



CHRIS SQUIRE...

NOT A FISH OUT OF WATER

“ I've been experimenting with different sounds and different ways of doing things ”

It's difficult to conjure up a classy opening line for an article on Chris Squire without wheeling out the somewhat threadbare collection of plaudits-for-the-skies superlatives — 'Britain's Finest', 'The Bassman's Bassman', and all the other gags of press office jargon that've been heaped on his lofty shoulders over the years.

The main problem, you see, is that all the high-powered praise is totally justified in Squire's case, and while there's certainly a very image-happy bunch of bassists who, for different styles and different reasons, might just as easily wear the laurel wreath, there's no denying the fact that Mr. Squire has won his a thousand times over.

The power, depth, and emotion that radiates from his playing is impossible to

saw up in one word, because its kaleidoscopic array of moods and colours is consistently on the move — soft, spare, and gentle at one end, yet savagely direct and full of dark incense at the other, capable of mounting an awe-inspiring assault of earthshaking, rampart-crushing might, heavily laced with that strangely malevolent kind of heathen magnificence seemingly more suitable for an Aztec sacrifice or a triumphal march through the streets of ancient Rome than the awed reverence of a Yes concert.

Having heard Chris' penchant for pomp and splendour in his recently released second spectacular, *Firth Out Of Water*, it's really not surprising to find that his earliest and, in a way, most memorably musical experiences came by way of the church choir he sang in as a schoolboy, where the grand and other ancient melodies he was exposed to fused themselves into his still unrefined musical personality.

Unmoved

Although he remained unswayed by anything having to do with rock 'n' roll until well into the 60's, a schoolmate who was into both classical guitar and rock helped Chris in a more liberal direction, culminating in the purchase of a Fender bass for no more mysterious a reason than the fact that Chris found the size of the bass much more comfortable than the size of the standard six-string guitar. A homemade amp (invented by the electronics freak down the road) rounded out his equipment set-up, and he slowly drifted into the midst of the then-thriving North London group scene, soon teaming up with a bunch of young musicians who eventually became known as the Sins, whose later evolution into a series of pro-Teskey mini-rock operas coincided with the birth of psychedelia.

As the history books already bear out however, Sins never quite made it, and except for a few forgettable gigs with an outfit called Mabel Green's Toyshop, Chris spent what was possibly the most important nine months of his musical life sitting in a room, day in and day out, honing his burgeoning bass technique to a razor-sharp edge, until fate, fortune, and destiny brought him to that accidental meeting with Jon Anderson in London's La Chasse club. The seeds for Yes were sown, and that chapter of The Chris Squire Story is still in the process of being written.

Right from that first Yes album however, Chris' head-turning approach to what's still probably the most ignored corner of rock ministration pushed him miles above the complacent, understanding task of being 'just the bass player'. While he certainly furnishes the firm, bedrock foundation for Yes' overall musical structure, he always seems to have strived to push his instrument to the foreground — if not in the strict capacity of a lead instrument, then certainly very close to it. It's a sharp and biting technique, heavily based around that characteristic trebly buzz that more and more bassists are trying to simulate.

But then, few bassists have become as closely identified with 'a sound' as Squires has, or, for that matter, with a particular instrument — in his case, the vintage



circa-1966 Rickenbacker (fitted out with Rotosound RS-66 strings) that's been an integral and indelible facet of both the Squire image and the Squire technique since the old Sins days. The question is, 'why a Rickenbacker?', and Chris seemed more than willing to explain as he sat atop the fringe in the West London film studio where Yes are rehearsing for their next album.

"I bought it a long time ago, and I've really gotten used to playing it, so it's comfortable for me because I know it so well. I don't know whether it's better, but it does seem to be a much easier bass to play than a lot of the others. Whenever I play another bass — and I do for various things — I always come back to the

Rickenbacker and it always seems so easy. Like if something was a bit of struggle on a Thunderbird, or something, it somehow seems to be much less difficult to play on a Rickenbacker."

Of course, the sound is just as important as the feel, and though Chris owns one of the more recent Rickenbacker 4001's, he finds that his old standby has something that the newer ones lack.

"The newer one is comparatively a very dull kind of guitar sound-wise, even though I went to the trouble of getting the old pickups to put on it. It could go even further than the pickups though — my old one might just have some particular electrical component, or even a fault that gives me the sound I like. But I have got another one now — the one I played on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, which has nearly the same serial number as my first one. It used to belong to Denovan, and it sounds more like my original Rickenbacker than the new ones do, so I could probably work on it and get it pretty much the same."

