This Wheel's On Fire," will appear in a solo spot.

Wyatt himself has a new record out on September 1. It's a single — "I'm A Believer" — a reworking of the old Monkees' hit and is produced by Nick Mason.

***FRONT COVER:** (foreground) Robert Wyatt with Mike Oldfield (left) and Julie Tippetts (right); (middle distance l/r) Gary Windo, Laurie Allen, Mongezi Feza; (back l/r) Dave Stewart, and dummy Nick Mason.*

Blunders



> Zoom

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

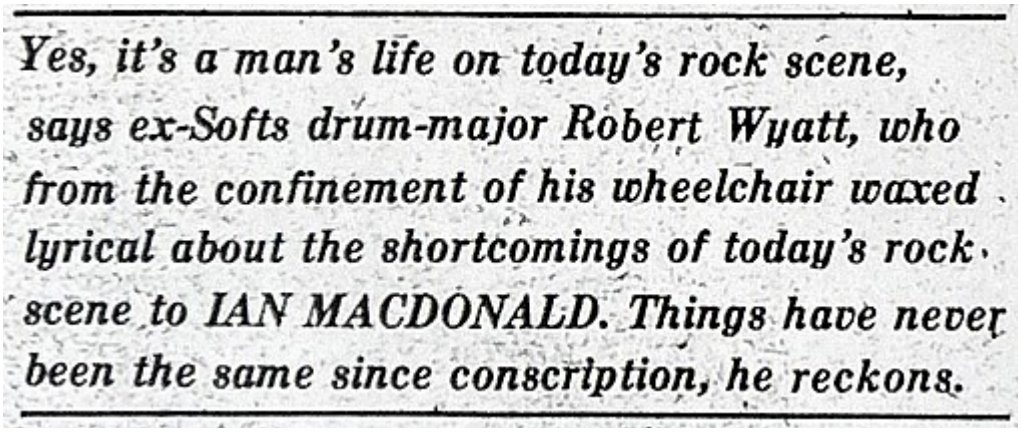
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Robert Wyatt : Join The Professionals, Form A Rock Band ... - New Musical Express 27 July, 1974

JOIN THE PROFESSIONALS, FORM A ROCK BAND...


Yes, it's a man's life on today's rock scene, says ex-Softs drum-major Robert Wyatt, who from the confinement of his wheelchair waxed lyrical about the shortcomings of today's rock scene to IAN MACDONALD. Things have never been the same since conscription, he reckons.

YEAH, WELL - Robert Wyatt (fact) drummed with Soft Machine, led Matching Mole, and fell from a fourth-storey window in Maida Vale early last year, breaking his back and finishing up in a wheel-chair. His lady's name is Alfie and they now live in a house in leafy Twickenham, and he's just done a solo-album for Virgin, the first enterprise in his post-accident career.

Robert Wyatt (opinion) was probably the most creative and individual drummer in British rock, and his enforced retirement from that activity is a great loss. Fortunately, he is also one of the most creative and individual singers / composers in British rock, as you can hear on Rock Bottom, the title of his new album. The usual deal at this point is for The Journalist to go and ask The Artist questions about The Record - which I did. However, I also knew that Robert was always disposed to think original thoughts about The Rock Scene in general, and reckoned that the isolation of his last year would have allowed



Join the professionals, form a rock band...

NME 27.7.74

Yes, it's a man's life on today's rock scene, says ex-Softs drum-major Robert Wyatt, who from the confinement of his wheelchair waxed lyrical about the shortcomings of today's rock scene to IAN MACDONALD. Things have never been the same since conscription, he reckons.

him plenty of time to indulge this bent. This turned out to be true, and looking over the transcript of the interview afterwards, I decided to concentrate on the Wyatt's-Eye-View of what's going down in the music biz by letting him spiel uninterrupted for the rest of this article and handle his album myself elsewhere.

So, without further ado - whatcha think of today's rock scene, Robert?

"I'm vaguely disappointed. I find myself looking with envy at the creative environments of other art movements in the past and - I don't know whether it's just the rosy glow of retrospection - I find the atmosphere around the rock scene today humourless, heavy-handed, and dull. Compared, say, to that surrounding the dadaists and the surrealists in art."

What's up then?

"Well, it's like armies. There's a generation of people who've got to think of something else to do - now they're not being conscripted for a couple of years - and the rock scene seems to be a kind of substitute for army life."

Huh?

"Well, take Charles Shaar Murray's thing about Sergeant Pepper and The Beatles not playing proper rock 'n' roll at the time when they were previously supposed to have been making great records - saying, in effect, that rock has got certain stylistic limitations and is all the better for them.

"I reckon you can say the same of military brass-band music, really - and that's what that kind of obsession with the 'it's-either-rock'n' roll-or-it-isn't' thing reminds me of.

"People say rock bands are influenced by R&B - but that heavy 4/4 thing they're all using now doesn't strike me as having much in common with the fluid, loose, danceable rhythms you get in R&B. It reminds me more of military brass-bands, and in fact, most British drummers these days sound as if they've come straight out of the army to me.

"The excitement that fans today feel seems to me to be like that of a crowd of people cheering their local brass-band as they lead them off to war."

Where's that come from?

"From the 'live' situation. It appears that a band playing to 20,000 people are, if they're going to be successful, going to sound pretty much like Led Zeppelin. That's the main constraint of the idiom today. New bands come in all the time with new ideas but, after a couple of years on the road, these are all squeezed out of them and they end up sounding more or less like Led Zeppelin.

"I've felt this on-stage myself. The audience puts a constraint on what you're doing, by being extremely reluctant to modify their imagined idea of what they're going to enjoy. And, since you have to work out a way of pleasing people to whatever degree is necessary to keep you in a job, it's inevitable that most bands slowly metamorphose into the audience's image of what they ought to be if they're going to get their rocks off to them. And that seems to be Led Zeppelin.

"Personally, I'm far more interested in the hit parade nowadays. The whole crazy logic of Top Of The Pops is very appealing to me since it's largely beyond me why one three-minute chunk makes it while another doesn't. And it isn't just the TOTP promotion-spot that does it. You have to see through all that unfairness and lunacy to a hidden logic - a real human need being catered for.

"I think it's very funny the way the hit parade makes people cross, actually."

What's the solution to all this Led Zeppelin impersonating?

"The acknowledged separation of 'live' and recorded music. Eventually they'll be seen to be as independent of each other as theatre and cinema, and the first suggestion of recorded music having the relationship to 'live' music that cinema has to theatre was probably Phil Spector, wasn't it?

"One big mistake these days is assuming you can do everything. One guy writes it and performs it and records it ... as Bryan Ferry said recently: *'the trouble with rock these days is that everybody writes their own material and they're not very good at it.'* I think it's lovely the way he's getting down to doing tunes that are much better-written than the ones he can write. He's really flourishing now that he's not trying to do it all himself.

"I'm also watching with interest the future development of Andy MacKay. That Eddie Riff record's really fascinating."

In what way?

"Well, it's Pop Art, innit? Much more so than the Who thing in the mid-Sixties when people were wearing striped plastic coats and claiming they were influenced by Bridget Riley. It's only with MacKay and Ferry that the original thought behind Pop Art has reached rock.

"What put me off Roxy Music initially was the idea of playing safe by using an obviously good, obviously professional, polished, modern rock rhythm-section which everybody can stomp along to - and then having the ideas-bits and the jokes sort of spread on top ... so that, if people didn't understand them, they could still come and watch the band and get their rocks off.

"I think that's cheating a bit. I really think that Andy MacKay should have a weak, rickyticky rhythm-section under his rickyticky alto sax. But the idea of that kind of muzak - the idea that you're stuck miles away from anywhere with a really crummy juke-box so you sling on about twenty B-sides - which is what his album's about - ...

"I think that's amazing."

If Ferry's the David Hockney of rock, who's MacKay?"

Richard Hamilton, probably - though, if I was being a bit rude, I'd say Rauschenberg, 'cos he puts in bits of 'legitimate' painting around the edges of his things the same way Roxy use a 'legitimate' rhythm-section.

"Again, it all comes from having to work in the 'live' situation. Of somehow having to make it 'strong.' There's nobody using the kind of wonderfully crummy rhythm-section that Buddy Holly used. Y'know - Elton John'll have his guitarist doing Shadows-type figures, but his drummer'll be bashing away at the modern heavy rock number. Instead of the old Fifties thing, which was someone playing very weakly with a lot of echo.

"In a way though, I like Ferry's attitude to the modern rock rhythm-section. It's like a reintroduction of class-distinction - the Gentlemen and the Players. I think it's a very funny thing to have happened ... so soon after 1967."



Can you elaborate on your theory of Ferry?

"Um, well - I don't think he's very *inventive* musically - he's a thinker, a conceptualizer. But I think he really loves singing 'cos he's so good at it. The idea of taking a lyric and replacing the American thing - the dotted crotchet, which is based on swing - and putting in the British staccato eighth-note ... it's very funny and he knows that and he's exploiting it.

"Take Brenda Holloway's 'Every Little Bit Hurts,' for example. Sing it the way she does it, the American way. You're doing 'every night I cry, every night I sigh' - duckety duck, duckety duckety duck.

"Now, if you sing that with English intonation and stress you're doing it like 'ev-ry litt-ul bit hu-urts' - dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum ... And you immediately sound like ... Bryan Ferry!

"There *are* people who suggested it before, mind you. Whispering Paul McDowell of The Temperance Seven using a resolutely English voice on old Louis Armstrong numbers, and so on.

"But there's plenty of things that Ferry's putting in on top of that - like his version of 'Wonderful World': 'Don't know much about the *Free-ench* I took.' That's lovely.

"This whole interpretive thing - last year everybody doing *Foolish Things*-style albums. I think it's very healthy. I agree with Ferry and Bowie when they say they're not really very inventive musically (even if the general public doesn't), because the kind of songs they write, the chord-sequences they use, are - and this sounds terrible, I know - the kind of thing I play every day and reject as not being good enough.

"I think it's good that people are beginning to go back and examine great songs, and not feel obliged to blunder about trying in vain to write them themselves."

Well, well, well. You can hardly call this mainstream thinking, can you, folks?

Only one question left, really. When'll Wyatt get down to doing his own interpretive album and what'll be on it?

"Sooner or later I'd certainly want to do it. I've got lists and lists of stuff in my notebooks - but, right now, the selection I'd probably want to tackle would go something like this:

"Ferry's 'Do The Strand', which is a genuinely good song; Charles Mingus' 'Goodbye Porkpie Hat'; Monk's 'Round About Midnight'; 'Every Little Bit Hurts'; two Beatles' tunes - 'If I Fell In Love With You' and 'She's A Woman', Caravan's 'Place Of My Own'; The Miracles' 'Ooh Baby'; 'Georgia On My Mind'; Brian Wilson's 'She Knows Me Too Well'; Charlie Haden's 'Song For Che'; Duke Ellington's 'Solitude'; Randy Weston's 'Berkshire Blues'; and 'Hey, Hey, We're The Monkeees' - y'know, the theme from the TV show."

I see. Well, I'm sorry Mr. Wyatt, but that's all we've got time for on this page. Your album's reviewed on page 14. Doubtless we'll all see you out on the road again before too long.

"When my guilt about sitting around here doing nothing gets the better of me, yeah."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Wyatt : back on top - Melody Maker - March 30, 1974

Wyatt: back on top

"Just backing tracks. They're only backing tracks," said Robert Wyatt, almost apologetically. With that endearing lack of self confidence prevalent amongst most of our better musicians, the former Soft Machine drummer seemed vaguely embarrassed to be playing the first things put down for his debut on Virgin Records.

"You can't really get an idea of what these sound like on those crummy playback speakers..." Yeah, O.K., Robert.


Melody Maker

MM Revival Special! New road show soon—now Alvin, Marty, Dave Dee...

RIP IT UP!

Jackson Five coming

Morrison and Mayall cancel

No need for apologies, of course. Incomplete or otherwise, the two songs sounded fit to rate with the best that he's ever recorded.

Proof, I guess, that you can't keep a good man down.

Robert's accident of last year, which effectively prevents him from sitting behind a drum kit (never his favourite instrument, anyhow) seems to have served only to have stimulated a new instrumental creativity.

And, naturally, there's plenty of the man's unique vocalising — high and breathy, with words running in ordinary speech syntax — dropped 'aitches and all.

Future plans for the album include the possibility of adding trumpet mouthpiece to his artillery of instruments, and maybe even a little standard drum kit, judiciously using overdubbing and playing both top and bottom kit with the hands.

The record probably won't turn out as exclusively a "solo" album. Robert has ideas, strange

ideas for other parts yet to come.

I hear from other sources that one plan is to have Hatfield and the North playing a backing track. Suddenly they'll stop, and Henry Cow will continue playing the same thing.

“That will sound peculiar,” admits my musician informant.

Robert Wyatt is recording in the tiny Wiltshire village called Little Bedwyn in a tied cottage belonging to the local manor.

It's an old place, with low ceilings and oak beams that give it an air of lived-in comfort. It looks the sort of place that Constable might have retired to, after a day in the hills sketching out landscapes.

After the noisy roar of Fleet Street, Little Bedwyn is almost uncannily silent. Rolling fields on both sides of the cottages, no traffic sounds at all.

Only trouble is, the fields roll a little too much.

The Virgin Mobile recording truck is parked half way up the nearest slope. Robert can see it out of the window, but can't actually get his wheelchair across the grass to it.

It's a problem that album producer Nick Mason, of Pink Floyd notoriety, intends to sort out.

“Nick's got a second floor studio in London,” says Robert, “And if I can figure a way to get up and down stairs without too much inconvenience, I'll move in there.”

“Actually you've arrived at a particularly un-busy moment; I seem to have reached a creative impasse. There's really not an awful lot I can tell you about the record yet. Can we talk about something else?”

That's Robert Wyatt. Easy to chat to, difficult to actually interview. Never mind. Tell us how come you're writing songs again, Robert.

“I haven't written very many, as a matter of fact. The ones I'm doing now have been in my head for a long while. Apart from one of Charlie Haden's all-time classic pop singles (laughs), this one will be all me own tunes, but I'm not planning to rely on my own inventiveness in that area forever.

Generally speaking I'm not as good at writing tunes as people like Hugh [Hopper], Phil Miller and Dave MacRae are, so I'm quite happy to tackle things that they've thought of as well.

What I'm listening to most at the moment is actually New Orleans rock and roll, that piano boogie stuff...”

Ever obliging, Robert plonks his hands on the adjacent grand piano and plays said boogie, the noise resounding around the small room.

“Yeah… Where was I? Oh, right, other people's stuff. I'd like to do an album of Bobby Charles songs, and there’s some Dr. John things too.

I've got a Lee Dorsey album that I'd like to record exactly as it stands using all me mates and not trying to do anything original at all.

You know, I'd just like to do it properly, get it swinging, and not inject a single idea if I could help it!”



This train of thought temporarily carries Wyatt away as he works through a lengthy list of albums that he'd like to re-record.

He'd like to do all of the songs on Caravan's first album, he says. Especially their first single — "Place Of My Own." What a great song that was.

Of course the songs would ultimately turn out unlike the originals, if just by virtue of the Wyatt tonsils.

"It's the old joke about getting it 'wrong' and calling it 'different'.

"A cliche, of course, but that's what happens. I think it's quite a respectable procedure, nothing to feel guilty about at all."

In the interest of realism, I asked what precise function Nick Mason would be serving on the new album.

"Well, I'd been blundering on until Nick came along, and he's been thinking precisely, like this song requires such and such an instrument, and that song will sound better in a proper studio, with a more practical outlook than I'm capable of, and sorting out the headaches about costs of cetera.

The musician is meant to forget about costs when he's recording, but I never can. I get paranoias about time dribbling away..."

That said, Robert begins to actually look paranoiac about time wasted, and turns again to the piano, there to execute a few fancy trills. Looks like inspiration's about to strike again.

"I really must get down to work," he says, and then, calling to the engineer waiting patiently half way up the hill in the mobile truck:

"Hey, Steve, can we do a tape loop now?"

It's going to be a great album, y'know.

Steve Lake

Previous article

Next article

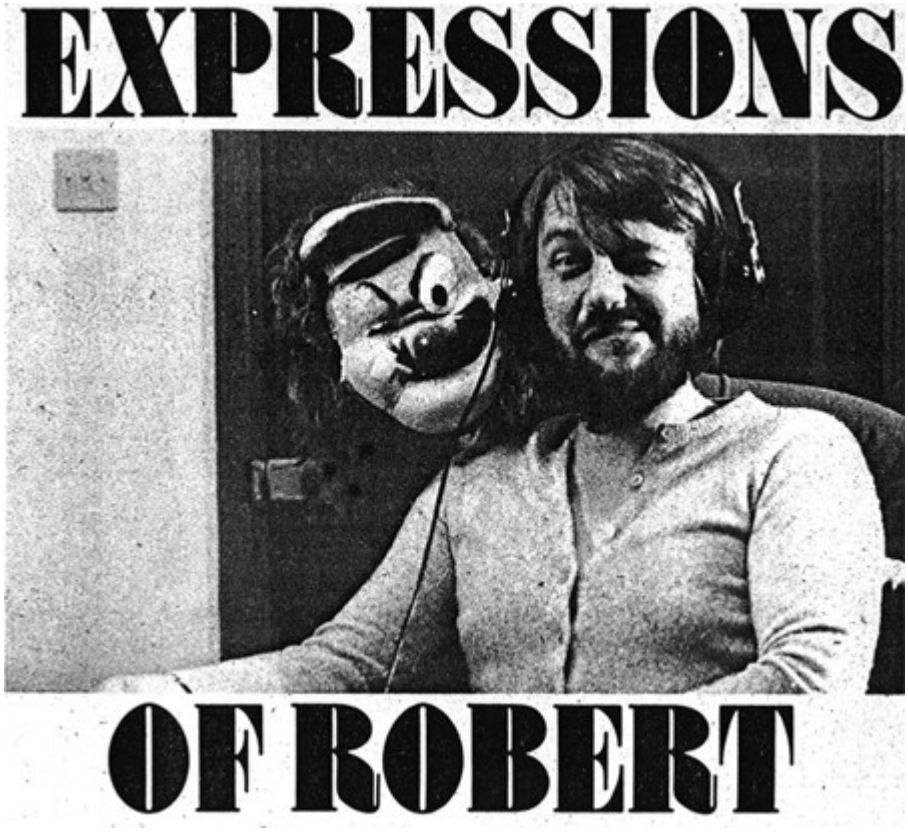
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Expressions of Robert - Sounds - March 23, 1974



Robert Wyatt has set out to make albums of songs before. The first was "End Of An Ear", a solo, album while he was still with Soft Machine, and that didn't turn out anything like an album of songs. The second was "Matching Mole", which got neater — he got through half the first side before he re-realised, as he rationalised it later, that making music is a cooperative process and it became a Matching Mole album.

Now he's started the next Robert Wyatt album, he's not saying "this time I'm going to make an album of love songs" as he's said in the past, and this time it might turn out to be much closer to that idea.

He turns away from the microphone where he's just been making "a tentative stab at a vocal" and stares out of the window in silence at the Wiltshire country-side for what seems like ages. "It's funny doing a song you wrote a year ago — almost like doing someone else's material. You get a different perspective on it, not better necessarily, but you put more into it in a way than you do on something hot from the presses."

But then a year ago the song would have been part of a re-arranged Matching Mole



repertoire. Now it's Robert singing over his own . backing track of organ, piano and conga drum, all recorded in the living room of a cottage in, Wiltshire, onto the Manor Mobile truck.

Matching Mole made two albums and played a number of gigs before all-too-familiar music business maladies forced them into a corner, which for a while seemed certain to put an end to the project. But they rallied, and a new version of Matching Mole was about to emerge last Spring. Then, at a party for Gong on June 1 last year, Robert fell from a window and broke his back, spending the rest of the year in Stoke Mandeville hospital.

Now out of hospital, he uses, wheels instead of legs and picks up his music again — if not where he left off, exactly, as near to it as time, circumstances and the fast-racing flow of his own ideas dictate. He's with Virgin Records now — "where all my mates are" — and is spending a week recording on the Manor Mobile before he and his lady Alfie move to a flat nearer London and he completes the album with production by the Floyd's Nick Mason.

He's always played keyboards, always sung, and always had a broad vision of the way he creates,. music in a studio: after "End Of An Ear" he said he saw himself as much an arranger as anything else, and when he was with Soft Machine he described himself as an "out of work singer, currently on drums with the Soft Machine", I've always rated him. an outstanding drummer, but while that didn't detract from me also thinking of him as an outstanding singer – certainly the most innovative and moving singer in this country that I've heard – and a man who could create staggeringly beautiful musical environments on record, the fact that so much of his work was behind a drum kit on stage prevented more than a part of his potential being realised.

Post-accident, he has absolutely. no plans to form a band, which' as he thinks back to the ratio of gigs he actually enjoyed against those that were a constant source of irritation, is a matter. of some relief to him. It is possible for him to do gigs of course, and he will – there's a Hatfield and the North concert at the Roundhouse coming up at which he'll probably appear, and there are plans for Robert to work out a short set within Hatfield's set which can happen whenever it seems convenient.

But without the structures of a band, Robert's energies seem to have come much more sharply into focus than ever before. Though the music may have been conceived a year ago, he has obviously modified it to suit his new situation, and what he's done so far sounds the strongest, most direct music he's ever done. The things he's done down in Wiltshire, of course, have been totally his own, but they achieve — even in the rough mixes — an intense sense of purpose within an extraordinarily wide range of sounds and ideas.

On one track the beat is sustained by four-to-the-bar done by beating a tin tray with a torch battery — it was originally just a time track but sounded so good that he kept it. On another, there's a churning guitar track which Robert describes as fake Dave Gilmour, though he was trying to do someone else. The song he was working on the day I was there was an affectionate song for Alfie, with sort of Edward Lear nonsense lyrics.

All of them have obvious influences, but equally all of them are quite definitely Robert Wyatt — the music has. a quality quite unlike anything else. Even his singing style has moved on from the one that Richard Sinclair reproduced so successfully on the Hatfield album, to encompass a much broader range of expression. There will, be other people on the album though — as he gets deeper into it he'll find which sections would benefit from different minds and playing styles, and he's drawn up a guest list of people he'd like to invite. to play on particular segments.


March 23, 1974 SOUNDS Page 11

EXPRESSIONS OF ROBERT

ROBERT WYATT has set out to make albums of songs before. The first was "End Of An Ear", a solo album while he was still with Soft Machine, and that didn't turn out anything like an album of songs. The second was "Matching Mole", which got nearer — he got through half the first side before he re-realised, as he rationalised it later, that making music is a co-operative process and it became a Matching Mole album.

STEVE PEACOCK

But the way it looks at the moment, the album will be the most complete expression of Robert as a musician he's ever achieved, and should bring his reputation out of the tight circle of friends and playing acquaintances. he's had since before the Soft Machine to people who might know of it; but who've not had the chance to experience it.

It's about time.

Steve Peacock

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Floyd's finest hour [Pink Floyd-Soft Machine: Rainbow Theatre, London] - Melody Maker - November 10, 1973

PINK FLOYD-SOFT MACHINE: RAINBOW THEATRE, LONDON


Melody Maker

DYLAN, BAND HIT THE ROAD!

Women in pop are in much the same situation as Blacks have been

RECORD CRISIS

Who storm

PINK FLOYD and Soft Machine stunned fans with two sensational shows at London's Rainbow Theatre on Sunday night. It was a splendid evening of rock-co-operation, in which both groups gave their services in aid of disabled drummer Robert Wyatt.

Compere John Peel was pleased to announce that some £10,000 was raised. He said that Robert intended to carry on with a singing and recording career. The ex-Softs drummer was not present but was acknowledged by cheers from the audience.

As two complex shows were performed on the same night, there were lengthy delays between sets which resulted in a certain amount of banter between the road crews and crowd. When the Softs finally came on for the second house, they were still dogged by sound problems. From my position near the right hand bank of speakers, only John Marshall's superb drumming could be heard with any clarity, although the combined keyboard riffs of Karl Jenkins and Mike Ratledge, wove an insidious pattern of great power and menace.

The Softs employed a cataract of sound in which improvised solos seemed of less significance perhaps than the overall blitzkreig, but John's drums employed a fascinating range of tones, and his attack was at times frightening.

There were no problems affecting the Floyd however, and they presented one of the best concerts seen this year; certainly one of the most imaginative and cleverly executed.

Dark Side Of The Moon, their last album was the main basis of operations, and the Floyd faultlessly combined quadrophonic sound, prerecorded tapes, lights, smoke and theatrical effects into a kind of rock Son et Lumiere.

There were many shocks and surprises along the way, and not having seen the Floyd for some time, I was frequently pinned back in my seat or ejected into the aisles, heart beating wildly.

Heartbeats in fact commenced proceedings, pulsating through the auditorium and stilling the more excitable elements in the crowd. Clocks ticked mysteriously and with perfect precision the Floydmen slotted their live instruments into the recorded sound.

The Floyd have a tremendous sense of pace. Occasionally they seem to overstate a theme or extract the last ounce from an idea, but the total effect is like coral growing on the seabed, establishing something deep, eternal and occasionally flashing with colour.

Overhead was suspended a huge white balloon to represent the moon, on which spotlights played, and not long after the performance began, searchlights began to pierce the gloom, and yellow warning lights began revolving in banks on the speaker cabinets.

Meanwhile the music continued apace, Nick Mason excelling with his terse, economical drums, hammering home the heavy stuff where required, and tastefully bringing down the volume when 'ere a new tack or shift in course was signalled.

Dave Gilmour has one of the most difficult guitar jobs in rock, having to contain his own exuberance for the benefit of the greater whole, but making every note felt on his own inventive solos. Dave was particularly effective on the funky 'Money' which should have been a single hit for t'lads.

Rick Wright's keyboards were immensely tasteful and melodic, gently spurred by Roger Waters mighty bass lines. Instrumentally the Floyd are a finely tuned mechanism that surges ahead like an armoured cruiser, oblivious to the smoke of battle.

Indeed the band were enveloped in smoke throughout the performance, glowing red lights adding to the illusion of inferno and hellfire. A choir of ladies cooed like angels of mercy and as a silver ball reflecting myriad beams of light began to revolve and belch more smoke, the audience rose to give them an ovation. They deserved a Nobel prize or at least an Oscar.

Chris Welch



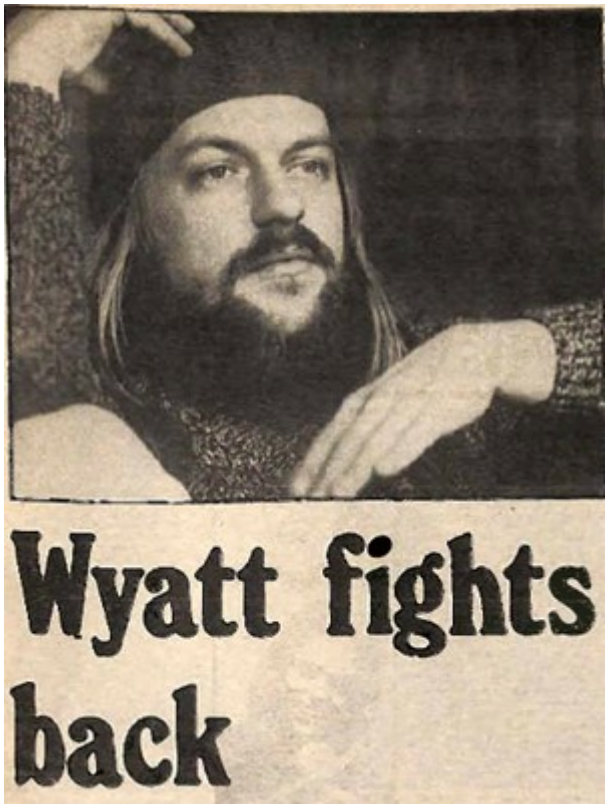
"Wyatt fights back" in the same issue

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Wyatt fights back - Melody Maker - November 10, 1973



He'll never drum again, but Robert Wyatt is getting ready to return to the rock business. From his hospital bed, he talks to Steve Lake.

Last week, Robert Wyatt and his lady Alfie had five pounds in the bank. Not a great reward for almost a decade in the music business, and the sort of situation bound to bring a little panic to any temporarily incapacitated musician.

And for Robert, of course, the prospect was particularly grim. Doubtless everyone knows by now that Robert broke his back in an accident at a party back in June, and now he's paralysed from the waist down.

The cold hard facts are that Robert will not be able to walk or play drums again. For a lesser person that could be the absolute end of the line, nothing left to do but wallow in self-pity.

Not Robert Wyatt, though. He's re-evaluating his position as a musician, and trying to find a way to return, to playing as soon as possible.

I went down to Stoke Mandeville Hospital with Mike Ratledge and Soft Machine manager Sean Murphy last week to see Robert. Frankly, it was a confrontation that I just didn't feel I was emotionally equipped to deal with.

What words could I possibly say to a personal musical hero, now confined to a wheelchair, that wouldn't sound like an obituary?

Some kids grew up with Gene Krupa, some with Jagger. Me, I grew up with the Soft Machine, went to more gigs than I can remember, and it was always an education to watch Robert.

It's not generally acknowledged yet, but Robert was a true innovator as far as drumming's concerned in the mid-sixties, single-handedly responsible, I think, for a lot of the cross-fertilisation that has occurred between rock and jazz.

But my worries were unfounded.

As soon as I saw Robert now out of the wards and as comfortable as possible in a cosy hospital annex called Ashendon House, I realised that he's capable of becoming an influential musician all over again.

One only has to look at his track record to understand the possibilities that are open to him. Generally speaking, if you deprive a drummer of his ability to drum, he doesn't usually have much to offer musically. Wyatt has always been more than just a drummer, however.

For two years he was the lead singer with a Canterbury band called the Wilde Flowers, and later of course he vocalised with the Soft Machine and Matching Mole, so he'll be singing more in future. Then there's his keyboard playing, about which he's always been unnecessarily humble, because he's very original.

As if that weren't enough, he's dabbled with electric guitar ("Memories" on Daevid Allen's "Banana Moon" album), and he once played trumpet in a trio which featured Daevid Allen on guitar and Terry Riley on boogie-woogie piano.

He has actually done some recording since his accident, proof that you can't keep a good man down.

"I went on my first outing since the accident, last week," he says, "to the Manor. I was hanging around the studios while Hatfield (and the North) were recording, hoping to be asked to rattle a tambourine or something, 'cos I'm pretty good at that, and eventually Phil (Miller) getting embarrassed by my presence, gave me a piece of paper and said 'Well, while you're here you might as well make yourself useful. Sing this.'

It was a new song that he'd just written. I thought 'Christ, I'll never be able to learn it. I'll make a fool of myself.' As it happened, though, it worked out all right."


Melody Maker

DYLAN, BAND HIT THE ROAD!

"Women in pop are in much the same situation as Blacks have been"

RECORD CRISIS

Who storm

The Pink Floyd/Soft Machine benefit concert came as a pleasant surprise.

"I couldn't believe it at first, in fact I didn't believe it till I read it.
But I'm knocked out because it means I can stop worrying about money for a bit, and that's a tremendous load off my mind."

And future plans? Rumour has it that Robert has written a whole batch of hit singles from his hospital bed.

"That's not quite true. I'd written a lot of songs for what was going to be the third Matching Mole album with Bill (MacCormick), Francis Monkman, and Gary Windo. I thought I'd got them all sort of safely stored in my head, but what with one thing and another I've forgotten most of them.

I've been working on some tape loops and things though.

By chance I've met a guy who's a friend of Ron Geesin's, and just happens to live across

the road from here.

He's got a piano, and some Revox machines, and Alfie's got me this little Japanese organ. We've made some funny old tapes. This guy doesn't know anything about me or Soft Machine or anything, but does know a lot about recording techniques."

And so, with more problems than most people could handle, he plans to slowly return to the fast-living rack 'n' roll circuit. I'm a hundred per cent certain that he'll be strong enough to cope with the pressures.

"Floyd's finest hour" in the same issue

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

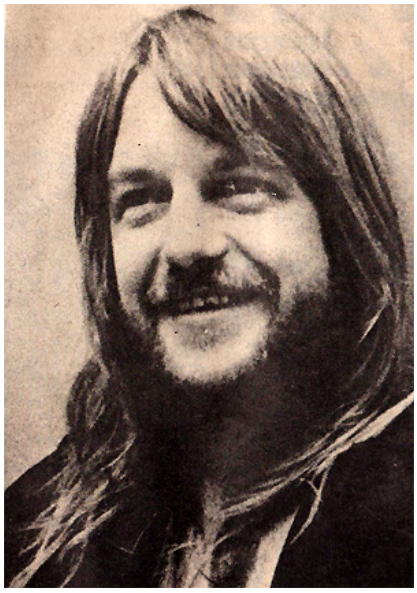
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Wyatt, the innocent abroad - Sounds - November 10, 1973

ELESWHERE in this lavishly presented issue of Everybody's Favorite Music Weekly (SOUNDS, you confounded fool) you may chance to read an account of the past weekend's frolics at the Rainbow featuring the Soft Machine and those roly-poly funsters, the Pink Floyd. I was once invited to dinner with Pink Floyd, the Pig and I were terribly nervous, couldn't understand what our fellow guests were talking about and weren't sure how to eat the excellent fondue and artichokes we were served.



THE JOHN PEEL COLUMNN

Wyatt, the innocent abroad

Since that evening no member of the band has spoken to me — which just goes to show what can happen if you don't care about table manners. Sit up and hold your fork properly while you've still got the chance. The concert review will have been written by one of the host of lynxeyed, erudite and frighteningly attractive young men that the paper employs in order to keep those girlish hearts a-flutter — and boyish too, no doubt, in a few isolated cases.

It's high time that Women's Liberation came to SOUNDS. The reason I mention this is that I had volunteered to report the event from my privileged position on stage as a friend to the stars. I am slightly wounded that my offer has been turned down but I don't intend to go on about it. I'll show 'em though. Any more of this and I'll be off to manage Brighton and Hove Albion.

It the slim youth sent to observe the goings-on fails to remark what a simply wonderful job I did of the compering then he will (and I don't want to seem harsh) be sent to bed without his cocoa and he'll have to take down all the posters in his room.

Last afternoon, as the winds howled about the portals of Broadcasting House and lesser men huddled together fearfully in doorways, high-stepping Radio 1 producer John Walters and I set off in my newest car and motored to Stoke Mandeville. Bucks, to see the subject, as it were, of this weekend's fun and games, young Robert Wyatt.

Before I forget I have not been slow to notice that the hulking Walters, previously a man of no little girth, has been surreptitiously losing weight and is beginning to take on the aspect of one of those warriors seen prancing about in an abandoned way in the woods of classical mythology. Just last week I observed him cooing over his reflection in a pool at the base of the post Office tower.

What, I suspect, the comely little rascal has in mind is to continue shedding the avoirdupois (as the women's magazines so coyly have it) until the times comes when he can ask me, with an affected casualness, how much I weigh. When I reply 10 stone 8 (actually it's more like 12 stone but it wouldn't be good for my image for you to know that — anymore than if you should accidentally discover that I am not, in reality, eighteen years old) he will announce, in a voice of burnished brass, that he weighs less than I do — and I will have lost the one advantage I have over him — unless you count the fact that he supports Crystal Palace, and even then supporting Palace has a certain cult value — like pretending that you think some Peruvian rock band is the best in the world.

As Walters is always quick to point out he is taller than I am, has some trumpery degree to my "O" levels, tells stories better than I do and believes that his silly cat is better than our three majestic animals.

When I first trotted north to peer at Robert in his hospital bed I was rendered almost inarticulate by the circumstances of his accident. What sort of light conversation do you have with someone who is that seriously injured? The fact that Robert has been a friend for a number of years seemed to make it even harder. Curiously he seemed less affected by the whole business than I was.



THE JOHN PEEL COLUMN

Wyatt, the innocent abroad

ELSEWHERE in this lavishly presented issue of Everybody's Favourite Music Weekly (SOUNDS, you confounded fool) you may chance to read an account of the past weekend's frolics at the Rainbow featuring the Soft Machine and those roly-poly funsters, the Pink Floyd. I was once invited to dinner with Pink Floyd, the Pig and I were terribly nervous, couldn't understand what our fellow guests were talking about and weren't sure how to eat the excellent fondue and artichokes we were served.

Since that evening no member of the band has spoken to me — which just goes to show what can happen if you don't care about table manners. Sit up and hold your fork properly while you've still got the chance. The concert review will have been written by one of the host of lynx-eyed, erudite and frighteningly attractive young men that the paper employs in order to keep those girlish hearts a-flutter — and boyish too, no doubt, in a few isolated cases.

It's high time that Women's Liberation came to SOUNDS. The reason I mention this is that I had volunteered to report the event from my privileged position on stage as a friend to the stars. I am slightly wounded that my offer has been turned down but I don't intend to go on about it. I'll show 'em though. Anymore of this and I'll be off to manage Brighton and Hove Albion.

If the slim youth sent to observe the goings-on fails to remark what a simply wonderful job I did of the compering then he will (and I don't want to seem harsh) be sent to bed without his cocoa and he'll have to take down all the posters in his room.

Last afternoon, as the winds howled about the portals of Broadcasting House and lesser men huddled together fearfully in doorways, high-stepping Radio 1 producer John Walters and I set off in my newest car and motored to Stoke Mandeville, Bucks. to see the subject, as it were, of this weekend's fun and games, young Robert Wyatt. Before I forget I have not been slow to notice that the hulking Walters, previously a man of no little girth, has been surreptitiously losing weight and is beginning to take on the aspect of one of those warriors seen prancing about in an abandoned way in the woods of classical mythology. Just last week I observed him coming over his reflection in a pool at the base of the Post Office Tower.

What, I suspect, the comely little rascal has in mind is to continue shedding the avoirdupois (as the women's magazines so coyly have it) until the times comes when he can ask me, with an affected casualness, how much I weigh. When I reply 10 stone 8 (actually it's more like 12 stone but it wouldn't be good for my image for you to know that — anymore than if you should accidentally discover that I am not, in reality, eighteen years old) he will announce, in a voice of burnished brass, that he weighs less than I do — and I will have lost the one advantage I have over him — unless you count the fact that he supports Crystal Palace, and even then supporting Palace has a certain cult value — like pretending that you think some Peruvian rock band is the best in the world.

As Walters is always quick to point out he is taller than I am, has some trumpery degree to my "O" levels, tells stories better than I do and believes that his silly cat is better than our three majestic animals.

When I first trotted north to peer at Robert in his hospital bed I was rendered almost inarticulate by the circumstances of his accident. What sort of light conversation do you have with someone who is that seriously injured? The fact that Robert has been a friend for a number of years seemed to make it even harder. Curiously he seemed less affected by the whole business than I was.

There's something about Robert — a sort of questing, wide-eyed-innocent-abroad quality — that has always made the Pig and I feel very protective towards him. Supremely silly, really, as he's invariably shown a capacity for coping with and adjusting to traumatic changes of circumstances much better than I could. As a result I'd decided by yesterday that his adjustment to the fact that he can no longer walk or drum, stemmed from some mystical inner power to rationalize to the point where his incapacity became merely interesting.

When I rather condescendingly trotted out this weighty tripe he quickly disabused me by observing that much worse things had happened to him in his life and that his sole philosophy as far as his accident went was "hum. bloody typical!". That's much better than my silly notions. Even though he's tentatively an Arsenal supporter he's a man for whom the Pig and I — and a great number of SOUNDS readers — have a con-siderable respect and affection. Therefore it's good to know that his scaly little head is sizzling with musical notions and schemes, and that the chances are good that some of these latter will be translated into vinyl.

In fact he's already recorded a modest harmony for the impending Hatfield and the North LP. The benefit performances by the Softs and the Floyd will have helped to bring Robert's plans for world domination closer to fruition so we should thank both groups, both on a personal and a musical level.

If you were at the Rainbow on Sunday and wondered who the rather attractive and distinguished looking chap was who was playing the records — you know, the one the girls just couldn't take their eyes off — well, sillies, it was me — or should it be "it was I"? Answers on a post card please and the first out of our postbag on Monday morning wins a half-nelson and a body-slam.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Pink Floyd in Wyatt Charity at Rainbow - Record & Radio Mirror - November 3, 1973

Pink Floyd in Wyatt Charity at Rainbow



PINK FLOYD AND SOFT MACHINE are staging two concerts at London's Rainbow theatre on Sunday, November 4 in aid of the Robert Wyatt benefit fund. Wyatt, the former Soft Machine drummer was seriously injured in an accident earlier this year and is paralysed from the waist.

The concerts will be staged in two performances, at 5 pm and 9 pm and are being sponsored by the Floyd who will perform their first live show of their latest album The Dark Side Of The Moon.

A spokesman said: "It's interesting to note that this will be the first time that the bands have played together in six years."

Tickets go on sale at the Rainbow on Thursday. November 1 at 11 am and can be obtained by personal application only. Priced at £5, £2,50, £2 and £1 the tickets are limited to four per person.



Lots of Lights

Fins Here

Pink Floyd in Wyatt Charity at Rainbow

Wailers are back

Alex Harvey

Greenslade — New album and concert

Blondel spectacular

Irish Tips

Al Stewart

YORK Records

RECORD & RADIO MIRROR

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Floyd, Softs benefit gigs - Melody Maker - November 3, 1973

FLOYD, SOFTS BENEFIT GIGS


Melody Maker

FLOYD, SOFTS TO AID WYATT

OSMONDS: sour grapes or old age?

—Special concert at London's Rainbow this Sunday. Full story: p5

PINK FLOYD and Soft Machine are together on the same bill for the first time in over five years. It happens this Sunday, November 4, at London's Rainbow, in two special benefit concerts for Robert Wyatt, former Softs drummer injured earlier this year.

The concerts, in which the Floyd will perform "Dark Side of the Moon," are promoted by the groups themselves and proceeds will go to a benefit fund.
First performance will be at 5pm and the second at 9pm. Tickets are limited to four per person and are available by personal application only. They go on sale at 11am today (Thursday). Prices: £5, £2.50, £2, £1.50. £1.

Soft's manager Sean Murphy said he and Steve O'Rourke, Floyd's manager, came up with the idea of a concert independently, but simultaneously.

"These two hands started at the same time in the same situation at UFO and Middle Earth,' said Murphy. "They're both marked out by the public as being extraordinary, different groups from the general theme.

"They have similar attitudes and are quite similar people. Robert and Nick Mason are particularly close and the rest of them have always, been friendly. The Floyd felt a great attachment to the Softs and Robert's predicament."

Nick Mason commented: "The scheme is to help Robert get off the ground with another band. That's what it's all about - it's no funeral. It's a special occasion. We're not into doing half-shows like this but there's a good reason for doing this one."



Mike Ratledge of Soft Machine who was at school with Robert, said: "We and the Floyd haven't played on the same bill for years so it's apt that the time we get together it's for Robert. "We're glad to be able to do something. It's fantastic that it's going ahead.
Speaking from Stoke Mandeville Hospital Robert Wyatt, now paralysed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair, told MM he hoped to be out of hospital before Christmas.

About the concert he said: "Isn't it amazing? It's a dream I still can't quite believe it. It's quite an extraordinary thing for them to do."

What were Robert's plans? "Sometimes I get very depressed and think I can't do anything if I can't drum. Other times I get excited because singing, playing keyboards and making tapes — my secondary interests — have been forced to the front by circumstances.

"I've got lots of ideas for recording but it costs money, it doesn't make money. I've had to think about the problems of rent and the cost of living.

"But with any luck this benefit will give me a few months' breathing space. I can do recording and not have to worry about the rent or anything like that until I get out of hospital."

Robert's wife Alfreda has moved into a room at the hospital and is living there to be close to her husband.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

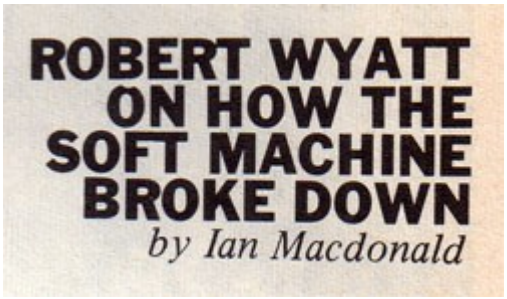
Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Mole In His Hole - Cream - Vol.2 N°2 - June 1972

THE MOLE IN HIS HOLE





Why did you leave the Softs and what are you up to in Matching Mole?

Lots of reasons - and my decisions about doing new things are so varied that they must be rationalisations of some basic thing that I really cannot pin down at all. I needed a complete change of life. At the time, it must have looked like from the outside that I had it made. In fact I was miserable. Absolutely miserable. So everything had to change on every level.

WHAT were the main problems?

Well, I can justify or get pissed off with characteristics of people I'm working with according to whether I'm getting certain musical things I want from them and whether I'm giving the necessary in return. If they are and I am, I see our personal relationship as satisfactory. But if I feel they're not doing what they should be doing or I'm not able to give them what a musician should, then this tends to manifest itself in personality difficulties and I start to dislike the person intensely. And the scapegoat in this case became Elton Dean.

I was jealous and proud of being in it with Mike and Hugh and that their thinking had, as I'd thought it would, finally manifested itself in some amazingly original music - and I felt that Elton didn't appreciate it. The thing is, when we decided to expand the line-up, we thought in terms almost of an artisan to play the ideas already coming from the group as it stood. We needed a wider range of noises more than fresh ideas and also we wanted to try out being a rhythm section behind a soloist for a while. But either we weren't a good enough rhythm section or Elton wasn't interesting enough in that context to carry off those kind of responsibilities — and I don't think he gave a shit anyway. I don't think he was interested in what Soft Machine was. It was a better-paid, more secure gig than his previous ones, and ... I don't want to sound vicious about him, I mean we had good and bad gigs, he rightly liked Mike's writing a lot, and he and I liked very much playing together, blowing freely, and loosening up the prepared things. It balanced out very well sometimes. But it was essentially a false relationship. Not merely strained — relations in the Soft Machine had always been a bit bizarre.



HOW?

Everyone had very different contributions to make to the band and we couldn't really agree; it could only be paths crossing, because we started out in different places and were going in different directions — and what would be satisfactory to one person simply wouldn't be to another. It'd be baffling. Like, someone would write a composition which you'd think beautiful and then arrange it and give the solo to just the wrong person, by which time it'd be too inextricably embarrassing to rearrange it. You know, it's his tune, leave him alone. We got so we didn't really know what each other was on about.

