

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

"We are proud to be in the same band," say ASIA. CHRIS WELCH salutes them.

STEVE HOWE, clad in khaki and dripping with sweat, emerged from the jungle. "It's my turn to be thrown in the fire," he grunted mysteriously. "But Carl Palmer has got the most dangerous job - he gets turned into liquid gold!"

A huge pyramid towered over the sultry scene, as more members of Asia emerged from the welter of palm trees, creepers and glistening foliage. Flames roared and jets of water hissed. Inside an Arab tent, a trio of Nazis stalked about while heavily-veiled girls flitted around making significant gestures.

It took an American guide to attempt to explain the scene: "This is a sort of cross between 'Raiders Of The Lost Ark', 'Lawrence of Arabia' and 'Casablanca'." It wasn't a Mel Brooks' nightmare in Africa. This was Twickenham Film Studios and the group were in the throes of making an expensive video for what is expected to be a smash hit single - 'Don't Cry'. (See next issue for colour pics from this video)

For two days Asia - Steve, Carl, John Wetton and Geoff Downes - acted like silent movie heroes deep in the heart of an elaborate film set, with the sound of 'Don't Cry' tinnily reverberating through the monitor speaker. "This is just like it was in the days of the two-reeler," said my American guide, Jo Bergman, who once portered the Rolling Stones through the press jungle of the Sixties.

Jo brought a touch of Hollywood authority to proceedings. As the lady from Warner Bros, she seemed to be one of the few people in the studio who actually knew what it was all about. While directors squirted each other with water and accidentally fell into the 5000 gallon swamp ("they do have fun these film chaps"), Jo tried to explain the story: "It's all based on Roger Dean's cover for their new album. They've created a story from the cover. And 'Don't Cry' is the first single to be taken off the album. They all play archaeologists who are lured by a beautiful girl. Carl swings on a rope, Steve goes through fire and Geoff is

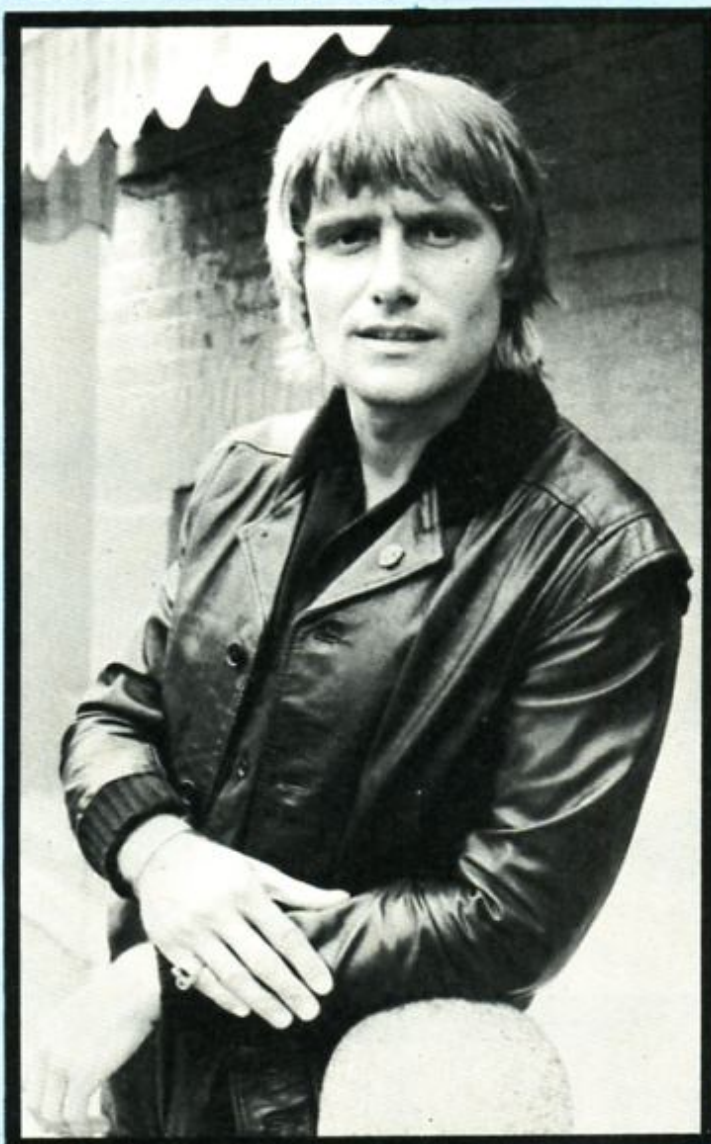


Photo by Ray Palmer

CARL PALMER: "We're not one-hit wonders."

manacled to a wall. Steve is the luckiest - he gets the girl."