With electric music, finding the right instrument is, of course, only half the battle, and after several years of trial and error, Chris has finally gone back to the original Marshall 100 watt bass amp he first used with the Sins, running it through Sunn 6x12 cabinets (with four Gains and two JBL's in each instead of the original Vegas), with the settings adjusted for full treble and presence, and roughly half volume, bass, and midrange. In the studio, he's found that the Marshall fits the bill nicely when run through a slightly less cavernous Marshall 4x12 cabinet (though he occasionally puts his bass through a Vas AC10 or a Fender Dual Showman with a 2x15 JBL cabinet).

Effects pedals

In a virtual sea of effects pedals, boosters, and miscellaneous gadgets that're primarily designed for guitarists, Chris is one of the few bassists who use effects as an integral part of his playing, and his pedal board setup includes a modified Cry Baby wah wah that allows a certain amount of the natural bass signal to come through, custom built tremolo, reverb, and master units, a Maestro Bass Master (which serves as a fuzz box), a Compact phaser pedal, and a set of Du Tona bass pedals, which allow him to play deep, sustained bass notes underneath the moving lines he plays on the bass itself.

In the final analysis however, the most sophisticated arsenal of up-to-the-minute equipment is pointless if the musician doesn't use it for something worthwhile, rather than for the pure novelty value, and while Chris has thankfully kept himself from going overboard, it's his basic, unfettered with tone and playing style that's often the most effective — powerful, prominent, and quite nearly approaching the level of a lead instrument. Apart from his solo album though, Chris' work on the last two Yes albums, *Tales From Topographic Oceans* and *Relayer* seems to be a great deal more subtlety and simplified — not anywhere near as 'busy' as his playing was on most of Yes' previous

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work, of which the most well known example is probably *Raundiabout*.

"That's possible, yeah, but I must admit that I'm very aware of generalizations not being a good thing, because that just depends on the song. I mean, *Raundiabout* is a piece of music based largely around the riff, and I'm sure that we'll probably do more things that're based around riffs as well as the other type of thing. I won't say that it'll be something that's as — I don't want to use the word innovative, because *Raundiabout* wasn't particularly innovative — but I'm sure that I'll be able to come up with something!

"I've been experimenting with different sounds and different ways of doing things, and now that all those things are actually under my control, I've got a few different styles and sounds to draw on. In a way, when I used to do a number with Yes, I've got a few different ways of approaching it, whether it's something soft and smooth, or something that's more rigid and treblier. I think one needs that variety."

But then, Chris' move in a seemingly more "hardier" direction over those last few Yes outings seems to have been heralded when it came to doing *Fall Out Of Water*, where the old, familiar Square Approach was, for the most part, far more prominent than it's been for quite some time.

Solo

"Well, on my solo album, I suspect that I tried to utilize as many different bass sounds as possible and, in fact, there isn't any of that really subby thing on side one. But on 'Lucky Seven' it is that subby sound — though it was done on a Fender, and I've hardly ever used that sound before with that kind of bass. I really depends on the material — sounds, the way one appreciates things, and the actual mixing as well. When *Raundiabout* was mixed, we didn't know a lot about it at that time because Eddie Offord was more in charge in those days, and it was mixed through quite bass heavy speakers. It didn't sound truly in the control room, so the whole album turned out more truly than we thought it would."

"With *Topographic Oceans* and *Reprise*, we weren't able to spend a lot of time getting the right bass sound and all because we had to go away on tour and things. I'm not saying we didn't take as much care in them, but we didn't have as much time to try things out, so the bass sound on *Reprise*,

in particular, ended up being quite different from what I thought it was going to sound like. I think you'll find that when you listen to my album, the bass is much clearer and crisper — not because of the way I was playing, but because of the way it was mixed. There's really only one right mix — the kind of mix where it's possible to clearly define everything — and that's the whole art, the whole trick of mixing."

Since he's not in a position to evaluate it objectively, Chris doesn't seem to think his bass is as prominent as it really is, nor does he see it occupying a lead-like function. "I can't evaluate it in that way because I am, in fact, a bass player. Bass lines can be very simple, and very effective in that way, and I have played a lot of those simple things."

Functional

The thing is, most bassists are as simple that the bass part, while "functional," often strays into sheer monotony. "Well, there you go then, I've found the trick! If it relates back to the music — what sort of music is it, how it should be treated, and whether the bass needs to do more. I'm sure that a lot of the cases where people are simple all the time is probably because they're limited to that and their imagination doesn't take them any further, or they might be in a group that's very set upon a certain format, and that's all they need to do. Some people are very happy being simple, and you can knock that really, because if they're in the kind of group where that's the right thing to do, then it is the right thing to do, and it'll reflect in the music of the whole group, whereas if they were all more adventurous, they'd probably be changing their whole style of what they're doing. They'd be another group. You!"

Philosophical arguments aside though, they don't make bassists any better than Chris Squire, and with a small lorry-load of Yes albums and one incredible solo project in his wake, it's all right there to be heard — one of the very finest examples of how the electric bass can be played — with a bit of care, thoughtfulness, and a large dose of imagination.