WHEN did that start?

The time the seven-piece went to France. Autumn, 1969. There were amazing difficulties on all levels, not excluding the practical one of not having the equipment or the money for seven people. Eventually it cracked completely. Poor old Nick got really screwed up. You know, there was a lot of happiness, -a lot of new things, a lot of problems, a lot of neuroses, added to which it was incredibly cold in the van and we were all a bit disorientated. The cracks just started to appear. The identity of the group became like a memory after that . . . for me.

HOW did it actually happen then?

Well . . . you get other people in to play Mike and Hugh's stuff, but to get in they have to be musically ambitious which means after a while they want to play some of their own material, and they play it to you, and you don't like it, right? And then it comes out in the open, let's face it, he's meant to be there for you, not you for him, and a hierarchy emerges which freaks out those people who consider they're wrongly placed in that hierarchy. The natural tendency then is to withdraw — cos no-one wants to think of himself as a shit or a schmuck. Then everybody starts getting formal with each other and by then it's turned into another job. From then on it's just a matter of time, really. Just a matter of time.

But, obviously my memories of that time with the Soft Machine are — well, like anyone's memories, like . . .

WHERE do those four records come into your memories? Is it documentary?

I never considered the Soft Machine recorded in any kind of intelligent relationship to our progress, what we actually sounded like. We'd take new compositions into the studio, record them, two months later learn how to play them, six months later discard them, and then a month after that go back into the studio again with more new things we hadn't learned to play properly. The Soft Machine at its best is hardly on record. At best, those records are only an indication of what the group was all about.

ARE you going to keep a sharper eye on the way Matching Mole is recorded?

No, it'll probably be just as ... I mean, all I've done is choose people with potential for excellence in themselves, not their similarity or me-worship or anything like that, so there'll be just as many difficulties — except there was no condescension in the original choice of people. No more Eltoning, in other words. Inasmuch as I ought to have owned up to him what I was asking him to do. Won't make that mistake again. In fact, I've avoided any quick, easy way to get a slick band together and it's yet to emerge what the new group will naturally be - if someone'll be on top of their music enough to turn into a leading-light, for example.

SO WHAT about the album?

Making that record and forming the group were two separate things. I'd have made it whether I'd formed a group or not. It's me. I had total control over it, said I'd choose the material, do the editing, litter the whole thing with fiddling about on the mellotron - with or without anybody's approval. It seemed years since I'd done a record. At the same time, I wanted to form a group because my ideas are more intense than numerous, I'm not a great fountain of ideas and I need to be in a group. I need other people around me to use their ideas and imaginations to pull the best out of me. Besides, I had to *say* I was forming a group etcetera or they wouldn't have let me do the record. Obviously they only like to record people who are out on the road with an act or something to promote it.

IS that pressure on you now?

Don't know really. I refuse to be pressured anyway.

SO WHAT comes next? Are you the leader or what?

Inasmuch as I chose the people in the band. But I see myself more as someone who pulls people together who might otherwise not have thought of it. Giving them opportunities. Like, Dave McRae is in no sense out of work — he's in constant demand as a session-musician — but Matching Mole is giving him an opportunity to play his music in a way that all the rest — Mike Gibbs, Ian Carr and so on — doesn't. I make space, is what I'm saying. I know what I'm good at and let other people get on and do what they're good at.

I feel what I'm doing, however much I enjoy doing it, doesn't cover enough ground to make me think I'm living a complete creative life. There are a few people who write — Hugh, Mike, Dave McRae, Kevin - with whom I like to fit in. I'm not capable of setting up situations by myself alone. I need other people, but only a very few special people and it's fucking hard to find them.

SO what were those two solo albums you made in Los Angeles?

Well, the Soft Machine in its first version had broken up, we'd done the last gig with Hendrix, at the Hollywood Bowl, Mike went back to London, Kevin went on to Majorca. The

record company didn't know we'd broken up — the first album wasn't released yet, though it was six months since we'd recorded it - and there seemed no obligation to carry on; and I'd got various things I'd been wanting to do that I couldn't do with the group as it then was. It was a great relief to get into the studio and play all the instruments myself and do it along without having to be democratic about it. That's all.

WHAT did you record?

There were two sets. See, I went to the record company and said Look, Mike's gone back to London, I dunno ... I mean, it was winter, 1968, and I'd just got back to New York and I'd been approached to do some film music and I was quite happy. But they said 'No, listen, this record's amazing, we want to put it out, the group should go on the road'. So I said 'Is it? Should it?' And phoned up Mike in London and said 'Do you want to start up a new version of the group?' And he said 'No, yes, no, yes, Yes'. And I came back and he did his first writing for the group — bits of 'Esther's Nose-Job', which was pinched off a bass-line of Kevin's, actually — and we did these tunes I'd been doing which turned out to be the first side of *Volume Two* - arrangements of bits and pieces of half-forgotten stuff Hugh had done years ago for the Wilde Flowers that I'd worked into a whole in L.A. - Plus *'Moon in June*'. Which didn't turn up till Third because I was terrified it'd be played wrong. Even then, I did all of it by myself - except the organ solo of course. That was Mike.

MIGHT you ever do another solo album?

Not foreseeably, no. I feel so much closer to the people in Matching Mole in terms of melody, feeling, and the rest. I'm not scared of doing my stuff with them. They've all been in groups that've done songs, for example, and I haven't been in one of them since I was with Kevin.

DOES that mean more songs in your set?

I'm dubious about it, because they'd be more complicated than the kind I've done before, and I might find it hard singing and playing at the same time. Bill might do some, but he'd probably have to write it himself. My stuff's written for my voice or is too specifically about me. And the others would find it hard to write for someone like me who can't read music and has a range of about three notes and you musn't write a semitone on either side of them if you expect it to be remotely in tune.

SO what are you up to live at the moment?

Rehearsing, mostly. Or we have been. Up until the second gig at the Festival Hall we were rehearsing in public; since then, with the exception of a disaster at Canterbury, we've to a great extent sorted ourselves out. I say this chiefly because most people would naturally think a group like this is pretty well-off, 'contract with CBS, album out, etc. In fact we're very poor and can't actually afford to rehearse properly even. We've had a lot of equipment nicked and the promoters in Britain aren't paying us a living wage. I'm not carping — we're paying our dues, like any other band — it's just that I want people to know that we don't use mikes that stop working every five minutes because we like them; we can't afford better. And when the PA blows, it's not... bravura, or something. It's poverty.

HOW do you see the roles of the other three in Matching Mole?

Phil is the only guitarist who doesn't conceptually piss me off a bit. I agree with him about how to play guitar and I really don't with anyone else. I admire lots of names — same ones everyone else does — and I don't want to start putting down other guitarists that aren't working in Matching Mole, but...

Well, the theory's like this: the technical side of I'm-a-guitarist guitarists is based on imitation bebop horn lines. But the sound's weak compared to what's come out of less technical music like- urban blues and rock and roll. So the idea these days is to get the two going together, the facility and the sound. And everybody's saying a lot of guys are doing it, but I don't think they are. . Like, someone for whom I have great overall admiration and who isn't going to give a shit what I say anyway, which is John McLaughlin. He's the answer to my dream of an acoustic guitarist who does what John Williams claims to be doing, which is total control of the guitar, understanding of it harmonically, understanding of bebop, understanding of Hendrix, and using the lot. But, as an electric guitarist, I find he does amateurish parodies of rock guitarists, but in a sort of tasteful, speedy way. If you analyse the solos on *The Inner Mounting Flame*, they're... they piss me off, frankly. As opposed to the Miroslav Vitous album where he's very good, or as an

acoustic player on *My Goal's Beyond*. He's undoubtedly the most on-top-of-his-instrument guitarist around, but, in the end, frustrating — in a way that I don't think Phil will be. Because, though he lacks that facility, he really understands sound and harmony in a way that other guitarists don't. They just don't.

Dave... he's very simply the best musician I've ever worked with in my life. That's about all I can say.

Bill's a bass-guitarist, not a bass-player or a guitarist turned bass-guitarist. I just trust his taste and intelligence, besides which he's amazingly ambitious for his own music. He's actually an idealist and it's not just a job for him — it's important to him that what we're doing has a potential for being very good and satisfying. I knew him before I thought of him as a musician and I never thought he'd turn out to be capable of playing like he does; I'm pre-disposed to believe that anybody who could be that clear and objective in discussion could actually turn out to have that egotistical madness, that... silliness that most good players have. Sloppy thinking on my part, really. I saw him with his group and I was surprised what a natural performer he was — in fact I think of him as quite showbizzy really. So few people, in any case, outside of Jack Bruce and maybe Steve Swallow, have really *used* the bass-guitar. Not functionally; there are some fantastic functional players around, like Sly Stone's and the guy with Edgar Winter. Bill pushes all aspects of the instrument and he's sometimes very demanding to play with.

DO you ever think you and/or the band are taking yourselves a bit too seriously?

Sure. But it's a piece of self-deception that's as necessary as a raincoat in the rain. In performance or in any process like that, you arrive at a strange kind of elated insanity. You feel like God. And it's hard to feel like God and not take yourself a bit seriously. Or something. Know what I mean?

PERHAPS I meant self-involvement when two or three thousand people are watching you.

People used to say this about the other group I was in - which shall be nameless, and which I won't name, but can only be described as the Soft Machine — that we didn't acknowledge or play for people who'd come to see something else, that's true, but eventually the people who got to know and like us were incredibly relieved to have their intelligence and their sensitivity flattered enough to follow us in whatever way our fancy was taking us. In an inverted way, that's just a flash, avant-garde version of showbusiness, really. How many people you lose in the process God only knows but, if I can make a living at it, I'm happy.

ANY gripes about that show business in general?

What an opportunity! God. Yeah, okay. See, in the good old days, back when the Teds used to beat me up and take off me Dizzy Gillespie records and stick on Elvis, there was even so a thing about values in music. One knew where the real worth was. The barriers were very rigid, sure, but it wasn't confused like it is now. Today, the pop press is always telling me, the barriers are down and someone who used to get off on Marmalade celebrates his coming-of-age or whatever by going over to the Other Chart or whatever it's called in *Time Out* and thinks he's digging jazz or classical music when he's listening to his new Keith Emerson album. He's not. It's just pop in another form.

And I think the general smugness of music-listening today — I see it in people's record collections — is regrettable. If half the guys digging Keith Emerson because they thought he was jazz actually put themselves out and listened to, say Keith Jarrett playing the real thing... well! I just dislike the air of easiness about it today, as if good music is now miraculously disseminated to all via ELP or whatever. The really good musicians are, as ever, out of work — and the barriers are not down at all, it's an illusion.

WHEN a fifteen year old chick is digging Marc Bolan is she having the illusion that she's hearing great music or is she hearing great music?

Is it an illusion you're asking me that question? No, look. You've got to be honest with yourself. When I was fifteen, I'd be looking around in a record-shop and I'd come across an album-sleeve saying Charlie Parker is the Guvnor. None of my friends had even heard of him. The Bird? Who? But I bought one of his records to find out. And I didn't like it at all — just seemed a lot of fast noises. But I went on with it, trusting opinion of sources I respected, kept listening, and found out that Parker was, in fact, the Guvnor. And I took it from there.

That sort of experience is available for anyone, but I don't care whether or not they take it. Elvis Presley may also be the Guvnor, I dunno. But he's not pretending to be more than he is, nor are his fans. But fans of 'progressive' or 'underground' music are. It's both a pity and a downright shame. It's a pity that Keith Jarrett has so little recognition he has to play in a group he doesn't really fit into, or even like, but the leader is lazy enough to let other people play in his time. And it's a downright shame that he can't form his own group because virtually no-one has bothered to find out about him. Because it's easy and okay and progressive to dig Keith Emerson. Right? That's all.

Ian Macdonald

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

'Matching Mole : the beginning of an other ear' - Time Out - June 16th-22nd 1972

Matching Mole : the beginning of an other ear



Few bands have faced such a discrepancy between the enthusiasm of their welcome and the uncertainty of their economics as Matching Mole. Multiply an average music biz melodrama by the number of holes it'd take to fill the Wembley Empire Pool and you'll come up with some semblance of the equipment, transport and pocket-money problems that have continually confronted this merry and determined little combo of Foster's Lager addicts. This, together with a considerable affection for Robert Wyatt's drumming and voicing, Phil Miller's guitaring, Bill MacCormick's bassing and Dave MacRae's keyboarding (and the now-departed David Sinclair's keyboarding on their record), prompted Al Clark to wander along to a rehearsal in Dave's front room, and afterwards talk with Robert across the kitchen table.

Voices and choices

It's been evident from the first Soft Machine album onwards that Robert Wyatt is the possessor of the most notched, rusty and unfailingly empathetic vocal chords in the entire area of music in which they operate. In one version of the Wilde Flowers, that celebrated, ever-changing Canterbury nucleus-for-the-future, he sang for about nine months while Richard Coughlan (subsequently of Caravan) did the drumming. And it's his voice that overshadows the early Soft Machine demos recently released by Byg. But that was an approach styled around straightforward pop singing, and evolving out of the general excitement surrounding pop music in the early and mid-sixties. Also, Kevin Ayers would occasionally write something outside his own range or might need a harmony part added, and Robert would oblige on that score.

However, by the time it came to recording the first album, his voice had extended itself

into modulations, instrumentalising, harmonising, echoing, a multilaterally true voice in an arid soundscape of good voices. He even became so horrified at the original lyrics of one of his songs ("I Should've Known") that here-wrote them the night before the recording into something so completely honest, revealing and amusing ("Why Am I So Short ?") that it undoubtedly created the precedent for all his word-games to follow. In this respect the previous influence of Daevid Allen, whou sed to lodge with his parents and was an original member of the group, was probably quite substantial.

"Daevid, not by preaching but by example, was living out all the things he was thinking about. To me activity was reading, looking at paintings and listening to records. Meanwhile, he was writing, painting and playing guitar. What you could do consisted of what you wanted to do. He used to sing and make noises and make tapes. He made tapes with people who could play and tapes with people who couldn't play, and there was no difference in quality between them. Things like that shattered the kind of rubbish that I'd been thinking up until then...".

It's surprising - in view of the beauty of Robert's treatment of Hugh Hopper's "A Certain Kind" on the first Soft Machine LP, his amazing vocal jigsaws on Volume Two, the lengthy lyrical passages of 'Moon in June' on Third and the extent to which much of the commercial success of Matching Mole's album can be attributed to the irresistibility of "O Caroline" and "Signed Curtain", both cracked, barely-sung diary-fragments which are indivisible from what they're about - that he isn't really all that keen on songs, or at least song situations.

"*Usually they're just props for making noise. There are certain vowels and consonants that work out and have the right effect, and the people who wrote them will contrive the imitation situation whereby that's what they actually wanted to say. In my case, my pride goes if I find myself lying like that, and I think that if I'm going to use words, I should use them as carefully as possible, bearing in mind that you're talking to somebody, and that if you are trying to say something then be careful what you say. But the thing I really like about music is way outside intelligible conversation, much deeper stronger and more moving than strinding sentences together. So I've generally played in bands which were essentially instrumental. In other words, I've never played with polite, subservient, accompanist-type musicians, and this creates a situation where if you're going to make your voice fit into the context of a set or an album, for the sake of the continuity and mood of the piece, you're just throwing your voice in to the elements, you're dealing with pure music rather than conveying some cute impression of yourself to strangers. So I've always tried to get unsituations where the very fact that I also like singing songs was discouraged. Whether that means I'm totally screwed up I don't know, don't really care either*".

Moon of an ear

"Moon in June" on *Third* is a collage of fragments assembled during the life of the group, mostly during his time in the States after the two tours they did with Jimi Hendrix. Some of it is a lament for being away from home. All of it is his own work. Mike Ratledge came in to play his organ solo and provide a drone with Hugh Hopper. Rab Spall contributed violin, but it wouldn't be unfair to call Robert 'Mr Moon In June', especially in the five-minute one-manaural orgy at the end. In common with most things, it came to represent something not originally intended... Like wanting to hold on to the reins of the Soft Machine he liked while it was beginning to become one he wasn't having so much fun with. With no reflection on Elton Dean, who Robert himself after all had gone out to find, he feels it was at that stage that compromise entered the whole business.

"*Moon in June" for me was the last chance I had to use all the things we'd done without being a jazz band, which was what was developing. I thought that before that we'd done something quite special that had nothing to do with being a jazz band and I wanted to get twenty minutes of it down somewhere. At the same time, I was excited about the new developments and wanted a change too. I don't know if I'll always be in this position, but I really only do those things in studios in the end because, however much I go on about co-operativeness and that, there comes a point when I know exactly what I want something to sound like and the only way to get it is to do nearly everything yourself, I can't write complex enough scores to get other people to do it. When people ask why I don't necessarily do on stage what I do on record, the only answer is that I could not subject other musicians to the rigorous detail and discipline that I have to impose on myself to get those things right. I just don't have that kind of personality*".

How did *The End of an Ear* come about ? Well, partly because CBS probably thought when

they gave their okay that, as he was the singer in a primarily instrumental group, he'd come busting out all over with a long-frustrated headful of commercial pop songs. For Robert though, the motivation was slightly different...

"That was a direct result of wishing that I'd had more than five minutes to meander at the end of "Moon in June". I was just so fucking happy adding layer after layer. Mike had gone, so I made all the little noises on the Lowrey organ that I'd wanted him to make. Christ, for the first time I wasn't just planning and dreaming and hoping, I was actually doing what I wanted to do, and I suddenly thought how silly to stick it on the end of a bunch of songs. So The End Of an Ear came about once I'd decided to continue the ecstasy of charging about in the studio pissed out of me head for forty minutes instead of five".

Were the title, and the 'out-of-work pop singer currently on drums with the Soft Machine' clause on the sleeve a pretty fair indication of how he felt at the time, and a nudge in the direction of his comrades ?

"*I seem to have inspired a certain amount of sympathy and personal enthusiasm amongst people about my own particular loneliness and battle within the Soft Machine. But the fact is that I was drunk and arrogant and didn't take them seriously enough when they didn't want to do the kind of things I wanted to. I put Mike and Hugh through ghastly emotional scenes, and the mind boggles at how they've stuck it all that long... I've had a lot of time to think about that and - sorry, I know public confession boxes is the best trend and all that - but it is worth saying because I'm getting vaguely sheepish and embarrassed about the sympathy for me within that context since they were simply trying to play what they wanted. If the Soft Machine was a prison, then it was a prison I built for myself out of my own indecision and lack of sense of direction. So the record isn't anti-Soft Machine, it's anti-me for not being able to think clearly what I wanted to do. The dedications on the cover are no-pride-left, anybody-out-there-help-help type ones, claiming people by writing down their names. It was absurd. I look back on it as being a feast for some second-rate psychiatrist*".

The longest dedication of all was to Gil Evans whose Wyatt-styled "Las Vegas Tango" came to take up about a third of the record's playing time.

"*He's one of the few people who've come across an endless musical thing to do. This is what the blues is, but it's not any one particular person's invention, it's just thousands of people eventually agreeing on a format that's endlessly satisfying. And Gil Evans, almost single-handedly, got a link going in my head between Spanish cante jondo and blues singing in "Las Vegas Tango", it's just a beautifully shifting seesaw of Spanish-influenced blues chords. That struck me as endlessly satisfying*".

The evolving mole

And then there was Matching Mole, or Machine Molle as some prophetic bilingual punsters would insist. Bill MacCormick was a civil servant at the time of joining but before that was in a group called Quiet Sun who did unusual time signature things. Phil Miller was in Delivery but also worked with people like Roy Babbington, and spent long amounts of time learning his way around his instrument. Or as Robert put it, "*His main background is sitting around playing guitar without any money*". Robert met Dave MacRae through Nucleus who were looking for a new drummer after John Marshall went to join Jack Bruce and, ultimately and ironically, the Soft Machine. Dave still plays piano for them as well as making his considerable contribution to the Mole.

"*Dave MacRae is an antipodean from another planet, and my life started out with them. He's such a total musician, equally happy in Australian jazz groups, knowing his Cecil Taylor, doing a Coca Cola ad or grooving behind Buddy Rich or Sarah Vaughan. The most important contribution he made to the record was being there, tuning up his piano and talking and putting on little odd plinking noises through all the instrumental things, and just creating the atmosphere of being in a room with all he can do but not doing it. It's not so much what he plays, but of how different the record would've been if he hadn't been there*".

The man who did play most of the keyboard parts on the record, David Sinclair, is now late of Caravan, late of Matching Mole and currently working on some songs with a friend, and drummer Pip Pyle. Why late of Matching Mole ?

"*Well, although he joined to play and rave as well as do the songs, the only thing that*

really worked compatibly was the songwriting. He's a great freaker-outer on organ. A keyboardman with a sense of madness is very rare, keyboard people are usually very schooled and can wreck musical madness with their knowledge of what should be happening. Dave can lose himself in wonderful ways,but when you're trying to build a tune that you're going to be playing night after night, it's not enough to have a few things in common. You've really got to have so much in common. Yon can afford casual relationships on a record which you can't afford in a working group".

Was there any track on the record particularly representative of the further-evolved Mole?

"*Hopefully I'm now becoming a quarter of whatever gets said or played. So for me "Part of the Dance" is the most useful pointer to the group because it was written by Phil and I'm just doing my quarter on it, like I'm doing now and like I hope to be doing on the next album*".

Does that necessarily exclude any more "O Caroline" or "Signed Curtain"'?

"*Those things are like cutting off malignant parts of a diseased body. I really don't need them anymore. To be able to write and sing those, without sounding too precious I hope, relieves some of the thing that goes into producing them. However, there's no way of making plans about that. I suppose I shall sit around pianos and sing and think up word games at certain times for the rest of my life. And if I'm in the studio, I'll do it*".

Afterpiece

A few days later, with the group having gone off to France on the Gallic Leg of their John Mayall tour I put my brain cells in a small cardboard box and take them down to an armchair in front of a television screen in South London's ETV studios. Resting in the certain knowledge that the Mole won't be bothering with any of the right-ones and rock'n'roll medleys that might make them rich tax exiles before they get to Avignon, I settle back and watch the playback of a broadcast they taped a few days earlier.

Dave, like an electronic Gandalf with impossibly long fingers, guides the smoky, shifting rhythms over Bill's obsessive Focal Timekeeper bass line and curls elegantly up and down whatever part of the keyboard he fancies. Phil, hunched and Grecian-God-Curled, is the ideal group guitarist, waiting for the moment to contribute effectively and knowing what an effective contribution amounts to. Bill and Phil, like Bill and Ben, have a very special binding language and don't even have to say anything. Robert doing his voice bits isn't a pretty sight but makes a remarkable sound, like a man sobbing his heart out inside an echo chamber. Matching Mole seems to be the sum total of all their lives so far.

It really is a quartet now. And I only talked to Robert. Aw shucks. See them soon. Nice boys every one of them, even if they don't go for smart casuals and fast cars. They're probably the most coherent and adventurous British band that's still accessible these days, equally balancing strong themes and inspired deviations. And they're not doing much, apart from rehearsing. Music-Music never did go down all that well. Still, it's always a new pigeon-hole and there's plenty of money and support in them. In Mole-holes there's only music.

Al Clark

PS : All of which having been said, done and typeset, it turns out that Matching Mole are playing in Saturday's Midnight-to-six gig at Kings Cross Cinema with the Soft Machine (now with Karl Jenkins in place of Elton Dean) and Just Us (Elton Dean's group-on-the-side gone full-time). The wheel goes round and it should be a right old skull fucker of a night...

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Mole : a spirit of togetherness - Sounds - April 29, 1972

Mole: a spirit of togetherness



Interview by Steve Peacock

When you go to a gig, the Matching Mole you see before you is quite unlike the Matching Mole you hear on their first album, just released; it's not unusual for bands to change a lot in the three months it often takes between recording an album and getting it out, but in the case of Matching Mole, there's rather more to it than usual.

"The first time Robert phoned me up he said he wanted to do an album of love songs", says bass guitarist Bill MacCormick. It didn't turn out quite like that, but there are two songs on the first side of the album, songs that represent a kind of release of frustration for Robert Wyatt that needed to happen before he shed his Soft Machine skin and started to get fully involved with the new group.

"Apart from wanting to get into a new band I'd also built up a certain amount of frustration whilst sitting about in various potential homes, writing letters to people that turned into lyrics and writing lyrics that turned into letters and getting all confused. A certain amount of frustration had built up that I hadn't put off my chest before".

STRONGER

Sitting around in keyboard player Dave MacRae's flat, talking to the band, you notice that the hesitancy and confusion of our last interview (Sounds 11/12/71) has given way to a

much stronger feeling of confidence and optimism. I've never actually seen Robert brimming with self-confidence but this time he's a lot closer. The period of change is over, and now it's a question of the group as it is now (David Sinclair, the original organist, has left and Dave MacRae has joined full time after working on most of the sessions) growing together.

"When I'm not playing", says Robert, *"I forget that I'm meant to be a drummer, so I sit in places with pianos singing songs and I think 'oh yes, that's what I do'. Then of course when I'm actually working again I find that I'm actually a drummer, so quite a different set of preoccupations and interests start coming up in your head. I've never quite resolved the difference between the two, so I'll probably spend the rest of my life tossing between them..."*



● ROBERT WYATT: a lot closer

EMOTIONAL

"It's not the technical difficulty, it's the emotional difficulty of it being a totally different role in a group - to be singing songs and playing drums is a totally different relationship to be having with everybody. I find it more natural when I'm actually working to work from the point of view of a drummer".

Though when be was with the Soft Machine he once said he was an out of work singer who just happened to be playing drums.

"I only really started drumming because nobody else could. There were people around with pianos and guitars and things and they needed a drummer. I tried singing with other drummers but they never did it right, and the way to make sure the drummer was doing it right is to play the drums yourself".

So did he feel he'd basically resolved the dilemma? *"No, I've decided that I'm really an organist. I'm at my happiest when very, very pissed and playing the Mellotron, or something like that. But it has nothing to do with proficiency and I'd have to be very pissed to get on stage and touch a keyboard"*.

LIFELINE

So now, with Matching Mole a few months into its life, they were evolving through finding out about each other and what they can do together.

Dave: *"It's more or less like that but with any band it's not an immediate process where you can walk in and do it. There's always the start which makes everyone want to walk in and play together, but once you get past that point it's a matter of finding out just how much you can do together, which we're still doing. Hopefully the lifeline won't run out on us – we're still improving, there's no doubt about that"*.

"It's important to have that spirit in what you're doing, it's important to want to get it on - and not in the way that you know you can to affect an audience so they go 'rah, rah,rah'. Everyone doesn't consciously avoid that, but tries to create an original-sounding music, which I think is about where it's at really. Otherwise you might as well take the route where the money is – and everyone knows where it is".

Phil Miller: *"We're playing for an audience, but primarily to give them something that's ours not what they think we can do. We want to give them something that's our identity, not what they could superimpose on us"*.

Though they're all pretty pleased with the album as it is - although the sound could have been a lot better if they'd been allowed to use a modern studio with the right equipment and it is history. The night before I spoke to them they'd been recording a session at the BBC for John Walters which'll be broadcast on "Top Gear" soon. This, they felt, caught the

present band pretty well.

Robert: *"The thing to remember overall is that this Matching Mole hasn't made a record yet. I'm amazed I fed I can say this but anyone who wants to who's interested in hearing this band and can't hear us live, please listen to the thing we did with John Walters when it comes out. Either I was more drunk than I thought I was or we really got off last night... radio's usually an anaemic medium for musicians, it's so hard for musicians to get off in a studio, but l'd be be happy for anyone who wanted to know what we were doing who couldn't go to a gig, to hear that session."*



● MATCHING MOLE: finding out about each other

ALBUM

"People say 'why make the album before you'd formed the group?', but the reason was that I wanted to. My preoccupation before I left the group I was in before was that there were a few little things I wanted to do, get off my chest. But that was only a quarter of an hour's worth of work, and from then on I wanted to get back into the real business of music-making, which is in fact co-operative".

Steve Peacock

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Mole in a hole - Melody Maker - April 29, 1972



Mole in a hole

Robert Wyatt talks to Richard Williams

On a clear day, you can see the South Downs. Robert Wyatt looks out of the 21st floor window, down at the traffic speeding along Westway, and right over London to the chalky hills beyond.

At the moment, all he an actually see is trouble. Which is ridiculous, I'm sure you'll agree, for a man acclaimed as one of rock's most intelligent drummers and most inventive vocalists, with a solid background in one of our most respected bands.

But his child, Matching Mole, is up to the neck in it. A little earlier, he and his manager were forced to cancel two gigs, in Plymouth, and Penzance, for the craziest of reasons.

"My manager rang me up," he says, "and told me that it would cost us £180 to do the gigs. And we were only going to be paid £160 for them. So we couldn't afford it, and we've had to cancel."

He admits that it goes against his personal motto — "When in doubt, play" – but there it is, and he's sorry for the people who genuinely wanted to hear the Mole.

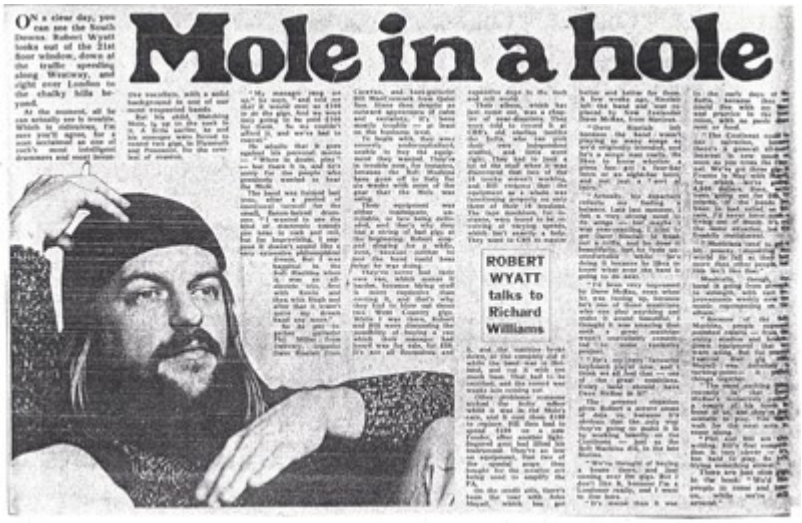
The band was formed last year, after a period of emotional turmoil for the small, flaxen-haired drummer. "I wanted to use the kind of electronic, sounds you hear in rock and roll, but for improvising. I suppose it doesn't sound like a very extensive philosophical dream. But I was happiest in the Soft Machine

when it was an all-electric trio, first with Kevin and then with Hugh and after that it wasn't quite my dream band any more."

So he put together guitarist Phil Miller from Delivery, organist Dave Sinclair from Caravan, and bass guitarist Bill MacCormick from Quiet Sun. Since then despite an outward appearance of calm and certainty, it's been mostly trouble — at least on the business level.

To begin with. they were severely undercapitalised, unable to buy the equipment they wanted. They're in trouble now, for instance, because the Soft Machine have gone off to Italy for six weeks with most of the gear that the Mole was using.

Their equipment was either inadequate, unreliable, or late being delivered, and that's why they had a string of bad gigs at the beginning. Robert stopped singing for a while, even, because neither he nor the band could hear what he was doing.



Mole in a hole

ROBERT WYATT talks to Richard Williams

They've never had their own van, which makes it harder, because hiring stuff is more expensive than owning it, and that's why they had to blow out those two West Country gigs. While I was there, Robert and Bill were discussing the possibility of buying a van which their manager had heard was for sale, for £50. It's not all limousines and expensive dope in the rock and roll world.

Their album, which has just come out, was a chapter of near-disasters. They were told to record it at CBS's old studios (unlike the Softs, who can pick their own independent studio), and little went right. They had to junk a lot of the stuff when it was discovered that two of the 16 tracks weren't working, and Bill reckons that the equipment as a, whole was functioning properly on only three of their 16 sessions. The tape machines, for instance, were found to be revolving at varying speeds, which isn't exactly a help. They went to CBS to master it, and the machine broke down, so the company did it while the band was in Holland, and cut it with too much bass. That had to be rectified, and the record was weeks late coming out.

Other problems: someone nicked the Softs' mixer while it was In the Mole's care, and it cost them £180 to replace. Bill then had to spend £190 on a new Fender, after another light-fingered gent had lifted his instrument. They're so low on equipment, that two of the special amps they bought for the monitor are being used to amplify the PA.

On the credit side, there's been the tour with John Mayall, which has got better and better for them. A few weeks ago, Sinclair left the band and was replaced by 'New Zealander Dave MacRae, from Nucleus.

"Dave Sinclair left: because the band wasn't playing as many songs as we'd originally intended, and he's a songs man really. He likes to know whether a piece has got a four-bar intro or an eight-bar intro, and not just a 'sort of intro.'"

"Actually, his departure reflects me finding a balance. Late last summer, I felt a very strong need to do songs — but maybe I was over-reacting, I tried to get Dave Sinclair to freak out a trifle, and he does it beautifully, but he feels uncomfortable while he's doing it because he likes to know what note the bass is going to do next.

"I'd been very impressed by Dave MacRae, even when he was tuning up, because he's one of those musicians who can play anything and make it sound beautiful. I thought it was amazing that such a great musician wasn't unavailably committed to some exclusive project.

"He's my very favourite keyboard player now, and I think we all feel that — one of the great musicians. Every band should have Dave MacRae in it!"

The present situation gives Robert a severe sense of deja-vu, because it's obvious that the only way they're going to make it is by working heavily on the Continent — just as the Soft Machine did, in the late Sixties.

"We've thought of buying a house there, and just corning over for gigs. But don't like it, because I'm a Londoner really, and I want to live here.

"It's worse than it was in the early days of the Softs, because then we could live with my Mum and practice in the front room, with no panic about rent or food.

"The Continent could be our salvation, because there's a general all-round interest in new music as soon as you cross the Channel. We've got three gigs in France in May with Mayall, for which we're getting 4,500 dollars. Here, we've been going out for £65. Of course, if the bands I've been in had relied on Britain, I'd never have made a living out of music. It's not the same situation, but it's freakily reminiscent.

"Musicians tend to get a bit poncey, expecting the world to fall at their feet more than other people, but this isn't like that."

Musically, though, the band is going from strength to strength, with vast improvements weekly over the music represented on the album.

"Because of the Soft Machine, people expected polished results — from the shifty studios and broken-down equipment that we were using. But the second Festival Hall gig with Mayall was definitely a turning-point— it pulled things together.

The most exciting thing recently is that Dave MacRae's tentatively pushed a couple of his tunes in front of us, and they're just ecstatic to play. You can't wait for the next note to come along.

"Phil and Bill are also writing. Bill's first composition is very clever — it's too hard to play. So he's trying something slower."

There are just nine gigs in the book. "We'd like people to come and hear us, while we're still around."

Richard Williams

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Wyatt quits Softs - Melody Maker - September 4, 1971



Melody Maker

ROCK GIANTS TO AID BANGLA DESH

Steve Miller for Britain

Wyatt quits Softs

Wyatt quits Softs

ROBERT Wyatt, drummer and singer with the Soft Machine, has left the band.

The reason for his departure is believed to be a difference of musical opinion, apparent for some months, which crystalised during the band's recent and highly-successful American tour.

A member of the Softs since their very earliest days in Canterbury, Wyatt left them for a short period last year when, for the same reasons, he went to play with Kevin Ayers and The Whole World. He returned when he found that Ayers' outfit came no closer to realising his musical ambitions.

Wyatt's replacement in the Soft Machine will be Phil Howard, who has for some months been a member of the part-time quartet of Soft's altoist Elton Dean.

FACES in actio
20). Now they are

AMERICAN
that there
jazz Expo Fe
Britain this ye
not be autho
confirmed or de
week.
At presstime on Tuesd
Harold Davison,



Wyatt quits Softs

4 Sept 71

ROBERT Wyatt, drummer and singer with the Soft Machine, has left the band.

The reason for his departure is believed to be a difference of musical opinion, apparent for some months, which crystalised during the band's recent and highly-successful American tour.

A member of the Softs since their very earliest days in Canterbury, Wyatt left them for a short period last year when, for the same reasons, he went to play with Kevin Ayers and The Whole World. He returned when he found that Ayers' outfit came no closer to realising his musical ambitions.

Wyatt's replacement in the Soft Machine will be Phil Howard, who has for some months been a member of the part-time quartet of Soft's altoist Elton Dean.

Robert Wyatt, drummer and singer with the Soft Machine, has left the band.

The reason for his departure is believed to be a difference of musical opinion, apparent for some months, which crystalised during the band's recent and highly-successful American tour.

A member of the Softs since their very earliest days in Canterbury, Wyatt left them for a short period last year when, fort he same reasons, he went to play with Kevin Ayers and The Whole World. He returned when he found that Ayer's outfit came no closer to realising his musical ambitions.

Wyatt's replacement in the Soft Machine will be Phil Howard who has for some months been a member of the part-time quartet of Soft's altoist Elton Dean.

Previous article

Next article

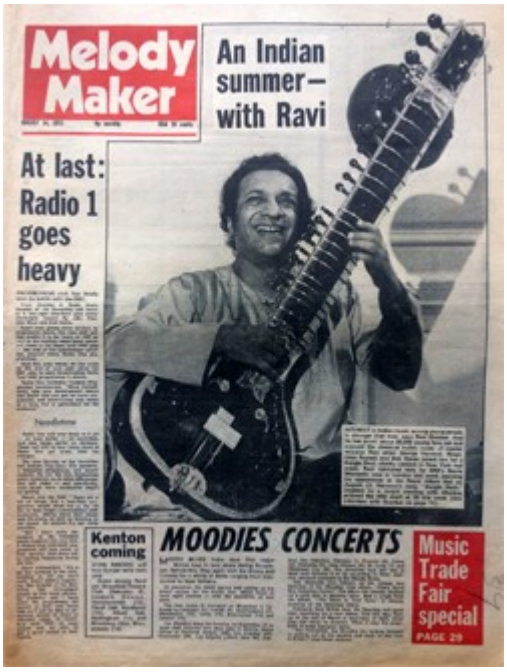
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

American experience - Melody Maker - August 14, 1971



American experience

by RICHARD WILLIAMS

Soft Machine's Elton Dean talks about the band's recent U.S. tour

Soft Machine may have missed playing at the Newport Jazz Festival on their recent American tour, but they did play a couple of concerts with Miles Davis, and Ornette Coleman did host a couple of parties in their honour at his famous loft home on Prince Street, New York. So it would not go amiss to say that, even allowing for enthusiastic exaggeration, the band made something of a stir during their visit.

That's a far cry from their previous American experience, three years back, when they toured coast-to-coast with the Jimi Hendrix Experience. That little lot was such a heavy gig that the band folded under the pressure, and didn't come back together for several months. Elton Dean wasn't with the band then. This was his first look at the States. and he says: "I can really understand how the band fell apart last time. Seven weeks of playing every night in America is just unimaginable. It must have been hell. Our tour was fairly leisurely, by comparison, although it didn't really feel that way."

Newport was supposed to be their first port of call, but the riots put paid to that. As it happens it was probably just as well, because they had a lot of trouble with their hired American equipment, which frequently put paid to Robert's vocals. These problems manifested themselves at their eventual first gig, in the Gaslight in Greenwich Village. Had Newport not been cancelled, they'd have been faced with the embarrassment of equipment hassles on a very prestigious gig.

It was at the Gaslight that Ornette first came to hear them. "I think somebody had played

him ‘Third’,” says Elton, “and he dug it so he came down to listen.” Coleman was so impressed that he immediately organised two well-attended parties for them.

Their next stop was also in the Village, at the Beacon Theatre, where they played the concerts with Miles Davis. Elton enjoyed Miles’ band, even though the sound balance was poor and the trumpeter appeared to have lost some interest in serious music. But the band which impressed him most in New York was John McLaughlin's new outfit, which includes violinist Jerry Goodman from Flock, bassist Rick Laird, and drummer Billy Cobham. Apparently Cobham had turned down the chance of joining Miles’ band, and there's talk that the McLaughlin band may tour Europe with the Softs sometime in the near future.

An amusing experience for Elton and the others came in Detroit, where they played bottom of the bill to a local band called Savage Grace and our own Yes. “It was a nice change, being at the bottom. We played pretty well, and the audience dug — there was a lot of shouting going on, lots of enthusiasm.”


American experience
Soft Machine's Elton Dean talks about the band's recent U.S. tour
VERTIGO GETS OUT
Freedom
Through the years
& ABOUT
Gentle Giant

Then they treked down to Texas, where they played in Houston and San Antonio — which, as somebody next to me said, conjures visions of a super-serious Ratledge playing some fantastically complex improvisation while people in buckskin are shooting off revolvers through the roof, pushing other people in buckskin through the bannisters, and yelling “Yeah!” “Actually not many people came to hear us there, because we were hardly known at all, but those who did come really seemed to like it. Then we went to Cleveland, and the last gig was somewhere in upstate New York. It was a disaster — the show started late and the owner of the cinema came on stage and stopped us playing. I suppose he wanted to get home to bed.”

“Musically, all the gigs were pretty good, and at times we played as well as we've ever played as individuals. Quite a lot of the time we agreed as a group, as well.”

The observant will have noticed that Elton is also running his own band, with Mark Charig (cornet), Neville Whitehead (bass), and Phil Howard (drums). Recently, it's been expanded to a quintet, with the addition of Softs roadie Jeff Green on guitar. “I find that I need the

quintet, as well as the Soft," he says. "I'd like to do much more work with it. It's the spontaneous thing. The Soft Machine has loosened up a lot, but the original conception still exists. There's a lot of freedom inside that, but it's a change to get back to something with no preparation at all."

Elton's own album has been delayed a little, because of a hang-up over printing the sleeve, but it should be out in a few weeks. It is, he says, a blowing album, with very little writing, and features the quartet with the addition of Ratledge and Roy Babbington on bass. The leader is now playing a lot of electric piano, with both his bands. He learned the piano when he was a child, but only returned to it a couple of years ago.

Although Ratledge still uses the Hohner Pianet keyboard atop his organ for written passages, much of the music now consists of duets between Elton and Mike on Fender Rhodes instruments. "Those instruments have such a lovely sound," says Elton. "It's very beautiful, and I enjoy playing that way a great deal now. In fact I play piano in the quintet as much as I play alto."

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Dialogue - Melody Maker - July 3, 1971

Dialogue

Continuing MM's occasional series wich features rock people talking among themselves. This week's participants are Soft Machine drummer Robert Wyatt, Mick Farren, leader of Britain's White Panthers, and promoters; Peter Bowyer and Mike Alfandary. The subject: festivals.



MM: Does anyone feel that festivals are on the way out?

Farren: Like rock and roll! (laugh). It's really a continuous movement. What a festival represents basically for me is that it's half a million people living exactly the way they want to live. It's unfortunate that both the free ones and the promoted don't basically differ very much - it's simply in the returns afterwards. When a thing is promoted it isn't done better because you're paying to go in. Generally it's quite often done worse.

Alfandary: Oh, I disagree with that!

Farren: Well, I've just been to a free one (Glastonbury) which was as good as anything I've been to

MM: From what I heard there was little food and water and hardly any warm place for people to stay.

Farren: Yeah, it was exactly like the Isle of Wight except that nobody got hit with an iron bar, you know.

Alfandary; Well, if something is free there is nobody in a way to be responsible. When it's promoted there's usually somebody there who is. Now if the person there in a responsible

position does not feel conscientious then it can be worse than a free one where everyone mucks in. But a festival that is promoted has a better chance of being well-organised than a free one.

Bowyer: As the organiser of a free festival, you put down a stage and lay on power and that basically is almost the end of your responsibility if you're only putting on a one-day event, a la Hyde Park The moment you charge money then you have to start putting up fences, you have to give the public toilets, facilities for food and doctors, because they have paid money and you therefore have the responsibility to the public to give them facilities!

Farren: Well, don't you think you have a responsibility in any case? The paradox of this thing is that we have this relatively enormous number of people who first of all want to see the music but primarily feel they want to live according to their own ethic. They don't want to live in the city structure. And basically the concept of promoting the event, because the people have a real need to live according to their own cultural ideas, is a contradiction in terms. And the second most practical problem is - and I think Peter and all festival promoters are becoming aware probably - is that the kids, the quarter of a million kids, don't have the money to be able in the kind of situation we have, to make them viable. Therefore, it's coming out of the hands of the promoters and now coming down to some kind of sociology rather than business, which makes it even more difficult. But more interesting.

Money

MM: How viable are free concerts if groups, managers, agents etc have got to make money? It's a business, a music industry.

Farren: Well, it really depends what they're in the business for. A few months ago I was talking to the Grateful Dead and they've making 90 dollars a week each. That's what they're in business for.

Wyatt: Yes, but Mick, look, the musical heroes of your lifetime are perhaps the most capitalistic, money-orientated people - the people whose every move they made was in terms of money - they were your heroes. In the rock and roll era that you're always talking about, they were getting this capitalist type which means you in England had heard of them and worshipped them. And there's all these jazz musicians and classical musicians who you don't really bother to listen to who were into all this art for art's sake and in fact have never got across to you or anyone else because they didn't have this great capitalist type behind them.

Farren:The real point is - and I'm not birching about a promoter making a living promoting rock and roll - it's the incredible situation we had at the Isle of Wight, say, where you have literally a hierarchical situation that was practically as vicious as Tsartist Russia! You had a man on the stage, say Alvin Lee, whose making something, like, I calculated, about three hundred quid a minute, and meanwhile at the other end of the field there's a kid walking into a tent and no one knows exactly what's wrong with him until they suss out that he's actually starving! I think that's just going too far. Plus the problem that at the Isle of Wight they spent, I think it was £30,000 securing Alvin Lee's £500 a minute - and still, presumably they lost money!

It's really nineteenth century capitalism. It's like, take as much as you can, and give back as little as you can. At least twentieth century capitalism realises you've got to give so much in order that the people can consume, so you can just keep turning over the whole wheels of the industry. We're just beginning to see the problem is that the music business is generally disappearing up its own arse! This is the problem with the Isle of Wight with their enormous security arrangements. The arrangements actually outpriced you know, made the festival non-viable,

MM: But who's going to say what a band is worth?