I must say, I couldn't imagine this happening in the latter days of Yes. This all seemed highly flippant and irreverent, and the group were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

A great weight, it seems, has lifted from the shoulders of Asia. The past has rolled away and they can now rejoice as fledgling members of a new group. They were all becoming screwed up in their old set-ups - U.K., ELP and Yes, as they were torn by frustrations and rivalries. Steve Howe, in particular, was wound up like a watch-spring. Now they seem happy and sane.

Small wonder then that their reaction to the news of a Yes 'reunion' was decidedly frosty. We talked about this, and Asia's new album, 'Alpha', together with their plans for the year, in between breaks in filming. And not even the Yes revival could dampen their spirits as they flung themselves into film fun.

One of the small crowd of onlookers trying not to get under the camera crew's feet, was Tony Bramwell, ex-Beatles' aide and himself an expert on promo films...

"I did five Beatles' films in this very studio. They cost £750 and I got told off by EMI for going over budget! And, would you believe, the director was

Nicholas Roeg. We did the films in one day."

They included 'Day Tripper', 'We Can Work It Out', 'I Feel Fine' and 'Help'. Estimated cost of Asia's three minute epic, shot on 16mm film and transferred to video... around 35,000 dollars.

Meanwhile, Asia were taking up their positions, seated at trestle tables inside the casbah with the Nazis and Arab girls. 'Don't Cry' boomed out once again, and the director, consuming a yoghurt with one hand and signalling frantic instructions with the other, bellowed 'Action!' The casbah, with the aid of subtle illumination, looked remarkably real, a tiny microcosm of another world, stuck in one corner of the dark and cavernous studio.

Carl, Steve and John looked quite impressive in their brown boots and explorers' outfits, but Geoff looked like a refugee from Monty Python's 'Life Of Brian' in tattered robes. Was this to be his new stage gear? "I don't think so," he smiled wanly.

Stumbling over a human skeleton, discarded from an earlier scene, I backed away as sheets of flame roared from gas burners, and John began miming to the playback. He looked uncomfortable, and later confessed it wasn't the special effects putting him off, but the extreme clowning and giggling behind him. Apparently, Charlton Heston had the same trouble during 'The Ten Commandments'.

The directors, harrassed looking young men who smoked too much and lacked sleep, called for order. "We MUST crack on. Right, smoke please John." As there were at least five people called John in the studio several heads turned, but the right John, a skilled technician of the old school, expertly wafted smoke from his machine to engulf the casbah. "Smoke, flames - EXTRAS!" Somebody missed his cue and they had to do the brief scene all over again.

Carl Palmer put on a performance full of facial grimaces and rolling eyes. "A bit laboured Carl - you're over-acting," he was admonished. "What do you want?" said Carl looking hurt. But he toned down

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STEVE HOWE



his John Barrymore routine.

"Right, it's a wrap on the casbah - let's have some fun in the jungle," said director Mike Grant. While they hosed down the jungle to make it drip - with a few squirts at the director which induced a stream of profanities - I had a chance to talk to the stars. It would be the last time before they set off on a marathon three-part tour of America that will run and run, from July to the end of November.

They will be consolidating the success of the last two years, when Asia confounded the rock world by blasting to fame with a triple-platinum album and even a brace of hit singles. With Geoff and John writing simple, but highly melodic, songs and the band's instrumental fire power reserved for key spots during their concerts, Asia have developed a musical package right for them and right for the times.

An audible sigh of relief could be heard from the members, who have been through more bands than they care to remember. There's no infighting, no dissent about the musical policy, just a feeling of gratitude that they have been given a second chance, when so many of their contemporaries have given up or faded away.

I heard some of the tracks from the new album, which was recorded in Le Studio, Quebec, and Manton Sound, Toronto, last February and May, and produced by Mike Stone. Side one is known by the main title 'Alpha', while the second side is called 'Beta'. The full track listing is as follows:

ALPHA: 'Don't Cry', 'The Smile Has Left Your Eyes', 'Never In A Million Years', 'My Own Time (I'll Do What I Want)', 'The Heat Goes On'.

BETA: 'Eye To Eye', 'The Last To Know', 'True Colours', 'Midnight Sun' and 'Open Your Eyes'.

'The Smile Has Left Your Eyes' is a beautiful song, sung with distinction on the band's last tour, and 'Don't Cry' is destined for the number one spot, certainly in the American chart, and it could penetrate all known UK charts. 'Daylight', the B-side of the single, has a huge textural sound that reminds me of 'Sgt. Pepper' - although John Wetton looked astounded when I mentioned this.