Alfandary: A band is worth what an agent can screw out of a promoter at any given time. That's exactly what it's worth! No more and no less than that. I was perfectly happy for the next Crystal Palace concert not to run If I felt that the public at the end were not gonna get a proper show out of it, and the only reason why it wouldn't have run is because the amount of money available to pay to groups would have been wiped out by one or two

groups and therefore a good show couldn't have been presented. And the business knew that! But it still didn't stop certain groups from asking money that was completely impossible to be paid! I think that the point about festivals is not the free or paying side. It should be split into what they mean socially - and I think festivals are largely a social event - and concerts, which have a financial orientation. A festival is a political statement of telling the establishment where to get off, and the fantastic buzz of standing in a crowd with all the people around you - your own people - and nobody can attack you, you're safe within that crowd, and you're shouting and going mad with the group, and that's incredible.

MM: Who's spoiling it for everybody else?

Alfandary: The people who're spoiling the festivals and the whole music business - and this is my dislike of it - are the managers and agents of groups who're getting big. The moment a group gets big it loses its responsibility to other groups. It gets as much as it can, thinking, my day may not last for ever and I'm gonna get as much money as I can. With venues of 1,000 capacity or just about, you want to have a group that will draw the public in and there's always a spot on that bill for a group coming up, making it, or wants to break itself. And what you find is that the price the middle of the road group charges is such that you find you cannot afford to pay a decent wage to the group you'd like to see second on the bill! So the smaller groups miss out, and that means there's not a lot of groups given a break, which minimises the number of groups .around, which means that the public can only go and see so many groups and then they've seen the lot, which means there's not a lot of turnover. It's a vicious circle, getting broken nowadays. Festivals did break smaller groups but nowadays they've lost their aura.



Peter Bowyer (second from left), Mick Farren, Robert Wyatt (second from right) and Mike Alfandary.

Council

MM : All right, but what about the attitude of the Isle of Wight council and, further than that, the government, which looks as if it intends to ban the Isle of festival?

Alfandary: I attended the debate at the House of Commons during the reading of the Isle Of Wight Bill and the government was embarrassed by that Bill. They really didn't want to know. I'm sure the bill will go through but the Government is embarrassed by it. It's a local bill which has been promoted by the Isle of Wight council, which has been the unfortunate victim of a terrible thing played upon it and its local community... I don't wanna go any further.

Farren: I'm afraid this is rubbish, Mike. We had exactly the same situation with the council when we ran that thing at Worthing last year (Phun City). We were totally f...d up because

the council worked in such a way that right up until the last moment it was virtually impossible to stage the festival. I mean, injunctions kept flying about, there was constant trouble, plus even the health department and the police were actively obstructive to laying on the facilities. I think Harold Pendleton had exactly the same trouble at Plumpton. I don't know a festival that hasn't been totally obstructed, I mean, most festivals are staged in fairly high density rural communities within 100. 150 miles of London, and all these places are so strongly Tory that (a) I can't see this bill not going through and (b), I don't feel the Isle of Wight is the least bit isolated.

Alfandary: Look, on this point of authorities, they don't want to stop young people's events, Many of the supporters of the bill were Conservatives, who didn't like rock music, hated it, couldn't understand it, but said, if young people wanna do it, then we wanna see it happen, but we want to see it happen so they're protected. And quite frankly, any one who's been to the Isle of Wight or Bath knows how unprotected the public is in that situation!

Farren; But the way the bill is laid out the kids going to the festival can in actual fact be potentially even more unprotected. If a festival is only run for 12 hours, you run three festivals consecutively for 12 hours each, you provide no facilities, no camping areas - nothing - you are then totally cool in the terms of the bill. They're not approaching the problem, they're trying to sweep the longhairs under the carpet.

Basically. we're dealing with a bunch of kids who for the first time in a long time in this country's history are attempting to live a life which is far more organic than the linear concept of current cities. I think it's indicative of every festival that there's a pressure group. I mean, the last year or so, there's been a pressure group who wanted to stay on the site and, you know, begin to work out the way they started to live at the festival, and they've always been turned off in the end. Secondly, it's a political thing because I totally disagree with Mike. I feel the phenomenon is (a) being stamped out and (b), totally swept under the carpet, So the kids who're present there end up, if they follow the lifestyle right through, in possibly the worst ghettos we have in this country.

Alfandary: Oh God, this is ridiculous! Ridiculous!

Bowyer: Actually I wonder what would happen If the Isle of Wight was basically where everyone who lived there was young and long haired, and suddenly one week-end 50,000 old, crony people invaded it for a Mantovani concert. This is what it is; up-tight, local residents.

Alfandary: Look, it's easy... hold it a minute... it's easy for Mick to live his own life and do whatever Mick wants to do, and to shout and do things in the way that he does them, which I, by the way, support more than Mike realises.

Farren: There's no danger in these festivals. There's not even much danger to the ecology of the countryside they take place in Therefore, why do you have to go on your knees to the authority to be allowed to have one? The average football match causes 20 times as much trouble in every city every Saturday with no question about them. If you stand outside a football match On a Saturday afternoon you're quite likely to end up killed!

Alfandary: The facts that Mick has brought up I agree with, There is one hundredth of the trouble at an open air pop event than there is at a football match. But I feel you've got to go to the authorities with love in your heart. You can't go to them fighting before you start. And this is why there has been such trouble with local authorities. This is why the Foulk Brothers, I think, had the greatest contempt for the organisation and the people and the inhabitants of the area in which they were putting their festival. And why open air events are so tricky nowadays is because of the fact they've been used to attack the establishment.

Fight

Bowyer: I think it goes back to the thing that you don't fight them. Because this is terrible thing I've found about the whole youth movement - that they are inclined to be more prejudiced to some extent than the older people. I think the young and the long-haired are as prejudiced and build as many barriers as anybody else.







Farren; When we were at Sussex, all we were asking was three days in a field, and basically we kept very much to ourselves.

We met with a great many of the actual people who lived in the country in that area - the farmers, the farm workers, the woodsmen - who were very anxious, firstly, to make a buck out of the thing, and secondly, they were quite anxious to help us. They all came down and sat and looked at the full-frontal that was going about and had a great time...

MM: Look, can we come up with some basic viable concept of how a festival should be ideally run?

Farren: I feel what essentially ought to happen, rather than this ridiculous legislation that's being debated at the moment, is, there is plenty of land in this country still left and the Coal Board, for instance have large amounts of land which are virtually f...d out - are totally wasted, and there is actually a movement to get it together. Essentially, a proportion of unwanted land could be given over. firstly, to a permanent community who could service the land, and secondly, make it available for these kind of events. I feel possibly this is the first solution. And if the youth movement, or whatever, has to dovetail in with the rest of society, then okay.

MM: And some kind of governing body?

Farren: Yeah, possibly, you know.

MM: Who'd be on this?

Farren: What we need is a body who is well aware of the way the people at the festival behave, as well as what needs to be done to pay particular promoted even that deal with these people. The average roadie has a very good understanding of what the audience needs. Personally I'd rather trust some of the doctors we have in the community, than the local Medical Officers of Health as the Isle of Wight Bill proposes.

Alfandary: Look, I know that neither party really understands youth. It doesn't. A youth council, or a council that can be called upon for its expert advice on what young people are really thinking, is a great idea, but if we get it, would become too established, and anyone on that council would have the same stranglehold over festivals. Just as the people on the MU have over exchanges. There is no perfect formula. Young people must just strive really hard in their own communities, to get everybody who's in a position of power, to understand what they're really about and what they're really doing. This means inviting the local straight, heavy MP along to a rock concert: getting your councillors down to the park when your holding an open-air event, and really talking to them.

Farren; Yeah, your local heavy MP comes down, gets himself photographed then leaves again. What we need is a body that can control on the one hand, the promoter who is going to attempt to cut corners on the life-support system within the festival, and the other hand needs to advise and control the community organisation who's possibly going to be untogether and undercapitalised, in providing the same facilities.



So first of all, it needs people who have experience of such events; like road managers are the obvious first in line and journalists second because of the information feeding through.

Health

MM: Do you all agree that festivals as such, are not in a particularly healthy state at present ?

Alfandary: No, no, no. They're great.

Bowyer: They're marvellous, no.

Farren: I believe they'll disappear because the organisation becomes so difficult. I don't think the need of people to congregate in the country-side will disappear, but I feel that festivals will, simply because they're too much of a problem. I mean, they are not viable in terms of profit and they're not possible in the terms of a very skint community coming up.

Bowyer: Well, you were at the Isle of Wight last year, and you were pretty much against it. But you read the bill. You knew the artists who were appearing; you knew the admission - about twenty-five bob a day. Do you think that unfair considering the artists appearing? A promoter puts on all those incredible names, right, and he charges thirty bob a day. In my book, I'd be willing to pay thirty bob a day to see that list of names.

Bogus

Farren: Well, for a start, the list of names was so vast that it was pushing for a totally bogus status situation. They could have stuck on a Doors album, had four guys standing up there, and I wouldn't have known the difference. There is a limit to how far people can sit on a stage and project themselves physically to that number of people.
Physically it was impossible.

Bowyer: But your protest was against the promoters.

Farren: And secondly. the promoters had gone into the situation with the idea that they would make the ultimate gamble and pull it off. Consequently corners were cut drastically. If it had rained at the Isle of Wight, I feel there would probably have been a major disaster.

The Isle of Wight was just the ultimate paradox. You had someone like Jim Morrison saying theoretically, not in actual words. "tear down the walls break down the capitalist barriers," and the whole thing being set up to maintain his elite position in society. It would have been possible for many of the musicians to have come to the Isle of Wight a great deal cheaper. The life-support system was so amazingly expensive that the kids who came, possibly with the bread to get in, couldn't survive.

Bowyer: Then they should have come better equipped than that. I mean. if you've got a huge festival like that and half the people come without the money to get in. then it suddenly becomes the promoters' responsibilities, and it's not his fault, right? Like. if a kid turns up and he can just afford to get in, but he can't buy himself a sandwich or a cup of tea - that suddenly becomes Ron Foulk's fault? I'd like to know why. Because he should put ten thousand quid in a kitty for the kids who've just come for a look and suddenly haven't got any bread? You know, people have got to look after themselves to a certain extent. They just can't rely on promoters, social welfare and the kindness of people to hold hem up all the time! The kid who gone to the Isle of Wight festival with 25 bobs in his pocket and gets in but can't afford anything else - that's his fault?

Farren: In simple terms - very, very simple terms - if there is a guy who is dealing in hundreds of thousands of pounds and there is a kid to whom 25 bob is a difficult deal, then it's surely the responsibility of the one to deal for the other.



Bread

Alfandary: Look, you don't go on a bus without the bread to pay for the bus fare, do you? I don't think you should go to a festival without the means to support yourself.

Farren: But if you have a rock musician saying. " Hey kids, go on the buses without money because that's...uh."

Alfandary: Then that's the irresponsibility of the rock musician for saying that!

MM: To you, Mick. a festival is a battle ground between the alternative society and the establishment?

Farren: I think a festival is a manifestation of alternative society. It's a manifestation of the very committed coming together. It's a dialogue, basically, It's a thing which I don't think any individual should make a vast profit out of. It's a situation that should continue, and I feel that's a situation that Peter as on agent, Mike as a promoter and Robert as a musician, should come out of with no more than their wages, nothing more. Everyone is together in it. Take the Hyde Park concert. The free concert in Hyde Park means that those kids go out and get rock and roll music for free. You get 100.000 kids in Hyde Park and they would have possibly have paid a quid to see the Pink Floyd if it had been a concert in the evening, and they'd have to pay to get in. That has returned £l00,000 spending power to that audience.

MM: The Hyde Park things are completely non-commercial, altruistic events?

Farren: No. they're not!

Bowyer: The Pink Floyd wanted to do the gig. They didn't stop and think: " Wow. money, money," It cost the Floyd nearly a thousand pounds to do that gig.

Farren: It put their album in the charts!

Bowyer: Come on, man, you really think that was their attitude?

Farren: No. I didn't really.

Bowyer: right!

Farren: But it did!

MM: This point about the alternative society using festivals or rock events as a means of confrontation with the establishment, this sometimes results in violence, doesn't it? Robert must know about this, because it happened at that Palais des Sports gig in France. How do the musicians feel about that situation?

Wyatt: The last time we were in Paris we didn't actually play, because there was so much tear gaz around and so many burning seats by the time we got on. We were advised not to go on for our own safety and that of the kids involved.

Buzz

MM: These were the same guys that disrupted the Isle of Wight.

Wyatt: Jean-Jacques wasn't actually at our gig, but he was at another place that was involved in our gig thing, they tied together. But it's all down to pleasure. His pleasure as a non-musician. He can get a great buzz out of some event where music doesn't actually arise but some other kind of buzz does.

MM: Can you defend the actions of these people who go primarily to disrupt festivals?

Wyatt: Well, I think that festivals are a signal for large numbers of people to get together, and perhaps the most interesting thing for them is not music but establishing their life-styles, and it'd be presumptious of me just because I'm a musician to expect them to come there primarily for the music. Initially, of course, I was irritated by the story. A bunch of long-haired geezers - and they do exist - had laid into the police and the police had said "Yeah, yeah, right." In fact the background to this was a long alternate battle which takes place. Each stage of the battle is like boxing - it has rounds, and we were one round. We hadn't seen the previous round and I haven't seen any since, But we provided the stage for that week's confrontation. In fact we were outsiders, a focal point upon which to get together. I've not idea how difficult it is for a kid to leas a new style of life in Paris. If it's really impossibly difficult then I think he's right to use a Soft's concert a focal point for expression. If an audience turns a festival into a violent occasion then maybe there's a reason, a need for it. But you can't tell kids how to behave at a festival. You can't tell the kids who're being hurt how to scream.

Messiah

Farren: Basically, this is the problem of the musician being out of context with the rest of the people at the gathering. The musician is in a much more difficult position because if he comes on stage with a whole environment that is totally focused on him then unfortunately he's put in an almost Messianic context. Unfortunately we have a music business which says that Mick Jagger, Robert and me, when we walk on stage and the whole thing is concentrated on us, we are the actual focal point, and our ideas are the most important thing in the whole event at that time.It's bullshit, real bullshit! But while we have a capitalist situation that turns someone like Jim Morrison, a mediocre singer, into something of a Messiah, then the musician is going to have to make up his mind. If the musician wants to cop out on being the arbiter of what is going on down at the festival then he must admit that he is merely part of the environment. And in those terms I don't really think he can expect to be paid £500 a minute because the cats operating the right shows aren't, the cats cleaning up the toilets aren't, and the lights and the facilities are part of the environment. That's the truth. Would you agree?

Blind

Wyatt: It all depends if you enjoy doing festivals or not. All I can say is, you choose the situation you get into. We don't like playing festivals so we don't unless there's a lot of

money in it, because we're not really communal musicians.

Alfandary: It's always good that the artists should not be involved in all the financial and social hustles that go on around him, but he is responsible, if not more, for those hustles. It's no good enough for an artist to turn a blind eye in whatever his management is doing. Edmund Burke once said that "evil is created when enough good men stand by and do nothing" and there are signs of commission which we're gonna put on managers, agents, etc. and sins of omission which we can lay very much on the door of the artist himself who doesn't want to know what's going up, I mean, there are classic cases of talking to an artist where I say., "Well, I'd like you to play this gig, it'll be a very nice gig" and he says, "it sounds great by me, but go and talk to my agent," but don't listen to a word he says, he's a crook". So how the hell do you fight that? What on earth do you say Right?

Previous article

Next article

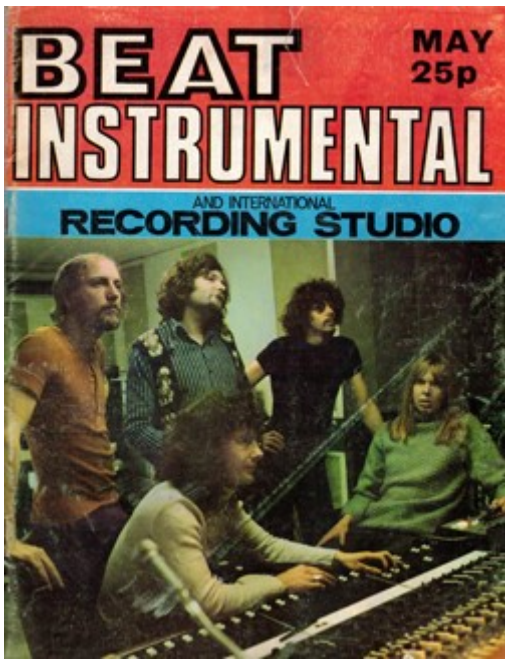
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Player Of The Month - Beat Instrumental - No 97 - May 1971



ROBERT WYATT

'I STARTED with an ammunition box as a snare drum,' says Robert, "an old metal clothes horse for a ride cymbal and a typewriter for hi-hat which went *whuck-woo whuck-woo* and that was my kit.'

When the Wyatt family lived back in Canterbury, a drum teacher from California came to lodge with them for a year. Instead of paying rent for the accommodation he gave drum tutorship to 14-year-old Robert. From this unlikely beginning has grown the musical career which has taken him through straight 'pop' group Wildeflowers and on into the accomplished Soft Machine. It has taken him from the dance halls of Canterbury to the Royal Promenade Concert of 1970. Of the latter gig Wyatt is not too proud, although he is full of admiration for the electronics wizard Tim Souster ("a really beautiful person") who first proposed the group for the appearance.

He describes his function as drummer as being the pulse of the group. 'It's a social act really,' he explains. 'It takes the dynamics of the people you're playing with. It dictates how clearly your beat is to be split up and how much space there is between a beat and a bar. When you're drumming you determine the pace that everyone is at - its affects what the other people do.'

Besides the Soft Machine albums *One*, *Two*, *Three* and now *Four*, Robert has been active in other musical areas. He was involved in the *Centipede* project and has also released his own album *The End Of An Ear*. On the back cover of this release Wyatt credits himself as being 'An out of work Pop Singer (currently on drums with Soft Machine).' This is probably the strongest indication he has given of where his personal artistic ambitions lie. For a drummer he has must surprising ambitions. 'I like a touch of madness,' he says, 'it's one of my favourite human characteristics. The basic thing that I always end up going back to is not really related to rock or jazz at all. It's related to strange tapes and voice things - more influenced by the Goons.'



PLAYER OF THE MONTH

ROBERT WYATT

I STARTED with an ammunition box as a snare drum,' says Robert, 'an old metal clothes horse for a ride cymbal and a typewriter for hi-hat which went *whack-woo whack-woo* and *that* was my kit.'

When the Wyatt family lived back in Canterbury, a drum teacher from California came to lodge with them for a year. Instead of paying rent for the accommodation he gave drum tutorship to 14-year-old Robert. From this unlikely beginning has grown the musical career which has taken him through straight 'pop' group Wilde-flowers and on into the accomplished Soft Machine. It has taken him from the dance halls of Canterbury to the Royal Promenade Concert of 1970. Of the latter gig Wyatt is not too proud, although he is full of admiration for the electronics wizard Tim Souster ('a really beautiful person') who first proposed the group for the appearance.

He describes his function as drummer as being the pulse of the group. 'It's a social act really,' he explains. 'It takes the dynamics of the people you're playing with. It dictates how clearly your beat is to be split up and how much space there is between a beat and a bar. When you're drumming you determine the pace that everyone is at —it affects what the other people do.'

Besides the Soft Machine albums *One, Two, Three* and now *Four*, Robert has been active in other musical areas. He was involved in the *Centipede* project and has also released his own album *The End Of A Near*. On the back cover of this release Wyatt credits himself as being 'An out of work Pop Singer (currently on drums with Soft Machine).' This is probably the strongest indication he has given of where his personal artistic ambitions lie. For a drummer he has most surprising ambitions. 'I like a touch of madness,' he says, 'it's one of my favourite human characteristics. The basic thing that I always end up going back to is not really related to rock or jazz at all. It's related to strange tapes and voice things —more influenced by the Goons.'

The drummers that seem to have influenced Wyatt are to be found in the rock world. 'I was listening to a Traffic album last night,' he said, 'and Jim Capaldi is one of my heroes for a start. I prefer the idiom of rock actually because it has a warm chunky feel. I like thick decisive rock drumming which is clear and easy to work with. I'm an admirer of Dave Mattacks (Fairport Convention) and Mitch Mitchell has been a great influence on me.

"Since I last saw myself in print admitting that I couldn't really play properly,' Robert added with a smile, 'I've actually been learning to play quite a lot. It's come almost by accident because we've been doing so much playing and I now feel quite proud of being a drummer. Had you come up two months ago and said that I was to be *Player Of The Month* I would have really been embarrassed.'

> Zoom

The drummers that seem to have influenced Wyatt are to be found in the rock world. 'I was listening to a Traffic album last night,' he said, -and Jim Capaldi is one of my heroes for a start. I prefer the idiom of rock actually because it has a warm chunky feel. I like thick decisive rock drumming which is clear and easy to work with. I'm an admirer of Dave Mattacks (Fairport Convention) and Mitch Mitchell has been a great influence on me.

'Since I last saw myself in print admitting that I couldn't really play properly,' Robert added with a smile, 'I've actually been learning to play quite a lot. It's come almost by accident because we've been doing so much playing and I now feel quite proud of being a drummer. Had you come up two months ago and said that I was to be *Player Of The Month* I would have really been embarrassed.'

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Sounds Talk-In - Sounds - April 17, 1971



The Sounds

Talk-In

ROBERT WYATT

LAST YEAR, Robert Wyatt was doing a lot of gigs with various bands outside the Soft Machine, and at one point there was even talk of him leaving them altogether. Now he says that he is happier than ever with the Softs, and in this interview he talks about the group now, the way they evolved, and his hopes for the future.

FEATURE BY STEVE PEACOCK

PHOTOGRAPHER : SPUD MURPHY

■ **As far as a lot of people are concerned, the Soft Machine is a comparatively recent thing, but it's grown out of long friendships, hasn't it? You were at school together in Canterbury and things.**

Brian Hopper, Hugh's big brother and Mike (Ratledge) were at primary school together, and by the time I knew them they were doing adaptations of various European pieces - Mike on piano and Brian on clarinet. Then at Simon Lankton school in Canterbury I met Hugh, and at that time I was very interested in Ellington, things like that. Hugh and I used to do violin lessons together, but we didn't all know each other that well at that time. Mike, as far as I know, didn't develop his interest in jazz at that stage. He was very into European music of all ages - Medieval French music up to the latest developments, Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, that sort of thing, which I didn't know very much about except from my Dad. He was very much into his idea of modern European music which wasn't in fact very modern, 1920s things really.

JAZZ

Towards the end of school life Mike and I would lend each other records sometimes, and he got interested in jazz - he started to show an interest in Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus, Eric Dolphy and so on. Then I went away for a while with Daevid Allen who freaked me out completely. He and my big brother Marc really got me into Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman, and they also got me into Terry Riley. He's a friend of David's and we did some little things with him in Paris.

DANCE

David first turned me on, you know all that stuff – sort of – birth period of your adolescence. Then Hugh came out and started to play bass guitar tentatively doing Ray Charles bass lines, and also trying to learn a few Charlie Haden bass lines off Ornette Coleman records. We used to do a lot of freaky instrumental things as a trio, and then we drifted back to Canterbury and formed what was supposed to be a dance group to work in the local area, but already we were doing some of Hugh's original compositions and stuff by Mose Allison, Nina Simone, and Otis Redding who at that time wasn't particularly popular.

■ **This was the Wild Flowers ?**

Right. We didn't get much work — we were about the most unsuccessful group you could imagine. At dances people would just stare at us blankly after about ten minutes.

SNOB

■ **Kevin Ayers joined you soon after that didn't he ?**

Kevin really was very important because, apart from listening to Ray Charles and realising that he was excellent although he wasn't in any sense avant garde, the person who really brought it home to me that songs and simple things were totally all right was Kevin. It never really occurred to me before that anything of majority appeal would ever have any interest for me at all — I'm a snob in every way; I'm a cultural snob, if I had the brains I'd be an intellectual snob, and at that time I was hoping to be a musical snob as well. Kevin would write songs, and at first they'd remind you of something, but after you'd heard it two or three times you couldn't imagine the song not having been written, they were such real songs.

I really had to think again about music then, about simple things that you recognise and know because I'd based my whole thing on music than on the element of surprise, and the idea of something not being surprising and still being totally beautiful was new to me. I realise in retrospect that I went through my own little mini pop revolution, just like everybody else did, but then I always had this great problem of combining this realisation with having always believed in totally freaking out, both with your music and in your lifestyle.


The SOUNDS Talk-In

ROBERT WYATT

Considering that I'm not quite doing what fits my fantasies, I think I'm in the best possible group to be confused in'

FEATURE BY STEVE PEACOCK

NEXT WEEK

DAVE COUSINS

DAVID PORTER

RICK NELSON

picato

Premier PERCUSSION'S NUMBER ONE

PHOTOGRAPHER: SPUD MURPHY

WRECK

All the kind of rock things and pop things were the last things to occur to me really. When we formed the group with Kevin it was very summery I remember, and we were all growing our hair and walking round looking like girls, and Kevin was wearing make-up, and we'd just all lie around in the grass — just like everybody did in the mid sixties. It was a beautiful thing and we were part of it. Somehow, when we were sitting out in the sunny grass, there didn't seem any point in freaking out, but as we got a group together with Kevin and David my background started catching up with me again, and I felt the need for some really tough musical minds to be working against. It got to the point where we made probably the most important decision of the lot, which was eventually to wreck the first Soft Machine and arrive at the one we've got now, by inviting Mike to join us on keyboards.

For a while, Mike would sort of politely "shift around on the chords behind Kevin, and we never quite knew how he felt about it. He enjoyed some things and not others, but he never really wanted to be a pop musician, I think he was a bit embarrassed by the whole thing. But I've always been in this position, where there's been a constant pull between my background and sort of simple harmony fun. That kind of paradox is the thread that runs through every situation I've been in I suppose.

NARROW

■ When Kevin left, was it purely that Mike's influence was becoming more dominant ?

I don't think you can confine it to that because it's too narrow a thing to say that Kevin was into or what Mike was into. The thing you've got to remember with Mike was that he wasn't narrow-minded at all. For all his reservations, he did give up several years of his life at that stage to work with people who were by his original standards musically illiterate. He wasn't narrow minded at all, far from it, and he loved Kevin's bass playing — quite rightly, because Kevin is such an imaginative, interesting bass player. In the same way, to say that Kevin is just into simple songs is wrong, because he constantly surrounds himself with much more demanding situations than your average folkie singer.

He was very much part of what was unusual about the Soft Machine in those early days, and was really responsible for some of the freakiest situations we got into. In fact he was one of the first in the group to get into out-of-tempo passages with just sound — that was Kevin not me or Mike, who first got into those incredible noises. I mean I tend to give people two-sentence roles in the past, but you've got to bear in mind that they're incredible over simplifications.

VOCALS

■ You were doing a lot of singing with the first group weren't you ?

In the early days of Soft Machine I had to do the drumming, because we didn't know any other drummers really — we wouldn't have dared to ask any jazz drummers, and rock drummers at that time weren't that sensitive, so I had to do it myself, and Kevin and I did the vocals between us. It was basically a song group.

■ And that influence lasted until the second album...

Well fact it is always there in my opinion. It may be kind of more obscure, but I really like the Soft Machine at the moment, and for all the superficial effect it might have on the casual listener, it is very lyrical. I think both Mike's and Hugh's writing is not only lyrical but almost old-fashionedly lyrical. I certainly couldn't work with a group that I didn't think was lyrical. It's tunes that I think matter.



LYRICAL

■ **But not necessarily sung tunes.**

Well, if you've developed the faculty for listening to say Charlie Parker, you've learned to hear quite quickly intervals and rhythms and things - you can ge' into that whole condensed lyricism. Parker and Monk and people are just as lyrical and soulful as anybody before, but they can say in ten seconds what people stretch out to a great loping thing of ten minutes. But if you're not really into picking up the things they're playing, then it's just a blur of notes.

Of course a lot of people who play fast haven't got the melodic inventiveness to keep up with their own speed, and they are the ones who are boring, but people like Charlie Parker retained all of that melodic lyricism at the incredible speed he played at, and it's the same at the moment with people like Gary Burton and Larry Coryell. I find that very ex-citing. So I'd say that the song thing hasn't left us, but it is harder to pick up on if you're used to the comparative ease of listening to rock music.

NEUROTIC

■ **You've said in the past though that you are a singer rather than a drummer. Do you still feel that way ?**

In a way. If I just knew how to do it so that I was in a situation where I was singing more, and was more involved with a traditional concept of lyricism I would do it, but meanwhile I don't consider the time wasted at all, because you learn so much with Soft Machine. It's a very demanding band and a very neurotic band - every other day I want to leave or someone gets p—ed off with someone else - but its because ,we put such incredible demands on each other. But considering that I'm not quite doing what fits my fantasies, I think I'm in the best possible group to be confused in. If I've got to be lost somewhere I'm very glad it's in the Soft Machine because offhand I can't think of any musicians around that I respect more than Hugh and Mike and Elton (Dean).

■ **Last year, there was a time when you were going outside the Soft Machine for various things. There was the time when you were going to go with Kevin, and there was Symbiosis, and various other things. Are you not doing much of that any more?**

It was quite a practical thing. At that time we'd spent a long time on the road, and Mike and Hugh wanted to take some time off to do some writing, and I didn't fancy doing any writing - I was getting a bit, ted up with the pre-planned stuff and I wanted to see, how much could be done just spontaneously again. That's what "End Of And Ear" is all about really - it's really an exercise in total spontaneity, and that whole time was really - Symbiosis, everything - but it wasn't meant to be my whole life. It was really to see what could come out of that, that wasn't coming out with the Soft Machine.

PRIDE

■ **Did anything come out ?**

Yes, but not really what I'd expected. What it mainly brought out was a lot of drumming things - paradoxically it gave me more, confidence as a drummer, than anything, whereas I've always been rather embarrassed about being a drummer in the first place because my main interest has always been beautiful chord sequences. I've learnt a certain pride in drumming now and I enjoy doing it.

■ **You feel that you've learnt as much as you're going to from those thing now then ?**

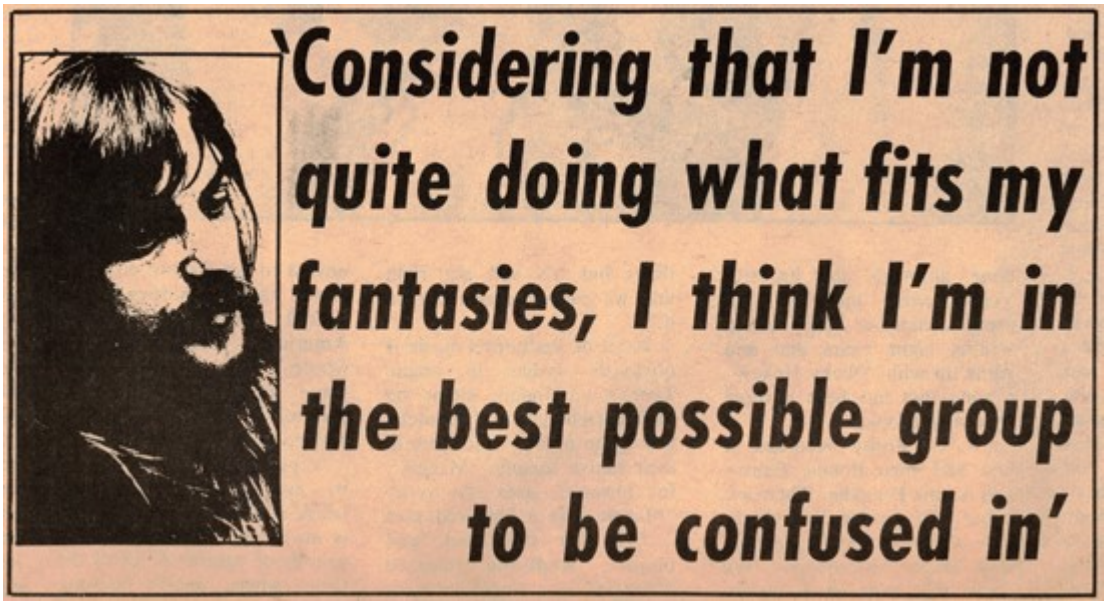
I don't know. It's just that Soft Machine's got lots of gigs now, and I think it's a better band than it was. It's not any more the three or us plus Elton, it really is much more of a quartet now. Mike and Elton in fact have found a way of working together that's stretched Mike out enormously, made him a much freer player. That time last year was just an interlude really. Symbiosis are still going incidentally, with Louis Moholo on drums.

STRETCH

■ You haven't done much writing recently then? Because you had a whole side of "Third", but nothing on the fourth album.

In a sense you could say that "End Of And Ear" and "Fourth" were a double album, one side of which was released before the other. In other words I got the contribution I would have made to this album done separately. It meant that I could stretch out, and Hugh could stretch out on "Virtually", which he definitely wanted to do, but probably wouldn't have felt justified in doing if I'd saved something of mine for the fourth album.

If I'm going to lead into anything else it's going to be more situations of singing, but it doesn't mean that I'm necessarily going to compose. Composing doesn't come naturally to me, though thinking up tunes does, because I haven't really got the skill to pin down what I think of. Melodically, I'm more impressed by other people's tunes anyway, and I'd like to work on some of Kevin's stuff, and on different versions of stuff that Hugh and Mike have written that could be interpreted differently from the way the Soft Machine interpret them. Not better, but just like throw another light on things that I feel are lyrical, but where the lyricism can get clouded over in the Soft Machine.



TUNES

Essentially, potentially I suppose I'm a sort of arranger really — not like writing out arrangements, but going into a studio and working on tunes. Like that Gil Evans on "End Of An Ear" - I'm totally intoxicated by the idea of the original but I just felt that all kinds of things could be done with it that Gil Evans either didn't want to do, or couldn't have, or whatever. But I'm a bit confused as to how to go about it.

■ Would you want to do it like "End Of And Ear", or perhaps work as an arranger with a group of people?

I really don't know, I think I'll try all kinds of different things. First of all I'll see whether

there are any other things that I could do within the context of the Soft Machine that I'm not doing now — like instead of just being the drummer, actually contributing conceptually — but it would have to be something that is acceptable to the others. Anything that doesn't seem to fit in with the Soft Machine… well I'd like to make lots and lots of records, I'd like to make a record a month but that would be financially impossible, so any little opportunities that come along I'll take. I mean, when John Walters gives us a ring and we can have ten minutes on "Top Gear", it gives me a chance to get a little song going - it needn't be for posterity or anything.

CONFIDENT

■ **Can you see any particular way that the Soft Machine is going to develop?**

I'd like to think that at the moment we're going to grow more and more together — accepting each others' differences and each others' similarities more. I'm much more confident about the group now than I have been at any other time. I'm more happy to be getting up on stage with the other three in pleasurable anticipation, though I still freak out sometimes after a bad gig. Obviously all of us have reservations about each other to a certain extent, but I think now the good qualities of the group outweigh the deficiencies. I'll just see what happens really - I don't want to get down to little details too much at the moment.

IGNORED

■ **The Soft Machine are one of the very few groups playing your kind of music who have become successful in terms of commercial success, and "name" and publicity. How do you feel about the way you are handled by record companies and promoters and publicists ?**

Well, God bless them all, but all of us want to be disassociated with some of the recent imagery associated with the group - to wit the poster for our Festival Hall concert and the record cover for "Fourth". I mean we made it quite clear to the__ people concerned that we didn't like either thing but our attitude was ignored. Luckily I think that most people who like the group like us for our music and don't worry about imagery, but to the extent that things like posters and LP covers give some extra information about the group and how they feel, I'd just like to say that that poster and that LP cover are not how we feel, on any level.

INTRIGUE

That cover photograph came out making us look like some solemn, ugly, broody pop group. It doesn't matter really, but that's the thinq that's representing you, for people to look at in their rooms for the next six months, and it's not exactly the kind of thing that is going to intrigue or interest our potential listeners. I don't know if the people who were getting that poster together realise it, but we've got an alto player in the group who has a head and a face - he's not that ugly, you know, we're quite happy to have him on the poster as well.

■ **You suffered a lot over that "pop at the prom" thing too, didn't you. There was some very strange publicity going around at the time.**

Well, I think that was really rather good, because it was a failed effort to make us respectable, and had it succeeded I think it could have done a lot more damage, I don't really have any interest in pleasing the Observer or the Sunday Times - I have no respect for those sort of papers, and I don't really want to be associated with that sort of thing. It kept the barriers up and to that extent, I think it was a very successful concert.

REACH

■ You don't think it would be nice if you music reached out to the people who read the Sunday Times ?

Oh look, I don't want to be nasty - some lovely
people read the Sunday Times, I do myself, there’s nothing wrong with that. Of course we're delighted anybody likes the group and sad if they don't, but that’s not an area of accolades an acceptance that is of any use to us whatsoever.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soft Machine - Jazz & Pop - April 1971



Soft Machine

The Soft Machine stirs different associations in different people. Some might think of Claes Oldenberg's soggy typewriters and drums.

For others, it could be William Burroughs' book by that name, a sort of illustrative exercise in man-as nauseated-anal-automaton. The Holy Modal Rounders sang about it. In "Dame Fortune" they told us "... man is just a soft machine..." And then, of course. Mick Jagger mentions the phrase in "Memo from Turner", something about "the man who hides behind the soft machine."

But the soft machine in question here is the band by the name... And they may well be the best of all possible soft machines. Now, somehow, in some way, all of these references fit together; somewhere in the world of nihilism, absurdity, Zen, Dada, fatalism and assorted underground phenomena, they are all in the same family: a soft machine is a Soft Machine is a soft machine.

The Soft Machine (de musica) is a strange mixture of personality clashes and uniformly talented musicians. They first got together about five years ago, while bumming around in the south of France. At that time, the members of the group were Mike Ratledge on keyboards, Robert Wyatt on vocals and assorted percussion, and Kevin Ayers on bass guitar. Their main claim to fame was their musical accompaniment for a play, Desire Caught by the Tail, written by that noted dramatist Pablo Picasso... and their seeming penchant for living out On the Road.

A couple of years later, they did a tour of the U.S. with Jimi Hendrix: the general audience reaction at that time was a sort of mild bewilderment: no one was too certain about exactly what they did, but everyone knew that they sure did it in a strange way. You see, in the first place, they didn't sound like either the Beatles or the Stones — not even Chuck Berry. Secondly, their stage presence was a bit on the outlandish side: it wasn't that they carried-on or anything... but they looked so strange. For example, Robert Wyatt caused quite a ripple in the trendy set during their week-long gig at The Scene due to his unusual jacket and tie. (They were painted onto his skin.) Actually, they all looked like a bunch of

punk kids, which, I suppose, is exactly what they were.

Shortly after their return to England, their first album was released on Probe records, and received a less than ecstatic reaction from the record-buying public: it was, and still is, a very strange record. The Soft Machine were among the first to espouse a desire to combine jazz and rock music, and their approach to the problem is to this day unique - no one sounds like this. The sleeve notes described it as "rock" music. but I'd say that would be stretching things a bit — it really wasn't rock'n'roll at all. It was more a musical montage, a crazy-quilt, loosely strung together by their own weird idiosyncrasies. Now, while this definitely was not one of the best albums in the world, it did from time to time rise to a peculiar sort of greatness. Robert Wyatt's vocals were haunting, actually beautiful; and while the music was generally on the over-indulgent side, the musicianship was superior. Each song contained something really fine, but somehow, nothing was sufficiently developed or explored; the group seemed hung-up in an effort to turn each song into a rock'n' roll thing, when they could have been much better as something else; it lacked continuity.

One year later, in 1969, the Soft Machine released a second album, Volume Two, also on Probe. Somewhere in-between the two albums, there was a change in personnel: Kevin Ayers left the group, and bass player Hugh Hopper, who had collaborated on some of the songs on the first album, joined them. (Kevin Ayers now has his own group called The Whole World.) The degree of improvement on the second album was phenomenal; the group trimmed off much of the excess baggage, and got into some really interesting things.

This second record was one of those "concept" albums: the first side consisted of ten pieces, collectively named "Rivmic Melodies", written mostly by Hugh Hopper. Much of the lyric material was straight theater of the absurd, such things as "A Concise British Alphabet, Parts I and II", amounting to a grand total of 22 seconds of music and 52 letters of the alphabet (A to Z, backwards and forwards). Several of the pieces were simply mental musings. such as "Hulloder", which starts off "If I were black..." (I'd want to be a big man in the FBI or the CIA, but of course I'm not... etc.); and "Thank You Pierrot Lunaire", in which they wonder why the audience is there watching, not doing. Personally, I wonder why they chose that title. (Pierrot Lunaire is the name of a cycle of 21 speech-songs written by Arnold Schoenberg in 1912. The pieces were based on the poetry of A. Giraud, who wrote about this weirdo pervert named Pierrot in the moonlight.) Then you have "Have You Ever Been Green?", in which they offer thanks to "Noel, Mitch and Jim," among others.

Robert Wyatt also has a go at absurdity with his Pataphysical Introduction, parts I and II. Pataphysical? Assuming that the spelling is dialectic phonetics, like Rivmic, I still can't find such a word in the dictionary. There is "paraphysis: one of the slender sterile filaments borne among the sporogenous or gametogenous organs in cryptogamic plants." Let's just leave it at "akin to physics" and forget about it. The music which accompanies the title sounds. like what comes through the door at your local cocktail lounge, with even a bit of "These Foolish Things" thrown in… Very funny, really. There is something about this album which reminds me of what The Who Sell Out might sound like, if the Who were the Soft Machine.

Most of the seven songs on this side were written by Mike Ratledge: the melodic lines are fairly analytical, and very difficult and in view of that, Robert Wyatt's vocals are remarkable. This boy can carry a tune. The melodic and harmonic patterns sound rather similar to the 12-tone school of composition. The rhythms, actually polyrhythms, although still somewhat embryonic, seem to come from Medieval sources and their Twentieth Century adaptations. Once again, the lyrics are pretty absurd; for example, "...time wasted, time that could be spent completely nude, bare naked..." from "Pig". However, Ratledge's compositions seem to be more sound-oriented, while Hopper's lean more towards idea-orientation. I could probably write pages about this album —it's that interesting – but skip that and simply suggest that you buy a copy. Although it's two years old, it is still way ahead of most of this year's music, both in concept and execution.

1970 gave birth to yet another album, Third. Hopper, Wyatt and Ratledge are still with us, despite any number of intra-group hassles, but someone new has been added: sax player Elton Dean, who can not be over-rated. On record, but especially live, this man is brilliant; his presence seems to have added a new dimension to the group, a control of feeling and mood which was often lacking in the past. Everything about the group seems to have been streamlined in the past year. The album cover is a perfect example: the first two covers were complicated, on the gimmicky side, illustrating that, in their minds perhaps "woman

is just a soft machine." (Bah!)

The third cover is different, simply black lettering on a sienna background and actually, the effect is more dramatic. Everything is more effective, totally uncluttered. The first album, precocious child that it was, had 13 songs on two side; the second (adolescent prodigy'?) contained 17 songs on two side; the third, a double album. has only four songs, one each by Wyatt and Hopper and two by Ratledge. This is the first really mature work, and each piece is given ample time for growth. Each man seems to have found his direction here, and although the paths are quite divergent, the musicians seem to function equally well in any environment. Hugh Hopper's composition "Facelift" seems to float somewhere in outer cosmic spaces, with passages of seemingly random, distorted sounds juxtaposed with eery melodic sequences. Everything is cyclical, but everything is strangely distorted and ultimately static, moving one step backward for every step forward. About 2/3 through the piece, a flute joins in, played by one Lyn Dobson; I don't know who he is, but the passage is beautiful, really beautiful. This piece was recorded live, and is one of the best live tracks I've heard in a long time, although something at the end of the piece gives the impression that a bit of extra labor was done in the studio — not that anything is wrong with that.

Robert Wyatt's piece, "Moon in June", is one of those songs that I've always wanted to hear. There is something about it, something so deranged yet reasonable, which makes this listener feel really good. I have several #1 favorite vocalists, and Robert Wyatt is among them. In "Moon", he seems to be singing a letter which no one ever wrote and no one could read… It's a weird song. The music is liberally seasoned with bits of melodrama, occasional spoken directives, with a little Ray Charles-type backing, lots of la-la's and dada's, and this almost aimlessly wandering vocal; the first half of the piece lopes along at a lazy 4/4 pace, and then at half-time shifts to a faster, more complicated variation. The last few minutes of the track are dominated by a sort of warped violin and frequency hum, which, when heard through earphones, have a rather numbing effect on the brain… As I said, it's a weird song. One more thing: for his act of composing 19 minutes and 18 seconds of continuous music without a single drum solo, Robert Wyatt definitely deserves this year's Sublimated Ego and Elevated Taste awards. Recently, he has recorded a solo (sic) album, called The End of An Ear which, so I hear, is absolutely fantastic... and, like "Moon in June", contains no drum ego-tripping, just a lot of fine, spacey music.

A couple of months ago, I saw Robert and Elton Dean participating in an improvisational jam at the London School of Economics. Their rather formidable talents were aided and abetted by several other fine jazz-based British musicians, notably Mark Charig on cornet, Nick Evans on trombone, Gary Boyle on guitar, Roy Babbington on bass and the astounding Keith Tippett on piano. Aside from doing some of the best drumming I've heard anywhere, he also crawled around on the floor with a microphone, rubbed the mike along the edges of a cymbal tied to Tippett's chair, and generally came up with some pretty outlandish but amazingly good sounds. Elton Dean's efforts at the LSE were equally incredible; whether alone, or in harmony with Charig and Evans, he managed to conjure up delights which literally gave me the chills.

"Um, yeah, I think that's a fair observation. I don't really believe in the language theory of music . It is a purely non-verbal form; any analogies to it are bound to be on the fallacious side. What we're really trying to do is produce a good auditory experience for ourselves and everybody else."

Soft Machine music seems three-dimensional, as opposed to one- or two-dimenstional.
"Well yes, in the sense that every single person in the group has a very strong role. There are no real subordinate roles. Each person as a force should be equally strong, equally contributary. And to that extent, it is three-dimensional. It isn't just a plain background with one instrument in the foreground. It should be a constantly evolving texture that each person is modifying."

For a contemporary group, especially a British group, the band seems very introverted on the stage, almost oblivious to the audience.

"Yes. Hugh, the bass player, doesn't really like the on-stage thing in a way. He finds it difficult to relate at all to audiences. I do slightly; I think Elton probably does too. We're all kind of vaguely shy people anyway, and especially in this kind of set-up, which we don't do very often - the club. You know, when you are playing in a concert the audience is completely anonymous. But in a club you are kind of forced right up against them, and this is a very strange feeling for us."

Now although the crowds here at the club have been very attentive, in fact I'd say well-

behaved as far as most club audiences go. I still started to think about watching the Mothers and watching Frank Zappa get so incredibly angry because the audience just didn't understand what was going on with the music. Has the band ever run into any of that?

"Oh yeah, we have. When we first started, it was always like that; it was always bad. But we didn't feel too strongly because we weren't very good, and we completely sympathised with the audience anyway, although they probably weren't reacting to the fact that we were bad, but to the fact that they didn't know what was going on. Nowadays, each of us reacts to the situation like any situation where there are different people. It depends on what mood you're in; sometimes I do get annoyed. But generally speaking, in the concert situation one isn't aware of it, because we create so much power on the stage, and because we never stop during the set. We're never really aware of the audience reaction right till the end, by which time it's too late to react anyway."

Greg Lake told me that when Emerson, Lake and Palmer go over to the States, they are going to try to play only in places that cater more to "serious" music, because they want that sort of audience.

"I really don't care, as long as the place has got good acoustics; that's the most important thing. I think you're going to attract the kind of audience that you deserve to attract, ultimately. So I don't think it matters a great deal what kind of place it is as long as it's got good acoustics."

Do you enjoy recording?

"When it's going well, yes I do."

Do you work out a piece on stage before recording, or do you do it the other way around?

"We'd rather work it out live, because we find that we can't really get a piece to where it should be just simply by rehearsing. Something peculiar seems to happen; one or two people get their parts together very quickly, and then if someone else is struggling to get it together, the others get very bored; whereas, a live situation always makes it very interesting for everybody. The music comes together much more quickly. So when it's possible, we try to work a piece out live before we record it. Although on the second LP, none of that was performed live, it was all done straight and rehearsed in the studio. And I think it suffered because of it. And some of the pieces on the third one too, we didn't play them enough live. We only did about five or six gigs; we should have played them a bit more. If we recorded them now, I'm sure they'd sound much better, but I think that's always true."

Do you have any idea at all of where you want the music to go?

"No, I don't think you ever do. I think you are only aware of it when you start doing something new. What usually happens is that there is a dissatisfaction with the writing, and the material you are performing at the time. Sometimes you have definite ideas that you want to change even though its only in a vague, conceptual level. But other times it just stays a period of dissatisfaction, and then suddenly something happens and the whole direction is changed, and you really haven't planned it at all."

I keep reading things that say you are always perilously close to self-destruction as a band...

"Yeah, true," Mike laughed.

But you still sound really tight just the same: what keeps you together?

"Um… I don't know, I don't know. I think that we're forced back on each other all the time, in the end; although any one of us can go off and work in another situation, ultimately one is forced back into this situation. Although there might be personality conflicts sometimes, it works out for the music. It's because we are different people that it somehow works."

Could you give me an idea of how you put together, of how one of your pieces will take shape, starting off with composition?

"That varies enormously, depending on who wrote it and how structured it is. Some of the pieces are written out pretty well completely; every part is written and there are areas of

freedom in it. And obviously, areas of freedom will change every night. After a while, the actual written parts will begin to change. Sometimes the piece is less heavily structured, and therefore open to modifications during the rehearsal by the rest of the group. There is no real fixed rule or procedure."

How involved are you in technology, in electronics in the music?

"Not completely dependent on it, but a large part of whether we play well is whether the technology is working for us. So you have to, in self-defense, become accustomed to... you have to acquire a certain knowledge about the machinery you are using. We are interested in using new technologies as they become available to us. but so far we haven't really done much work with it."

Have you ever used a Moog?

"Ah, no. We used a VCS 3, which is the English equivalent… It's better. We've only done that once at the Radiophone Workshop. I wouldn't mind using it, but I think it would take me about six months' hard work to use it in a really intelligent way, instead of becoming victimised by having only a limited number of patterns… Not really having enough control over it. I think it would take as long to learn the VCS 3 as it takes to learn to play any other instrument completely from scratch. Ideally, I think it shouldn't be played like an organ. People will set up a certain sound and then play it like an organ; but the whole thing about a VCS 3 is that it's a completely new different system of playing. It offers you that, and if you don't use that, then there's no real point in using a VCS 3."

Mike got up. The rest of the band was ready to start rehearsing. One wishes there had been more time - time enough to speak to all of them. This group is notorious for its differences. Ask them a question and you get four different answers… It could have been very interesting. But they like to tour the States and maybe, now that they've moved over to Columbia and have been getting some backing, they'll actually do it. As good as the records are, they really don't tell the whole story. In spite of the group's dubious feelings about playing live, they remain one of the best live groups around. So if they do show up in the U.S. of A., don't miss them. Soft Machine are a quite unforgettable experience.

Michelle Hush

Previous article

Next article

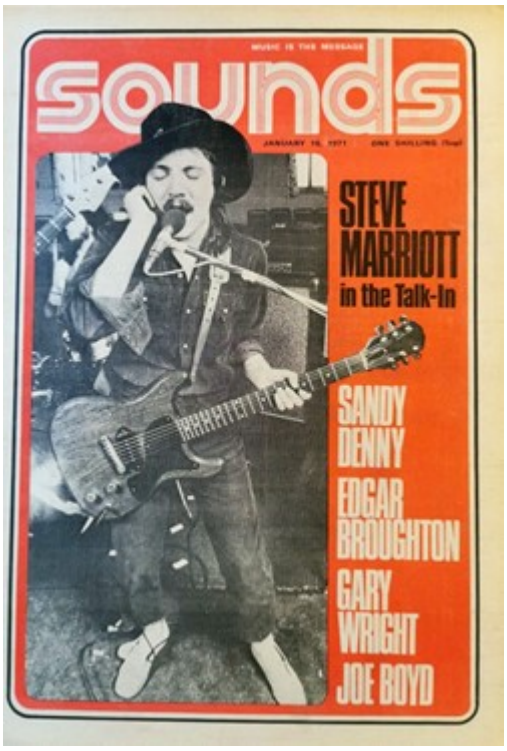
Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

A freaky spear carrier - Sounds - January 16, 1971



A freaky spear carrier

Steve Peacock visits the BBC TV studios and meets Soft's Robert Wyatt in rather unusual surroundings

I SUPPOSE everyone has a mental image of what a TV or film studio is going to be like - cameras lumbering around like baby elephants, thick cables lying all over the floor, lights, and hundreds of people dashing around importantly giving orders and counter-orders — but I didn't expect my exaggerated images of the principal characters in the charade to be so close to the Real thing.

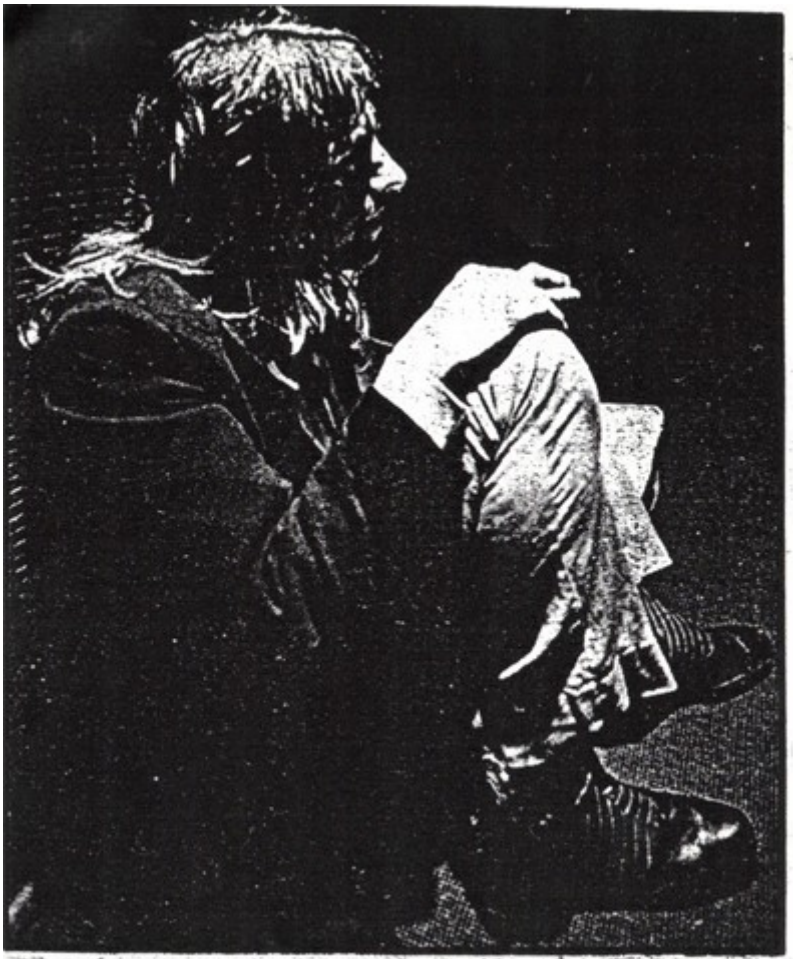
Spending a day at a BBC TV rehearsal can be extremely tiresome, and much of Wednesday last week was, but the tedium was somewhat enlivened by the mould-cast studio characters — not so much the actors, but the people who make up the studio cast.

The director was just as I'd imagined him to be: playing his part to perfection he stormed around the set going into paroxisms of "super, well-done, just right" "when something was good, and screaming at the extras, the floor manager, his assistant, or the lighting man when somebody missed a cue. Even, his costume was perfect — hippie shirt, baggy trousers tucked into suede boots, and a little beard.

The floor manager scurried around with his book and his ear plug, looking more than slightly harassed, calling out "Come on everybody, quiet now, sshhhh, come on, right, applause now, that's it, lovely" and things like that at every available moment, and echoing the director's every whim:

"Where's Julian?"
"Come on everybody, where's Julian?"
(A voice) "He's gone to put his beard on."
"He's gone to... who said Julian could go and put his beard on?"
"Oh yes, it's all right. I said Julian could go and put his beard on."

Other people were leaping about playing their parts to perfection as well, and if they televised the scenes in the studio rather than the play - the first episode of a new "Take Three Girls" series — they were making, I'm sure it would be immensely popular.



● ***ROBERT WYATT: "The whole thing depends on the audience identifying with the girl"***

In the midst of it all, Robert Wyatt who plays a freaky avant garde drummer, was looking bemused and rather lost. Very roughly, the story of the play concerns a new one of the 'Three Girls" who is a journalist, goes to interview an avant garde composer (played by Robert's brother, Julian Glover), pans him in, an article, and he loses his arts council grant.

He gets his revenge and makes a fool of her in public by distorting her image as she distorted his, and in the end we are all supposed to think "poor girl, nasty freaky composer." In fact, it seems rather a silly play, another uncomprehending piece of TV trivia.

Robert, who describes his part as "one of the spear carriers in the avant garde army" as opposed to the trendy straight army, is supposed to sit around playing spontaneous music on cue.

"The whole thing depends on the audience identifying with the girl who starts off ambitious therefore bitchy, and ends up vulnerable, therefore romantic — or that's how they see it,", he said during a break in rehearsals.

"By the end, you realise that the guy who wrote the play just doesn't care about the composer, all he's interested in is the three dumb chicks. I suppose it is stupid to get so serious about it but underneath all the superficial layers I can't help feeling that there is something serious at stake."

There is indeed something serious at stake, and the confrontation portrayed superficially in the play happens all the time between artists and the public, but I suppose it would be asking a bit too much of a series like "Take Three Girls" to go veru deeply into it.

Previous article

Next article

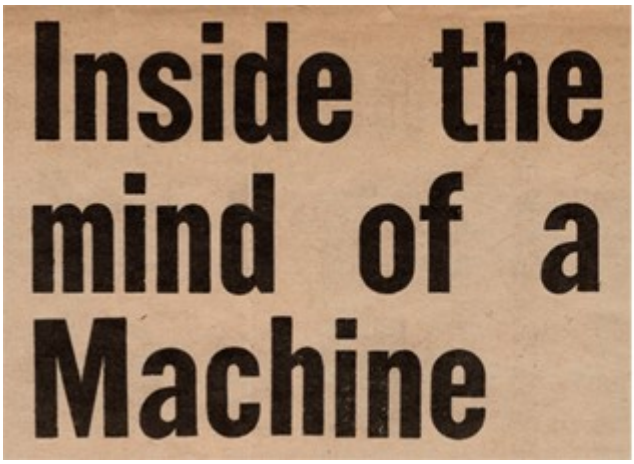
Back to the list

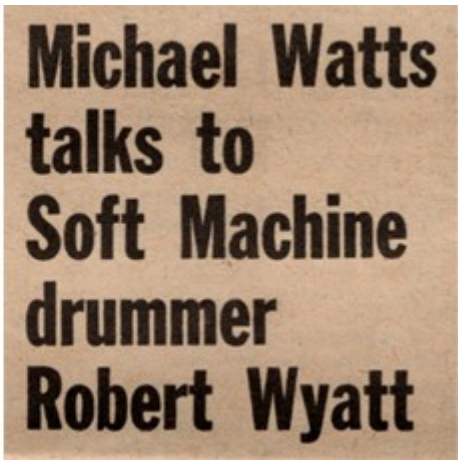
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Inside the mind of a Machine - Melody Maker - January 2, 1971





1970 was a very good year for Robert Wyatt. It was the year in which he established himself as a major drummer in contemporary British music; the year in which he experimented outside the confines, unrestrictive though they are, of The Soft Machine, dallying briefly with Kevin Ayers, then concentrating more strongly on his role inside the Keith Tippett Centipede project, with whom he has played so impressively on their three initial outings.


Melody Maker

RADIO 1 TO DIE?

1971 pop squeeze

GILBERT PLAYS SUCCESS COOL

And then, as the year has drawn to an end, he has further established his own identity by becoming a prime mover in Symbiosis, that excitingly impromptu, free-blowing band, and finally topping off the proceedings by producing his own album — you believe he produced it, too?

He has called it "The End Of An Ear," which is quite a funny pun, I suppose. But then, Robert it quite a funny person with his huge fur French hat crammed down over his untidy lank hair.

Whenever I think of Robert I think of that hat, and there are other mental images, too. Of Robert slouching around in that curious way of his, with his creased trousers that are

always too short flapping around his ankles, dressed in the maroon coat that always look a size too big; of Robert lathered with sweat as he sits stripped to the waist, flailing away like a man possessed under the hot lights of the Albert Hall during The Softs' televised concert; and then there is Robert sitting with bitter tears in his eyes in a dressing room in Rotterdam because he hates the performance he has just given.

Because, you see, he's nothing if not an emotional person. He is also nothing if not a nice person, and niceness is not an excessively common quality among musicians and entertainers. Much of the secret of his success is that people respond so readily to his spontaneity and generosity of spirit. Everybody wants to work with him, and when they have made the gig they come back for more. There was nobody happier and more elated amongst those 50 people in Centipede than Wyatt, and no one more brought down when they band received reviews that were generally cautious and, in one instance, bitterly hostile.

" I'm upset, not for my own sake," he explained later, " but for Keith and Julie."
" And he meant it.
Anyway, like I say, he has reason to feel disappointed about his own career at this point. The past 12 months have proved very fruitful for him. Come to think of it, he could have called that album "The End Of A Year," couldn't he?

HOW do you feel about interviews, Robert?
I regret most I've done when I see what's happened, but then I regret most performances on records, too. I think one of the big difficulties is that written words and spoken words aren't the same thing. You actually think different things in print — I do. Things I say, words I use in speech, if I was writing down the same thought, I actually wouldn't use the same word. There's nothing anybody can do about that, really. It's misleading. I find I say things just to pad some things out, or to be clever for a minute while I'm trying to think what I really think. I can see the value of them, but I still find it makes demands... it upsets me sometimes, put it like that. But that's true of anything.



Inside the mind of a Machine

1970 was a very good year for Robert Wyatt. It was the year which he established himself as a major drummer in contemporary British music; the year in which he experimented outside the confines, unrestrictive though they are, of The Soft Machine dallying briefly with Kevin Ayers, then concentrating more strongly on his role inside the Keith Tippett Centipede project, with which he has played so impressively on their three initial outings.

And then, as the year has drawn to an end, he has further established his own identity by becoming a prime mover in Symbiosis, that excitingly impromptu, free-blowing band, and finally topping off the proceedings by producing his own album — you believe he produced it, too?

He has called it " The End Of An Ear," which is quite a funny pun, I suppose. But then, Robert it quite a funny person with his huge fur French hat crammed down over his untidy lank hair.

Wherever I think of Robert I think of that hat, and there are other mental images, too. Of Robert slouching around in that curious way of his, with his creased trousers that are always too short flapping around his ankles, dressed in the maroon coat that always look a size too big; of Robert lathered with sweat as he sits stripped to the waist, flailing away like a man possessed under the hot lights of the Albert Hall during The Softs' televised concert; and then there is Robert sitting with bitter tears in his eyes in a dressing room in Rotterdam because he hates the performance he has just given.

Because, you see, he's nothing if not an emotional person. He is also nothing if not a nice person, and niceness is not an excessively common quality among musicians and entertainers. Much of the secret of his success is that people respond so readily to his spontaneity and generosity of spirit. Everybody wants to work with him, and when they have made the gig they come back for more. There was nobody happier and more elated amongst those 50 people in Centipede than Wyatt, and no one more brought down when they band received reviews that were generally cautious and, in one instance, bitterly hostile.

Michael Watts talks to Soft Machine drummer Robert Wyatt

Annie.
" I'm upset, not for my own sake," he explained later, " but for Keith and Julie."
" And he meant it.

Anyway, like I say, he has reason to feel disappointed about his own career at this point. The past 12 months have proved very fruitful for him. Come to think of it, he could have called that album "The End Of A Year," couldn't he?

HOW do you feel about interviews, Robert?

I regret most I've done when I see what's happened, but then I regret most performances on records, too. I think one of the big difficulties is that written words and spoken words aren't the same thing. You actually think different things in print — I do. Things I say, words I use in speech, if I was writing down the same thought, I actually wouldn't use the same word. There's nothing anybody can do about that, really. It's misleading. I find I say things just to pad some things out, or to be clever for a minute while I'm trying to think what I really think. I can see the value of them, but I still find it makes demands... it upsets me sometimes, put it like that. But that's true of anything.

BUT Hugh (Hopper) and Mike (Ratledge) don't like interviews, do they?

Well, Hugh is pathologically shy. Very. The fact that he goes on stage is part of it. You don't get up on your own, you get up with music and amplifiers, and volume. He's very private and being introverted but it does surprise me. What surprises me is that people who are extroverts are shy. What amazes me is why brilliant musicians is so, so shy, because if the extrovert is probably so that they open their tin their mouths rushing to coffee bars meeting pe and I'm surprised that had the time to learn to anything at the same time

Whereas I find that it's more are you social people very often the ones who l to play instruments grop. The one way you can ha be a performer, beca it's really a false identity on stage. You can ri and unshackle and perm

The group has two primarily instrumental, instance, because of characters, in a way. We very emotional group in direction. We just suit both. From whatever seems to excite us at moment to whatever area seeing to excite us, the simple things that gaps, the lack of gaps because we are orchestra I think, to have a stage where the audience expected to see band I just find that so embarrassing — making number, bang, then into the next one, all business. I can't bear it.

YOU don't always sp happy with group. . . What do you t it's gonna wrong for you sonally?

(Long pause). All the th you can talk about is m to agree on. We all g similar ideas on the p bitions of freedom and different types of freed and structure, and discip and what use they are, when they're useful and w they are not, and how to control and still exp yourself. But music isn't concrete ideas, concepts you had them; the real m is the way you play, actual note that you put a the note before.

And quite simply, at times we aren't playing same piece of music — drumming isn't the drums for the bass line that the solo isn't because Hugh and I are somewhere else. The idea, after all, is not to create four pieces of music but one piece of music, and I'm upset on nights when we create four pieces of music.

SO what have you gained musically from the Symbiosis?

Since the summer, since I've started playing with Kevin, I've realised that in other contexts there are things in me which come out and never seem to come out, when I play with Soft Machine, it's not a question of quality at all, it's just a question of different atmospheres demand different skills, and I hadn't realised just how much you do adapt and just play what seems necessary. I would be very loath to put a word to it and think of a concept which fits what I mean.

All I know is that when I get on a kit, and there's Roy Babington on on left and, whatever it might be, Nucleus Whitehead or someone, and Gary (Windo) and Nick (Evans), the whole different thing happens. I just lift up my sticks and immediately something else happens and different atmosphere arise that would never arise with Soft Machine. I just play completely different things.

Symbiosis is different people. All music is a co-

I don't primarily think of myself as a drummer. I think of myself as a catalyst for the real musicians

ship. European music are of schooled in a way into an almost military hierarchy of composer, conductor and orchestra.

What happens is, there's a kind of assumption that the type of person who conceives the music is a different kind of person from a performer — that's what European music means, although many great European composers have been virtuoso performers of their own work, and many great composers are great conductors. But generally speaking, this is a theory that's accepted, and the fact is that in my opinion the most vital influences on music has been the black music of the past 50 years.

The most interesting thing I seems to me, that has been developed by black music is sense — combine both skills in one person. And this seems to me the most interesting, challenging thing that jazz music has come up with that European music doesn't really like to get to grips with. And what Symbiosis is, is a complete inhalation; in other words, we're all listeners without any of the composers, or when we do have composers — like Keith was with us the other night — he's not in a composing or controlling role at all.

And it's an incredible risk, Symbiosis every night, because we just turn up and play. The responsibility is enormous; you've got to be on from then and there because you're going to be doing all the composing and all the performing at the same time, and so is everybody else.

WOULD you agree that this seems, to be, a very interesting period for young jazz musicians and the thinking rock musicians? They really seem to be coming together.

Well, Centipede is directly responsible for Symbiosis and so on. Yeah, I think so. For me, I find it staggering, and a bit scary, because it seems to me there's so much to do and so little to hide behind.

There's a lot of knowledge and wisdom that's been spread around in the last four or five years. There's a lot of information you are exposed to now with I think there's bound to be a lot of heavy stuff of pornographic interest — interesting but disposable — but I think it's incredibly exciting. Short answer to your question — yes.

WHAT do you think jazz people can learn from those musicians with rock influences?

That's interesting. Before I talk about it I think that if you think of it as a blanket thing you're in trouble; a hard criterion out of general-ised theories sound, like one

From the technical point of view I'm just nowhere really. I've always felt a bit uncomfortable since we started

difference in worlds
two so-called rock
working
bring
different things to
than a rock
classical musician.

If there are any
things, I think they
obvious ones, jazz
are now realising that
nothing
rationally
bass player and
There's nothing
getting your bass pla
flannel heart, even
means they have
crude instruments
take guitar and electri
There's nothing
immoral or immature
The fact that rock
assume that you've
hear the bass line —
very often they overd
sently to the
element of musical
in rock. There's an el
childishness in jazz.
an assumption
musicians are
teaching and rock
all the learning.

If the soloist, for
is doing a developme
a harmonic sequence
can't hear the
sequence, so you don
what the solo
ferring to, then you
point of reference;
the lovely sounds
you'll pardon the ex
you like the sound
being, you lose, actu

BUT Hugh (Hopper and Mike (Ratledge) don't like interviews, do they?
Well, Hugh is pathologically shy. Very. The fact that he goes on stage is part of it. You don't get up on your own, you get up with equipment and amplifiers and volume. It's very private on stage; it's not an exhibisionistic thing to do at all.

People are often surprised at musicians and performers being introverts but it doesn't surprise me. What surprises me is that people who are extroverts are musicians. What amazes me is when a brilliant musician is an extrovert, because if they're extrovert it probably means that they spent their time in their teens rushing round coffee bars meeting people, and I'm surprised that they had the time to learn to playt anything at the same time.

Whereas I find that introverts are less social people are very often the ones who learn to play instruments properly. The one way you can hide is to be a performer, because it's really a false identity to be on stage. You can really feel untouchable and private.

The group has become primarily instrumental, for instance, because of our characters, in a way. We're a very unplanned group in our direction. We just sort of drift from whatever area seems to excite us at the moment to whatever other area seems to excite us. Even the simple things, like the gaps, the lack of gaps, is because we are embarrassed, I think, to have a silence on stage where the audience is expected to react back to us. I just find that totally embarrassing — ending a number, bang, then straight into the next one, all that business. I can't bear it.

YOU don't always appear happy with the group... What do you think it's doing wrong for you personally?
(Long pause). All the things you can talk about in music we agree on. We all share similar ideas on the possibilities of freedom and the different types of freedom, and structure, and discipline, and what use they are, and when they're useful and when they are not, and how to operate, and still express yourself. But music isn't, like, conscious ideas, concepts if you had them; the real music is the way you play, the actual note that you put after the note before.

And quite simply, sometimes we aren't playing the same piece of music — the drumming isn't the drumming for the bass line that Hugh's using, or there's another bass line that isn't being played, or the rhythm section thing that should be with Mike's organ solo isn't because Hugh and I are somewhere else. The idea, after all, is not to create four pieces of music but one piece of music, and I'm upset on nights when we create four pieces of music.

SO what have you gained musically from the Symbiosis?
Since the summer, since I've started playing with Kevin, I've realised that in other contexts there are things in me which come out and never seem to come out, when I play with Soft Machine. It's not a question of quality at all, it's just a question of different situations demand different skills, and I hadn't realised just how much you do adapt and just play what seems necessary. I would be very loath to put a word to it and think of a concept which fits what I mean.

All I know is that when I get on a kit, and there's Roy Babbington on me left and, whoever it might be, Neville Whitehead or someone, and Gary (Windo) and Nick (Evans), that a whole different thing happens. I just lift up me sticks and immediately something else happens and different situations arise that would never arise with Soft Machine. I just play completely different things.

" I don't primarily think of myself as a drummer. I think of myself as a catalyst for the real musicians "

Symbiosis is different people. All music is a cooperative thing, you see. Beyond all people's

individual talent, which the music has. How to pin down the best relationship…

European music sort of solidified in a way into an almost military hierarchy of composer, conductor and orchestra.

What happens is, there's a kind of assumption that the type of person who conceives the music is a different kind of person from a performer — that's what European music assumes, although many great European composers have been virtuoso performers of their own work, and many great composers are great conductors. But generally speaking, this is a hieracy that's accepted, and the fact is that in my opinion the most vital influence on music has been the black music of the past 50 years.

The most interesting thing it seems to me, that has been suggested by black music, is that, as in, say, painting, the person who conceives of it and the person who plays it can be one and the same — combine both skills in one person. And this seems to me the most interesting, challenging thing that jazz music has come up with that European music doesn't really like to get to grips with. And what Symbiosis is, is a complete imbalance; in other words, we're all blowers without any of the composers, or when we do have composers — like Keith was with us the other night — he's not in a composing or controlling role at all.

And so it's an incredible risk, Symbiosis every night, because we just turn up and play. The responsibility is enormous; you've got to be on form then and there because you're going to be doing all the composing and all the performing at the same time, and so is everybody else.

WOULD you agree that this seems to be a very interesting period for young jazz musicians and the thinking rock musicians?
They really seem to be coming together. Well, Centipede is directly responsible for Symbiosis and so on. Yeah, I think so. For me, I find it staggering, and a hit scary, because it seems to me there's so much to do and so little to hide behind.

There's a lot of knowledge and wisdom that's been spread around in the last four or five years. There's no excuse for certain types of musicians not knowing about other types. The standards are so high now! And the aera of information you are expected to cope with! I think there's bound to be a lot of messy stuff of journalistic interest — interesting but disposable — but I think it's incredibly exciting. Short answer to your question — yes.

From the technical point of view I'm just nowhere really. I've always felt a bit uncomfortable since we started

WHAT do you think jazz people can learn from those musicians with rock references?
That's interesting. Before I talk about it I think that if you think of it as a blanket thing you're in trouble; a band created out of generalised theories sounds like one to me, always. And a band made out of people who've met and work together well sounds like that as well. There can be as much difference in worlds between two so-called rock musicians working together; they can bring more completely different things to each other than a rock musician and a classical musician.

If there are any general things, I think they’re the obvious ones. Jazz musicians are now realising that there’s nothing mature about consistently droning out your bass player and pianist. There's



Page 28—MELODY MAKER, January 2, 1971

WYATT

FROM P17

ideas. It's an important thing in rock, the amplifiers and that, and instead of being rude about them, I think jazz musicians are realising more and more that they've got a very important function and that they're solving problems that can't be solved in any other way in the immediate future.

And I think rock musicians can learn from jazz musicians. The most important thing they learn is that you can get a lot more out of music and put a lot more into it if you learn to play properly. Quite simply, jazz musicians are showing rock musicians that there's an awful lot of things you can do on a guitar and drum kits that aren't unnecessary or just technical fiddle bits — they just expand your language.

In practice, most jazz musicians tend to me to be very involved in what they play — actually, the relationship between them and their instrument; and they've developed that to a very high extent —a man and his bass, a man and his alto a man and his piano. And what rock has spent a lot more time doing than most of jazz is studying the actual effect and balance of what all these instruments sound like from the outside on a stage.

WHAT aspects of your playing, do you think, have improved since working with the jazz musicians in Centipede?

Funnily enough, this is where categories break down, because it's almost like for the first time I've had to be a rock drummer. It's the first time my primary function has been to lay it down so that, as much as my role permitted, everybody knew where things were, what was going on, what the dynamics and feel were. A functional role to a degree I've never had before. In fact, until this year I've never worked with other people's bands before.

I've been spoilt very much. I've developed everything I've done either in playing in groups without leaders or groups where everybody had an equal say. Keith certainly didn't tell me what to do, but it seemed after the first run-throughs the right approach to take in relation to what Brian (Spring) and Tony (Fennell) were doing. And funnily enough, it's taught me about rock drumming — about that kind of functional drumming as opposed to counter-point drumming. Christ, I haven't played in 4/4 for about two years!

WHAT do you think your strengths are as a drummer?

Well, I suppose it's a bit late to say this, but I don't primarily think of myself as a drummer. I think of myself as a catalyst for the real musicians. How I see myself being most useful is getting people at it slightly more than if I wasn't there, or even getting them together and at it. If I was really into drums as an end I'd be sitting here practising. But I haven't got a practice pad! So long as I can play well enough to pin down what's going on and to emphasise the pace that's necessary.

From the technical point of view I'm just nowhere, really. I've always felt a bit uncomfortable since we started. Basically, I came up to London to sing songs with Kevin (Ayers). Five, six years ago. I'd done a lot of things before then that were instrumental, but by instrumental I don't mean jazz or rock. In fact, the funny way these discussions come to jazz and

want me to loaf about in the sun and just have a nice time and groove, which is virtually the state he's got to now, because he has the traditional attitude that he's done his homework, built up something, and now he's out in the sun finishing it off, so to speak.

I hadn't earned it yet, somehow, and though there was great love abounding it wasn't one which had to be constantly backed up by me being there all the time or him coming here, just that he felt I had to go out and do it, and then when I'd got something that I'd done, maybe go back and see him, again. And I haven't been back yet because I don't feel I've done anything yet that would stand up to his kind of standards.

SO how did the tie-up with Graves originate?

There's a bunch of friends there in the early thirties who'd gone out there—poets and writers — and their children, their grandchildren, got invited out there by the people who stayed on there — you know, the children of the people who went back to England during the war. And I'm one of them. He's no relation, though my father's first wife was his secretary.

There's a kind of family of thinkers that my parents belonged to, and to a certain extent Robert Graves could be called the head of that family. He's a kind of distant tribal chief, though it's several generations removed. He had various fights with me dad, who died some years ago. My father at that time, he was a sort of brilliant young Communist layabout, really, (laughs). He's done various things. He'd got a degree in law at Liverpool, and then he did modern languages at Oxford, and then he got on to do psychology at Cambridge. A very bright bloke.

He lived just long enough to realise that I wasn't going into university, which really disappointed him. He died in a state of anger at me, I'm afraid. But he was also a pianist, and that's definitely where I got my ideas from. The house was full of music.

And Graves, he's incredible. There's a colony, a set around him there. Mind you, I'm talking about when I was there, which was before The Soft Machine. I've got lots of friends who have gone back there. Kevin spent some time there. He got into Majorca as a place to live much more than I did.

SO when you came up to London you were going to sing with Kevin?

Yes, I think that was the idea; I didn't really know. I 'd been through a period in my head very much like the stuff I'm doing now, although not technically, probably. The music I was listening to — had been listening to — was

nothing childish getting your bass player and pianist heard, even if it means they have to play crude instruments such as bass guitar and electric piano. There's nothing essentially immoral or immature about it. The fact that rock musicians assume that you've got to hear the bass line — although very often they overdo it — seems to me an actual element of musical maturity in rock. There's an element of childishness in jazz. There's an assumption that jazz musicians can do all the teaching and rock musicians all the learning.

If the soloist, for instance, is doing a development upon a harmonic sequence and you can't hear the harmonic sequence, so you don't know what the solo lines are referring to, then you lose the point of reference; you lose the lovely cosmic hum, if you'll pardon the expression; you lose the sense of well-being, you lose, actually, the music, and you just leave the ideas. It's an important thing in rock, the amplifiers and that, and instead of being rude about them. I think jazz musicians are realising more and more that they've got a very important function and that they're solving problems that can't be solved in any other way in the immediate future.

And I think rock musicians can learn from jazz musicians. The most important thing they learn is that you can get a lot more out of music and put a lot more into it if you learn to play properly. Quite simply, jazz musicians are showing rock musicians that there's an awful lot of things you can do on a guitar and drum kits that aren't unnecessary or just technical fiddle bits — they just expand your language.

In practice, most jazz musicians tend to me to be very involved in what they play — actually, the relationship between them and their instrument; and they've developed that to a very high extent —a man and his bass, a man and his alto a man and his piano. And what rock has spent a lot more time doing than most of jazz is studying the actual effect and balance of what all these instruments sound like from the outside on a stage.

WHAT aspects of your playing, do you think, have improved since working with the jazz musicians in Centipede?

Funnily enough, this is where categories break down, because it's almost like for the first time I've had to be a rock drummer. It's the first time my primary function has been to lay it down so that, as much as my role permitted, everybody

knew where things were, what was going on, what the dynamics and feel were. A functional role to a degree I've never had before. In fact, until this year I've never worked with other people's bands before.

I've been spoilt very much. I've developed everything I've done either in playing in groups without leaders or groups where everybody had an equal say. Keith certainly didn't tell me what to do, but it seemed after the first run-throughs the right approach to take in relation to what Brian (Spring) and Tony (Fennell) were doing. And funnily enough, it's taught me about rock drumming — about that kind of functional drumming as opposed to counter-point drumming. Christ, I haven't played in 4/4 for about two years!

WHAT do you think your strengths are as a drummer?
Well, I suppose it's a bit late to say this, but I don't primarily think of myself as a drummer. I think of myself as a catalyst for the real musicians. How I see myself being most useful is getting people at it slightly more than if I wasn't there, or even getting them together and at it. If I was really into drums as an end I'd be sitting here practising. But I haven't got a practice pad! So long as I can play well enough to pin down what's going on and to emphasise the pace that's necessary.

From the technical point of view I'm just nowhere, really. I've always felt a bit uncomfortable since we started. Basically, I came up to London to sing songs with Kevin (Ayers). Five, six years ago. I'd done a lot of things before then that were instrumental, but by instrumental I don't mean jazz or rock. In fact, the funny way these discussions come to jazz and rock is that I don't see them as the two great sources from which musicians are drawing.

A lot of my richest sources of inspiration come from not one musical idiom or the other but from paintings, and theatre and people's characteristics that you haven't seen come through in music.

BUT everybody is affected to a greater or lesser extent by every experience they encounter. Didn't you once tell me you'd learnt a lot by being told by Robert Graves, the poet, to leave home at 16 and make your own way in the world?
Well, I lived with him in Majorca for a while, and he became my Mediterranean father in a way. He's happy to have me there, and I hadn't left school when I first went there, but he didn't want me to loaf about in the sun and just have a nice time and groove, which is virtually the state he's got to now, because he has the traditional attitude that he's done his homework, built up something, and now he's out in the sun finishing it off, so to speak.

I hadn't earned it yet, somehow, and though there was great love abounding it wasn't one which had to be constantly backed up by me being there all the time or him coming here, just that he felt I had to go out and do it, and then when I'd got something that I'd done, maybe go back and see him, again. And I haven't been back yet because I don't feel I've done anything yet that would stand up to his kind of standards.

SO how did the tie-up with Graves originate?
There's a bunch of friends there in the early thirties who'd gone out there —poets and writers — and their children, their grandchildren, got invited out there by the people who stayed on there — you know, the children of the people who went back to England during the war. And I'm one of them. He's no relation, though my father's first wife was his secretary.

There's a kind of family of thinkers that my parents belonged to, and to a certain extent Robert Graves could be called the head of that family. He's a kind of distant tribal chief, though it's several generations removed. He had various fights with me dad, who died some years ago. My father at that time, he was a sort of brilliant young Communist layabout, really, (laughs). He's done various things. He'd got a degree in law at Liverpool, and then he did modern languages at Oxford, and then he got on to do psychology at Cambridge. A very bright bloke.

He lived just long enough to realise that I wasn't going into university, which really disappointed him. He died in a state of anger at me, I'm afraid. But he was also a pianist, and that's definitely where I got my ideas from. The house was full of music.

And Graves, he's incredible. There's a colony, a set around him there. Mind you, I'm talking about when I was there, which was before The Soft Machine. I've got lots of friends who

have gone back there. Kevin spent some time there. He got into Majorca as a place to live much more than I did.

So when you came up to London you were going to sing with Kevin?
Yes, I think that was the idea; I didn't really know. I'd been through a period in my head very much like the stuff I'm doing now, although not technically, probably. The music I was listening to — had been listening to — was Sonny Murray, Milford Graves, and Cecil Taylor, essentially. And Eric Dolphy, and Elvin Jones, of course. And I arrived at the point where I decided the simplicity of Kevin's songs, and the rightness and charm of them, had a fantastic appeal to me after a couple of years of Sonny Murraying and freak-out. And I'm now, I think, at a similar stage. I'm likely now to get into the stage that Chris Spedding has been through on his album. I haven't heard it, but what he's said about it I recognise, and I think a lot of us do.

In fact, it's becoming a long syndrome in music — people going from complexity to simplicity. But I still feel very lost, actually. Sometimes I'm back where I started six years ago. I've to go through the cycle all over again now.

Michael Watts

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

A fantasy come true, by Robert Wyatt - Sounds - November 28, 1970



> Zoom

A FANTASY COME TRUE, BY ROBERT WYATT

BY STEVE PEACOCK

LIKE many other bands that I find musically interesting and emotionally exciting, Soft Machine depend a lot on the contrasts between the members of the group to bring their music to life.
It is not a clash of personalities, but a constant interchange of ideas and approaches that keeps what they do fresh, both in their performances and when working out arrangements. These differences show up a bit on their last album "Third" (CBS 66246), but what shows up even more clearly is the way that four very different people come together to enrich each other's playing, and the music as a whole.
Obviously this works with all groups to some extent, but often there is either one person who dominates, or the musicians come together in the first place because they work with similar ideas.

With bands like The Whole World, Pink Floyd, and the Softs the approach is different and it produces music that is more likely to evolve in new directions.
"Obviously, the changes in the music depend a lot on the people in the group," said Robert Wyatt, drummer and more extrovert quarter of the Softs. "For instance, when Kevin (Ayers) loft and Hugh (Hopper) joined, it made a great difference."
Robert is probably the most basic, least technicallyminded of the four. Does he find it restrictive playing within the comparatively tight framework of Mike Ratledlege's compositions, which are pretty much worked out and arranged?
"I find it difficult" he said "but the discipline is probably very good for me, and it brings out things that nobody could have thought of."

Of course, there is plenty of room for improvisation and individual interpretation within Mike's compositions, and even more in Hugh's, Robert's and Elton Dean's. And the group go further along this path by adding other musicians to the lineup on occasion.
" When I talked to Robert, they were working on the last track of their new album at Olympic Studios, and working with them on the session were Alan Skidmore, Nick Evans, and Roy Babbington.
The effect of that horn section and of the two bass players on the track, one of Mike's called 'Teeth", was incredible - it had so much life about it.

One side of the new album is devoted to Hugh's "Virtually", and other tracks are "Kings



and Queens" by Hugh and one by Elton - "Five minutes of total insanity" according to Robert.
Using two bass players has worked well, and there are plans for Mike Giles, formerly drummer with King Crimson, to do some things with Robert and the Softs - another combination that should produce some very interesting music.

Though the Soft Machine is Robert's main interest, he likes to branch out in other directions. Mike and Hugh do most of the writing for the group and there really isn't enough time to cope with aIl their ideas.
Robert has just completed his own "solo" album, he has been involved with Keith Tippett's Centipede project, and he hopes to start doing some gigs with a sextet soon. Earlier this year he left the Soft Machine to work with Kevin Ayers band, but he soon went back.

"I suddenly realised that I was in my mid-twenties and I had got a job. Everything was very tidy, much too predictable. I just felt like a bit of musical promiscuity."
But it didn't work out quite as he had hoped: "I realised that the things that I could achieve musically with Kevin would probably take far longer than with the Soft Machine. What really happened was that from a distance, I was able to re-appraise the Softs."
His album, out on Friday, is the product of about three weeks recording at Sound Techniques in Chelsea.

"We just went in blank and played and doodled around to see what came out. It's nearly an hour long, and probably the only real tune on it is a Gil Evans thing called 'Las Vegas Tango'."
Robert plays piano and electric piano and sings - "not songs, more as an alternative to playing instruments" - and other people on the album are Elton Dean, Mark Charig (cornet), Neville Whitehead (bass), and Dave Sinclair from Caravan (organ).
"It's not supposed to be some kind of great alternative to the Soft Machine," said Robert. "I just thought it would be nice to have an album like that by somebody."
The sextet he hopes to do some gigs with will be Nick Evans, Mongezi Feza, Gary Windo, Roy Babbington, and Steve someone - Robert couldn't remember his surname.
But the thing that has really excited him recently is the Centipede project, Keith Tippett's monster amalgamation of 48 musicians
"It was like a gathering of the tribes, such a happy occasion," he said. "I really enjoyed it so much - all those people just playing together and enjoying it.

The only thing that brought him down was the critics' reaction to the gig.
"I don't want to complain too much, because if any group has been helped by critics, we have," he said, "but I think with the Centipede thing those guys missed such a lot. It was such a happy occasion, and when someone goes away and says, 'oh yes, quite interesting in parts,' he just misses the point.
"We're musicians, we realise what is wrong with it and that it was ragged and everything. Critics just don't seem to realise that musicians are people as well, and they can be hurt like anyone else.
"I don't hate critics, because that is silly, but l'd like to point out that they've probably depressed and discouraged Keith again. I hope they are proud of their achievement."

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Softs blow hot and cold in Holland - Melody Maker - October 31, 1970



The Softs blow hot and cold in Holland

Michael Watts on a 3-day Dutch trip with Soft Machine



WHOEVER it was that picked on the title of a Burroughs' novel as the name of The Soft Machine made a curiously appropriate choice. That particular author's conception of the cut-out technique as a means of obtaining interestingly incongruous juxtapositions in literature could well be applied to the Softs in the sense that although they are identified with and receive the same sort of popular acclaim as the rock bands of this period, their lifestyle emphatically does not belong to that context.

They eschew all that bit about casual chick-pulling, booze, drugs, and general looning, for instance -those associations that people invariably make with bands who play to the audiences that they do - and they totally lack the public persona to go with the admiration and adulation that they are accorded everywhere.

One must therefore draw the happy conclusion that their obvious success is based on purely musical values rather than because one or all of them has a spurious superstar tag, or indulges in visual exhibitionism.

They are unlike, say, The Nice, whose musical shortcomings lack of rhythmic invention, for example – were obscured for many people by Emerson's onstage dynamics, or Cream, whose undoubted talent was buttressed by the images of its three members.

With the exception of Robert Wyatt, the drummer, they are very much introverted people, with a self-containment that is difficult to pierce.

Musically, however, there is nothing self-effacing about Soft Machine. Hugh Hopper, on bass, works within a small framework of chords, but using a heavy fuzz tone he slides out scalding sheets of sound, like thick steam, that gives the music its distinctive under-pinning.

Wyatt, who is the only one of the four who cannot read, is probably in the top half-dozen drummers in Britain, with an attack and an energy that derives not so much from being conventionally heavy in the use of the bass drum, but more from his extremely powerful wrist action. Anyone who has picked up his sticks, which are very wide and solid, will appreciate just what strength there is in those wrists. But on top of that he has an instinctive subtlety and understanding of complex time signatures that set him apart from most of his fellow drummers.

On electric piano and organ, Mike Ratledge, who at 26 is the oldest member has a tendency to use Brubeckish piano phrases at times, but he establishes most of the light and shade in the music, ranging from the tumbling, rolling piano sound to the stabbing nasal alto tones of the organ, with which he comes in behind Elton Dean, and saxello.

Dean is for me the most interesting soloist. He combines a cool lyricism, full of sweet and mellow tones, with a strutting jaunty air that soars into high-pitched atonality in key passages - a series of tight squeals and shrieks that punctuate the heavy organ sound in sharp bursts and lift the music to its peaks.

Half-hearted

I make these observations after spending three days with them during their short trip to Holland, where they played in Eindhoven, the Doelein in Rotterdam, and the Gebouw concert hall in Amsterdam, where the tour ended on Sunday evening.

The Eindhoven concert began at about midnight on the Friday. Eindhoven itself somehow fits one's conception of a flat, featureless Dutch town. There are 200,000 people living there and most of them seem to work making bits of electronic equipment for Philips, which has its headquarters there.

Driving through the street I got the impression that most of them were still doing overtime because nary a soul was abroad, apart from those who were going to the concert, and they did not look too many, either.



MM men hit the road with two very different bands...

The Softs blow hot and cold in Holland

Michael Watts on a 3—day Dutch trip with Soft Machine

Half-hearted

Stomping

SOFT MACHINE: success based on musical value

picture by BARR

They did not sound too many as well, from the half-hearted applause that the band got, and this did nothing to help lift their performance, which struggled feebly to get off the ground.