With roaring organs and blasting gongs, the band seem to be playing like men possessed, yet their legendary skills as musicians are

contained within tight, short formats. A complete reversal of the trend towards over-long, over-complicated arrangements that bedevilled Yes and ELP in the mid-Seventies.

The smile left Steve Howe's eyes when I mentioned the plan to restart Yes with Jon Anderson, Chris Squire, Trevor Rabin, Tony Kaye and Alan White. The first comment was from Steve's manager Brian Lane, who used to manage Yes: "It's like Joe Bugner trying to make a come back."

Said Steve: "I knew about this on the grapevine ages ago. I think they are jumping back into the frying pan. This isn't a thoroughbred Yes project. They just looked up their 'phone books for a lead singer and thought: 'Oh, yes, Jon Anderson'. I think their coming back is one big 'Ugh'. It's taken me all this while to stop talking about 'Yes' when I mean 'Asia', because after ten years it was hard to drop the habit.

"It started out as Cinema and then got into deep water, and for six months they went no further. They didn't have a singer, so when they asked Jon he said he'd only do it if they called the band Yes. Now everybody is rubbing their hands thinking they'll make a million dollars. But they've not checked it out. For a start Rick Wakeman isn't in the band, nor Geoff and I certainly am not. I'm in Asia - playing the guitar! Why should I worry about Yes anymore? Yes was a big section of my life. How can it come back, when it was called Cinema only a few weeks ago?"

"Yes was from a certain time in history and those first three LPs I did with them were the real Golden Days of Yes. That was the creative time for the band when everybody was pulling together. That's what is good about Asia now. We all had something worth fighting for. We were all in a hole, and we'd all originally worked our way out of bedsitters. I'm not doing Asia for the money, it's because I want to play - in a good band."

Will Asia be playing Britain this year?

"We didn't do what we said we would do last year, which was just stick to America. We ended up playing America, Europe and the UK. It has been suggested we play Britain at Christmas, but I think that will be stretching us too far after this long tour that's coming up."

John Wetton said he would like Asia to play in London, maybe four concerts for charity at the Odeon, Hammersmith at

Christmas. One of the band's worries at the moment is that they have been spending a long time in the studios and, with a huge tour already mapped out, they feel they might work themselves into the ground. Said Steve:

"We've been rehearsing and recording and if they start sticking more dates on the tour, I might go stark raving mad! Sure we can play England, but not right after a mammoth tour. The logistics of it are very harsh. But the truth is, we have to go abroad to make a living."

Wasn't Steve a millionaire from his days with Yes, though? He roared with laughter at such naivety.

"We never dug a goldmine with Yes - we never created any Empires. We grossly mismanaged ourselves. We had an endless string of bills and huge running expenses. Believe me, all you young groups out there, you are doomed. For the first 20 years of your life you have absolutely no concept of what it's all about.

"If you are in a successful group, you musn't pull out all the profits and lash out on 20 Rolls Royces. The money either goes to the taxman, or you just squander it, on yourself. I never wanted to go to the bankruptcy court, so I was intelligent with my money. But there are no hundreds of thousands in Panamanian bank accounts. I never wanted a Rolls Royce or Cartier watch. All I ever bought were guitars. I suppose I could have rushed out and bought gold bars, but I'm not a businessman.

"I never wanted to be a superstar with Yes and it would worry me if my children thought me superhuman. In fact, my children have helped me a lot. They are like a mirror, offering a glimpse of reality. They make me realise who I really am, and I had so many years of confusion. The most important things to me are my family and giving my utmost on stage. This LP we have done is about the personalities in the band and the things we have been through. It's not a lot of gimmicks - it goes a lot deeper. It has a much deeper meaning than the last LP."

John Wetton recalled how Asia got together in the early days:

"Brian Lane and I talked and we went to LA because the musical climate was not right for us at home. It was 'The End Of The Music Papers As we Knew Them'. We signed with Geffen Records, and it took the trip to California to convince us we

should start the band. It was Brian who suggested we call Steve Howe because Yes were in dire straights and really finished. Steve and I talked and suggested people for the band including Geoffrey. I mentioned Simon Phillips as the drummer but he didn't last.

"I had been involved in a band before with Carl, Rick Wakeman and Mike Oldfield. We rehearsed but it never came off. So then we called Carl from Tenerife. We were all overjoyed with the success when it came. Although we had all been in successful bands before, this was a shot in the dark. And it was crucial for us all. The nice thing about Asia is we are free to do what we want and we are all open to ideas."