A large part of the trouble was that they playing on a huge stage, grouped together in the centre on an island of amplifiers and drum kit. Wyatt, particularly, had trouble in getting his sound across, and the resonance of the snare and the rest of his equipment was lost in the pool of space. The only one who seemed to get it on at all was Hopper, standing gangling and awkward at the edge of the amps, shifting untidily from one foot to the other.

With his horn-rimmed spectacles, his thinning hair and casual but unfashionable clothes, Hopper has the air of a student who has spent all his life at college passing exams. In fact, he never took his, although he studied bio-chemistry for a time. He dropped out and became a roadie, for The Softs eventually, until he graduated to playing with the band on the departure of Ayers.

Almost all of the time on the tour he stuck with Ratledge. Maybe it's because he was a student as well - at University College, Oxford, where he says he got a "good second" in philosophy.

Philosophical he certainly is. Despite the musical hangups that occurred, he just looked calm and saturnine, peering quietly through oblong shades which he never took off all the time.

He and Hopper behaved with total unconcern about the process of going along to a gig and getting up and playing. After a performance was over they sat back quietly in the dressing room and indulged in some obscure word game they had devised, in which Dean would join in, or maybe they would decide to have a game of Dutch billiards, other times they just went to bed.

Wyatt, a short, stocky figure, with lank fair hair that droops around his shoulders, is the most outgoing of the four and the most instantly likeable. Also the most temperamental, living off his nerves for some of the time, it appeared.

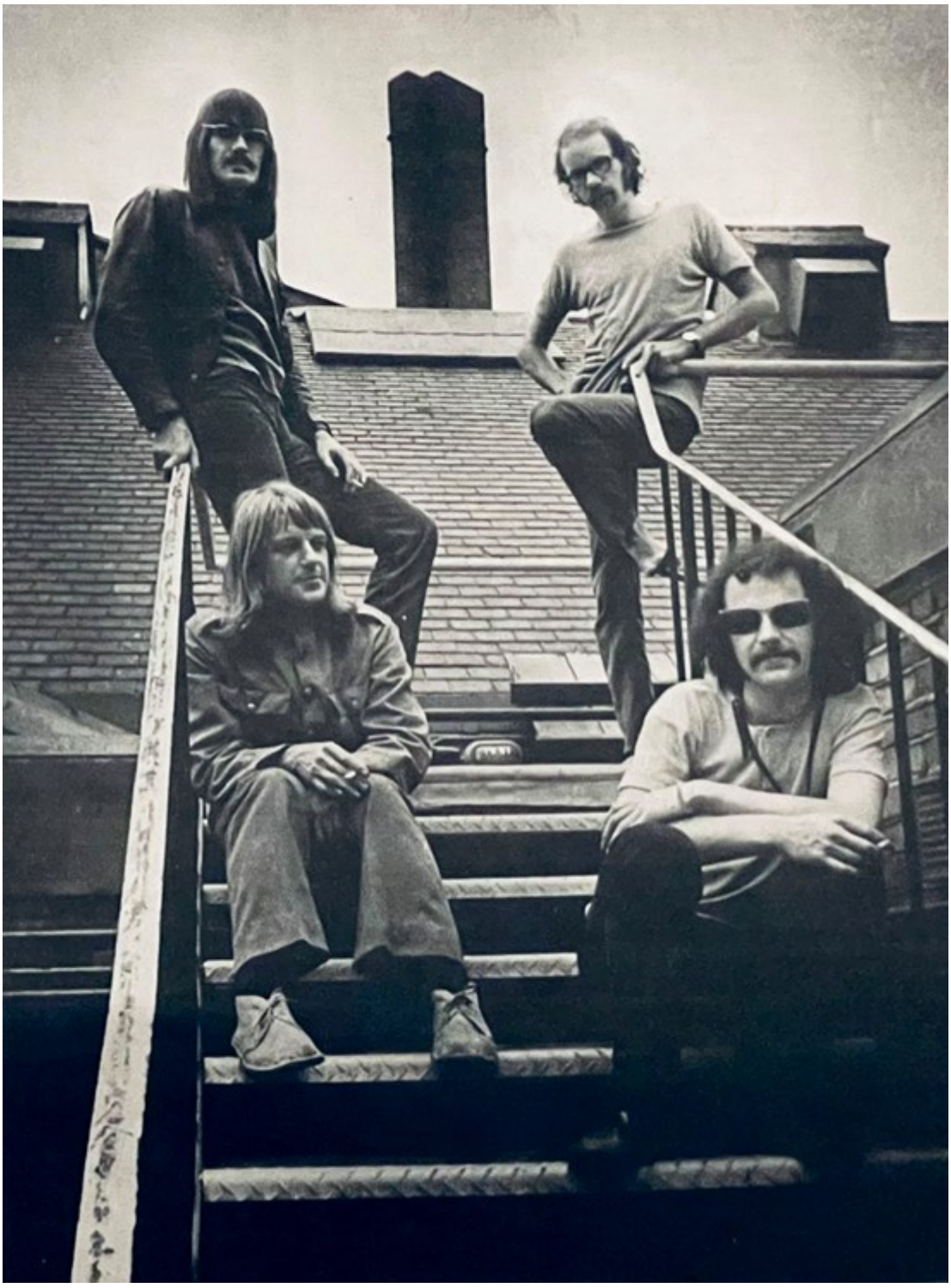
Wyatt did, in fact, blow up on the Saturday, at the Rotterdam gig. The band played two sets and an encore, the music being drawn basically from the Third album and revolving around versions of "Facelift", "Slightly All The Time" and "Out-Bloody-Rageous". Wyatt, it seems, was not happy with the material on that night and he stormed into one dressingroom at the interval while the rest of the band went into another room.

"It's like playing at a bloody Dutch tea party", he remarked bitterly over a bottle of beer. "The audiences here will clap anything you do".

Basically, he was unhappy with the strongly jazz-orientated approach that the band evinced on the tour. Robert prefers to work within the rock context, but none of his compositions were used on the tour because he has kept them aside for his solo album.

The Doelein concert was an improvement on the night before, but their playing lacked any real fire and tension. This was not really Wyatt's fault, it was as if the band was slowly flexing the muscles and waiting for some catalyst to spark off their collective energy.

Amsterdam was the ideal place for this to happen. The city has a youth and vitality about it that you immediately notice when you have just left London.



SOFT MACHINE : success based on musical value. Picture by BARRIE WENTZELL

Stomping

It's also a city where the audiences are more responsive to the Soft Machine than any other in Europe, because they were among the very first to grasp the coat tails of the band on its way up. In a sense, the Dutch, and the natives of Amsterdam particularly, have adopted the Softs as their own, and they all turned out on Sunday to welcome home their protege.

This obviously gave The Softs the emotional lift they needed. Playing the Gebouw concert hall, which is a favourite stomping ground, they ripped into their standard programme of the tour, kicking off with "Facelift" and a new Hopper composition, "Virtually", changing gear into "Out-Bloody-Rageous", with its dipping and swelling piano parts, and rounding things off with a new Elton piece, "Neo-Caliban Grides".

The band came out really lathered up for the second half. Wyatt had forgotten his prejudices, and he was solidly behind the rest with some sharp swishing cymbal work on the first three pieces, "Teeth", "Slightly All The Time" and "Eamon Andrews" - all Mike's compositions, which had a nine to the bar feel about them. Elton's long winding solo, which rose and fell like a gentle landscape, was picked up by Hopper on his own composition, "Kings And Queens", which contained some rasping bass lines, and then they swung into "Esther's Nose Job", very fierce and pounding, which featured a climatic ending with Dean shrieking in the upper register over a huge slabby backdrop of sound.

They did not need too much calling to go back for an encore. Ratledge was the first back on stage, immediately jumping into an extract from his own work, "Slightly All The Time", whose lovely melodic alto phrase, that runs throughout the whole number, got an immediate response from the crowd.

Just one further thing. If, as Tony Palmer says, the Soft Machine are a band distinguished only by a lot of bombast, well, then I'm a Dutchman.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Jazz in Britain - Soft Machine at the Proms - Jazz Journal - Vol 23 - No 10 - October 1970

SOFT MACHINE AT THE PROMS



Pop music had a chance to prove it had grown up and become 'respectable' when The Soft Machine (Mike Ratledge - keyboards, Hugh Hopper - bass guitar, Robert Wyatt - drums, and Elton Dean - saxophones) played at the Proms recently. It was not one of those pretentious fushion affairs of a group playing with a symphony orchestra, which seem to be as fashionable and as fruitless as similar attempts in jazz a decade ago, but an exciting juxtapositioning of some of the more recent developments in both pop and classical fields. The group played to an appreciative full house, comprised both of regular Promenaders and rock fans.

The Soft's performance began with the playing of a tape loop of an organ, during which the group came on the platform, plugged in and tuned up. This preamble gradually involved into the performance proper, as the tape loop took on the role of backing riff. It was thus impossible to define the point at which the music 'began'. Such a procedure can help one to 'get into' the music. Instead of it being framed by a definite beginning and end between which the audience looks on from outside (analogous to the act of playing a record) the sounds became part of the environment as they steal in behind, merge with, and gradually take over from interval chat. The band was soon pounding out punchy phrases which shifted among various time signatures, often irregular (five, seven and eleven-four were all used). The playing was excellent, though - possibly because of the unusual metres - a little stiff. It would have been nice to have heard the Machine stretch out a little more on a straight four-four. The constant ebb and flow of the music made it impossible to be bored, yet I found their approach slightly restricting. It was a compromise between the continuously evolving melodic line of an improviser like Ornette Coleman, and Mike Westbrook's method of using a constantly repeated phrase as a framework for a solist. The music moved too slowly to be the flood of improvised melody of

the former, and did not stay on one riff long enough to give a soloist a chance to open up as in the latter technique.

The group is loud (though not too loud) and has a great deal of drive - a pity that Hooper's "bass playing was reduced to a dull thud by the Albert Hall's acoustics. Some of the best music came when Elton Dean was given a chance to extend himself (this was no surprise to those of us who have heard him play with Keith Tippett and Graham Collier), and a wordless vocal by drummer Wyatt provided a looser feeling - a rare moment of inspired abandon. All the Soft Machine members have considerable technique, and their overall concept is bold and creative. One can be critical of details, though the essence of what they are doing is very worthwhile. That the concert was an overwhelming success apparently means that there will be more events of a similar nature at future Prom seasons - how about a Jazz Prom, Mr Glock? An evening with the John Surman Trio or a commissioned work from Mike Gibbs could be some of the best investments the BBC could make.

Martin King



supply the grift in advance it can be inserted in this column!

EARL HINES
(European tour)
October 30 Town Hall, Chatham. Earl plus his quartet will be returning in November for dates in Bristol, Basildon etc. Details in next month's issue.

BUDDY RICH
October 28 Fairfield Hall, Croydon; 29 Colston Hall, Bristol; 30 Odeon Hammersmith. Buddy is due back on November 9 for additional British dates.

BATH UNIVERSITY JAZZ SOCIETY
(The Small Hall)
October 21 Keith Tippett Group, 8 p.m.

KEITH TIPPETT
October 2 in concert at Main Hall, Mickleover, Derby.

CRAWLEY JAZZ CIRCLE
October 1 Norman Goodall Quartet, Floodlight Club, West Green; 15 Graham Pilgrim record recital on Dave Brubeck. Details from 59 Lyndhurst Close, Southgate, Crawley; 22 New City Jazzmen at Floodlight Club.

CHRIS McGREGOR'S BROTHERHOOD OF BREATH
October 2 Winter Ceres date at the Notre Dame Hall, Leicester Square—with guest star Alexis Korner; October 23 British Student Centre, 11 Portland Place; October 31 Royal Court Theatre, Sloane Square—please note: this is an afternoon gig—5.30 p.m.

JAZZ EXPO '70
See ad in this issue for full details.

CODA
The Canadian Jazz Magazine
Edited by John Norris
NEWS, COMMENT, ARTICLES, RECORD REVIEWS
Subscribe now—40s. for 12 issues:
JAZZ JOURNAL
27 Willow Vale, London, W.12

ZZ JOURNAL EACH MONTH
RIBE NOW

JAZZ IN BRITAIN

SOFT MACHINE AT THE PROMS

Pop music had a chance to prove it had grown up and become 'respectable' when The Soft Machine -(Mike Ratledge—keyboards, Hugh Hopper—bass guitar, Robert Wyatt—drums, and Elton Dean—saxophones) played at the Proms recently. It was not one of those pretentious fashion affairs of a group playing with a symphony orchestra, which seem to be as fashionable and as fruitless as similar attempts in jazz a decade ago, but an exciting juxtapositioning of some of the more recent developments in both pop and classical fields. The group played to an appreciative full house, comprised both of regular Promenaders and rock fans.

The Soft's performance began with the playing of a tape loop of an organ, during which the group came on the platform, plugged in and tuned up. This preamble gradually enveloped into the performance proper, as the tape loop took on the role of backing riff. It was thus impossible to define the point at which the music 'began'. Such a procedure can help one to 'get into' the music. Instead of it being framed by a definite beginning and end between which the audience looks on from outside (analagous to the act of playing a record) the sounds became part of the environment as they steal in behind, merge with, and gradually take over from interval chat. The band was soon pounding out punchy phrases which shifted among various time signatures, often irregular (five, seven and eleven-four were all used). The playing was excellent, though—possibly because of the unusual metres—a little stiff. It would have been nice to have heard the Machine stretch out a little more on a straight four-four. The constant ebb and flow of the music made it impossible to be bored, yet I found their approach slightly restricting. It was a compromise between the continuously evolving melodic line of an improviser like Ornette Coleman, and Mike Westbrook's method

and creative. One can be critical of details, though the essence of what they are doing is very worthwhile. That the concert was an overwhelming success apparently means that there will be more events of a similar nature at future Prom seasons—how about a Jazz Prom, Mr Glock? An evening with the John Surman Trio or a commissioned work from Mike Gibbs could be some of the best investments the BBC could make.
Martin King

NUCLEUS AT THE NOTRE DAME HALL

The Jazz Centre Society's 'Winter Ceres' of concerts got off to a great start on September 13th, when the following line-up presented an exhilarating evening of electric jazz: Ian Carr (tpt/flg-h), Brian Smith (ten/sop), Karl Jenkins (oboe/el-pno), Chris Spedding, (el-gtr), Jeff Clyne (bs/bs-gtr), John Marshall (dns).
Those who dismiss Nucleus (and the current Miles Davis band for that matter) as rock 'n' rollers are way off the beam; it's the pounding rhythm that bugs them of course, but no pure rock bassist has ever played with the technical brilliance or melodic ingenuity of Jeff Clyne or Jack Bruce and no rock drummer could match the complexity of the magnificent Marshall's fiercely swinging rhythmic patterns. The only snag was the imperfect balance (always a problem in jazz concerts, even at the Festival Hall); it was very hard to make out Karl Jenkin's contribution on piano—however, when they did emerge, they were beautiful; Karl seems to be too modest to solo on this instrument, but his work as a backing musician is all that could be wished for. His consistently excellent work on oboe was a prominent feature of the proceedings too, and a highlight of the first half was a performance of his *Lullaby For A Lonely Child*, even if it was nowhere near as lyrical as the version on Graham Collier's 'Down Another Road' album.
Chris Spedding, for most of the time impressively

A B BASICS

Chick Webb, one of the finest powerhouse big-band drummers in jazz, was a diminutive and ailing man with a hunch back. He suffered from tuberculosis and was dead by the age of thirty seven. Yet in his lifetime he breathed life into bands that would, without him, have been quite ordinary.
William Webb was born in Baltimore in 1909 and was something of a child prodigy. At eleven he was playing on the beats on Sheepshead Bay and for several years played drums in the area, with groups such as the Jazzbo Orchestra. A chance meeting with guitarist John Trueheart resulted in his trying his luck in New York during 1924. He auditioned with Edward Dowell and was an immediate success. His fame spread rapidly and his skill was soon a talking point among musicians.
His style was, in fact, quite simple but he produced tremendous drive. Whether on snare or cymbals he played with tight staccato urgency, accenting the after beat strongly. Men who knew him well claim that the wonderful sound he got from his kit has never been captured on record. In particular, he was renowned for the resonance of his snare work and this factor gave even more potency to his clean cut articulation. He was essentially a leader and he played breaks with alacrity associated with the New Orleans stylists and did so in such a way as to give impetus to all the bands he led.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Why Sir Henry Moore turned in his grave - Disc and Music Echo 1s - September 5, 1970

Why Sir Henry Moore turned in his grave

By CAROLINE BOUCHER


DISC and MUSIC ECHO 1s

I. o. W. 'Never again'

Jethro: big UK tour

ELP GO OUT ON THE ROAD

Hendrix concert —free show? see page 4

Alvin says "no" to movies.

I. O. W. THE DISILLUSIONED ORGANISERS SPEAK

WHILE THE post-mortems are hold and the critics scoff about the first pop group to play at the Proms. Soft Machine continue their rehearsals and regard the incident as just another gig.

Bass guitarist Hugh Hopper only bothered to read a couple of national paper reviews - one scathing, the other complimentary.

"I think we're all pleased we did it now." he says. "At the time lots of little things went wrong onstage, although probably only we noticed - the equipment broke down, things like that. On 'Omnibus' it looked quite good but I wasn't very pleased with the sound - but then it's never good on TV or radio."

The whole Proms appearance came about through Tim Souster, a friend of Mike Ratledge. who heard the Soft Machine back in January and asked them to do a piece on the Proms the same night as him.

"I wasn't very keen," recalls Hugh, "because the Albert Hall is a very strange place for sound.

"We didn't do anything different for that concert," says Hugh, airily. "We just did our usual thing. We fuse things in a sense that we like different bits of music which is all put together. anyway, so there's probably a bit of the classics in there."

Hugh was talking during a break in rehearsals held in the back room of an Islington pub. Soft Machine were rehearsing new numbers for stage performance and the next album, which they start shortly. When I arrived they were in the middle of an Elton Dean composition - his first for the group since joining last November.

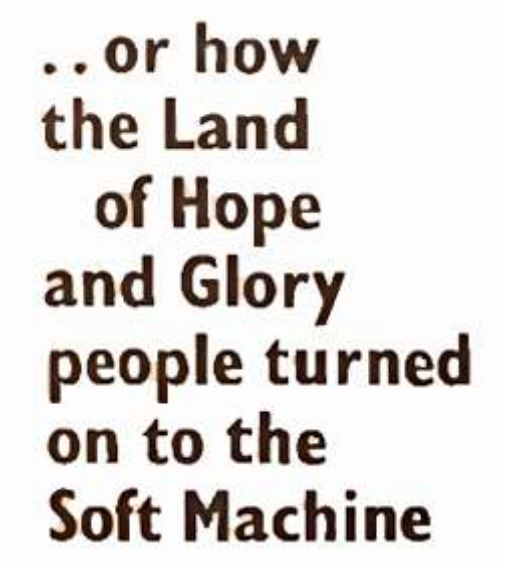
"We started off with me getting a four-piece brass section in - and then it ended up with

just Elton. For anyone who writes it's very nice to have a brass instrument there, it's much fuller. We got the brass because we wanted to expand our writing; it was becoming a bore writing for three people.

"When Lyn Dobson left we thought it would leave a bit of a gap, because when Lyn was in the group Elton stayed in the background, but now it's great and he's worked in really well."

Soft Machine have an usual history. They've been in existence since 1966 and were the first group (with Pink Floyd) to start the London UFO scene in 1966.

Since then they've always had a nucleus of devoted fans but have never hit the limelight as Pink Floyd went on to do. The reason for this is probably that they're reticent people and their music has less universal appeal than other bands.



In this respect their Albert Hall Proms appearance has done them good, and got their name to a larger audience.

I think our fans are not quite blues fans but the hip section of the community - people who actually like listening to the music as well as the effects. What really surprised me were friends of my parents who set up and witched the Omnibus programme at eleven o'clock at night and really enjoyed it" says Hugh.

"I don't think by appearing at the Prom's we could have damaged our reputation, because we were at a level before where any publicity would have helped. If we'd been very well known and played badly it might have hurt us, but as we weren't very well known, it could only really improve rather than hurt us."

It's difficult to pin a "typical" and identifiable sound on the Soft Machine - it's varied over the years depending who was in the group and whose particular number they're doing. It started off as a fairly conventional line-up which varied as people came and went, although pianist Mike Ratledge and drummer Robert Wyatt have been permanent fixtures since their formation in Canterbury. So has Hugh, except for a period in 1967 when he left to ride about on his motor bike, later rejoining them as road manager and finally taking up bass with then again in 1968.

It's all slowly changed. When it first started the group revolved mostly round Kevin Ayers (bass) and Dave Allen (an Australian guitarist/poet) who was later exiled. When they left and Mike became the most influential, and now I think it's Mike and myself. it's good because not many group are organ based - they usually have a lead guitar".



SOFT MACHINE: left to right Mike Ratledge, Hugh Hopper, Robert Wyatt and Elton Dean

Mike and Hugh tend to do most of the writing - they write separately as a rule but some tracks are collaborations, and Robert writes the occasional thing.

"I think it's good for everyone to write. However good one writer if only one person does the writing all the compositions have the same sort of sound.

Record sales are pretty important to the group, too, as they're not the sort of band that' on the road every night - they do perhaps one gig a week, usually in a big hall, so they've never been earning a terrific amount of money. Now Hugh has just brought out a book of some of his scores for the group, as they were constantly being asked for notes and chords of various numbers at gigs. They also have an American tour lined up for the autumn which they're anticipating with mixed feelings.

"Now," says Hugh, "there'll be people there who actually know us, I really don't know what's going to happen."


From Tom Jones to Toomorrow

By CAROLINE BOUCHER

Why Sir Henry Moore turned in his grave

..or how the Land of Hope and Glory people turned on to the Soft Machine

There I am on top of the Post Office Tower

amateur photographer

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

The Softs, the Proms and drummer Wyatt - Melody Maker - September 5, 1970



The Softs, the Proms and drummer Wyatt

By Richard Williams

It's NOT long since Robert Wyatt announced that he was vacating the drum stool with Soft Machine in order to pursue a career with Kevin Ayers'band and various other friends.

"I should know better by now," said Robert last week, shaking his head half in sorrow and half in happiness. "I say things , and I really mean them at the time, but a week later I'm feeling something else entirely.

" In all fairness to the Softs, they're still auditioning drummers, which is something I

suggested because I thought they might find someone they like better than me, someone who can read music for one thing. Not reading is my thing . . . primitive music, y'know.

" But I really intended to leave the band, and I suppose I had to get outside it to find out what I really wanted. We had a few fights inside the band, but it's all back together now, and I don't want anything to break that very fine balance we've regained."

The Softs' recent Henry Wood Promenade Concert at the Albert Hall created controversy among the critics, who seemed to be expecting something the group were never prepared to give. Robert looks back on it with very mixed feelings.

" The whole business of surfacing for a couple of hours in that environment was to be heard by people who normally wouldn't listen to us in our normal context — and it was unnatural.

" I enjoyed parts of it, and the audience was certainly the biggest we've ever had in Britain. It was a very nice evening, socially speaking, and it was good that the audience seemed to enjoy the Terry Riley and Tim Souster pieces just as much as our stuff.

" We played all right, I suppose, and Elton particularly rose above the circumstances to play some excellent solos. In terms of the occasion, I'd say that all music grows up in a certain environment, and ours is loads of people lying around getting stoned, and we spend the first half-hour sorting out the sound balance so that the evening gradually opens out. At the Albert Hall, of course, that just wasn't possible.

" There was also the whole thing of playing to a deadline. It was very frustrating having to finish at exactly four minutes before 12 o'clock because if you run over that the engineers will pull out the plugs."

How did Robert view the motives of the BBC people who put the Softs on the Proms? " I don't honestly think the BBC had too much say in it. It was down to Tim Souster, who managed to get into the sort of position of respect where he was allowed to present his own evening, and as he was interested in our music he asked us to be part of it. I don't suppose the powers-that-be at the BBC knew what they were getting at all.

" Oh dear, I really don't want to sound sour and bitter about it at all. What I'm saying is that we've done a lot of gigs and the Proms doesn't stand out as one of the important ones.

" But I can also see that it seems to have been important in terms of public reaction . . . for a start, the little old ladies round our way used to think that we were a load of nasty, dirty hairies, but now they all say ' Good morning, Robert' very nicely.

"In the end, though, I can't honestly say that I feel it's important. Bridge-building isn't something that you can do consciously, it happens by accident, but it's nice that people can listen to and like something that they wouldn't normally come across. Anyway I don't consider that we're a bridge-building band. We're very narrow really, pursuing one train of thought.

" Elton's writing should make it a little different — but then, oh well, everything seems to go through the sausage mill and come out sounding like the Soft Machine."

Now that Robert is safely back inside the group, does he still harbour desires to get into other areas? " Well, one thing I'm doing right now is playing with my own quartet, which has Elton, Marc Charig on cornet, and Neville Whitehead on string bass.



SOFT MACHINE at the Albert Hall (from left): Hugh Hopper, Elton Dean and Robert Wyatt.

" We've already recorded a long, free version of Gil Evans' 'Las Vegas Tango' for my own album on CBS, and it's really a totally free thing. Maybe we'll get into doing our own versions of Soft Machine numbers — that would be nice, getting another angle on them with a flowing string bass line instead of the fuzz bass-guitar.

" With this band I'm trying to get some space back into my music. Arrangements, freedom, and all those different procedures can make satisfying music, which is very hard to define, but the actual effect is a certain kind of density.

" I admire the sense of space you get from ' Miles Smiles' or the Miroslav Vitous album; the density of rock bands can be very crude and unrewarding. So many things are happening in the quartet; I'm constantly playing things that I've always wanted to play but never been able to, and that's a result of the more fluid situation.

The experiment of working with Ayers and the Whole World was not a success, although Robert still has great admiration for the band. " I did two or three things with them in England, including the Hyde Park 'free,' and a week in Holland.

" I tried it, but I have this tendency to change my mind completely about everything. I still think it's one of the most amazing bands in the world ... oh dear, I'm unhappy about this interview — I'm saying all the things I mean.

" Kevin's band does tend to be a little ramshackle in its approach, and perhaps I've been spoilt by being part of a comparatively slick organisation for quite a long time. I really dig David Bedford though."

Robert's own album, which is nearing the mixing stage, is " hours of completely free things in various combinations, with all the unfashionable sound tricks that Zappa discarded five years ago and which I'm toying with right now.

" Hugh wants to get the Soft Machine into the studios to record very soon, and one of the best aspects of the band at the moment is the way Elton's got so involved in the music.

" He's even getting us to do things that we stopped trying to do to each other years ago, like getting me to read parts. The others completely accept that I'll never do it, but Elton keeps plugging away.

" It's really nice to see Mike and Hugh struggling with someone else's compositions for a change, instead of grinning evilly while I try and struggle through theirs."

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

Soft Machine man's switch - Melody Maker - July 18, 1970


Melody Maker

EMERSON: BIG DEBUT FIXED

The most popular paper

1,216,000

Soft Machine man's switch

Isle of Wight date with Moody Blues and Joni

COOL AND UNCOOL— WIN AN LP AND HAVE A LAUGH ON PAGE 8

The MELODY MAKER has the biggest music paper readership in Britain

Soft Machine man's switch

by RICHARD WILLIAMS

ROBERT WYATT, drummer with the Soft Machine, is joining Kevin Ayers' band. The Whole World - but he will not be leaving the Softs.

" The Soft Machine is a lovely group, and it will be carrying on," Robert told the MM on Monday. " But the fact is that the others don't like life on the road, and that's what I exist on.

" They're perfectly happy sitting at home and writing music, and they don't like to play one piece of music night after night. Being on the road brings them down.

" That's what gets me going, the whole trip of playing the same music night after night, so I'm going to play regularly with some mates, and the most convenient mate happens to be Kevin."

Ayers was a member of the Soft Machine until last year.

" I don't want to do anything very ambitious: just little gigs that the Softs are too big to do now.

"I'm not killing off the Softs — I'm just letting the group breathe, and this is the next stage in the development."

Robert makes his debut with The Whole World in this Saturday's free concert in London's Hyde Park, and he will next be seen with the Soft Machine in their Proms concert next month.



22
26

ody Maker's
read by more

e percentage of
£1 and more than

Spending over £1	Spending over £4
57	69
48	55
25	33
23	36
low) 29	33

re best informed and
geable and critical eye

rs the entire scene
of experts.
the world's most
every week.
is established by

R has
ner

Soft Machine man's switch

by RICHARD WILLIAMS

ROBERT WYATT, drummer with the Soft Machine, is joining Kevin Ayers' band, The Whole World — but he will not be leaving the Softs.

"The Soft Machine is a lovely group, and it will be carrying on," Robert told the MM on Monday. "But the fact is that the others don't like life on the road, and that's what I exist on.

"They're perfectly happy sitting at home and writing music, and they don't like to play one piece of music night after night. Being on the road brings them down.

"That's what gets me going, the whole trip of playing the same music night after night, so I'm going to play regularly with some mates, and the most convenient mate happens to be Kevin."

Ayers was a member of the Soft Machine until last year.

"I don't want to do anything very ambitious: just little gigs that the Softs are too big to do now.

"I'm not killing off the Softs — I'm just letting the group breathe, and this is the next stage in the development."

Robert makes his debut with The Whole World in this Saturday's free concert in London's Hyde Park, and he will next be seen with the Soft Machine in their Proms concert next month.

COOL AND UN
WIN AN LP
A LAUGH

Fl
Far
also
bill.
Alsc
the Vo
lem, a
New Yo
shared
Jimi Hen
more Ea
Year's Ev
Hendri
festival
Experien
sists of
guitar)
Gypsie

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soft Machine - Time Out - July 11th-25th, 1970

SOFT MACHINE



THE SOFT MACHINE

(Robert Wyatt - drums, Mike Ratledge - organ, Hugh Hopper - bass, Elton Dean - alto sax and saxello.)

Now that the Soft Machine have been chosen to play at the Proms this summer, maybe the pop scene will finally wake up enough to give their music some of the recognition it's lacked for so long. Apart from a small group of devoted fans the group have been ignored in Britain for three years now simply because few people have stopped to listen to them. The pop writers don't go to their concerts, record companies don't release their albums and most of the record-buying public had never heard of them. Thanks to Richard Williams of Melody Maker and John Peel, a little notice is now being taken of what the Soft Machine are doing, but their recent residency downstairs at the Ronnie Scott club still passed largely without comment. And yet they are the only pop group ever invited to play there.

The group's music isn't easy to listen to and probably makes a lot of people feel very uncomfortable. It defies categorisation, using the electronic paraphernalia of modern pop as a medium for hour-long pieces that rival the works of the best twentieth century classical composers in scope and complexity. As much could be said of King Crimson and the Pink Floyd, but when you add the Soft Machine's willingness to experiment with unusual time signatures, their use of brass, Mike Ratledge's incredible organ solos and Robert Wyatt's drumming, they are in a class of their own. It's strange that it takes Ronnie Scott and the organisers of the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts to give a group of such obvious quality the status it deserves.

London first heard the Soft Machine three years ago when they played regularly at the now legendary UFO club in Tottenham Court Road. At that time the group comprised three school friends from Canterbury Grammar - Wyatt, Ratledge and Kevin Ayers on lead - and Daevid Allen, an Australian, who played bass. Despite their over-indulgence in unorthodox sound effects and rather pretentious refusal to break between numbers, the music was raw and exciting, a refreshing change from the banalities of the contemporary pop scene. The group also made the fullest possible use of the lights, strobes and weird stage outfits then coming into vogue to intensify the direct physical assault their music made on slightly

bewildered audiences. Inevitably enough, their only attempt to make the charts, *Love Makes Sweet Music*, released in April 1967, flopped and, by the time promoters were beginning to realise that a large audience existed for 'underground' groups, they were in France. While flower-power boomed in Britain the Soft Machine were playing on the beach at Saint-Tropez, warming up audiences for a new play by Pablo Picasso, *Désir Attrapé Par La Queue*. When the local mayor stepped in and closed it down they moved to a marquee just outside the town, playing for very little money but making a big hit with the media people from Paris who gave the group invaluable exposure on French TV. They've played a lot in France since then and now rate as one of their top three groups.

The British Immigration Authorities forced the first change in personnel by refusing to allow Daevid Allen back into the country. An Australian, he'd been working with the group without a permit. So Kevin Ayers switched to bass and they carried on as a trio, playing art schools for under £50 a night. The group worked better as a trio, getting a tighter sound with more scope for Mike Ratledge's increasingly complex organ solos and Robert Wyatt's voice. Kevin Ayers was a strong influence on the group at this time, writing songs like *We Did It Again* and *Lullabye Letter* and appearing on stage without a shirt, his eyes extravagantly made-up. Robert Wyatt went one better by playing in swimming trunks.

Early in 1968 Mike Jeffery, manager of Jimi Hendrix and the Animals, signed the Soft Machine to support Hendrix on his American tour. At first it looked like the break they'd been waiting for but the tour soon degenerated into one long hassle, playing night after night and travelling incredible distances, with no time to rehearse and very little sleep. Only a historic gig at the Museum Of Modern Art, New York, and the release of the group's first LP saved it from being a total wash-out. A faithful reproduction of their stage act, the LP was recorded in a week and they were unhappy with the results. Tom Wilson was supposed to produce the record but he hardly ever showed up, leaving the Soft Machine who'd rarely seen the inside of a studio to do most of the work themselves. Nevertheless, *The Soft Machine Volume I* is an excellent record, probably the best released that year, with certainly the most original sleeve. It sold well in the States and on the continent, but was never released in this country. Under the influence of Mike Jeffery, the group had signed with the Probe label who distributed their records in Britain through EMI. In 1968, however, Probe were beginning to setup their own outlets here and refused in the meantime to let anyone else handle their records. So, despite frantic telegrams from the group back in England, nothing happened. Their second LP nearly went the same way, finally being released here a year after it had been recorded.



Mike Ratledge - organ (Photo: Dominique Tarle)

The Soft Machine broke up in the States, unable to take the strain of touring any longer.

They reformed almost immediately but without Kevin Ayers who felt unhappy with the musical direction of the group. *'Esther's Nose Job'* had been lying around for over a year but Kevin had never been able to play it, nor was he willing to learn. "It was fine when we were playing the very free things", he recently told Richard Williams, "but it got into a lot of writing and jazz things like odd time signatures and I really wasn'tup to that". To replace him Wyatt and Ratledge brought in another school friend, Hugh Hopper, who had been their road manager in the States. He'd written *'A Certain Kind'* for the first LP, had been rehearsing on bass with the group for some time and, most important of all, he could read music.

Very soon afterwards they recorded the second LP for Probe. Apart from a few superficial similarities - each side of the record being conceived as an entity for example - it was very different from their first. *The Soft Machine Volume 1* captured the intensity of the old stage act but remains a succession of songs, swept along and linked together by Wyatt's ferocious drumming. On *Volume 2* Wyatt had cut down on the vocals and his drumming was less in evidence. Hopper's bass was fuzzier and less pedestrian than Ayers had been and Mike Ratledge was beginning to break away from the restrictions of the 30-second organ solo. The group was tighter yet more relaxed than before and the Hopper-Ratledge writing team obviously had potential. Although it was messy and pretentious in parts and lacked the immediate appeal of their first LP, the record deserved a lot more attention than it was given.

During the last year the Soft Machine have become virtually unrecognisable as the group Kevin Ayers used to play in, despite playing with him on his *Joy Of A Toy* LP for Harvest. They still use some of the numbers from their second LP but most of the material is new and written by Hopper and Ratledge. Although he has written in the past, Robert Wyatt has more or less given up now. Realising that it was impossible to sing and drum well at the same time and worried that his voice sounded out of tune, he has cut down on the vocals as well and limits himself to a few scat solos at each performance. Mike Ratledge now rates as one of the best organists in pop or jazz and Hugh Hopper has improved tremendously since he first played with the group. One of the nicest things about the group is their willingness to experiment musically, and while Wyatt has been phasing out his vocals, their use of brass has increased. For a while last year they appeared with the entire front line up from Keith Tippett's group but after a few months the practical problems of keeping a large band well-rehearsed proved too demanding and they made do with Lyn Dobson (flute and soprano sax) and Elton Dean (alto and saxello) who is still with them.

Despite having concerts at Croydon and the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the residency at Scott's under their belts, a tour of the provinces under way and a Promenade Concert to look forward to on 13 August, the group's new double LP is an important step, the first product of a contract they recently signed with CBS.

Reasonably priced at 59/6d, *Third* is similar in conception to the Floyd's *Ummagumma*. Mike Ratledge is responsible for two sides, *Slightly All The Time* and *Out-Bloody-Rageous*, Hugh Hopper for *Facelift*, alive recording of two performances in January, and Robert Wyatt contributes *Moon In June*. *Facelift* begins with an amazing organ solo by Mike Ratledge who is joined by Elton Dean's alto and Lyn Dobson on soprano who build up for Hugh Hopper to introduce the main theme. The riff is given urgency the first time round by the organ, bass and horns before Ratledge moves into a long solo, followed by some



Robert Wyatt - drums; Hugh Hopper - bass. (Photo: Pete Sanders)

excellent work on flute and soprano sax by Lyn Dobson. *Out-Bloody-Rageous* is the best of the studio tracks, a beautiful and restrained piece which opens with progressions of the theme on piano tapes played backwards. Again, Hopper's bass introduces the rest of the group. Interest is held by some clever changes in tempo and towards the end Dean plays a moving alto solo while the mood is brought to a climax by the organ, bass and drums. The group's strength is their mastery over incredibly complex time changes, sometimes overshadowing the horns which are left repeating the theme of a piece while Mike Ratledge solos into the next tempo. As we see on *Slightly All The Time*, which features a long solo by Elton Dean and some fine work on flute by Jimmy Hastings, the Soft Machine give considerable freedom to their sidemen - a welcome change from the rest of the 'pop meets jazz' brigade. At times Elton Dean does appear a little uncomfortable with his material but the structure of the Soft Machine's music would hardly accommodate the solos he plays with Keith Tippett.

Robert Wyatt's track should really have been called "Volume One Revisited" and it'll please the people who wish that they had stuck to that style. *Moon In June* is the only time that we hear Robert's voice on the record and its lyrics are in the old throwaway style - "before we go on to the next part of our song, let's all make sure we've got the time". He accompanies himself on organ, electric piano and drums until Hugh Hopper switches to fuzz bass and Mike Ratledge comes in with a solo played very much in his *Volume One* style while Robert plays with echo on his voice. I suspect that a lot of people are going to like this track best of all since only here do the group dispense with the brass and go back to the freedom of some of their old pieces.

Third is a staggering musical achievement that transcends anything yet produced by a British rock group and is essential listening for anyone who wants to hear what a fusion of the best of modern jazz and rock can produce. In fact it can't really be discussed in terms of those categories at all since the Soft Machine have virtually created their own. Their music has a long way to go, as Mike Ratledge is the first to recognise, and we'll see a lot of changes as soon as they are in a position to take more time off for recording and writing. But whatever happens to the group in the future, after *Third* no-one can pretend to ignore them.

Jim Talbot

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Two pound notes must copulate - Bath Festival of Blues and Progressive Music '70 Program



Gentle Ghost are intending to film the Bath Festival. They want to make films in a way that the 'system' does not usually allow, and they want to get to a wide audience.

This article suggests that at this point in time they are unlikely to succeed. Our society forces us all to sell out at some level. We can rely on 'the system' to win.



> Zoom

(Richard Leacock was the first exponent of cinema verite documentaries. Tony Garnette produced 'Kathy Come Home' and 'Kes'. Joseph Losey is a highly revered film director who is perpetually involved in difficulties in setting up the films he wants to make).

'TWO POUND NOTES MUST COPULATE'

'My belief is that it will cease to be an industry at all, in the sense that it is now... that it'll be more like the writing of novels. Film-making should be so easy and simple technically, that it'll merely be a matter of creativity and the talent. You will no longer need two hundred thousand dollars to make a movie.'

'There will be no such thing as a cameraman; there'll be film-makers.... There'll be no such thing as editors; there'll be film-makers... It'll become an integrated process.'
(Richard Leacock, in 'Movie' 1963)

'THERE WILL BE NO SUCH THING AS CAMERAMEN'

Ricky Slade just happened to glance at a dirty piece of paper lying in the street. He just happened to pick it up and read it...
'Anyone interested in working in or being in a film...'

'A film is a process over time involving a number of people in - dare I use the word? - a dialectical relationship with each other and the content of reality or view of life which they are trying to synthesise.'
(Tony Garnett in 'After-image 1970')

Hugh Berger had decided to form a group of people to make films. They had to be the right people, and some of the people who replied to his advertisement were rejected. Some were too straight and smug; some were simply starstruck. Others were alright, and 'Gentle Ghost" was formed. There are about 50 members.

Hugh felt that most people in the film industry stuck to pre-conceived ideas, they used only the vocabulary they already knew. It was important that everyone in the group (which does include members of the 'industry') is sufficiently flexible to allow themselves to continue 'discovering'.

This was an item on their agenda -

CONTROL AND DIRECTION WITHIN GENTLE GHOST: DISCUSS...
The process of making the film must be a process of discovery by all involved, only then can it hope to reveal something and gain the audience's participation. The essence of discovery is not unification of purpose but the pursuit of the individual in relation to what is around him.

THE GROUP IS INDIVIDUALS

Ricky Slade, who happened to glance at a piece of paper in the street, was accepted. This was the first time he had ever been accepted by anything. It is said he comes from Atlantis, so this may be the reason.

'Lots of people would reject him, because they wouldn't bother to find out about him... but he's probably one of the most creative people we've got'.

He isn't Ricky Slade every day, sometimes he is Zo Marshall. He thinks people should have lots of names which proves that he has the right qualities. Gentle Ghost want to work together as much as is practical, they don't want their separate contributions autographed and neon lit.

THE INDIVIDUAL IS A GROUP

Hugh doesn't really like films. 'Film is a voyeuristic and corrupt medium, but its a good way of communication with lots of people all over the world with vision and sound'.

Even film directors go to the cinema.

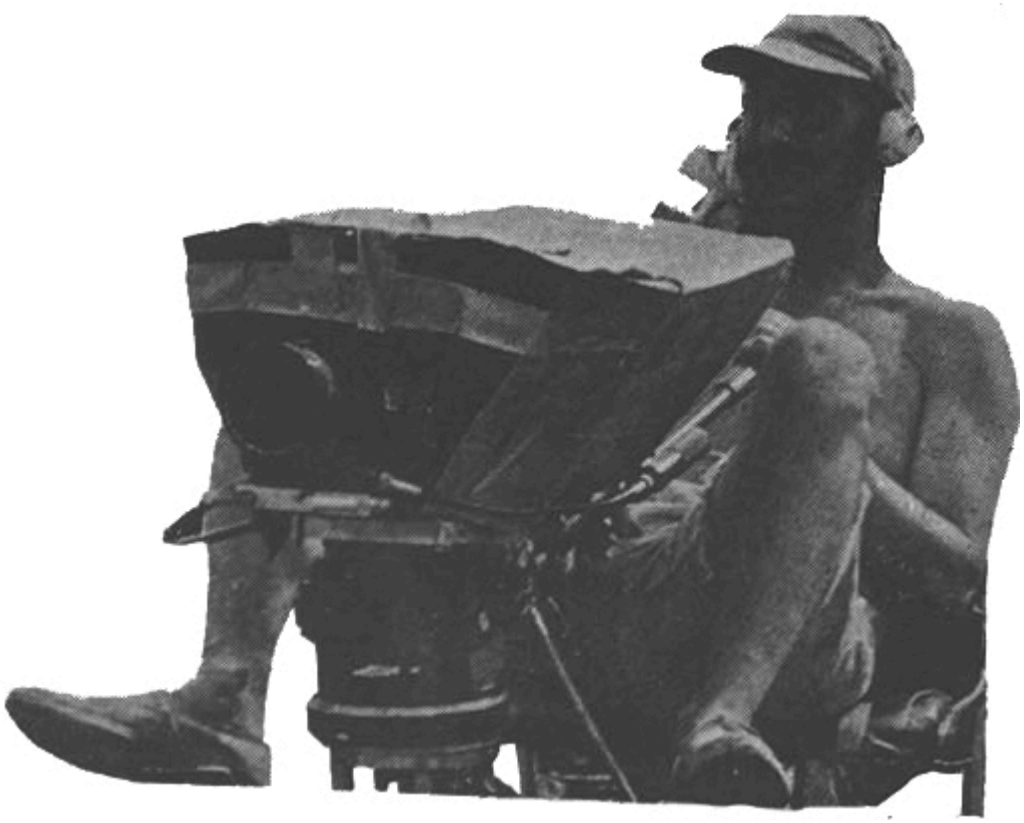
'There is a new enthusiasm for film which I recognise, and I spend a lot of time going round the cinema clubs because I think the new audiences are terribly important to what people can eventually do with films. There are new cinema clubs all over the world and these new audiences are important and their interest must be met. Its the only counter weapon against the monopoly of the big distributors, which has left the film medium largely unexplored... and which forces people like myself into spending three quarters of our lives fighting to get a picture on and protecting it afterwards, instead of making films, which is my job.
(Joe Losey, Unit, June 1967)

Gentle Ghost's first project is under way; they are negotiating to film the Bath Festival.

'Gentle Ghost has been formed with the intention of showing that events like the Festival are representative of an important and sincere attempt at a more humane life-style than modern society offers.'

The planning is complete, but they are waiting for the right signatures on a number of pieces of paper before they can be completely sure that the film will happen. The tension they are feeling is something that Joe Losey would understand.

'I have had innumerable projects that I have tried to set up, but other directors have got hold of and set up, and usually made a mess of, for the simple reason that their reason for wanting to do a subject was quite different from mine. They catered for certain elements that appealed to the money'.



THE COLOUR OF MONEY

'We are trying to make films in circumstances where films are seen as commodities. The reason for films - and its as strong as this - the reason for films in our society is to make profit for shareholders and to get returns on capital investment'.
(Tony Garnett)

If Gentle Ghost don't get to make their film it will probably be the fault of those 'shareholders' in 'events like the Festival' who care less about 'humane lifestyles' than they do about 'profit'.

In one way Gentle Ghost have benefited from the fact that films are commodities. 'Woodstock' has become a very profitable one, and sponsors love to jump on bandwagons. But it is probably Woodstock's success that has put them in the position of having to make either a much bigger scale film than they intended, or nothing Gentle Ghost wanted to make a film for about £2,000 and soon realised it would be impossible. They had competition for the rights to film from other well established companies. There was no question of simply walking into a festival and filming whoever they felt like. Just like everywhere else in wicked modern society.

'The whole thing got blown up and blown up out of all proportion. The amount we needed shot up to £30,000, and only a third of this was directly for the film itself.'

No-one in Gentle Ghost would get more than expenses, only the extra technicians they plan to hire and David Cammell, who they hope will be over-all director, would be paid. Led Zeppelin and The Moody Blues insisted on the kind of deal which would make it impossible to include them.

'We are trying to make films in circumstances where films are seen as commodities'

It is harder to accept that musicians are content to make music in circumstances where both they and their music are commodities, when they seem to be so much part of 'Us'. It is hard to accept that the system has such a devious grip on those we identify with.

THE GROUP IS NOT THE INDIVIDUAL

The following words were written In 'Rolling Stone'.

They knew what kind of movie they were after/before they started. They wanted it groovy. Good vibes. One big happy party. Even on Saturday, after it obviously was not that kind of a trip. David Maysles, one of the Maysles Brothers that's doing the movie, noticed one of his cameramen shooting footage of a naked, porcine young lady who was freaking out backstage. A fairly typical scene... Maysles tapped the cameraman on the shoulder and said: 'Don't shoot that. That's ugly. We only want beautiful things'. This happened at Altamont.

THE GROUP IS THE GROUP

An item on a Gentle Ghost Agenda -
REASON FOR MAKING FILM AND INTENTIONS: DISCUSS.....TO BE THE FESTIVAL AS SEEN FROM THE PEOPLE THERE. To show their motivations and our motivation. Everything must be shown whether we like it or not. We must avoid preconceived ideas of what the concert should be like. It is possible with a documentary to make anything happen we choose; but what we want is honesty and reality, there is no fear in these and we have nothing to hide.'

The following words were written in 'Rolling Stone'.

'The Maysles Brothers, the film company which shot the whole Stones' tour, complete with its violent climax at Altamont, had gotten some remarkable footage of Hunter's killing. No less than three cameras caught the action, and one of them had the entire sequence from the time Hunter was knifed and down and surrounded by Angels..... Which makes it the hottest film property of 1970. Universal Picture has already weighed in with the highest bid.....'

'WE WANT ONLY BEAUTIFUL THINGS'

Somebody certainly spotted the box office potential of the Woodstock Festival film. They also spotted the gullibility of this 'alternative' consumer society. The popularity of 'Woodstock' was due to the inability of this peaceful rebel nation to see the joke, or even to notice the propaganda. They gave their support like so many sheep to the notion that something had actually been achieved. The Mafia did very well out of it, three days of solid pushing with nearly half a million customers. Warner Brothers won't do badly either. Etc, Etc. That's not to say it wasn't enjoyable for those who were there; that's not to say it wasn't a well made film. We are all free to choose the market we go to, we are free to buy the goods we choose. But we mustn't let ourselves be brainwashed into believing that wo were part of a **different** system for those three days of 'peace music and love'.

The film didn't have the guts to reveal that there was as much exploitation and manipulation behind the scenes as there is in any clip joint. The beautiful people were too busy consuming to notice that they were supporting the same old shit.

Presumably we won't so easily identify with Altamont. We'll still go and see it - and it'll be a hit. We will condemn it, disassociate ourselves - and it'll be a hit.

POUND NOTES MUST COPULATE

"We are doing this to show what the alternative society is about, not to show the gloss on the surface of a pop concert'.
(Gentle Ghost)

Repeat of item on Agenda: -:...
'... The process of making the film must be the process of discovery by all involved, only then can it hope to reveal something and gain the audience's participation. The essence of discovery is not unification of purpose but the pursuit of the individual in relation to what is around him.'

Woodstock proved that audience participation can be got by concealing. Perhaps if the day comes when there are no such things as cameramen, the individual will himself bother to 'discover' his relationship to what is around him. If Gentle Ghost are concerned to 'show what the alternative society is about', I hope they will admit it if they discover that they can't find it. It may be only the same old society in disguise, in which case it may be the deciding factor whether or not they make this film at all.

In a capitalist society capital has to be returned — money earns money and two pound notes must copulate.....
(Tony Garnett)

Additional information from Alfie Benge (november 2025) :

The film was never made. The company couldn’t put up with the demands of so many people wanting to be paid. The most excessive being Led Zeppelin who wanted £10,000 to be paid before any filming could begin. So they didn’t make the film.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

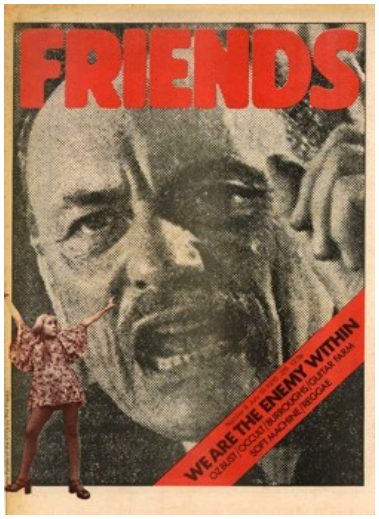
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Soft Machine : contemporary classical musicians - Friends N° 9 - 10 July 1970





Andrew Lycette

The first Soft Machine record was a single issued by Polydor in 1966 called 'Love Makes Sweet Music.' It was a conventional pop ditty of the sort which would undoubtedly make the Top Twenty today. But the Soft Machine has moved on from those long distant days when they used to play with Mark Boyle's light show at the Roundhouse or in Joan Littlewood's evening multi-media scenes at Stratford East. They were really only fooling around then, now they are serious professional musicians. Hugh Hopper who himself only joined the group in 1968 after their American tour, told of the paradox, "In those days we were the freaks and serious people came to watch us; now we are the serious ones, and the freaks come to watch us." (Fair enough, he admits that it is best to listen to the Soft Machine stoned, "unless you have an open mind anyway. The best thing about the group are its sound qualities and its dynamics. Well, you can appreciate the dynamics anyway but to get inside the sound "you've got to be either stoned or very receptive." Robert agrees. He says, "You get five times your money's worth if you listen to us smashed").

That's the thing about the group; they are in no way what they seem. English hads try to make them into freaks, but as Mike Ratledge says, it just happened that they were around when the Press latched on to the word 'psychedelic' to describe everything that was going on around the U.F.O. scene. French conoisseurs think they are revolutionaries and pataphysicians.

First a touch of group history though. Mike, Robert Wyatt and Hugh were all together at the Simon Langton Grammar School in Canterbury. They started playing what Mike calls vaguely 'free jazz' when they were 16 to 17 years old. They never actually appeared in public though and limited their venues to each other's houses. Now even after a decade together off and on, they are still none too happy about playing in public. Mike admits like

Hugh to stage fright, and that's why they don't try to act like pop stars.

After this beginning Mike who was a couple of years older than the others went up to Oxford University where he read Psychology arid Philosophy and gained a middle second class degree. He didn't like the place.

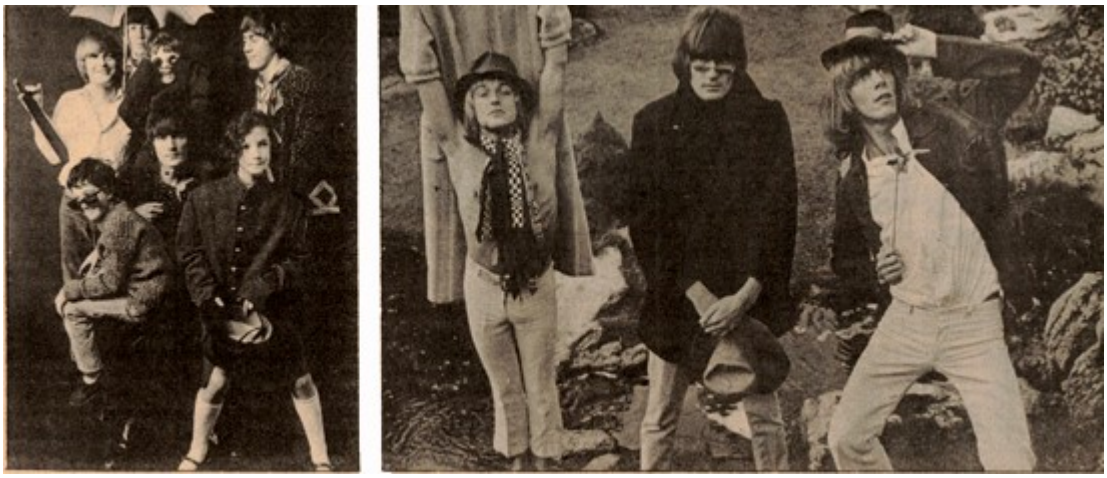
Rather than go to the USA he rejoined Robert in group including Kevin Ayers, and two Australians, Dave Allen and Larry Newlin. Dave was a guitarist whom the group had met in 1963, when, as a modern jazz quartet, they played at the then fashionable Establishment Club. They split up the same year though when Mike was up at Oxford. Hugh and Robert, who had dropped out of school, tried for a while to make it with a pop group (soul et al) called the Wild Flowers, but they got nowhere except very hungry. Kevin and Robert then split to Majorca, still trying to cash in on the post-Beatles pop boom, Hugh to Paris where he got into acid at the early date of 1963.

DINGO VIRGIN & THE FORE SKINS

When they all got back to London and the new group was formed with Mike down from Oxford, they ran through a lot of names — Mr. Head and Dingo Virgin and the Foreskins being two — before arriving at the Soft Machine. It was a title that seemed to fit at the time, and, as Dave knew Burroughs, they got permission to adopt it. But as Mike says, he has explained it away to journalists all over the world in a variety of different manners. Probably the best of these is still the original meaning that Burroughs held when he took the words from physiology where they appear as a generic term for the human race. We're all the human race, therefore we're all Soft Machine.

Ratledge & Co. are still up there, but on a strictly musical sense now, and this helps explain the genesis of the current group. Ratledge especially tended to find the quintet too amateur, too poppy. Larry soon quit, and Kevin and Dave were not quite the musicians the group required.

Still they continued to play in England (the 1966 U.F.O. boom) and on the continent (as in 1967, when they appeared for a week in one of Ian Knight's inflatable balloons on the beach at St. Tropez, but were forced by police pressure to move on and to find refuge as resident musicians at the Picasso play/orgy 'Le désir attrapé par la queue'). David was not allowed to return to England after this as he had been playing without a work permit, so his freaky - there is no other word for it - influence retired from the group.



The original Soft Machine - Wyatt, Ratledge and Ayers

Kevin, who had really got the Soft Machine together in the first place and forced Mike and Robert to find decent equipment and contracts, went after the 1968 American tour, in which they appeared with Hendrix night after night for five months in a succession of gymnasia with foul acoustics. They returned really pissed off and very tired (except for Robert who amused himself greatly at Hendrix's expense in the L.A.); in fact, they disbanded completely for a while. Kevin split again to the continent, and Mike and Robert were soon keen to reconstitute the band, the original trio, with Hugh Hopper, who'd been

their roadie in America and who almost reluctantly agreed to rejoin them as a musician, because they were going to attempt some different sorts of material. "When the Soft Machine first formed," he says, "I didn't really like what they were doing. It was very pretentious, the David Allen thing, the Kevin thing. Not till I actually became their road manager did I get into it."

It seems that he and Mike were now able to assert their influences more. Mike began to compose for the group (for, in spite of what it says on the label, he had little to do with the first L.P.). He is the sort of person who hates sentimentality (of the Incredible String Band type) neither Kevin's romantic lyricism (which Robert loves and which is beautifully manifest on Joy of a Toy where the Soft Machine appear to show there are no hard feelings), nor Dave Allen's anarchistic "Give me a blue mist on a snowy mountain top, Mike" type of approach were quite his scene.

DEBUSSY, RAVEL & HINDEMITH

Mike, who had been learning the piano since the age of 7, who was into Debussy, Ravel, and his favourite, Hindemith when he was at school, and who studied under the world famous classical musician, Treharne, while he was at Oxford was able to bring the music the core of the Soft Machine's act, especially as Hugh was able to read a score which made working much faster. "We had problems over the lyrics, and we found it was difficult to get into word situations. Kevin was more interested in reaching people immediately through verbal participation, but we were not prepared to spend enough time working out a reasonable compromise between this and the music we wanted to play. Robert was singing too much to concentrate properly on his drumming. So now we've made a sort of blind leap of faith. A pop group as we are makes the basic assumption that people are the same, and you succeed by doing what you like."

So now they've moved on from a situation where they were providing jazz backings for Kevin's and David's songs, through a period when they used to sing about the most banal matters possible (as, for example, on a Top Gear last year when they sang a song extolling the virtues of the B.B.C. canteen just along the corridor, using a tune, incidentally, that has cropped up again on the new album with different words and different connotations — good artists never waste their material), to their present practice of playing pure written music with complicated structures and with only very occasional breathless renditions from Wyatt's screaching larynx. Mike puts this down to the fact that "everyone's changed, we're all more experienced," which is undoubtedly true. This has meant that the Soft Machine has left behind the clever poppiness of 'I Did It Again' (supposedly based on a Terry Riley composition, but in fact, Hugh says, rather more influenced by James Brown) and have used their professionalism to venture into unknown areas in their search for what Hugh calls quite simply "nostalgic sounds."

So they've now added an excellent saxophonist in the Coltrane tradition (Elton Dean from the Keith Tippett group) to give themselves extra freedom within which to expand their sound. They did try at one time to use four brass, but that created too much of a big band noise (it was too expensive, anyway); then they went down to two brass which they all liked and which was easy to reproduce on stage, but Lyn Dobson, the flautist and soprano saxophonist did not fit into the group ("there were personal problems," said Mike tactfully). Now they are happy to have just Elton to add to their sound. He enjoys playing with them on a non-permanent basis and is free to play with other groups when he wants.

THE PROMS

The move into the realms of freely structured amplified jazz-pop has of course led to some antipathy from the traditionalists among the Soft Machine's fans (especially, it appears, in France where in true Gallic fashion the cognoscenti remain conservative while imagining that they are radical). The band is undaunted though. It goes on next month to appear at the Proms (the original Henry Wood version) which will be a mind-zapper for the dinner-jacketed audience in the Albert Hall. (Not that the musicians make much about it; Robert, who is careful to say that he enjoys being in a so-called art group, says that it will just be another gig for them and that it will be interesting to gauge the audience's reactions). They would like to do some film music too, but so far they have turned down a number of continental offers in the hope of something bigger and better (though it is true you can see them, along with the Floyd, in a pirated French version of the Amougies festival). Hopper says that he personally would like to do the music for a film by Losey or Polanski. Apart from that they really haven't many plans, though they hope to release another album

pretty soon.

Sean Murphy, their manager, who shows where he is at with his intention to publish an artist's guide to contracts, has signed them up at C.B.S., who are just as happy with the deal as are the group, and has developed the group's policy of concentrating as much on continental audiences as on British ones (with great results, especially in Holland where their second L.P. topped the charts and where in fact they are doing their only festival this year).


THE SOFT MACHINE: CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL MUSICIANS

But then they are not really interested as a group in playing live at all. Ratledge and Hopper insist that they must spend at least as much time relaxing at home, writing their compositions, rehearsing their ideas as appearing on stage. (Again this is the result of the American tour on which they found themselves becoming increasingly stale and unoriginal as they were unable to rehearse or write new material, and it is especially necessary now that when Mike composes a piece he also writes out the parts for the others, especially for Elton who consequently gets through a great deal of work). Hugh in fact admits that he is probably more interested in producing than in playing. His side of the new L.P. is therefore probably the most technically ambitious, adding a number of loops to the group's Fairfield Hall concert in January.

SMALL SCALE INSTITUTION

Robert is quite different. He wants to get back on the road where he feels his real interests lie. "To round off my life I feel the need to get out there, but not in the context of the Soft Machine, that has become too big, it's become a small scale institution. I don't think of myself as a professional musician, I am rather in the tradition the folk musician, the minstrel, if you can make such distinctions, and I think you can." Therefore he proposes to do a lot of work with Kevin Ayers' new group, and with another musician whom he was loth to name because it might compromise him in his position in his present group. Elton feels much the same and will continue to work with Keith Tippett, and with Zoot Money.

In the meantime the whole group are quite happy with their double L.P. The second one they had to rush through on a small budget. Hugh hadn't actually ever even played live with the group, and they were unable to do the things they wanted to do, so they don't particularly like the result. The first album (although incredibly it reached number 38 in the States) is simply old hat to them.

But it is too easy to group the quartet together in a composite 'they' and it doesn't really work. Mike is still very much the university non-conformist, though on a personal level rather than a political one. He is officially married to Marsha Hunt, who is a friend whom he helped stay in the country by going, through the offices. He refuses to admit to any sort of classification either for his music or for himself. When we were talking about Mark Boyle (on whom he had written an enthusiastic article for the French magazine Actuel), he stressed that he offered no self-contained aesthetic criticism. "It really depends who you talk to in this group, man. I mean Robert tends to make everything into a consistent system. I'm really not interested in that at all, i.e., you know, I don't want to systematise all my likes and make it into one great big system. So it tends to be just things I like, and I happened to like Mark Boyle's stuff, his light shows were very good." All this delivered very fast (he has an uncanny source of energy for a cat who can exist for two days on one

omelette and a couple of packs of Benson and Hedges), very intelligently, very precisely. It was typical of him to insert the abbreviation 'i.e.' as an example of his desire to get what he was saying right. Thus when I asked about the literary influences on the early Soft Machine (the Jarry, the French symbolists and surrealists who creep in and appear to have been very important, especially with the evidence of one of their amps which has the words DADA scrawled on its back, but this is only a truly dada touch, because the amp had been stolen in France by a group called DADA LIVES who managed to write half their name before the equipment was refound), he remonstrated, "I mean how do you divide a person up. I mean that's like saying - shit what else do I like doing — you know, if I like motor-cars, you can call it motorcar music. I mean I happen to like reading literature - beautiful tautology that - well, reading anyway, but I don't see why that makes it a literary basis." He admits that he sees the lyrics as rather a fill-in; "Christ, man, words are such a hassle." He prefers to talk of his music as "organic," and spends a lot of time working at the structure of his pieces, developing ideas from Terry Riley, and making sure that the sounds are right. As Hugh said, "Mike is much more interested in melody, he's interested — in written music, in getting a structure. He's been through the intermediate stage (e.g. people like Cage) and now he's listening more to written music which has go to have some form. Myself I'm less worried by form than the others."



The seven piece Soft Machine at Ronnie Scott's

VERY ECHOEY SOUNDS

Hugh, the other main creative influence in the group, very quiet, unforthcoming, patient, apathetic in Mike's words (but not in terms of the music he writes and produces. He doesn't like Americans (their self-confidence he finds obnoxious, though he admits it's probably because he is jealous), he reads Evelyn Waugh and a lot of similar novels, and he answers questions very slowly, very honestly. Acid, for example, had "split me down the middle; sometimes I was really happy, sometimes I was very depressed." This seems to reflect his usual attitude to life. "Several times in the last year I've said to myself that is the last time I am going to play. That's the build-up from a number of depressing situations. But the alternative is even more depressing; I would have to make money in even more depressing situations" — something he has done before and has no desire to return to. Mike may be interested in structure, Hugh is more into sounds qua sounds (thus his desire to produce and his brilliantly inventive bass guitar work on the new L.P.). "When there is a very still passage, not much rhythmic movement, you just get very echoey sounds by playing very loudly and very high notes — I think that is the only thing I really enjoy playing." Actual tunes do not turn him on so much, at least not after he has sussed out what they're all about. "When you make music it's very strange, because once you've written it and worked it out it doesn't have the same interest, it's done. I used to find this particularly when I played semi-pro, when I played other people's music. Take MacCartney's 'Yesterday'; when I heard that I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard. When I actually learnt to play it, it was still a nice tune, but it didn't have any magic. Trouble is, that happens as soon as you write a tune yourself. The best thing is to write it and then lock it away for a year."

Robert is completely different again, bubbly, amusing, sympathetic and, like Mike said, with a tendency to use his intelligence to categorise everything in his mind. He thinks that the way most rock groups are run is amazingly fascist. Not that he sees himself as any kind of revolutionary. "I'm a very conventional socialist. I don't think like others that capitalism is a

system that has got to be totally overthrown before happiness will ensue. Each system is as prone to misuse as any other." He thinks the Labour party legislates nearer to the Christian ideals than any other party in the world (any other left wing party would have made an ideological issue out of the abolition of hanging, he says), and this consideration is very important to his mind. "Christianity has a fantastic ethic-I haven't come across anything better." This rationalist approach to his politics means that, in spite of his wander-lust, he has little time for heads, whom he found "tiring and somewhat humourless. I don't like that kind of naive dabbling with occult, I like the company of really sharp people. In fact, I'd rather watch Morecombe and Wise than read through the Confessions of Alistair Crowley." When he was abroad therefore, he wasn't in Ibiza or Morocco, but rather with his second father, the poet, Robert Graves, who looked after his when his own father died and who educated him with his brilliance, his wit and his liveliness. It also means that he can be pretty scathing about pop gurus and hangers-on. The people who write Rolling Stone, he feels are thirty years old and trying to convince themselves and others that the rubbish they listened to when they were younger was worthwhile. (This remark mirrors his prejudices against modern American music which he hardly listens to — "I don't know what we'd have done without black music, but I have enough respect for it not to try and copy it" — though he loves Hendrix, Sly and the Family Stone and all jazz). He finds it funny too that "the one thing the current revolutionaries are most perturbed by is the fact that their heroes in the pop business are part of the big capitalist set-up." The real revolutionaries in music, as far as he is concerned are not the MC5 — a Mafia hype — but people whom the young revolutionaries have never heard about, people like Charlie Havens and John Surman.

CHURNING AWAY & PHYSICAL

Robert has some original ideas about the music the Soft Machine are putting over too. He is the only member of the group who doesn't seem to believe that the group has progressed in its sound in the last year or so. He agrees that it has gained in popularity; "up to six months ago it was hardly worth our doing a gig in England." "Now it is true we play more notes more often, but actually the base patterns and the rhythm patterns which everything turn on are very traditional. You know, Hugh and I are one of the most straight-forward rhythm sections I've ever heard in jazz or pop. Compare us now to the earlier Soft Machine. There was much more complex dynamics a year or so ago." So he admits, "I think we are a rock group. We're always playing the basis we're working on. In jazz people build up their variations, and gradually drop away what they're variations on, whereas we're rock in the sense that whatever we're improvising on or building things on we keep very strongly in evidence. That's why I always wanted to be a rock player; because whatever we're doing on top, it's always churning away and physical underneath. So we're not only a rock group, but a very traditional one at that. Changing time signatures doesn't mean very much, and in some jazz groups it even masks the inability to play good music."



Photographs by Byron

Robert agrees that the addition of Elton has been very important though, not least because it has allowed him to give over his voice part to the saxophone. Elton is a typical South London head, unpretentious and mildly self-deprecating. He was called to join the group after the Soft Machine had seen him playing at the Plumpton festival last year. His new

arrival means that he has some quite astute things to say about their playing. For instance, he sees his spiritual colleague in the group as Robert, because "he's a spontaneous bloke who blows and fills in little bits, while Mike and Hugh keep to a set pattern." This is in contradistinction to Robert's idea of his function as a member of the rhythm section, and to my own opinion that Mike and Elton can be paired together because they both play mind-blowing phrases over and above the main themes (though that's really Robert in reverse).

It would be a bit sick at this stage to trv to classify the Soft Machine in any particular way. They are not particularly concerned with making it bigger than Jesus Christ; they don't think they've found either an intellectual or a musical answer. Consequently the margin of malaise in their music, from the words on the first L.P. "My head is a night club with tables and chairs,' through the frenzied organ and drum take-off at the end of Kevin's Song for Insane Times on his album of Joy of a Toy, to the new tight and original musical sound dominated by the conflicting leaps and bounds of the organ and saxophone. They are not escapists ("We are not up there to make everyone forget their troubles," says Robert who agrees this is a function for some groups and who therefore really digs Mungo Jerry). They are rather opportunist drifters in the beat style (see Mike's life lines on the first L.P.) interested in creativity for it's own sake (not quite l'art pour l'art). As Robert puts it, their ideal situation would be as painters, because these artists gets the best out of their medium, they are able to concentrate all their talents to producing one particular effect, or series of effects. Yet still "We're part of the European concert group tradition, but using bits of information that others don't know about, such as the rock rhythm techniques of Sly and the Family Stone. Yea, we're contemporary classical musicians."



Ad published in the same issue

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Where pop and classics meet... - Melody Maker - June 27, 1970



by Russell Unwin

Where pop and classics meet . . .

UP until now there has been very little to discuss regarding the relationship between the pop music and the classical music of the day. In the past they have been poles apart.

Today, pop music has grown up and become sophisticated; it is not so obviously naive. Classical music too has grown up in a way: it has learned not to take its illustrious forefathers too seriously. It has learned, in short, to do its own thing. So the two worlds have found themselves with much in common.



Experiment

Both spheres of music are characterised by a desire to experiment - experiment to establish new forms and modes of expression. In this there is much interchange between one camp and the other.

Then we have the breaking down of the distinction between composer and performer, in this case the performer becomes the composer and vice-versa; spontaneous improvisation, sometimes based on a strictly organised concept, sometimes on a completely free basis is the order of the day in both fields. Groups of musicians create and resolve their own musical situations on the spot.

Although it may be taken as true that contemporary pop and contemporary classics have so much in common that they must be the same thing, there are still subtle distinctions which keep them regrettably apart. The basis of this distinction is mostly one of function.

The function of the Who, one of the most middle of the road bands around, is to generate power and excitement. The function of Stockhausen is to stimulate and exercise the thoughtful mind. So the distinction is, crudely, between body and mind.

Overlap

These are two extreme examples to illustrate the point. It is the area where the two fields overlap which is most interesting and only just beginning to be effective.

The only two bands which seem to be wholly committed to this area, looking back over the last few months, are Soft Machine and King Crimson.

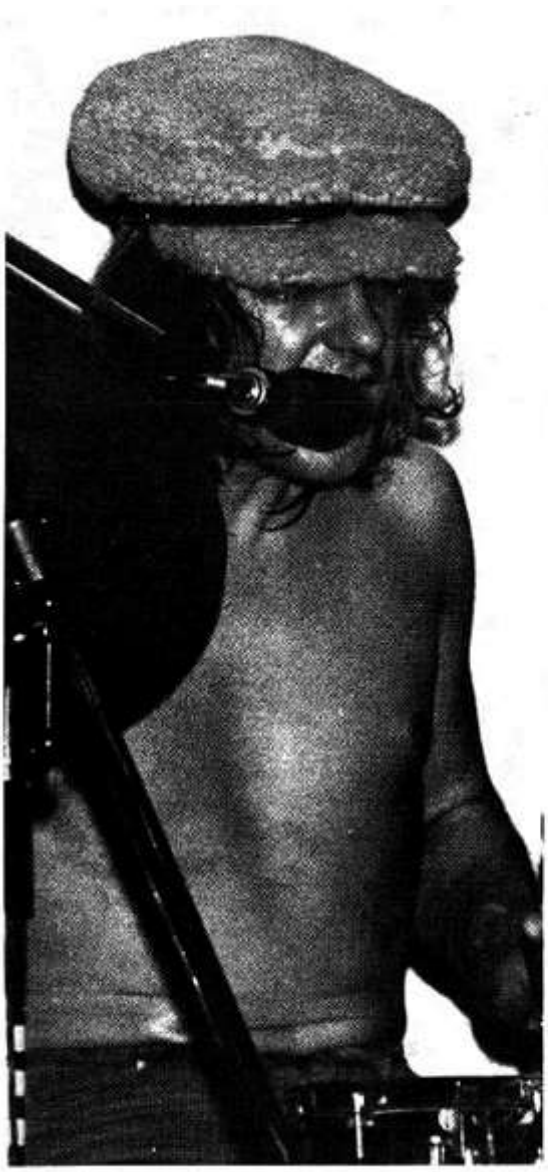
In live performances and on record Soft Machine have a unique sense of form. Their sets are a continuous tight stream of material which develop constantly and logically, making complete use of different types of sound and all kinds of rhythm.

As a whole the music creates an enigmatic, original character of its own which always maintains a high level of interest. On record the music is the same; each side of the disc becomes an entity in itself, without being a random succession of tunes as in most pop albums.

King Crimson have done the same on their albums, each piece has a special relationship with the record as a whole, making full use of the facilities available within the recording studio. Indeed with Crimson the whole package becomes a tight unity including sleeve design and the words to the songs.

Sound

The lyrical songs on the Crimson albums, although superficially they seem almost Simon and Garfunkel, somehow take on a different meaning in relation to the usually heavy sound of the band. They seem to have found a new function for the traditional song, in the same manner as the Beatles did in "Abbey Road."



SOFT MACHINE'S Robert Wyatt



KING CRIMSON'S Bob Fripp

The most important aspect of the music of both Soft Machine and Crimson is their readiness to use sound for its own sake. With Soft Machine the echoed vocalisation of Robert Wyatt and Mike Ratledge's organ, with Crimson the tasteful use of the mellotron especially in the " Devil's Triangle " section at their "Poseidon" album.

This puts the two bands in line with the contemporary avant-garde classicists who also have a tendency to use sound for its own sake.

Another band which I must mention in this context is. of course, the Mothers of Invention, who have influenced both Soft Machine and Crimson as well as many other bands. The Mothers music is again intelligently assembled as a whole but with a strong satirical element.

The Mothers satirise pop music of the past to make their own unique contribution to the present. The only trouble with the Mothers is their tendency to be purposefully obscure - being way out for way out's sake. Anyway they are always good for a laugh.

Phase

A big thing has been made recently of amalgamations between pop groups and symphony orchestras. The Nice, and Deep Purple did it. Barclay James Harvest are about to it. This really is a passing phase probably brought on by a shortage of good original ideas.

There is absolutely no future in Jazzing up Bach and the like. The only interesting excursion was Deep Purple's Concerto for Pop group and orchestra which did at least bring two vastly different types of musician together on equal terms on one

stage.

Zeppelin

It can be seen then that a true lasting relationship between contemporary pop and contemporary classics can only be made by following the example of groups like Soft Machine and King Crimson. Probably the open proof of this relationship will be made at this year's Proms when Soft Machine play alongside Tim Souster. Roger Smalley and the BBC Symphony on August 13.

Other bands play exciting music on the scene today, but unfortunately much of it is very derivative. For instance. Led Zeppelin are a marvellous band but they only make it with their exciting sound and the way they do their numbers, the same goes for the Who and other heavy bands.

Jon Hiseman's Colosseum deserve a special mention for their uncompromising wedding of pop and jazz, but the roots are still in the blues. Pink Floyd are a band whose instrument play the musicians instead of the other way round.

If contemporary pop is to survive intact as an art form on an equal basis with contemporary classics, it must begin to move away from its origins and establish its own ground. Otherwise we shall have nothing to relieve the monotony of the top thirty.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Our week at Ronnie's made us improvise - Melody Maker - June 6, 1970



THE SOFT MACHINE are probably the only non-jazz group in Britain who could command a week in the hallowed precincts of Ronnie Scott's Frith Street emporium in London.
In great measure that's a tribute to the way they've synthesised elements from many diverse musical sources, grafting them onto their own well-defined personalities to form an organic and readily identifiable style.
Mike Ratledge is their organist, a rather saturnine man who wears 1965 McGuinn shades and hovers over his twin keyboards, producing sounds which have the suddenness and intensity of lightning.

SOFT MACHINE'S MIKE RATLEDGE TALKS TO RICHARD WILLIAMS

The week at Scott's was obviously an unusual and instructive experience for them. After all, how many of their contemporaries get the chance to sit down and play in one place for six nights, with all the opportunity for detailed exploration that it implies? "

It was useful mainly for that reason," says Mike. "The way it stretched our repertoire was very challenging, and we had to push ourselves into areas of freedom where we wouldn't normally need to go. "

We had to improvise more than we usually do, because we didn't have enough material. In that sense it certainly taught us something.

In terms of audience reaction, the week was not a success. Ronnie's regular patrons were unsympathetic, and few of the Softs' fans could afford the necessarily high prices.

" I think we left the audiences pretty much as we found them, except for those who came specifically to hear us, and they were spread out over the



week. I can't see that it had much value as far as exposure to a different audience goes."

RESTING

The group have now played three London concerts — two at the Fairfield Halls and one at the Queen Elizabeth Hall — within a comparatively short space of time. Mike says that this was purely coincidence, and comments: " My ideal is to play a set repertoire twice, in the same place, and then come back later with new material.

" That's why we're resting at the moment: it's in order to write some new stuff, and I think we'll be playing in London again soon."

Mike and bassist Hugh Hopper write roughly an equal amount of the repertoire. Drummer Robert Wyatt composed early in the band's life, and wrote several of the tracks on their second Probe album (" Volume Two "), but now it's fairly divided between Mike and Hugh. Ratledge doesn't find it easy to talk about the difference in their writing.

LAZY

" Our different backgrounds don't come over. There's as much difference between two of my pieces as there is between one of mine and one of Hugh's. Hugh tends to write a theme, have a blowing section in the middle, and then return to the theme at the end... but then I've written things like that too.

" I tend to write things with a given concept. I'm very lazy and don't have much confidence, so I need something — like a progression or a time signature — to get to compose. These conceptual elements are really something I use to con myself into believing in what I'm writing.

" I'm very interested in unusual time signatures, but at the moment I'm writing a piece in 6/4, which isn't exactly far out. But in terms of a general direction my music is heading for more complex structures.

" Our sets are an amalgamation of different tunes by different people, and when you string them together into a 45-minute entity there's bound to be a somewhat ad hoc quality about the arrangement. You try to make the transitions as organic as possible, but it's not the total piece of music that I'd like it to be at the moment. The sudden switches that people criticise aren't inside each piece, they come when we go from one piece into another."

Unorthodox time signatures are becoming more commonplace, partly because young musicians are growing up around them and thus can "feel" them much more easily than their elders, to whom playing in 7/4 was like going to the Moon.

" I've been aware of them since I started writing," says Mike, " and I guess it was with Messiaen (the 20th Century classical composer) that I first came up against them, although of course they-ve been used throughout musical history in so-called primitive music as well as so-called classical music. But Messiaen was the first person I'd come across who'd obviously spent a lot of time getting into it."



CONTRAST

Mike uses a Lowrey organ, in contrast to the almost ubiquitous use of the Hammond, but it wasn't originally a voluntary decision.

" I bought it when we hadn't got the money for a Hammond, and I got to know what I could do with it. It's worked out well because the majority of organists use Hammonds, so the Lowrey's characteristics stand out a bit.

" I suppose that a large number of my stylistic idiosyncrasies are due to the inherent peculiarities of the Lowrey."

For the future, the Softs plan to remain as a quartet, with altoist Elton Dean, but may add other musicians for selected performances. One innovation will certainly be the use of prerecorded tapes.

" The tapes will mean difficulties like keeping the pitch constant throughout the electronic fluctuations, but they won't be tied down to anything very specific and the musicians will be fairly free on top of it. It won't be like laying down specific drum or piano tracks — it'll be loops and things like that."

MISTAKES

The group's new album, " Third," will be out soon after you read this, and Mike is very pleased with the speed and care with which CBS have handled it. " My feelings about the music on it change constantly. I liked it while we were making it, of course, but listening to it now I'm aware of the mistakes, while assume a disproportionate importance. " None of us can be objective about it now, but I think that each of our albums has been better than the last, although none is as good as it should have been."

Richard Williams

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soft Machine album - an MM preview - Melody Maker - May 30, 1970



Soft Machine album— an MM preview

IT MUST be hard for a lot of people to understand that, in France, the Soft Machine are one of the top three or four bands. Hard because they mean little in Britain as yet, although they can pack the Fairfield Hall and command a week's residence at the Ronnie Scott Club.

Their first two albums were released first in the States on the Probe label and only the second of these was put out in Britain, after a considerable timelag. These omissions will be rectified early next month, when their new double-album will appear under a new contract with CBS.

The album called simply "Third," resembles Pink Floyd "Ummagumma" in that each member of the band has been given complete freedom. Bassist Hugh Hopper and drummer Robert Wyatt have one side each, while organist / pianist Mike Ratledge has two.

The album called simply "Third," resembles Pink Floyd "Ummagumma" in that each member of the band has been given complete freedom. Bassist Hugh Hopper and drummer Robert Wyatt have one side each, while organist / pianist Mike Ratledge has two.

It opens with Hopper's "Facelift" which is actually a collage of two live performances (from the Fairfield Hall and Mothers in Birmingham, both last January) plus some tapeloops overlayed by Hopper later on. Most of the material is from the Fairfield concert, and the side opens with the extraordinary organ solo with which the second half began.

Ratledge is now probably the most resourceful and inventive organist anywhere, making most other practitioners sound academic with his sliding pitch-warps and visceral gobs of sound. The "bugged" soprano (Lyn Dobson) and alto (Elton Dean) play a Zappalike theme, wich segues quickly into a very percussive 7/4 tune, with Wyatt asserting himself strongly behind the organ solo. Dobson solos well on flute and electric soprano, and it's back to the theme, which is played forwards before the tape is reversed to give a pyramid effect.


SOFT MACHINE'S Mike Ratledge

Ratledge's "Slightly All The Time " starts with harmonics on the bass, and Dean's overdubbed alto and saxello play a theme which has a strong jazz flavour Dean solos on alto over a ponderous bass progression, being interrupted occasionally by brief two-horn riffs which are introduced each time by a staccato organ phrase. A flute solo by Jimmy Hastings develops into a written flute loop, which repeats on top of the saxes' theme, and the saxello and organ solo over a 9/4 pattern. The track fades with a stately theme voiced by the reeds, fuzz organ, and fuzz bass.

Robert Wyatt's "Moon In June" features a great deal of the drummer's highly unorthodox singing, with is most effective in the improved passages, especially when doctored with echo. Robert played most of the organ and electric piano on this track, Ratledge only coming in for a solo near the end.

Finally there's Ratledge's "Out-bloody-rageous," which opens in startling fashion with piano tapes played backwards, all based on progressions of the bass line which underpins the main theme. This theme is again played by Dean on overdubbed alto and saxello, and trombonist Nick Evans makes a couple of brief appearances. Dean has an extraordinarily beautiful alto solo before the track ends with another tape collage, this time of the electric piano overdubbed three or four times, playing phrases of differing lenghts which gradually contract.

The Softs are an exhilarating band, and listening to them can be like jumping off a cliff into a pool of freezing water. The new album is full of music of such fine, invigorating quality, and their crucial importance in the future of popular music cannot be denied.

Richard Williams



new pop albums

A feast of Arthurly music from Love

Soft Machine album— an MM preview

LOVE

GROUNDHOGS

DUANE EDDY

WHEN ME MANAGER SAID THEY WANTED "NO ONE BUT YOU" I THOUGHT 'E MEANT YER ACTUAL 'ZOOT'....BUT NO, 'E MEANT ME NEW SINGLE!

ZOOT MONEY'S FIRST SINGLE ON ENTERPRISE

"NO ONE BUT YOU"

CASSETTE TAPE RECORDERS

CAVENDISH SALES

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

A child of the pop scene - Melody Maker - February 14, 1970



A child of the pop scene

by RICHARD WILLIAMS

ROBERT WYATT is the member of the Soft Machine you're most likely to be watching while you listen to their music. Tousle-haired and athletic behind his drum kit, he has (he has the kind of natural showmanship which does not compromise the quality of the music he's a part of.

Reviewing their recent Fairfield Hall concert, I commented that it seemed paradoxical that, while the group are progressing rapidly, the audience is still managing to catch up with them.

"Perhaps there's an element of flattery involved," says Robert, "in that we expect them to follow anything we feel we want to do.

"But we can never really gauge for ourselves what he audience is feeling because we don't stop for applause. Now that even the break in the middle has gone, we'll play for a minimum of one and a half hours and come straight off. So we only feel any sort of reaction when we're changing afterwards.

"Our sort of progression is the kind in which the musicians improve as they play, gaining more control over their instruments and pacing themselves better. This is something that everyone has to learn, and that's what's happening to us.

"I never know what people think of us. It's quite mystifying. We can come off stage and Mike'll be quite depressed while I'm turning cartwheels.

"We're not an intellectual group – if we were, we wouldn't get anywhere. We don't even talk about it any more, and it just happens in a subconscious sort of way. Because Mike is musically highly educated doesn't mean we aren't intuitive.

"We don't spend enough time in rehearsals for Mike and we spend too much time there for me, because I can only discover things in the act of playing the piece, in a performing situation.

'It's like painting in a way. Some painters do sketches first, but often the whole thing is the work itself. I use time like a painter, putting layers on; the first set starts out casually, and then I build it up as I get into it. It's really very elastic.

"The basic thing is to find the right people to work with, and after that you commit yourself to working round whatever they're doing. If I thought there was anybody playing something really fantastic, I'd want to work with them – and for me that's Mike, Hugh, Elton, and Lyn.



MELODY MAKER, February 14, 1970—Page 11

ROBERT WYATT is the member of the Soft Machine you're most likely to be watching while you listen to their music. Tousle-haired and athletic behind his drum kit, he has the kind of natural showmanship which does not compromise the quality of the music he's a part of.

A child of the pop scene

ROBERT WYATT: 'I never know what people think of us.'

Reviewing their recent Fairfield Hall concert, I commented that it seemed paradoxical that, while the group are progressing rapidly, the audience is still managing to catch up with them.

"Perhaps there's an element of flattery involved," says Robert, "in that we expect them to follow anything we feel we want to do.

"But we can never really gauge for ourselves what the audience is feeling, because we don't stop for applause. Now that even the break in the middle has gone, we'll play for a minimum of one and a half hours and come straight off. So we only feel any sort of reaction when we're changing afterwards.

"Our sort of progression is the kind in which the musicians improve as they play, gaining more control over their instruments and pacing themselves better. This is something that everyone has to learn, and that's what's happening to us.

"I never know what people think of us. It's quite mystifying. We can come off stage and Mike'll be quite depressed while I'm turning cartwheels.

"We're not an intellectual group — if we were, we wouldn't get anywhere. We don't even talk about it any more, and it just happens in a subconscious sort of way. Because Mike is musically highly educated doesn't mean we aren't intuitive.

"We don't spend enough time in rehearsals for Mike, and we spend too much time there for me, because I can only discover things in the act of playing the piece, in a performing situation.

"It's like painting in a way. Some painters do sketches first, but often the whole thing is the work itself. I use time like a painter, putting layers on; the first set starts out casually, and then I build it up as I get into it. It's really very elastic.

"The basic thing is to find the right people to work with, and after that you commit yourself to working round whatever they're doing. If I thought there was anybody playing something really fantastic, I'd want to work with them — and for me that's Mike, Hugh, Elton, and Lyn.

"Hugh's bass playing is the most interesting new thing for me. He's doing things to the bass that I've always wanted people to do at this level. When he solos he might play high and fast, but he always keeps the kind of weight and authority that the bass should have. When he races up to the top he doesn't leave a gap at the bottom."

About audiences, Robert comments: "I've always found British audiences to be the least idealistic of all. The French and the Dutch kids really want something else to listen to, and they don't want to feel they're being hyped.

"The whole atmosphere in Britain, when you're dashing up and down the M1, is different. For instance if the PA goes wrong, there's less urgency to get it fixed. Maybe this is because Britain is home, and we don't feel the sense of occasion that we get abroad. That's probably our own fault, because some groups are very conscientious about every gig.

"The university audiences and the militant Left have little to do with what I've got to say. In West Berlin . . . people ask us why our songs aren't more politically committed, and why we charge entrance fees, and "Whose side are you on anyway?". The best audiences are primarily interested in the music."

Robert's singing is an interesting feature of the group, and about this side of his performance he says:

"I'm completely a child of the pop scene. When it comes to drawing inspiration for one of Mike's time signatures, I go and listen to Sly or James Brown. That's more poppy than most pop people listen to.

"The voice came from a need for a particular sound. I can't pitch accurately low because of the nature of the instruments, so I sing high. It's also better to keep tonally blank and let the clear note come through.

"It's also a slightly social thing, in that it's the closest I can get to talking to the audience. I haven't got Lyn's thing about the voice being the source of all sound, and it took a long time to figure out how to use it. Singing songs was obviously out with this band, and Syd (Barrett) has been a big influence. It's an unaffected thing, just straight words really.

"But what I was saying about the pop thing: if there has been any grafting on to our music, pop music was the last thing to be grafted on. Nevertheless in ways we're completely opposed to what happens in jazz, where people extend themselves all the time. We all feel the pressure to the drums. It clears the overall conscious of the editing aspect of performance."

Among the changes which Robert is making in his playing is the use of snare-drum with the snares off, making the drum into a third tom-tom, pitched higher than the others.

"I've been doing that and playing nearer the rim of the drum, to get a ringing sound. This changes the whole nature of the kit, and removes the cymbals from their usual relationship to the drums. It clears the overall sound and makes a lot more space, because the sound with cymbals and snare going with the other instruments can be very muddy."

Robert's technique fascinated me the first time I saw him. He plays not so much like a conventional kit drummer, but more like a tympanist, with that fluid movement around the drums which comes from the arms rather than the wrists.

"I learned from a jazz drummer, who taught me to play with my elbows in, using my wrists like Philly Joe Jones. But I never really mastered it, and anyway you can't get the volume or intensity that way, so I rather let it go and started using my forearms more.

"I'm seriously considering taking the snare drum away from the centre of the kit and putting it more to one side, so that I can get away from the Buddy Rich thing and use it more for accents.

"The kit I use was given to me by Mitch (Mitchell), who had it custom-built in the States out of maple-wood. When I sit down behind it it's like being in a little room, it's very comfortable.

"If jazz drumming has had any influence on me, it's been in teaching me what not to do — although I hope that doesn't sound arrogant. Some drummers have all this jazz training and just do it all wrong. For me, it's really all down to James Brown's rhythm section."

RICHARD WILLIAMS

"Hugh's bass playing is the most interesting new thing for me. He's doing things to the bass that I've always wanted people to do at this level. When he solos he might play high and fast, but he always keeps the kind of weight and authority that the bass should have. When he races up to the top he doesn't leave a gap at the bottom."