One of their ideas is to release a 'live' 12-inch version of 'Heat Of The Moment' from Zurich, before the armies of bootleggers who follow them about get first release.

"You see them in the audience - checking their levels. They also bootleg our tee-shirts. You wash them once and they turn plain white!"

Said Carl Palmer, dripping sweat in the undergrowth: "We want to show people now that we are not one-hit wonders, but a two album band, really well established. It's amazing how much higher standards are now. With Emerson, Lake & Palmer, our first album was done in 17 days. This one has taken five months!"

Carl, too, is delighted with the chance to work once more in a suitable setting. He had his own band, P.M., for a while, but it never took off and wasn't the best outlet for his spectacular drumming style. Now he is happy to play Asia's songs while unleashing his solo talents. As for cracks about his revolving drum stage - says Carl: "That's alright, I'll just spin round the other way for the next eight years!"

Carl told me about an ironic quirk of rock history. Apparently, when he was in Atomic Rooster with Vincent Crane they auditioned Steve Howe, then with Bodast - and turned him down. "We wanted a Heavy Metal player and Steve had too much finesse!"

How does Carl enjoy playing with Steve and backing Asia's songs after his riotous years with ELP?

"I enjoy it and it was about time I started playing this type of music which I'd never, ever done. I'd love to have been in the Beatles playing songs. I'd always been in fast bands like

CARL PALMER



the Thunderbirds or the Crazy World Of Arthur Brown. I can still do all my stuff and play songs as well. After playing technical, highly arranged music for years, it's nice to move on to playing melodic songs with great musicians.

"ELP were great players too, but we tried to do everything in 20 minutes. Here we play for five minutes at a time. And this is the first band I've worked in playing 'four on the floor'. I'd never play disco style, but I realised one day, I'd have to give in. The music warrants it, so I don't mind. If I tried to project like I used to in ELP, then Asia wouldn't be successful, and I wouldn't be right for the band anyway.

"It's great playing for our new fans who are 15 years old and haven't seen us before. They've only ever heard about me and ELP from their older brothers and sisters. They really get off on it. The old ones are yawning a bit, though, and saying: 'Why is he still spinning round?'"

How does John Wetton feel about their new album?

"I'm very pleased with it, although I think recording in Canada was a mistake. Geoff and I wrote most of the material.

The others write too, but it seems our stuff is most suitable for the band."

John emphasised that the band's policy is to write and record three minute songs.

"The instrumental power we have is fine onstage, but I don't think we would have done as well as we have, had we not made a policy of cutting down numbers. We cut out all the deadwood, anything that was not pertinent to the song went

found a partner in crime with Geoffrey because we happen to write in a similar vein and we have the same backgrounds. All we are trying to do is write good songs and have them well produced, and do the best we can on stage. We go for big harmonies which can lead to problems live, but the excitement helps bypass all that.

"People have said: 'What's the difference between this album

different. We can feel within the band that something is going to change pretty soon. We are going to enjoy it while we can and then start to think again next year. We can't do another album like this one. We know that. The time we took was ridiculously long and we began to lose touch with it. After our stint in Canada I felt I couldn't sing anymore and that I couldn't write lyrics anymore. I looked out the window and all I could see was a mountain, lake and trees." (And that really sounded like a seventies rock band - Mountain, Lake & Trees).

So how solid is their following among today's fans?

"We seem to be on an up in America. But it's difficult to tell, isn't it? After all, we are a pretty young band . . . even if we are really old lags!"

It was time to return to the painted pyramid and the mountain made from sandbags. "You know," said John, "for a band who come from such different backgrounds, we get on surprisingly well. We have the odd row, usually about mixing, but there's none of that: 'You bastard, I remember what you said on the last tour'. We are proud to be in the same band."

"We can feel within the band that something is going to change pretty soon"

out the window. In previous groups we all used to pad things out. Now we cut things to bare necessities and if the song still doesn't make it, then it doesn't go on the album."

Has rock music been getting too florid?

"Oh very much so. I was in there with the rest of them. Take one idea and make it into a 16 minute piece. In U.K. with Eddie Jobson I tried to compromise between pop tunes and art rock and that really didn't work. I've

and the last,' and the answer is . . . nothing really. It's business as usual. All that's changed is the songs. But there will be lots of changes in the stage setting. This is going to be our big 'rock'n'roll tour', and then we are going to have a complete re-think and cut back everything on stage. This will be our nod at completely over-the-top rock. Next time around will be a lot more simple, both in music and stage show.


"We've got to do something

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