About audiences, Robert comments: "I've always found British audiences to be the least idealistic of all. The French and the Dutch kids really want something else to listen to, and they don't want to feel they're being hyped.

"The whole atmosphere in Britain, when you're dashing up and down the MI, is different. For instance if the PA goes wrong, there's less urgency to get it fixed. Maybe this is because Britain is home, and we don't feel the sense of occasion that we get abroad. That's probably our own fault, because some groups are very conscientious about every gig.

"The university audiences and the militant Left have little to do with what I've got to say. In West Berlin… people ask us why our songs aren't more politically committed, and why we charge entrance fees, and "Whose side are you on anyway?" The best audiences are primarily interested in the music".

Robert's singing is an interesting feature of the group, and about this side of his performance he says:

"I'm completely a child of the pop scene. When it comes to drawing inspiration for one of Mike's time signatures, I go and listen to Sly or James Brown. That's more poppy than most pop people listen to.

"The voice came from a need for a particular sound. I can't pitch accurately low because of the nature of the instruments, so I sing high. It's also better to keep tonally blank and let the clear note come through.

"It's also a slightly social thing, in that it's the closest I can get to talking to the audience. I haven't got Lyn's thing about the voice being the source of all sound, and it took a long time to figure out how to use it. Singing songs was obviously out with this band, and Syd (Barrett) has been a big influence. It's an unaffected thing, just straight words really.



ROBERT WYATT: ' I never know what people think of us '

"But what I was saying about the pop thing: if there has been any grafting on to our music, pop music was the last thing to be grafted on. Nevertheless in ways we're completely opposed to what happens in jazz, where people extend themselves all the time. We all feel the pressure to the drums. It clears the overall conscious of the editing aspect of performance."

Among the changes which Robert is making in his playing is the use of snare-drum with the snares off, making the drum into a third tom-tom, pitched higher than the others.

"I've been doing that and playing nearer the rim of the drum, to get a ringing sound. This changes the whole nature of the kit, and removes the cymbals from their usual relationship to the drums. It clears the overall sound and makes a lot more space, because the sound with cymbals and snare going with the other instruments can be very muddy."

Robert's technique fascinated me the first time I saw him. He plays not so much like a conventional kit drummer, but more like a tympanist, with that fluid movement around the drums which comes from the arms rather than the wrists.

"I learned from a jazz drummer, who taught me to play with my elbows in, using my wrists like Philly Joe Jones. But I never really mastered it, and anyway you can't get the volume or intensity that way, so I rather let it go and started using my forearms more.

"I'm seriously considering taking the snare drum away from the centre of the kit and putting it more to one side, so that I can get away from the Buddy Rich thing and use it more for accents.

"The kit I use was given to me by Mitch (Mitchell), who had it custom built in the States out of Maplewood. When I sit down behind it it's like being in a little room, it's very comfortable.

"If jazz drumming has had any influence on me, it's been in teaching me what not to do – although I hope that doesn't sound arrogant. Some drummers have all this jazz training and just do it all wrong. For me, it's really all down to James brown's rhythm section."

Richard Williams

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Dobson's voice - Melody Maker - January 31, 1970

Dobson's voice



MUSIC IS the only means of enlightenment for this century." Thus spake Lyn Dobson, multi-instrumentalist and thinker, formerly of Group Sounds Five and Manfred Mann and now ensconced in the rapidly rising Soft Machine.

" I'm interested In finding the central core of music," he says. " It can all be traced back through primitive folk music to the central core, which is basically a drone and a polyrhythmic structure.

" Jazz doesn't mean anything much to me now, apart from people who have transcended it, like John Coltrane. The problem of jazz is that it falls into an ego trap.

" People use jazz to prove how clever they are, but you can do more with one note than with any amount of clever phrases. I've been through years of playing fast, using other people's licks, but It never means anything.

"The quality of sound is what really matters, and that's what I'm working on with the Soft Machine. Playing with electric instruments is different — it changes the whole nature of the horns.

" You have to come to terms with the sensual nature of the instrument like the sitar which is my main thing now although I don't play it in the band.

"If the sitar is played badly and is wrongly tuned it means nothing and can hardly be

heard, but if the strings are all in sympathy you can hear it — 20 miles away.

" I never really got into music until I started meditating on my own about four years ago . . . but I don't want to sound pretentious about that.

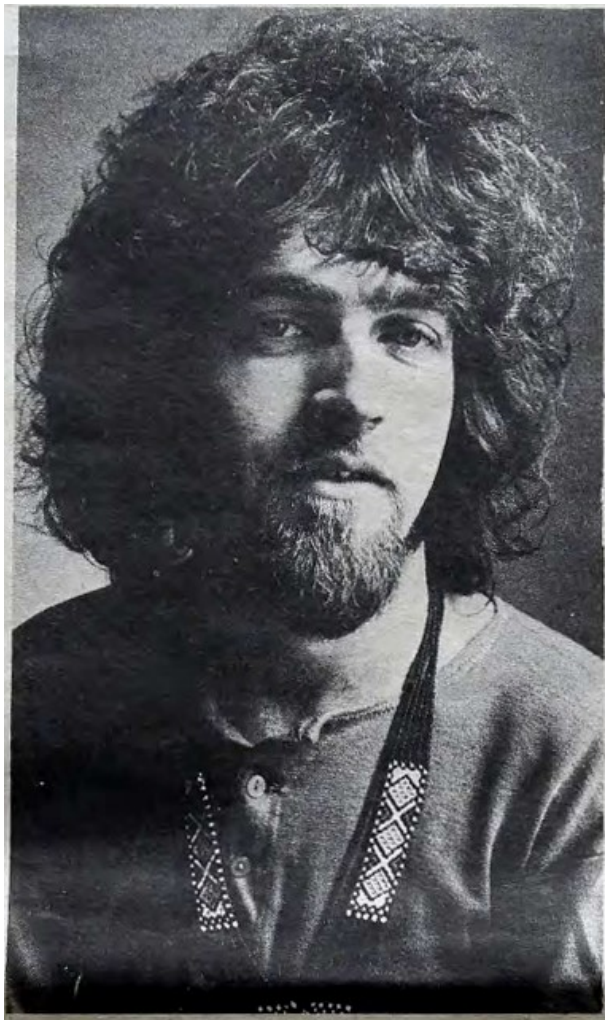
"You know the open air is really the place to play. One of my ambitions is to make an LP out of doors. That's the feeling you have to try and recreate when you're playing an electric horn in a concert hall.

" At the Fairfield Hall the Soft Machine and the audience really came to terms with the environment, and when it's like that I don't feel that I'm a musician on the stage entertaining a lot of spectators. It has to be a total communication thing.

" The whole structure of groups and concerts is artificial Music is a thing in which everybody ought to partake. I've been busking, not for the bread, but to bring music to people in the most unlikely situations.

" I've sat in Tube stations playing and I really turned on people who never dream of going to a pop concert.

" The majority of people playing jazz are happy to make it musically a minority thing. But music isn't valid until it's out in the open. Otherwise it's as ridiculous as a religion which a few people set up for themselves alone, not letting anyone else participate.



LYN DOBSON: Soft Machine man

" Music has got to be destructive rather than creative, and although it's necessary to express hate occasionally, it's the love thing that really matters.

"Steve Marriott taught me a hell of a lot when I played with Humble Pie." (It was on their first album) " He has no technique really, but he's an incredible musician and I really

respect him. he knows instinctively how to tune a guitar and make it resonate, and he can create that feel that makes everyone want to get up and dance round the room.

" The Soft Machine are trying to arrive at that point by complex intellectual approach, but they are aware of the intuitive thing too, so it still comes out pretty basic. And with the group I've also got a chance to get into my own things at the same time. For instance I want to do an album of my own songs, using sitar.

'* Indian music is the most simple music ever, although it seems so complex, and it hasn't changed for hundreds of years. Ragas aren't discovered by intellect — they're really natural law, which is unchangeable.

" About 18 months ago I decided what I'm going to do, and onece I've said what I want to say I'll disappear off to the hills to jam with Indian musicians!"

Richard Williams

Previous article Next article

Back to the list

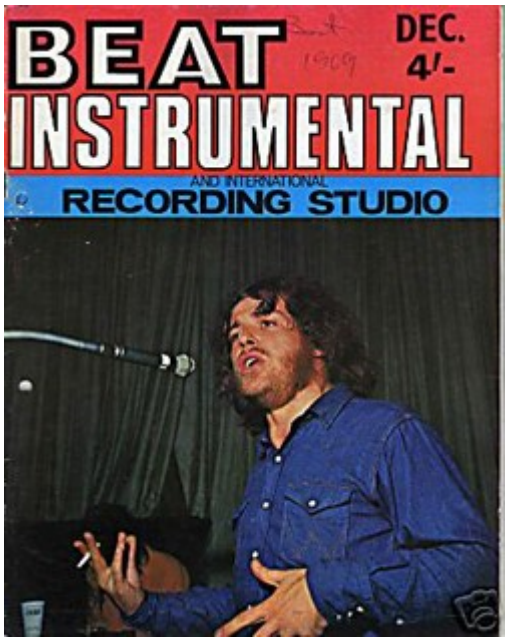
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soft Machine - Beat Instrumental - December 1969

SOFT MACHINE



"INDEPENDENCE" and "freedom" are words much used today to justify any act from dossing down in Piccadilly to running naked through Trafalgar Square, but Soft Machine use these words with such liberal enthusiasm, that they don't give the impression of just quoting well-worn cliches.

With two LPs under their belts – the first of which was released in America only – the Soft Machine trio strongly believe that the individual and musical freedom they try to practise has formed a great part of the way their career has progressed.

Like so many of our talented groups, they have made a big impact in the States, but have found it very hard to become accepted here. However, having emerged from the psychedelic morass, they have long since dropped the light show as part of their act, and are now intent on earning a reputation on the British scene.

Socially, these three – Mike Ratledge (keyboard), Hugh Hopper (bass) and Robert Wyatt (drums) – don't go around together much, but guard and encourage the right to preserve their own interests.

"We're all horrifyingly independent of each other," said Robert when I met the group recently, "and we're always putting each other down."

An ominous statement when isolated, but the group feel that through this they can progress as a unit. "When we play, we play as individuals. One of us does what he wants to do and drags the others along. If anyone feels bad he is involved with the others and his interest is maintained. This ensures that nobody becomes a passenger. We must be one of the few groups that haven't any passengers, and we're each of us strong enough to have a group built round us and carry it off, but we feel that as individuals we complement one another musically."

This musical independence produces the Soft Machine sound which is impossible to categorise. "We play everything we have ever learnt from rock, pop, jazz – the lot. We're not frustrated jazz musicians, which is what a lot of people think. On the contrary, we like to feel that most jazz musicians are frustrated Soft Machine members."

They never seek to smother one another, merely blend together to produce their own sound. As Robert said: "I'd love to play solid rock, but I would never dream of asking the others to play it all the time."

Another form of independence they're looking for is financial. They wish they had enough money to be able to record more, because they're dissatisfied with both their LPs so far. Their second album is the only one to be released in Britain, and they all feel that it no longer represents the type of music that they are playing.
"The album was recorded months ago, and there's only one track on it that we still play. Admittedly this is because a lot of it is too technical to play on stage, but the record just isn't us at the moment. What we would like is a bit more bread so that we can be free to go into a studio and record how and what we want.

"Time is the big problem. On the last album, because their wasn't much money around, everybody was rushed and the simple and beautiful ideas that we had just didn't come across. They all became fuzzed. It's so frustrating because we know our potential is much greater. The recording studio is a very expensive instrument to play, and not many people can afford to play it well.

"If we don't get more studio experience how can we be expected to learn and progress on record. We're very grateful to the recording company for everything, but actually we truthfully wish that less money had been spent on promotion, and more on getting the record together. At the moment we think we would prefer people to come and see us live, rather than judge us from the album."



Don't get the idea that Soft Machine are content to sit back and dwell on past failures, and dream of future glory. The lads are at present working very hard, and are optimistic about future recording as they have finished some tapes with which they are very happy. They have finished writing the musical score for a French television series, and they have hopes that a film score is in the offing. They also have plans to expand their sound on stage, something that they have always wanted to do.

"Whenever we've got the bread, we're going to play with a line-up of three saxes and a trombone. Two of the saxes are coming from Keith Tippet's band, the other from Mike West's band, and the trombone from Carl Jenkins. We've always felt a bit restricted on stage in the past, but this should really improve our sound."

If they were each given total freedom, what would they all do? The answers came back very quickly. Robert would like "to play rock with soul, do more record production and maybe write more music." Hugh would "produce and write music," while Mike would "do music – period – and extend my interest in the cinema."

There seems to be little chance that the members of Soft Machine will become totally independent and free of each other and go their own ways, for, as I was leaving, Robert said to me: "You know, I couldn't leave Soft Machine, I would feel I was missing something great. I just have to be part of this exciting music we're making." Mike and Hugh just nodded.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

When Soft Machine broke down and cried - Disc and Music Echo 1s - November 29, 1969

WHEN SOFT MACHINE BROKE DOWN AND CRIED



It's impossible to pin an identifiable sound on Soft Machine. Their style has already changed since their last album was out—only a few months ago. And as for their early singles, well, you just Wouldn't recognise them.

Soft Machine themselves forget how long they've been around—five, six, seven years? The two basic originals, Michael Ratledge (keyboards) and Robert Wyatt (drums), say the group was formed when they were at school in Canterbury, got its name some time after that, alternately gathered and lost other members and just choogled along.

At present they have Hugh Hopper on bass. "He was working on a farm in Canterbury," says Robert proudly. "A true country lad. He was about to sell his bass and buy a bicycle and go cycling round France when Michael and I found him. He had a loathing of show-business and it was only by promising not to play any pop we got him." It seems to be this jovial outlook coupled with a genuine dedication to music that- has kept Soft Machine going for so long.

They are well known and popular to a minority in England. ("John Peel has been marvellous, it's been quite embarrassing the way he's helped us along," says Robert.) They also have a large following on the Continent, and were well received when they went around America with the Jimi Hendrix tour last year, after which Mitch Mitchell gave Robert his drum kit.

At the beginning of the emergence of the Underground scene here they were often at UFO, and shared the terrible times with the other groups when they were sent out to mischosen venues.

"We had such terrible times in the early days if we ventured outside UFO," recalls Robert with a shudder. "We'd get microphones and gear bashed up. Six times out of 10 we'd come offstage in tears. I never want that to happen again. "But even in those early days we were on the fringe rather than a part of that scene, like Pink Floyd were. We were spending our summers in Majorca, and other times in Paris with friends on a kind of jazz scene."

Robert says he thinks they have never achieved wide acceptance because they've never bothered with catchy gimmicks.



Soft Machine (left to right) Robert Wyatt, Michael Ratledge, and Hugh Hopper.

"If you want something badly enough you fight for it, and none of us have ever thought of anything clever to say to the audience. We don't fling our arms in the air or freak out onstage—we haven't bothered to make an impact on the keen little ears all over the country. It's just a purely musical thing for us—we're not revolutionaries or anything."

Although Robert will remember instances when they won a competition in Margate by playing "I Put A Spell On You," "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag" and other delights many years ago, Soft Machine write their own stuff now. "I can't write so I have to get them to write it down for me, and then they write stuff and I stick words on them for records," says Robert.

"I've always liked to work with brilliant people. I've never liked passengers. And I've never worked with anyone who was coasting and feeding off the rest of the group. We're probably not the happiest group—Hugh and I have completely different ideas, but it's worth it to know we feel strongly and it works onstage. Music comes before sociability for me —it's all very well being friends but it doesn't make for good music.

"If Hugh's listening to music it'll be 'Uncle Meat,' Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie. Mike listens to American avant-garde stuff or Debussy quartets, and my record collection is Bee Gees, Sly and the Family Stone and Wilson Pickett doing 'Hey Jude.'"

"The thing we have in common is that we really have got clear, strong ideas on what music should be and what we should be doing. This is why none of our groups will ever last, and that's why you can't give Soft Machine a certain noise."

At the moment they're into the jazz scene, and augmenting their trio with Keith Tippett and three of his jazzmen and Lyn Dobson on soprano and tenor sax and flute.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Unclassifiable Soft Machine - Hugh Hopper talks to Bob Dawbarn - Melody Maker - November 8, 1969

Unclassifiable Soft Machine

Hugh Hopper talks to Bob Dawbarn

LAST WEEK in Paris, the Soft Machine were presented by the French government with an award.

Even the group seem a little vague about what exactly it was for.

"It was something to do with a section of the government called Leisure for Youth," bass guitarist Hugh Hopper told me. "They give awards for records in every field of music. I can't say what section they found for us, but there was a little note on the award which said we were for anyone over 12.

"Duke Ellington, apparently, was for everyone over eight so we are not sure how to take that."

The French Government certainly had a problem. The Soft Machine are utterly unclassifiable — their music has elements of jazz and straight music as well as the tougher forms of pop.

Looks

And now they have become a seven-piece with the addition of the front line of the Keith Tippett Group — Mark Charig (tpt), Elton Dean (alto) and Nick Evans (tmb) — and Lyn Dobson (tnr, flute).

"Although obviously they all have other gigs



we are hoping it will be a regular front line," explained Hugh. "There are still technical problems over amplifying the saxes and getting everything balanced correctly. We've only been playing together two or three weeks but it certainly looks as though it is going to work out.

"It gives us the chance to bring out certain things in our music that we have been thinking about for some time, apart from having four extra solo voices. We had begun to feel rather restricted by the trio."

Free

I asked if the music was likely to become even more free.

"No, we were really freer in the old days," said Hugh. "We are now much more interested in arranging and use a lot of totally arranged passages.

"Fortunately our audiences seem to change too, they follow what we are doing and adapt. Mind you we have never worried about being commercial and have therefore never been tied down by thoughts of hit records and the rest of it.

"We are all writing in the group, though Mike Ratledge, our organist, does the greatest volume of stuff. We are also getting much more work abroad now — we have three weeks coming up in France and then a tour of Holland, Belgium and Switzerland in January. There is so much more money for us over there."

Though the group does not want labels attached to their music, Hugh agrees that it is a little odd to find them working largely in the pop field.

"We go out as a pop group, but there is little similarity between us and the pop world apart from that," he admitted. "Mind you, we all came up through pop. I spent some time in a soul band, for example. But, basically, the Soft Machine plan to make it commercially without making commercial music."


SOFT MACHINE: their music has elements of jazz and straight music

There is a growing mystique surrounding the group on the Continent. "They are more open to new sounds in places like Amsterdam than they are in Britain," explains Hugh. "They get much more enthusiastic. The English aren't an enthusiastic race — I know I'm not. We all tend to be a bit cool. The odd thing is that on the Continent they aren't interested in their own bands. Instead there is this strange mystique about British groups. Or Americans - there are plenty of black Americans there playing free music and earning a living. They couldn't do it here, nor, possibly, in America. The Swedes, for example, have always been receptive to the avant-garde music".



SOFT MACHINE, their music has elements of jazz and straight music

LAST WEEK in Paris the Soft Machine were presented by the French Government with an award.

Even the group seem a little vague about what exactly it was for.

Unclassifiable Soft Machine

HUGH HOPPER TALKS TO BOB DAWBARN

Looks

Prices

Wide

Free

If you are after that dividend, SPORTING RECORD cannot afford to be without

LS JACKPOT
LD KING

ery Tuesday 9d.

Future work for the Soft Machine includes the writing of seven hours of music for a new French TV series which Hugh describes as "a Eurovision thing about some fugitive type guy." The Machine will also be appearing in the series.

Prices

Hugh is already involved in commercials and says: "We would all like to get into incidental music and film writing."

Why change from a trio now?

"The simple answer is we haven't been able to afford it before," said Hugh. "Now we have sorted out our management thing and we have a lot of work on the Continent — and we are getting good prices. We had some nice powerful sounds with the trio but when playing for an hour on stage it gets a bit boring."

The new Soft Machine has already got one unusual booking — it will be playing opposite the Thelonious Monk Quartet at Ronnie Scott's on November 11 and 18.

Wide

"I don't know how the management will take our amplification," commented Hugh. "Or how Monk will, for that matter. But we are really looking forward to this one."

How wide, I wondered, was Hugh's own musical taste.

"Well, my favourite record is the Miles Davis-Gil Evans 'Sketches Of Spain', he told me. "Pop? I'd listen to somebody like the Cream, though I don't say I would buy their records.

"In fact the last record I bought was 'Uncle Meat,' the Frank Zappa thing. Really, Zappa approximates to what I like in the pop world."

Bob Dawbarn

Soft Machine - looking for more complicated musical ideas... - Record Mirror - October 25, 1969



THE Soft Machine don't look on themselves as a pop group, although they are usually booked out as one. They would rather record than perform publically.

"The first album we made was more or less a rehearsal record," drummer Robert Wyatt said. "We're looking forward to the day when somebody will say to us, 'here's a studio — get on with it in your own time'.

"Some people have referred to us as 'underground'. But what is underground? Words like that fall into a trap. At one time Thunderclap Newman's single was more underground than Jethro Tull's because his was in 5/4 and Jethro Tull's was in 4/4."

SOFT MACHINE—one of the most interesting and inventive groups around.

Soft Machine— looking for more complicated musical ideas . . .

ECLECTIC

The trio's music is eclectic—their influences ranging from modern jazz to modern classical music. Ornette Coleman, Don Ellis, Hindemith and Bartock all figure in their musical make - up. Electronic sounds also plays a big part.

From listening to older forms of music, Soft Machine have learnt the use of dynamics — something which many groups haven't even heard of.

"Although we do play loudly, we use dynamics and are as supple and as varied as we know how," explained Robert. "The people who've influenced me in my music are Duke Ellington, Charlie Mingus and Gil Evans.

"Continuity in music is what we're doing. We're involved in the more demanding points of continuity as it goes on and on and the music builds.

"We're aiming for more complicated ideas whereby the structure changes throughout a piece." Mike Ratledge added. "The jazz pianist, Cecil Taylor, has influenced me in terms of his energy and attack in his music. Miles Davis was an influence when he went through his modal thing."

HARPSICHORD

Hugh Hopper plays bass, acoustic guitar and alto with Soft Machine. Robert takes vocals and Mike plays flute in addition to piano, organs and harpsichord.

Although Soft Machine are one of the most progressive groups around, they haven't lost sight of pleasing their audiences. With this in mind, they should be around to entertain us for some time to come. IAN MIDDLETON

The Soft Machine don't look on themselves as a pop group, although they are usually booked out as one. They would rather record than perform publically.
"The first album we made was more or less a rehearsal record," drummer Robert Wyatt said. "We're looking forward to the day when somebody will say to us, 'here's a studio - get on with it in your own time'.

"Some people have referred to us as 'underground'. But what is underground ? Words like that fall into a trap. At one time Thunderclap Newman's single was more underground than Jethro Tull's because his was in 5/4 and Jethro Tull's was in 4/4."

ECLECTIC



The trio's music is eclectic - their influences ranging from modern jazz to modern classical music. Ornette Coleman, Don Ellis, Hindemith and Bartók, all figure in their musical make - up. Electronic sounds also plays a big part.

From listening to older forms of music, Soft Machine have learnt the use of dynamics - something which many groups haven't even heard of.
"Although we do play loudly, we use dynamics and are as supple and as varied as we know how," explained Robert.
"The people who've influenced me in my music are Duke Ellington, Charlie Mingus and Gil Evans.

"Continuity in music is what we're doing. We're involved in the more demanding points of continuity so it goes on and on and the music builds.

"We're aiming for more complicated ideas whereby the structure changes throughout a piece." Mike Ratledge added. "The jazz pianist Cecil Taylor, has influenced me in terms of his energy and attack in his music. Miles Davis was an influence when he went through his modal thing."

HARPSICHORD

Hugh Hopper plays bass, acoustic guitar and alto with Soft Machine. Robert takes vocals and Mike plays flute in addition to piano, organs and harpsichord.

Although Soft Machine are one of the most progressive groups around, they haven't lost sight of pleasing their audiences. With this in mind, they should be around in entertain us for some time to come.

Ian Middleton

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soft Machine's no ordinary trio - Melody Maker - July 5, 1969

Soft Machine's no ordinary trio


Melody Maker

Exclusive!

STONES AT HYDE PARK

WHAT YOU'LL SEE
WHAT YOU'LL HEAR

'and if you can, bring a drum or a tambourine even a tin to bang on or something,' urges Mick Jagger

TURN TO PAGE 4 AND CENTRE PAGES

Hendrix split: Redding goes, group grows

MITCH MITCHELL'S PLANS UNKNOWN

What the disc price war means to you

see page 3

CECIL TAYLOR, Scott La Faro and Elvin Jones may seem unlikely influences on a trio who regard themselves as part of the pop scene, but they were the original inspiration of Mike Ratledge, Hugh Hopper and Robert Wyatt who currently make up the Soft Machine with the occasional addition of Brian Hopper on saxes.

But then Soft Machine is hardly one of your predictable pop groups, and generally favour lengthy, complex compositions with unusual time signatures.

The group originally grew from a collection of friends in Canterbury who made up a variety of personnels and groups over the years. The first step, says Mike Ratledge, was an avant garde jazz group in 1962 based on the music of Cecil Taylor. A bit before its time?

"That's what the public thought, too" admits Mike. "We did a couple of weeks at the establishment and then the leader, Daevid Allen quit and went to Majorca while I went to Oxford University.

"The Soft Machine may still be a minority-appeal group, but, for us, it is the music that is important. And we certainly haven't done badly. We do a fair amount of college work here and quite a bit abroad - Holland, France, Switzerland plus seven months in America. That American trip was too much, we were working every day with no time to rehearse and just had to take time out to rethink when we got back.

"A large percentage of our music is improvised, although perhaps not so much of it recently as the structures get more complex. All our material is original."

The group has completed a new album which is released in the States this week and may be followed up with another American tour. The LP won't be out in Britain until September.



SOFT MACHINE: Cecil Taylor influence

"We don't plan ahead," admits Mike. "We suffer from the problem of being three individual people and the group is run on a weak kind of democracy. Actually that side of it is easier since we cut down to three instead of four - one feels more uneasy about ganging up on one person."

As somebody whose first inclinations were towards jazz, does Mike get full satisfaction from the current set-up?

"I don't feel we have copped out in any way, if that's what you mean," he says. "Our present style is forced on us because it is the best way these particular people can work together.

And there is really nothing you can't use when writing for the group.

"The thing is that we have got enough time now to do new material and also get outside the music business. Film music is one thing, we have several projects going. But generally we want to get out of the limitations of a three-piece group. On the new album we have used tenor horn, flute and alto. Writing for a larger group appeals to all of us.

"Everybody in the group writes and, at the moment, each arranges his own material. One problem I find is that you can get caught up on details of structure and the whole piece loses its identity, then you wonder if the original idea was worth it.

"But playing when you have nothing to say is just as important as playing when you have something to say. This is one of the things a group just has to learn".



Bob Dawbarn

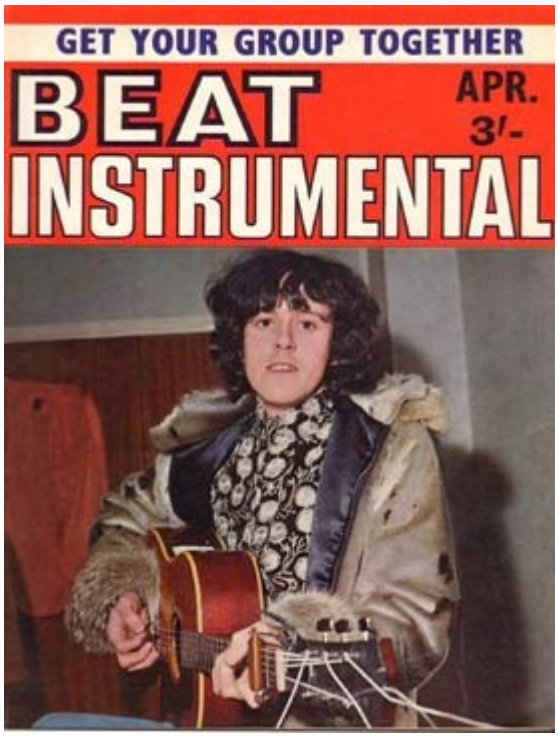
Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

Soft Machine - Beat Instrumental - April 1969

SOFT MACHINE



WHEN the beads, bells and heady atmosphere of psychedelia first came to our shores about two years ago, two groups in particular emerged and became adopted as musicians by appointment to the hippie movement. One of these was the Pink Floyd. The other was the Soft Machine, with Mike Ratledge on organ, Robert Wyatt on drums, and the now departed Kevin Ayers on bass.

But while the Floyd found themselves hot commercial properties, churning out hit singles and a first album that sold by the ton to a far wider public than just the flower crowd, the Soft Machine never achieved any breakthrough to mass audiences, though they started off with an equally fanatic following. Their performances were perhaps more pioneering than the Floyd's enlisting the considerable talents of Mark Boyle's light show and the dancing of Graziella Martinez.

Much to everyone's surprise, the Soft Machine disappeared from the scene practically without trace. Only recently has anything been heard of the group after an absence of well over a year, their protracted vanishing act being due to an extended visit to the U.S.A., where they reaped much success.

Much more success, that is, than came their way in England. They had one single out on Polydor that did nothing spectacular, got into dire financial straits and nearly became the traditional starving musicians. Often they would not even have enough money to buy petrol for getting to a gig.

The turning point came when their manager, Mike Jeffries, who also looks after the Hendrix Experience, arranged for the group to go on a concert tour of the States with Jimi. At this time, America was far more receptive to new ideas in pop, and the Soft Machine's style, relying to a far greater extent than previous pop on improvisation — as opposed to apeing American blues guitarists — was certainly a marketable commodity. They had already won many converts in France and Holland, and America was the ideal place for the group to concentrate their energies.

soft machine

WHEN the beads, bells and heady atmosphere of psychedelia first came to our shores about two years ago, two groups in particular emerged and became adopted as musicians by appointment to the hippie movement. One of these was the Pink Floyd. The other was the Soft Machine, with Mike Ratledge on organ, Robert Wyatt on drums, and the now departed Kevin Ayers on bass.

But while the Floyd found themselves hot commercial properties, churning out hit singles and a first album that sold by the ton to a far wider public than just the flower crowd, the Soft Machine never achieved any breakthrough to mass audiences, though they started off with an equally fanatic following. Their performances were perhaps more pioneering than the Floyd's enlisting the considerable talents of Mark Boyle's light show and the dancing of Graziella Martinez.

Much to everyone's surprise, the Soft Machine disappeared from the scene practically without trace. Only recently has anything been heard of the group after an absence of well over a year, their protracted vanishing act being due to an extended visit to the U.S.A., where they reaped much success.

Much more success, that is, than came their way in England. They had one single out on Polydor that did nothing spectacular, got into dire financial straits and nearly became the traditional starving musicians. Often they would not even have enough money to buy petrol for getting to a gig.

The turning point came when their manager, Mike Jeffries, who also looks after the Hendrix Experience, arranged for the group to go on a concert tour of the States with Jimi. At this time, America was far more receptive to new ideas in pop, and the Soft Machine's style, relying to a far greater extent than previous pop on improvisation—as opposed to apeing American blues guitarists—was certainly a marketable commodity. They had already won many converts in France and Holland, and America was the ideal place for the group to concentrate their energies.







This first tour with Hendrix was so successful that the group stayed on after it had finished. Right from the start they had been playing to crowds of five and six thousand and receiving considerably more appreciation than at home. All across the country it was good. They were apprehensive of the dreaded mid-west and the reputation of such cities as Dallas — but in the event, the worst places they had to play were the New York suburbs. Everywhere they played the hippies turned out in force, in the most unlikely places.

Their album, *Soft Machine*, is presently number fifty in the American album charts and still rising after three months; it had an advance order of forty thousand. Though the group have been back in England since last September (now with a new bassist, Hugh Hopper, doubling on alto sax), there is still some doubt whether it will be released here. Track didn't put it out when it was made, their policy at that time being to concentrate on hit singles, and the group were not here to promote it.

They have now finished work on a second album, produced by themselves, which could appear instead. There were a number of things on the first album of which the group disapproved; produced by the man behind Bob Dylan's records, Tom Wilson, they were not given much help. Wilson thought they were such talented musicians that he should impose himself as little as possible. A further problem in recording — on both records — was caused by lack of time, the whole thing having to be completed in a week.

The second record was made in England, at Olympic, early this year. Again, time was a difficulty. Robert didn't have a drum kit to rehearse outside of the studio so he had to try and work out what to do in his head. Once inside the studio, everything had to be played again so he could get into the music when the time should have been used purely for recording.

Since they have been back in England, the group have been relaxing. They made enough

money, working solidly every night for a year, to be able to rehearse, write, and get on with other activities —Mike, for example, is writing a book on Preston Sturges, an American comedy film producer. They have played very few gigs, preferring to stick to the better venues instead of taking all the work that comes along.

Concerts with Kirk

They did play a number of concerts with Roland Kirk and the Ronnie Scott band, Scott's men augmenting the Soft Machine line-up. Mike felt that having a three-piece band can prove limiting, and enjoyed the idea of working with a big band. This brings up the question of how to label the Soft Machine. Are they a jazz group? There are many similarities with jazz trios, but the excitement of the Soft Machine is vintage pop. The members of the group have been involved in the avant-garde jazz scene. But the only real answer is to say that they are playing what they want — call it jazz, pop or whatever.

R.S.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Mike Ratledge Interview - Oz - n°18 - February, 1969

MIKE RATLEDGE INTERVIEW



> Zoom

The interviewee prefaced the text below with the fact that he had no opinions on any subjects. It was 'ridiculous to attempt an interview.' The tape recorder was switched on. The interviewer gives the impression of being both stupid and innocent — which is quite genuine. For him, pop begins and ends with the Four Seasons & the work of Phil Spector - a fact of no particular relevance.

F W: Are you an Underground group?

M R: That can mean two things. Are we regarded as the subject of cultisms in the Underground? The answer to which may or may not be true, it is not for me to say. The second thing is whether that is desirable. I would say that none of us wish to be a cult in the Underground. The Underground is basically what Taylor Meade described it as — 'Doing something for nothing.' And that's what it's turned out to be. When you're asked to do an Underground benefit, and the promoter starts talking to you in terms of the art you're offering, you know very well that you won't get any money for it, you'll even have to pay your own expenses. It means no organization, the stage will be a shambles, the P A will be hopeless and everything else. But good things have still come out of the Underground. The U F 0 was good when Hoppy was running it. It was well run. But the Underground is usually shambollic.

F W: Would you like to be disociated with the Underground, move out, make a lot of money, a lot - like Hendrix?

M R: I'd hate to have the position of Hendrix in terms of his work schedule and what it's doing to him. I'd hate to be on the road months at a time, working every night and never rehearsing. I mean, still playing numbers like Hey Joe after three years to an audience that shows it doesn't listen to what you're playing because the applause at the beginning of a number when it identifies it is louder than the applause you get at the end. That's all they're interested in.



The group have returned to this country where they are working on the second L P They hope to avoid live performance and tours after the American experience, with the exception of possible Continental tours with Ronnie Scott & Roland Kirk. They are at present rehearsing for the L P. A new bass player has joined the group.

The first L P has not been released in this country. Copies were available in the import sections of shops like Music Land in Berwick Street, Soho.

INTERVIEW

was well run. But the Underground is usually shambolic.

F W: Would you like to be dissociated with the Underground, move out, make a lot of money, a lot – like Hendrix?

M R: I'd hate to have the position of Hendrix in terms of his work schedule and what it's doing to him. I'd hate to be on the road months at a time, working every night and never rehearsing. I mean, still playing numbers like Hey Joe after three years to an audience that shows it doesn't listen to what you're playing because the applause at the beginning of a number when it identifies it is louder than the applause you get at the end. That's all they're interested in.

F W: Off-stage sounds like a nightmare. What's it like?

M R: Exactly as they say it is – working with Hendrix it is anyway.

And travel in the States with a pop group is like a luxury purgatory. You stay in Hiltons, then a Cadillac Fleetwood takes you to the airport first thing in the

technically bad.

F W: What about the Doors?

M R: The Doors I can't really see, except as a sociological phenomenon. The Doors are a chance for all the little teenyboppers in the States to think they're digging something avant garde when they're not at all. They have got all the symptoms of being avant garde. They've got the proselytising lyrics, the sex figure of Morrison who masturbates on stage, so he's really iconoclastic and you're worshipping an iconoclast – who is not actually moving the art forward in any way. They go into old blues riffs, none of them are proficient, they have no authority on stage, their sound is appallingly weak. In all the ways that pop music has broken through in five years, they don't possess any of these features that caused the breakthrough. Hendrix contributed a new searing sound. But they have no sound identity. They're contributing nothing musically.

F W: Groups like the Jefferson Airplane – how do they fit into the scale you just

M R: This jazz/pop thing is very difficult. There are two types – the jazz group that goes into pop, and the pop group that goes vaguely into jazz. Don Ellis and Gary Burton have gone into pop. And in a peculiar way they tend to lose something. Whereas pop groups going into jazz don't. Jazz groups going into pop tend to misconstrue what the actual excitement about pop is. They tend to simplify their structures, but what makes pop is the sound. The excitement of the sound is something which somebody like Don Ellis hasn't got, nor Gary Burton. So they lose both ways. Whereas pop groups in jazz, if they're any good, maintain the excitement of the sound. The best example of this is the Mothers', although they're not really a Jazz/Pop group – there's no such middle stream. But they use devices as in jazz, and they have jazz soloists. But they still have the tough rock sound. The Spirit is another example of this.

F W: Do you have a tough rock sound?

M R: It's tough. I don't know whether it's rock. It's very distorted and individual.

F W: If somebody who manufactures hits (like Spector used to) came to you and asked to record for him – would you?

M R: No, largely because you can't calculate a hit ever. It's chancy. So you'd be left recording something which is neither a success nor a pleasure to perform. The only thing to do is to do what you really like doing. (pause) Supposing Jim Webb came up to me with a song. That's a better example. I wouldn't mind doing it if I liked the song – but not as the Soft Machine. That would be unfair on what little public we have. But I love playing with other people whatever music they play. If Kevin in the group did a pretty-pretty single I wouldn't mind playing on it with him. But not as a Soft Machine. It just confuses the consumer.

F W: How do you react to pop journalism?

M R: The basic trouble is that all journalists are outside us. i.e. they don't

F W: Off-stage sounds like a nightmare. What's it like?

M R: Exactly as they say it is - working with Hendrix it is anyway. And travel in the States with a pop group is like a luxury purgatory. You stay in Hiltons, then a Cadillac Fleetwood takes you to the airport first thing in the morning. Another Cadillac Fleetwood meets you, takes you to the hotel. You wash, the Cadillac Fleetwood takes you to the gig and back to the Hilton. You sleep. In the end it completely destroys your sense of geography. You're manipulated like a piece of baggage. You have no control over the direction your life takes. It's like those experiments where they deprive rats of control over their bodies. In the end you suffer from depersonalisation, loss of identity. It sounds heavy but it does happen like that. There is no longer any 'I' that travels, the travel subsumes you, there is no such thing as place because air destroys that as a form of travel. And America is constructed in such a way that it denies any individual differences from place to place. This is the blueprint for America.

F W: Alright.

M R: What do you mean alright? I haven't finished yet.

F W: O K What about American groups?

M R: There are the Mothers' and the Spirit. They were the only two groups I was interested in, or impressed with at all. (pause) There are four types of groups. Firstly, the group that has technical proficiency on their instruments and have got ideas of their own. The Second has ideas but no technical proficiency. Then those that have no ideas of their own but have the proficiency. And lastly, those who have neither ideas nor technical proficiency.

F W: But they have publicity.

M R: Yes. The Mothers and the Spirit come into the first group. There are thousands of other groups that have either technique or proficiency. Or blues groups doing blues arrangements better than the people did them originally. Then there are weird underground groups in places like Chicago who have ideas but no proficiency - like the M C Five. But most are not worth mentioning because they are so technically bad.

F W: What about the Doors?

M R: The Doors I can't really see, except as a sociological phenomenon. The Doors are a chance for all the little teenyboppers in the States to think they're digging something avant garde when they're not at all. They have, got all the symptoms of being avant garde. They've got the proselytising lyrics, the sex figure of Morrison who masturbates on stage, so he's really iconoclastic and you're worshipping an iconoclast — who is not actually moving the art forward in any way. They go into old blues riffs, none of them are proficient, they have no authority on stage, their sound is appallingly weak. In all the ways that pop music has broken through in five years, they don't possess any of these features that caused the breakthrough. Hendrix contributed a new searing sound. But they have no sound identity. They're contributing nothing musically.

F W: Groups like the Jefferson Airplane — how do they fit into the scale you just suggested?



M R: The J A and the Big Brother Holding Co. are big cult figures on the American underground. I've never seen the J A live, but apparently they're much better than on record. They're too tidy on record for me and the soloists aren't what they're reputed to be. They have strong voices sure. But there's still a blues tyranny in America basically. To be a substantial hit you have to be a blues group. B B & T H C are not an avant garde group. They're just a big super-charged, super-heat blues group. You read in the papers in England about the avant garde in America, their names — when you hear them they're just blues groups.

F W: You started as a straight jazz group and moved into pop. This isn't typical, because the usual group starts with blues and ends up with an avant garde reputation. But you never were a blues group.

M R: This jazz/pop thing is very difficult. There are two types — the jazz group that goes into pop, and the pop group that goes vaguely into jazz. Don Ellis and Gary Burton have gone into pop. And in a peculiar way they tend to lose something. Whereas pop groups going into jazz don't. Jazz groups going into pop tend to misconstrue what the actual excitement about pop is. They tend to simplify their structures, but what makes pop is the sound. The excitement of the sound is something-which somebody like Don Ellis hasn't got, nor Gary Burton. So they lose both ways. Whereas pop groups in jazz, if they're any good, maintain the excitement of the sound. The best example of this is the Mothers', although they're not really a Jazz/Pop group — there's no such middle stream. But they use devices as in jazz, and they have jazz soloists. But they still have the tough rock sound. The Spirit is another example of this.

F W: Do you have a tough rock sound?

M R: It's tough. I don't know whether it's rock. It's very distorted and individual.

F W: If somebody who manufactures hits (like Spector used to) came to you and asked to record for him — would you?

M R: No, largely because you can't calculates hit ever. It's chancy. So you'd be left recording something which is neither a success nor a pleasure to perform. The only thing to do is to do what you really like doing. (pause) Supposing Jim Webb came up to me with a song. That's a better example. I wouldn't mind doing it if I liked the song — but not as the Soft Machine. That would be unfair on what little public we have. But I love playing with other people whatever music they play. If Kevin in the group did a pretty-pretty single I wouldn't mind playing on it with him. But not as a Soft Machine. It just confuses the consumer.

F W: How do you react to pop journalism?

M R: The basic trouble is that all journalists are outside us. i.e. they don't play instruments, they've certainly never played in a pop group. They probably, until recently, haven't listened to pop music, not until the Beatles. They're not equipped in terms of musical knowledge to make any kind of judgement. If they confined themselves to saying who they liked and didn't like that would be acceptable. Unfortunately, they try to give musical reasons why they approve. These musical reasons tend to become a series of cliches that people bandy around, which usually have no relevance to the people they're talking about. A specific instance is Tony Palmer who claims qualities for The Cream which they don't possess. He says they expand the structure of common pop song chords, whereas they're still using blues structures basically, and more than any other group around. It's the same for all groups designated avant garde. It reminds me of the beginning of jazz where they tried to make jazz respectable by comparing jazz musicians to Stravinsky & Schoenberg & Bartok. But this is confusing the form because each medium has its own syntax. To make cross-judgements is confusing. It doesn't respect the identity of the medium, like all people writing

film criticism in terms of theatre. Thereby you miss the basic point of what cinema is. So Tony Palmer and the rest of them — when they talk about the Beatles being better or as good as Schubert or Schoenberg or whatever are missing the point about what makes Pop special and different from these people. Cross-judgements simply confuse rather than illuminate. Apart from not being really desirable.

F W: So how would you evaluate the Soft Machine in your musical terms?

M R: It's difficult. I think we're using a lot of things that modern jazz is now using. The most recent numbers use time-signatures like 13/4 and 9/4. We're tending to get more onto a completely compositional basis and not the idea of the cyclical song that's repeated. We're getting a way from the idea of a song as a repeated structure A B A. And more onto song as complete composition. With our definite structure, the structure is a straight fifteen minutes which doesn't actually repeat, which is more of a classical procedure if you like, but then that's not saying that we're jazz/pop or that we're classical. That simply confuses it. We have a straight pop sound inasmuch as it's very abrasive, direct and immediate. Most criticism tends to be based on this pointless comparative system. To say we're like Coltrane or like Cecil Taylor doesn't really help all that much.

F W: Well, you particularly sound like those people to me.

M R: Sometimes it might. But I know that everyone in the group has liked Coltrane at some stage, and the group feeling he got was something one liked. But I prefer to think that we had assimulated it. Because what makes it worth talking about us, or any other group, is what makes them different from the people they've been influenced by.

F W: Is there a pop-musician who even approaches Coltrane as a musician? I'm sorry.

M R: Certainly not in the terms of technique. But they have things which Coltrane doesn't have, and vice versa. I personally don't think that pop has got to the stage where I'd rather listen to any pop group than Coltrane. I'd rather listen to Coltrane any day. You see, you idiot, I don't see that there should be this exclusive choice. Everybody tries to set it up in terms of exclusive preferences.

F W: What of the present claims for pop music, claims which I find pretty screwy, that it is the complete reflection of our time, pop singers being its best interpreters.

M R: As MacIntyre would say - That's either trivial or false. Either you make it tautologically true in terms of retrospective criticism that every artist has always reflected his age — he has no choice. Or it's false because certainly the people one meets in the pop world have no motives in those terms of expressing this thing.

F W: Some of them make these precious claims for themselves.

M R: So do a lot of other people. We all over-estimate our importance, and quite often this is necessary to survive. If you didn't think that you were doing something worthwhile you'd never do it, so again that's inevitable.

F W: I think pop music's importance is over-inflated. Why is there this importance attached to it?

M R: In the last ten years it's been possible to get a lot of money from pop. It was always true of people like Presley. But now the 'star' thing isn't so strong. Today it's friends next door who make a record and become successful or make money. There can't be a person living who doesn't know through somebody or other a pop group that's actually made a lot of bread. So it draws more and more people into it, like supposed intellectuals and everybody else. There's this possibility of so much money to be made. And in the early fifties there was a beginning of a whole concern with the gap between the cultures. Michael Tippet used to have a big thing about the high brow and low brow culture. With this concern the gap began to narrow. At the same time things were becoming more available.

F W: So if poetry made people a fortune, we'd probably now find thousands of poets - is that what your reasoning?

M R: If you could make a huge amount of bread from writing poetry it



would work this way. Money means a/ you'll be a social success b/ you have dozens of chicks c/ it means amazing publicity d/ money must imply a large audience because nobody makes a lot of money without a huge audience e/ it would have to involve a Personal confrontation. If all these conditions were satisfied you would find poetry practised by thousands of people.

FW: What about you?

M R: I'd do whatever I like doing. It sounds strange but I don't do things for economie motives. I fantasize about doing things for money like robbing banks, or huge advertising cons, or writing a con novel. But I never do it.

F W: Why not?

M R: Because I'm too fucking lazy, and I have no real conviction that they would ever work.

Both questions and answers ran out at different points in the interview. To start things off it was necessary to establish what the Soft Machine were NOT doing. As below.

M R: There is nothing to connect us with people like Cage in terms of operational procedures. We don't use chance methods like throwing the I Ching, or I.B.M. random charts, or throwing coins or that stuff. Occasionally we have written a piece which is written by chance in that every note and the rhythmic structure of the piece was written by chance. But that's not our basic working procedure.

FW: You play a long number though called WE DID IT AGAIN? What was that all about? For five or six minutes, or more.

M R: Everybody in the group saw it in a different way. Robert saw it as a chance to do soul drumming for thirty minutes or whatever it was. Kevin saw the whole idea of the repeated figure as being spiritual liberation, the ultimate effect.

F W: Being boring?

M R: It was his idea that if you find something boring, a basic Zen concept, then in the end you find it interesting. And there is something in that if you listen to something repeated in the same way your mind changes the structure of it each time, the ear either habituates or forces a change on it itself, which is similar in a way to the stuff Terry Riley's doing. I saw it mainly as an irritant source.

F W: For yourself or the audience?

M R: I saw it directed at the audience. And the only times I wanted to use it was when I felt like saying fuck you to the audience. But Kevin wanted to use it at any time possible. And Robert saw it as a gesture too. Kevin saw it half way between this spiritual liberation thing, and showing how hip we were. These ostenato techniques. I saw it as an irritant source though mainly.

Fletcher Watkins - Michael Broome - Mary Moore

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soft Machine - International times N°45 - 29 November 1968

SOFT MACHINE

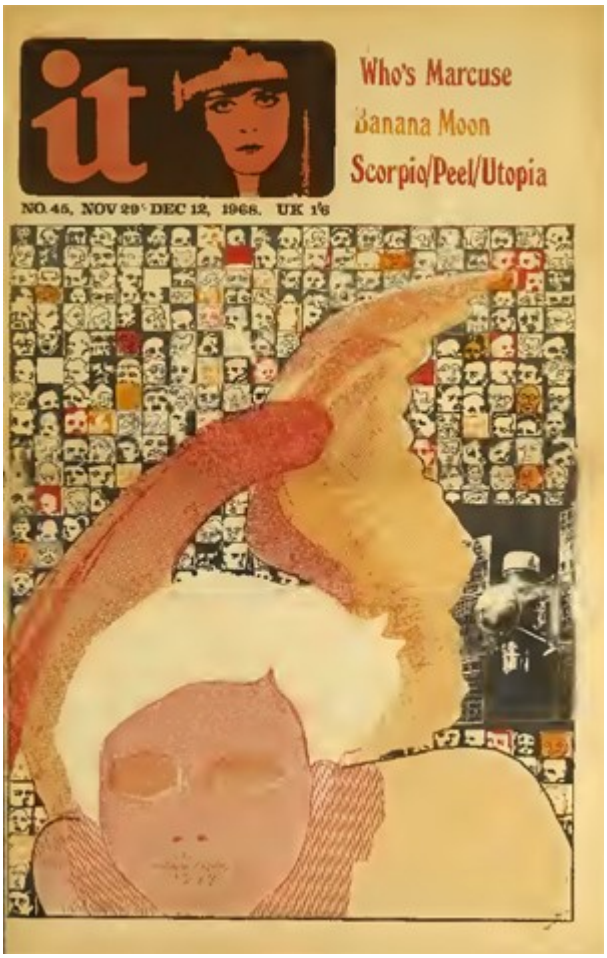


SEVERAL exotic people were sitting on the floor at an Indica Gallery opening in 1966, the tall one with the Dr Strange cape was called Michael, he said: "We've asked William Burroughs if it was OK and he said 'I suppose it'll be alright' so we're going to call ourselves THE SOFT MACHINE." From under the influences of Cornelius Cardew, John Cage, Tilbury and the New York Fluxus Group they assembled, learnt to play instruments in order to play the strange sounds in their heads, and played! They played at IT's celebration party at the Roundhouse for our first issue, where they had Norman with them who played Motor-cycle and took people for rides on it round the edges of the building when it wasn't needed as an instrument They also had Daevid Allen, writing songs, singing and using his poetry and electronic knowledge picked up when his houseboat was moored on the Seine on the Left Bank and he was involved with the French "machine poets".



The Soft Machine, famous for running over Jerry Fitzgerald's giant jelly in the IT Uncommon Market, famous for their experiments with the random element of modern electronic music, and their hour-long songs. Now Daevid sits in the south writing belles

lettres, Norman the philosopher from Oxford and his motor cycle are somewhere in the USA and the Soft Machine are en record;



THE SOFT MACHINE (ABC CPLP 4500), where old UFO favorites like 'Hope for Happiness' are presented in short concise versions which all relate to each other by the use of lines from different songs so that the album becomes essentially one long set. The jazz influences are very heavy particularly in Robert Wyatt's drum solos which could have been recorded live at Minton's, however the atonal serial piano and organ certainly could not have. These vary from a mad Cecil Taylor organ, very fast, describing musical structures by playing all around every note in order to isolate it and consequently making each line a musical event and each tune a sequence of events or a happening rather than some static exercise which could be repeated the next night. Other times the organ is very religious and reminiscent of English university church services and choral societies. They use an old trad jazz technique of describing the time sequence with the bass drum on every beat (sometimes varied with cymbal) in order to free the drums from timekeeping duties. Thus the drummer is able to experiment and improvise at will with no cumbersome restrictions. In 'We Did It Again' a sound fabric is built up by constant slow overlays of sound reminiscent of Coltrane's 'Africa Brass' days, which are then consolidated to one or two continuous sounds. The use of electronics on this album is delicate, sensitive and precise and certainly very advanced. After a long absence they return to us both on plastic and in person. It's nice to see them back.

Miles

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

New stars on the horizon - Hit Parader - November 1968





The Soft Machine became the new musical tide pullers in the South of France where they were cross fertilized by the illumination of the Sensual Laboratory of Mark Boyle. Integrating sight and sound, they opened a fantastic discotheque in St. Aygulf bay, St. Tropez. The club designed by Keith Albarn, was especially created around the music and the light show. When the building was completed, it looked like a vision from space, iglooed with four wings rising at the centre in a concentric stack, with four shoulders jutting out at the base. Inside the building, at the centre was a stage, seven feet off the ground where the Soft Machine played and the light show was given. The skin of the building was only an inch thick, so the sound coruscated off the exterior, carrying across the bay to the neighbouring inlets, causing concern to the bourgeois campers. It was a total experience. Of course, the inevitable happened. Crowds came in the daytime to hear rehearsals and in the night time to leap out of their encapsulated selves, dancing to exhaustion, then running to the water some twenty yards away immersing themselves sauna style; then creeping from the water's edge into the darkness of the moon.

The Soft Machine speaks for itself: “Allen Zion, film maker, and Jean-Jacques Lebel, Pope of Happenings, who were opening Théâtre Libre in St. Tropez, heard us and flipped. We were hired to inaugurate the opening. They had planned a film show and happening as the second part of their evening; the first part, a play by Picasso, ‘Desire Caught By The Tail,’ featured Rita Renoir, strip queen of the Crazy Horse saloon in Paris. She dug us and with the ensemble said put the Soft Machine on in the first part to loosen up the audience, then drop the play in and let the depth charges happen. We did.”



new stars on the horizon

THE SOFT MACHINE

"We play hour long sets developing a concert style. The compositions were spaced with improvisations from drum and organ punctuated with songs. The organic rhythms began to flow. The light show diverted the eye from the intellect to the bodily functions and soon, like the pied piper, the audience was dancing on the stage, changing their normal styles to free form and movement. We had arrived at new departures, the Soft Machine, architects of space time." "Kevin Ayers developed new songs, Robert Wyatt became a drum master and counterpoint to Kevin while Michael Ratledge's organ settled compositions on the improvisations flying like a bird liberated from space. We were creating bridges between musical idioms. Mike Zwerin, critic of the Village Voice, wrote a stunning article, Earle Brown, modern American composer said, "This is the type of music I'm trying for also." Yvette Romi wrote an article in the Nouvel Observateur, Paris, hailing us as the Futuristic Beatles. Invitations came rolling in, Café des Arts, St. Tropez and Eddie Barclay's soirée to name but three. We closed the season with invitations from the European capitols. The North awaited.

"At the Edinburgh Festival we added a dance troupe from Paris to give an experimental performance entitled 'Lullaby For Catatonics.' The evening was a critical success. We then accepted Amsterdam TV, where the light show caused an artistic sensation, while the music changed the idea of what's happening on the pop scene in Great Britain. We opened a fantastic club named The Birds where the revolution set in; and are negotiating a film. Paris, with its scorpion string, teased us onto TV, Camera 3 and Dim Dam Dom. From there we went to the Biennale where again we joined the dancers in a fantastic whirlwind. This time the word from the South of France caught up with us. There were calls at the rate of 110 an hour to see the show. Both nights were sold out and the calls were still coming in for a big concert." Keep your eyes and ears on the Soft Machine. Let it happen and watch it soar.

Cramdom Bentley

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

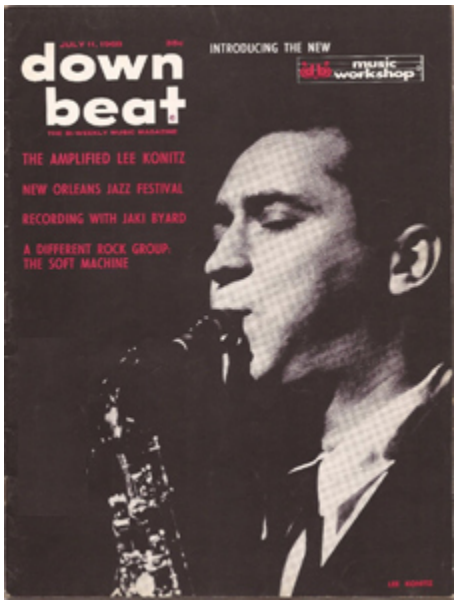
ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

The Soft Machine - Downbeat - July 11, 1968

THE SOFT MACHINE



By Mike Zwerin

THE SOFT MACHINE IS the world, a woman, a book by William Burroughs -or a psychedelic pop group from London. Whatever it is, it recently toured the United States as part of a package with the Jimi Hendrix Experience.

Enveloped in Mark Boyle's moving, abstract projections, floating in many colors on top of them, the Soft Machine presents quite a sight onstage, though not an unusual one in our time. They wear the accouterments expected of the prototype-shoulder-length hair, hats from thrift shops, tiny dark glasses, paisley shirts, beads and bells. Drummer Robert Wyatt sometimes plays dressed only in a bikini bottom. In short, they look like three freaky dropouts.

Things are not always as they appear. Organist Michael Ratledge went to Oxford on a scholarship, winning the college prize in philosophy in 1964 and later taking his honors degree in psychology and philosophy. He describes himself as having a "cool but absent mind... I'm very much the kind of person who does what's there. I'd planned to do graduate work in American poetry, of all things, but I applied too late for the grant. The same day I learned it was lost, a lady friend of Kevin's (Kevin Ayers, the group's third member) gave him her mink coat. We sold it, bought an organ, and started an avant-garde jazz group. But London wasn't ready for us yet. Then we found we could play the way we wanted, call it 'pop', and have a chance to be heard.

" Robert's parents are liberals, old friends of Robert Graves. He spent two summers as Graves' house guest in Deya, Majorca, and the poet and novelist is something of a hero to him. Robert smiles easily and well.



Although the most outlandish dresser of the three he is not unconscious of the bag it puts him in or of his impact on "squares."

"I had a hard time deciding about my hair-had it cut a couple of times. Any kind of uniform bothers me. But when I saw the Rolling Stones for the first time, I decided I just wanted to look that way, regardless. We have been cal!ed a 'psychedelic' group, which implies we all take acid.... and that turns us into some kind of sideshow. I resent that. What I do, I do myself. I don't need any drugs to play the drums."

Kevin Ayers is more like what coud be cal!ed hippy. On the group's press release, he is described as follows "... vocals bassguitar leadguitar songwriter arranger illustrator poet eater. Born Herne Bay U.K. 1944 (Leo) educated Singapore and Chelmsford Essex height 73". Left school early and hung about London Canterbury Canary Islands Casablanca Majorca writing his songs en route. Has the gift for writing most commercially magical songs. (A boy but wild when moody.) ..."

Kevin is also soft-spoken and lucid. "Our music," he said, "is just an extension of what we were fooling around with when we were all living together in Canterbury. It's the way we prefer to spend time, rather than p!aying cricket or golf. The fact that we are working, earning bread, is kind of accidental. When we play concerts, we don't think about things like pleasing teenyboppers. Our music is different."

How is it different? We were all in his small room in New York City's Wel!ington Hotel on Seventh Ave., the 6 o'clock news going unwatched on television. Kevin was stretched out on the unmade bed, his face half covered by silky hair. He propped his head on one band and thought for a few seconds.

"I guess it's because it isn't based on the blues, really. We kind of stay away from those familiar patterns. That's probably why we haven't made it yet. Managers are only interested in 'can they make money.' I think this tour may have started ours thinking maybe we can. The audience response has been fantastic."

BY MIKE ZWERIN

ONE OFTEN HEARS about young pop groups making fortunes but rarely about the others. When I first met Michael, Kevin and Robert last summer, they were pretty much stranded on the French Riviera. Along with two road managers, they had crossed from London and driven to the Riviera jammed in a panel truck full of electronic hardware. They were scheduled to work all summer as part of the "beer festival" on the beach of St. Aygulf. After a week, they were fired. It seems the wrong element (penniless) was hanging around the discotheque but not drinking beer.

Then the trio floated around St. Tropez for some time, sleeping on floors or the beach. Finally, Jean Jacques Lebel hired them to be the second half of his Festival Libre, and they performed each night after Pablo Picasso's play, *Desire Caught by the Tail*. It was a good time, but as is so often the case, they were paid in inverse proportion to their enjoyment of their own music.

So far they have invested more than their salary in amplifiers, speakers, guitars and other such things. A new level of affluence was reached on the tour of the United States: $100 a week. Out of that, however, they paid Boyle because they feel his projections are essential, an opinion their management doesn't share.

Michael has written a scholarly paper on Boyle. "Mark Boyle's 'events' are content with a direct presentation of the reality that already exists, with no self-interposition from the artist... Whereas 'happening' implies agency, 'event' is the effect of something happening; to perform a 'happening' it is necessary to act, but one cannot act an 'event.' It is sufficient to realize the fact that a 'happening' has occurred. An 'event' is a discovery of what is happening, a 'happening' an active invention-fact as against act."

Boyle, a Scot with a melodious brogue and establishment-length hair, has eyes that blaze with warmth and involvement. He explains himself:

"The most complete change an individual can effect in his environment, short of destroying it, is to change attitudes to it. This is my objective...
I am certain that, as a result, we will go about so

alert that we will discover the excitement of continually digging our environment as an object/experience/drama from which we can extract an esthetic experience so brilliant and strong that the environment itself is transformed."


The Soft Machine

BY MIKE ZWERIN

In 1966, Boyle obtained sophisticated projectors that made possible his most ambitious "pieces" entitled "Earth, Air, Fire and Water," and "Bodily Fluids and Functions." In the latter, human body fluids, such as blood, saliva, bile,vomit and sperm were projected onto a large screen together with electroencephalogram and electrocardiogram responses of a couple making love, while the sounds of the bodies were amplified throughout the auditorium.

Although his projections over the Soft Machine are somewhat more modest, they add an exciting visual dimension to the music. Unlike most other light shows, he uses no stills and no objective images of any kind. The light and movement, formed by liquid chemicals, are determined by chance factors. Michael writes, "... These presentations make it possible for the spectator to rediscover the 'esthetic' aspect of our environment that has become hidden by accretions of use and habit and to become aware of... environments that were previously inaccessible to us."

The Soft Machine is not part of anybody's musical establishment. The jazz establishment will not accept it because of the rock format, instrumentation and appearance. At the same time it is not commercial enough for the pop world. And although composer Earle Brown loves the group - he may write a piece for it - "serious" musicians right now don't consider this sort of thing legitimate.

Despite occasional lack of control and a tendency to extend length beyond content, the Soft Machine is unique and satisfying, an impressive synthesis of various elements from Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, John Cage, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and rock itself.

Its cloudy sound moves to unexpected places in weird ways. Everything is filtered through a fuzz box, an electronic gadget that intentionally distorts sound. (For an example, listen to the introduction of the Rolling Stones' I Can't Get No Satisfaction.) There is a good deal of collective improvisation. Sets are more like suites, each 'tune" running into the next. Unlike most rock groups, the Soft Machine makes crescendos and decrescendos and incorporates silence.

I have never heard (or seen) any thing quite like it.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

Soft Talk - International Times - n° 33 - June 14, 1968



SOFT TALK

KEVIN AYERS/ Soft Machine

First of all I am on the stage playing the guitar in front of a massive unidentifiable being. Secondly I am part of this beast and watching myself perform... goading myself from the front row to break out and explode.

Inevitably the result is that we are both disappointed, there has been no explosion and (inconsequently) no fusion. The moth of myself has seen the ecstatic flame that tantalises with its ridiculous nearness, unable to embrace her completely and suck her essence, there is no orgasm to share and the only positive result is a negative identification and sympathy on the part of the audience for the failure (once again) to escape the seemingly inescapable shell that imprisons our composite molluse.

The real FREAK OUT is still confined to violence... imagine an emotional experience of the same energy intensity as that created in a fight or any such physical battle... imagine

imagine that, o rational male! However... when violence is presented as a spectacle for entertainment, it functions as an effective tittilating device, as it posesses a contagious vibration, easily received, especially by a collection of people. The effects of these vibrations are the staple diet of most communications media... when will there be a headline proclaiming the devastating effects of an outbreak of happiness?

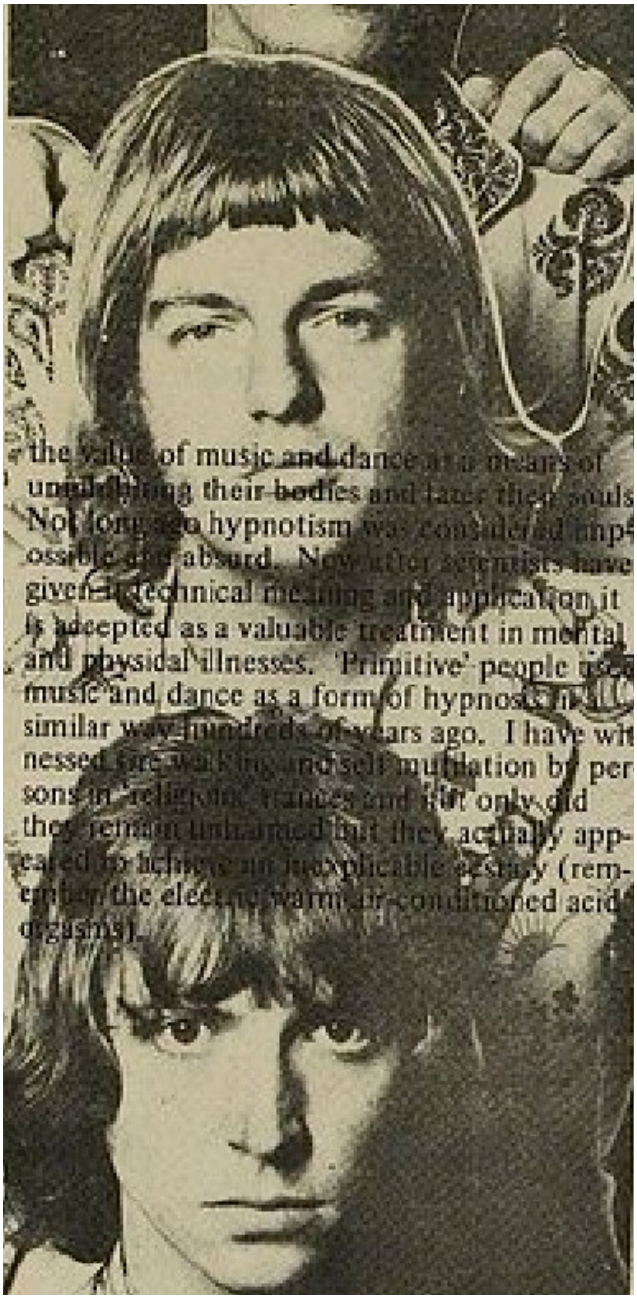
Most performances fail to be anything more than entertainment because the spectator is seldom asked or moved to contribute more than signs of approval or disapproval... both of which are positive communications but they only provide a short lived union between performer and spectator rarely carried outside the theatre and offering no more than a level of pleasure or disatisfaction.

AH total participation... oh communal ecstasy. Whether the participation is in madness, gladness or sorrow the orgiastic wish is still the strongest box office draw. A performance which assists the overcoming of all inhibitions that prevent the confined life spring in all of us from bursting out is the performance that all aware performers must be working on at this very moment.

Primitive peoples, with the remnants of ancient knowledge still with them, appreciate...

[I can't decipher the following sentences and reproduce them as printed in the article...]

...



...

The reason for the above references is that I believe (with my head) a new breed of performer will evolve, or emerge, and the type of performance will be radically different. Instead of being amused with a spectacle, people will amuse themselves under the direction of the New Performer.

The amusement will no longer be a presented fantasy but will take the form of self discovery and experience, hopefully bringing about the destruction of inhibitions that prevent total experience... perhaps mass hypnosis through repetitive music presented under strict discipline on the part of the performers. Or perhaps the New Performer will be a composition of audio-visual energy created by an enlightened group blessed with the true spirit of benevolence.

What do I think I mean by total participation?

Confronted with possible injury and/or death, a man will turn bestial to save his skin. When confronted with an unfamiliar situation he will still be defensive, but this time in a more rational way, using logic (he thinks) as his armour, and he loses the experience in the mud of reason, comparison etc.

The difference between the madness of violence and the madness of the extraordinary is that violent lunacy is of such a low message to every human being. The madness of the extraordinary, being of a higher order, fails to attract the participation of the most enlightened men. (By madness I do not specifically mean insanity and debauchery. I mean here the madness that seems most elusive that of leaving our accustomed repertoire and exposing ourselves to utterly unfamiliar experiences).

This lowering of defences to the unfamiliar is difficult: even as you read this you are asleep.

Well, how conscious are you of your surroundings... do you remember what you felt half an hour ago (if anything)? Do you still feel that you are a trapped soul peering through the two available windows of your body... occasionally, by accident, making contact with something but never contact enough to really feel you have totally participated in the experience...

Well... you ignorant self pitying crab... away with your doubts the wind is your sponsor.



SOFT TALK

KEVIN AYERS/ Soft Machine

FIRST of all I am on the stage playing the guitar in front of a massive an identifiable being. Secondly I am part of this beast and watching myself perform... goading myself from the front row to break out and explode.

Inevitably the result is that we are both disappointed, there has been no explosion and (inconsequently) no fusion. The moth of myself has seen the ecstatic flame that tantalises with its ridiculous neatness, unable to embrace her completely and suck her essence, there is no orgasm to share and the only positive result is a negative identification and sympathy on the part of the audience for the failure (once again) to escape the seemingly inescapable shell that imprisons our composite mollusc.

The real FREAK OUT is still confined to violence... imagine an emotional experience of the same energy intensity as that created in a fight or any such physical battle...imagine imagine that, o rational male! However... when violence is presented as a spectacle for entertainment, it functions as an effective titillating device, as it posesses a contagious vibration, easily received, especially by a collection of people. The effects of these vibrations are the staple diet of most communications media...when will there be a headline proclaiming the devastating effects of an outbreak of happiness?

Most performances fail to be anything more than entertainment because the spectator is seldom asked or moved to contribute more than signs of approval or disapproval...both of which are positive communications but they only provide a short lived union between performer and spectator rarely carried outside the theatre and offering no more than a level of pleasure or dissatisfaction.

All total participation...oh communal ecstasy. Whether the participation is in madness, gladness or sorrow, the orgiastic wish is still the strongest box office draw. A performance which assists the overcoming of all inhibitions that prevent the confined life spring in all of us from bursting out is the performance that all **swan** performers must be working on at this very moment.

Primitive peoples, with the remnants of ancient knowledge still with them, appreciate

The reason for the above references is that I believe (with my head) a new breed of performer will evolve, or emerge, and the type of performance will be radically different. Instead of being amused with a spectacle, people will amuse themselves under the direction of the **New Performer.**

The amusement will no longer be a possessed fantasy but will take the form of self discovery and experience, hopefully bringing about the destruction of inhibitions that prevent total experience...perhaps mass hypnosis through repetitive music presented under strict discipline on the part of the performers. Or perhaps the New Performer will be a composition of audio-visual energy created by an enlightened group blessed with the true spirit of benevolence.

What do I think I mean by total participation?

Confronted with possible injury and/or death, a man will turn brutal to save his skin. When confronted with an unfamiliar situation he will still be defensive, but this time in a more rational way, using logic (he thinks) as his armour, and he loses the experience in the mud of reason, comparison etc.

The difference between the madness of violence and the madness of the extraordinary is that violent lunacy is of such a low message to every human being. The madness of the extraordinary, being of a higher order, fails to attract the participation of the most enlightened men. (By madness I do not specifically mean insanity and debauchery. I mean here the madness that seems most elusive that of leaving our accustomed repertoire and exposing ourselves to utterly unfamiliar experiences).

This lowering of defences to the unfamiliar is difficult: even as you read this you are asleep.

Well, how concious are you of your surroundings...do you remember what you felt half an hour ago (if anything)? Do you still feel that you are a trapped soul peering through the two available windows of your body...occasionally, by accident, making contact with something but never contact enough to really feel you have totally participated in the experience...

Well...you ignorant self pitying crab... away with your doubts the wind is your sponsor.

REX SET

Festival Hall, June 3 — What a letdown from the Tyrannosaurus Rex. It was an unwise move for them to do such a long set, and the reason is, their arrangements do not vary enough. If they had done two sets of say half an hour, with someone like Stefan Grossman, or Roy Harper in between, I think it would have been much more enjoyable.

Stefan Grossman, who opened the show, gave an excellent performance and achieved the most important thing - which was that of creating an atmosphere: which he did very successfully.

John Peel made appearances between performers, and by the sounds of it he had been turning on with lagers, he also spoke too near to the mike, which muffled a good many of his words (I doubt if they were of great importance).

Next came Roy Harper, a very professional performer, who also had a good idea of the meaning of communication. I hope we see a great deal more of him.

David Bowie, although one or two drugs were heckling him, received the longest and loudest applause of all the performers, and he deserved it. It was a pity that he didn't have a longer set.

Then came the Tyrannosaurus Rex. They have a beautiful sound, but too much of it all at once is like using a typewriter all day - it gets boring. If they had stopped after Deborah, the interest in their sound would still have been at its peak, but they went on and spoiled it by Marc singing without music. He asked the audience to clap, which was a wise move on his part, because it covered up some of his off-key notes but not all of them.

Their performance was not up to standard. The reason might have been that they were nervous at playing to such a large audience. Every time I have seen them at the Middle Earth they have always been of a fairly high standard.

Don't forget they have got a new L.P. coming out in about 3 or 4 weeks time entitled: **My people were fair and had sky in their hair, but now they're content to wear stars on their brows.**

I heard one side of this L.P. about 2 months ago, I liked it.

Kip

MIDSUMMER HIGH

SATURDAY 29th and SUNDAY 30th June at NASH HOUSE in THE MALL

SATURDAY AT NOON

USTAD IMRAT KHAN —sitar and surbahar

This is a Free Ad for

FREE HYDE PARK
at the Cockpit, Hyde Park, 3pm.
Saturday, 29 June.

PINK FLOYD
TYRANNOSAURUS REX

Presented by the Ministry of Works

SATURDAY night HIGH

BONZO DOG DOODAH BAND, NICE, JUNIORS EYES, Unique Films, Lights, poets, surprises, and of course SIMON with his plastic Dream Machine.

Amazing Arts Lab Food.

SUNDAY evening

West Indian Words with ANDREW SALKEY, EDDIE BRATHWAITE, JOHN la ROSE and other poets and writers plus

USTAD IMRAT KHAN

TICKETS

Whole (40 shillings) or parts (8/-, 25/-, 12/6) from I.C.A. and other BIP selling points and I.T.

Presented by I.C.A. and BLACKHILL Enterprises.

If you're a singer, sing for us
If you're a writer, write for us
Send us tapes and picture
APPLE, 94 Baker St, W.1.
(Thanks)...

WITH THE EMPHASIS ON ENJOYMENT

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

A different drummer - Downbeat - Vol.34, N° 20 - October 5, 1967

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER



State Of Mind

By Mike Zwerin

ROBERT AND I are lost in Frejus, driving around in circles. We are looking for the Autoroute to Juan-Les-Pins and the Antibes Jazz Festival. Finally, we ask a cop standing in front of a gendarmerie. He points the way politely.

"That's the building they took us to— looks like it at least," Robert says.

"Who took you?"

"The cops. They picked us up, man."

"What for?"

"For being in the south of France. We were sitting in a cafe in Cogolin having coffee. Two cops pulled up and said to come with them. We told them we had an important date in a half-hour to see' about a gig. They didn't care, though. We had our passports, and they let us go after two hours.

"Long hair can be a hangup. I cut mine a couple of times—couldn't decide which way I wanted to go. Finally, I let it grow long after I saw the Stones for the first time. I like that look. But you get put in a bag. We are known as a psychedelic group so everybody looks at us like we are some kind of side show. People say, 'Boy, it must be wild to play on acid.' Man, I do my thing myself. I don't need acid to play the drums."

As we chug along in my little old French car, Robert starts singing *Donna Lee*, and Bird's solo on it. "Man, for a 21-year-old rock-and-roll drummer, you sure know a lot about jazz," I shout over the unmuffled motor.

Robert is hugging his crumpled shirt and shaking his blond hair rhythmically as he talks.

"I spent a lot of time listening to jazz," he says. "That's all I did when I wasn't in school. I even wrote some criticism once."

"Really? About what?"

"Sonny Rollins and Cecil Taylor. But it was mostly teenage fan stuff. I was pretty star-struck. Still am, I guess. It's a drag, too, because—well, I know that most of the guys I like don't dig

what I'm doing. Categories are a drag. But I guess I'm just a rock-and-roll drummer. Funny. . . ."

He talks about Robert Graves, the poet and novelist, and the two summers he spent in his house on Majorca. I think about the Soft Machine, the pop group from London with which Robert Wyatt is drummer and lead singer. They are pretty freaky-looking on stage, wearing their weird hats, long hair, shades, and their funky, bizarre garb. It is odd that young people who look that way are familiar with *Donna Lee*, Robert Graves, or Cecil Taylor. But things are not always as they appear.

The Soft Machine has been playing around St. Tropez a lot since I've been here, and I've heard them a lot. There is no doubt that the music they play is jazz. Of course, there are vocals, but when Ray Charles or Jack Teagarden sing, it is still jazz, isn't it?

In between the vocals, the Soft Machine improvises, and they swing. It's not simple-minded either. They do it all on electronic instruments, though, and this throws many people off. The sound is as new, as strange—and as fresh—to jazz as bebop seemed at first. And as the older cats laughed at the hoppers in the '40s, the establishment of jazz laughs at the music of the flower children in the '60s.

The Soft Machine's members have a cloudy sound. They use vocal sound effects close in on microphones. Robert sings with plenty of soul, in tune, swinging, reminiscent of Wilson Pickett or Otis Redding. Mike Ratledge on organ is a very exciting cat. He is obviously influenced by Cecil Taylor as he flies around the keyboard, often atonally, over the hard rock beat.

STRICTLY AD LIB

New York: **Eddie Blackwell** was **Ornette Coleman's** choice to replace **Charles Moffett** as drummer in his quartet (**Charlie Haden** and **David Izenzon,** basses) during a recent engagement at New York's Village Gate, but Blackwell didn't stay long. He left for Africa with **Randy Weston** to fulfill a two-week engagement. Coleman then called on **Billy Higgins,** who had been the drummer in his original group at the Five Spot in 1959. For Coleman, Higgins, and Haden (another member of that first quartet) it was a grand reunion . . . Versatile multi-instrumentalist **Roland Kirk** was a veritable whirlwind after his return from the Molde Festival in Norway and the Danish Radio Festival in Copenhagen. To begin, he and his quartet (**Ron Burton,** piano; **Steve Novosel,** bass; **Jimmy Hoppes,** drums) played at the Village Vanguard opposite the **Bill Evans** Trio (**Eddie Gomez,** bass; **Philly Joe Jones,** drums). During this stint, Kirk & Co. helped Jazz Interactions open their new series of Sunday afternoon concerts at the Red Garter. (Fluegelhornist **Art Farmer,** with tenor saxophonist **Jimmy Heath,** pianist **Cedar Walton,** bassist **Roland Wilson,** and drummer **Billy Higgins,** shared the bill.) The following week, the Kirks played opposite **Milt Jackson's** unit (Heath was in this group, too) at the Club Ruby in Queens. And while visiting the Rainbow Grill to hear **Duke Ellington** Kirk sat in with the maestro on soprano saxophone and clarinet. In the middle o all this he found time to sign an exclusive long-term contract with Atlantic record . . . **Jaki Byard,** recently re-signed by Prestige records, has been working a Sergio's in Westchester, with **Jack Gregg** bass and **Roger Blank,** drums . . . Alt saxophonist **Sonny Criss** spent a couple of August weeks in New York concertizing and recording. He led a quartet including Cedar Walton, bassist **Bob Cranshaw,** and drummer **Lennie McBrowne** in concert at the Museum of Modern Art, with vocalist **Earl Coleman** as guest. The next day

/Continued on page 42

State Of Mind



A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

By MICHAEL ZWERIN

ROBERT AND I are lost in Frejus, driving around in circles. We are looking for the Autoroute to Juan-Les-Pins and the Antibes Jazz Festival. Finally, we ask a cop standing in front of a gendarmerie. He points the way politely.

"That's the building they took us to—looks like it at least," Robert says.

"Who took you?"

"The cops. They picked us up, man."

"What for?"

"For being in the south of France. We were sitting in a cafe in Cogolin having coffee. Two cops pulled up and said to come with them. We told them we had an important date in a half-hour to see about a gig. They didn't care, though. We had our passports, and they let us go after two hours.

"Long hair can be a hangup. I cut mine a couple of times—couldn't decide which way I wanted to go. Finally, I let it grow long after I saw the Stones for the first time. I like that look. But you get put in a bag. We are known as a psychedelic group so everybody looks at us like we are some kind of side show. People say, 'Boy, it must be wild to play on acid.' Man, I do my thing myself. I don't need acid to play the drums."

As we chug along in my little old French car, Robert starts singing *Donna Lee,* and Bird's solo on it. "Man, for a 21-year-old rock-and-roll drummer, you sure know a lot about jazz," I shout over the unmuffled motor.

Robert is hugging his crumpled shirt and shaking his blond hair rhythmically as he talks.

"I spent a lot of time listening to jazz," he says. "That's all I did when I wasn't in school. I even wrote some criticism once."

"Really? About what?"

"Sonny Rollins and Cecil Taylor. But it was mostly teenage fan stuff. I was pretty star-struck. Still am, I guess. It's a drag, too, because—well, I know that most of the guys I like don't dig what I'm doing. Categories are a drag. But I guess I'm just a rock-and-roll drummer. Funny. . . ."

He talks about Robert Graves, the poet and novelist, and the two summers he spent in his house on Majorca. I think about the Soft Machine, the pop group from London with which Robert Wyatt is drummer and lead singer. They are pretty freaky-looking on stage, wearing their weird hats, long hair, shades, and their funky, bizarre garb. It is odd that young people who look that way are familiar with *Donna Lee,* Robert Graves, or Cecil Taylor. But things are not always as they appear.

The Soft Machine has been playing around St. Tropez a lot since I've been here, and I've heard them a lot. There is no doubt that the music they play is jazz. Of course, there are vocals, but when Ray Charles or Jack Teagarden sing, it is still jazz, isn't it?

In between the vocals, the Scft Machine improvises, and they swing. It's not simple-minded either. They do it all on electronic instruments, though, and this throws many people off. The sound is as new, as strange—and as fresh—to jazz as bebop seemed at first. And as the older cats laughed at the boppers in the '40s, the establishment of jazz laughs at the music of the flower children in the '60s.

The Soft Machine's members have a cloudy sound. They use vocal sound effects close in on microphones. Robert sings with plenty of soul, in tune, swinging, reminiscent of Wilson Pickett or Otis Redding. Mike Ratledge on organ is a very exciting cat. He is obviously influenced by Cecil Taylor as he flies around the keyboard, often atonally, over the hard rock beat.

And rock is stretching out. The time moves from slow to fast and back again. They have a number in 7/4, subdivided 1,2,3,—1—1,2,3. Robert swings hard in a style I've never heard before, a combination of Ringo Starr and Elvin Jones. The tunes are very long, perhaps too long. They sometimes lose the dancers and even the listeners. But the Soft Machine is exploring in lonely territory, not accepted by its heroes and yet not commercial enough to make heavy bread. If it should eventually have a hit, it may be because it has sold out, whatever that means. The temptations of the market place can be overwhelming. Right now, though, you really have to listen to the Soft Machine to understand it. And it is music really worth listening to, truly avant-garde. All you have to do is throw away all your prejudices.

In Juan-Les-Pins, Robert and I take a walk before the concert. Robert talks about drummers. Elvin is his favorite but "Jimmy Cobb is very underrated. When everybody was driving that two-and-four high-hat thing into the ground, Jimmy was doing something entirely different. Tching, tching, tching, tching, on the ride cymbal, way on top of the beat. Man, that's a groovy way to keep the time. And when he plays in another meter, like six, he just keeps doing it instead of subdividing into two threes, like so many other drummers."

Later, we have dinner with Paul Desmond. I wonder, at the beginning, how these two generations of jazz musicians will relate to each other. It is immediately clear that Robert has great respect for Paul and is rather flattered to be with him.

Like so many of his peers, he is extremely mature and knowledgeable for his age. He talks and listens in the proper places. He talks about the musicians he likes—Mingus, Monk, Trane, Ornette. He knows details about the life and music of Steve Lacy and even about more obscure players such as Clarence Shaw.

As the evening progresses I can see that Paul is becoming more interested in Robert, less concerned with his long hair or image.

The next night, the Soft Machine is working. They are covered with moving, multicolored polka dots. Lights are flashing. Dancers, bodies are jumping, twirling, shaking. The place is alive and swinging with the Soft Machine in gear, and there is no category.

Like so many of his peers, he is extremely mature and knowledgeable for his age. He talks and listens in the proper places. He talks about the musicians he likes—Mingus, Monk, Trane, Ornette. He knows details about the life and music of Steve Lacy and even about more obscure players such as Clarence Shaw.

As the evening progresses I can see that Paul is becoming more interested in Robert, less concerned with his long hair or image.

The next night, the Soft Machine is working. They are covered with moving, multicolored polka dots. Lights are flashing. Dancers, bodies are jumping, twirling, shaking. The place is alive and swinging with the Soft Machine in gear, and there is no category.

Previous article

Next article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME

2500 Ball at IT-Launch - The International Times - October 31 - November 13, 1966

2500 Ball at IT-Launch


The International Times Oct. 31 - Nov. 13/1s.

it

LOOK 4 PAGE UNDERGROUND FILM FESTIVAL SUPPLEMENT

EUROPE CALLING— POUND SPEAKING

Ezra Pound Speaking

It isn't cool to rave about your own party, but the IT Rave-Up at the Roundhouse two Saturdays ago was such an event we decided it merited an IT report.

It was mainly atmospherics: two and half thousand people dancing about in that strange, giant round barn. Darkness, only flashing lights. People in masks, girls half-naked. Other people standing about wondering what the hell was going on. Pot smoke. Now and then the sound of a bottle breaking. Somebody looks as if he might get violent. There was a lot of tension about.

Plus the specifics:
- The Pink Floyd psychedelic pop group, did weird things to the feel of the event with their scary feedback sounds, slide projections playing on their skin (drops of paint run riot on the slides to produce outer space/prehistoric textures on the skin), spotlights flashing on them in time with a drum beat... more about them next issue.

- The Soft Machine, another group with new ideas, drove a motor bike into the place, in and around the pillars that held up that gallery we had been warned wasn't all that safe... more about them too.
- a large car (some said it was an Oldsmobile, others a Cadillac) in the middle of it all, painted bright pop art stripes and explosions, by Binder, Edwards and Vaughan, New-York Interior decorators who, someone said, put stripes over everything. Car was previously seen parked inside the Robert Fraser Gallery. Apparently the group has a juke box on show and in action in the Golden Egg on the Strand.



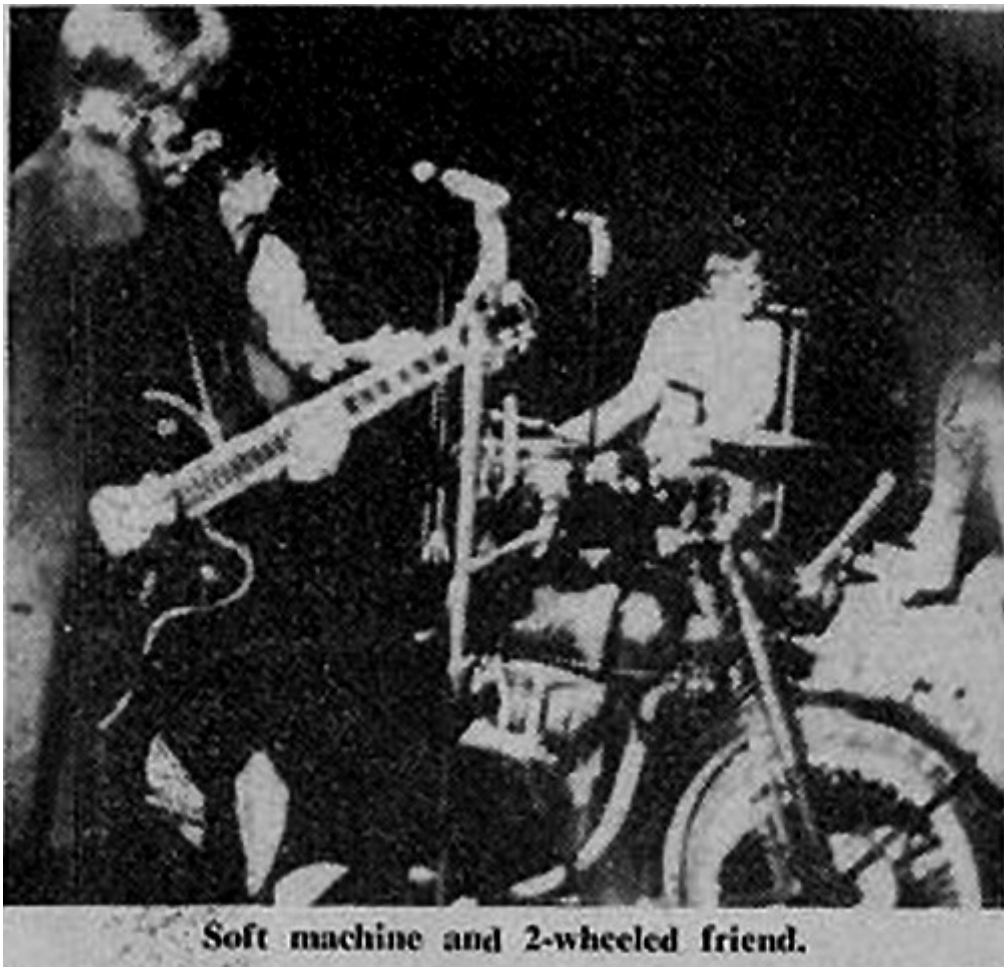
- Simon Postuma and Marujke Koger, the Amsterdam couple who are opening Karma (see Miles column last issue), designed an interesting cubicle with coloured screens and nets, and within the box one of them, in suitable dress, read palms and told fortunes.

- In another part of the Roundhouse, Bob Cobbing and the London Film Coop gave an all-night film show, featuring film like Scorpio Rising. Towers Open Fire, under the most difficult of conditions. The audience stood in front of the projectors, on top of Bob Cobbing. Yet the films went on. It may, though, have been just the right setting for those particular films. Burroughs inner space disappearance in Towers Open Fire somehow had more impact because of the vibrations from the "party".

- "famous people turned up : Antonioni and Monica Vitti, Paul McCartney disguised as an arab, Kenneth Rexroth, Peter Brook, Mickey Most and Tony Secunda. We also saw a well-known junkie, a notorious homosexual, and many happy people who were only know to their friends but who the hell cares in a scene like that anyay ?

Of course several things went strong. There was that narrow entrance for an unpleasant start. That communal toilet that ended up in flood. A giant jelly made in a bath for the party was unfortunately run over by a bicycle. How this happened, or what became of the remains of the jelly or the bicycle, no-one seems to know. After the party, the crowds caused a traffic jam in the streets outside. It should be said here that throughout the event the police were co-operative.

[Perhaps it was just relief that something has at last happened in the Round House. It was a good party, and just to prove that something really IS going on in London, another bigger, better one is currently being planned. details next issue.]


Soft machine and 2-wheeled friend.

Previous article

Back to the list

ABÉCÉDAIRE

Les années Before | Soft Machine | Matching Mole | Solo | With Friends | Samples | Compilations | V.A. | Bootlegs | Reprises

HOME