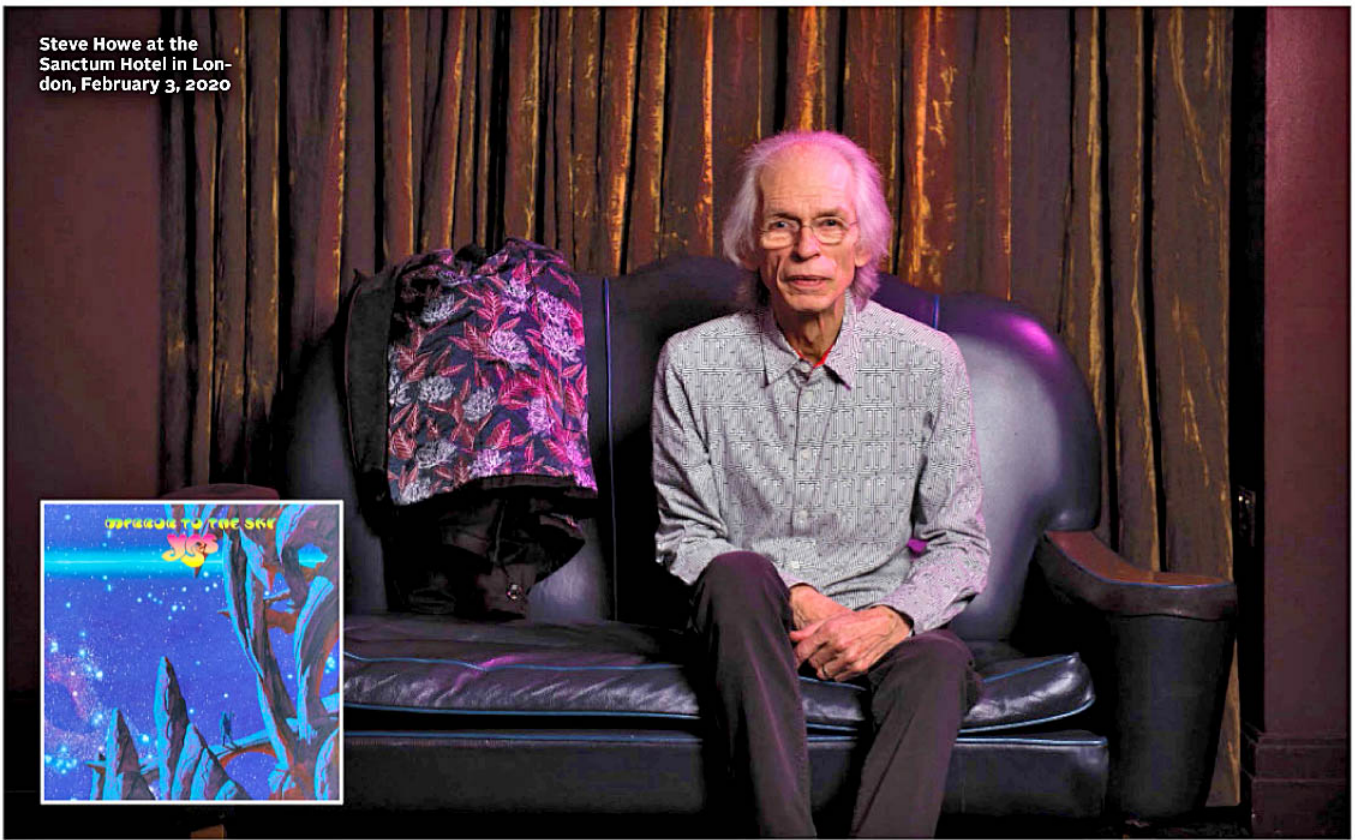


Steve Howe at the Sanctum Hotel in London, February 3, 2020



Giants Under the Sun

LIFELONG YES GUITARIST STEVE HOWE WEIGHS IN ON THE BAND'S NEW ALBUM AND HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED SINCE 1973'S *TALES FROM TOPOGRAPHIC OCEANS*

By Andrew Daly

▶ BEGINNING IN 2011, veteran prog-rockers Yes have been on an incredible run. To some, *Fly from Here* (2011), *Heaven & Earth* (2014) and *The Quest* (2021) rival much of what the London-born band managed to accomplish during its Seventies heyday. Regardless of whether you agree with that bold assertion, it goes without saying that after years of lineup shuffling and early to mid-2000s inactivity, Yes is a band invigorated. Moreover, that late-career renaissance continues in the form of the group's latest long-player, *Mirror to the Sky*.

When asked about Yes' refusal to settle in as a legacy act, guitarist Steve Howe says, "We've been on a great run with these last few albums, and that's been a blessing. Of course, there are classic songs that we want to play and that we should play. But a throughline from the old material to the new carries us along. We've never been keen on leaning on what we've done; we're always tweaking things. We're always searching for any indicators of excitement or interest. So if we have an opportunity not to repeat ourselves on stage, we will take it."

Some 53 years since he first graced the stage with Yes, Howe is as vibrant as ever. Still following an ever-evolving creative muse, the unassuming virtuoso dialed in with *Guitar World* to discuss *Mirror the Sky* and more.

Is making a new Yes record at this stage formulaic for you?

Surprisingly, no. *Mirror the Sky* went a bit backward. We were almost done with the record, and our label was ready to release it. But then, I mentioned that we had further tracks at about 10 minutes each. →

The label didn't even know we had them, but they were all for them once we played them for them. One of those songs was "Luminosity," which guided us stylistically. Working from that position sent us in a direction that dictated the entire album, which we feel in many ways is something that branched over from the last album, *The Quest*.

What's the secret to keeping from being repetitive?

It seems simple, but it's about picking the right songs. We write tons, so going with songs that have lyrics that will inspire us is imperative. It's about crafting each piece with unique colors and defining texture. And truthfully, that's what Yes has always done. We see our music as if it's all connected but still able to stand alone as individual pieces, you know? And I think that by avoiding any prog-rock clichés, we've been able to separate ourselves from the masses of King Crimson soundalikes.

How do you view your role within Yes?

Of course, the guitar is something I do quite regularly. [Laughs] So I'm a guitar player, but beyond that, I'm a songwriter. And the way that develops is that I'll put together some riffs, add some attitude to them and then try to decide if and where they might fit. I guess I view my role as someone who brings excitement to the music. Of course, there's my role as a producer, too. And that's tricky because I've got to ensure that my general overseeing

doesn't interfere with my work as a guitarist. But it's a funny position because when I'm wearing the producer's hat, I might go hours or days without talking about guitar.

"We've been able to separate ourselves from the masses of King Crimson soundalikes"

Some excellent steel guitar work on *Mirror to the Sky*. How do you approach that?

I had a lot of fun with that, especially during "All Connected." The way that started was [vocalist] Jon Davidson had some ideas he was working on, and I found that within those, there was a ton of space for something interesting. From there, I decided the steel guitar would do nicely and began building a framework. With that, compared to some of the other songs, there was a bit of extra development regarding the arrangement. Instead of ending as normally, we looped back to the intro and then played the song out. And then, I improvised on the steel, so those structures were recorded separately.

***Tales from Topographic Oceans* will turn 50 this year. What's changed most for**

Yes in that time?

Interesting question. It would be an understatement to say that our recording methods have changed. [Laughs] Back then, we'd record things on the road to cassettes and quarter-inch tape. And when we'd bring it to the studio later, we'd say, "God... this sounds awful. What are we going to do with this?" From there, we'd say, "How do we play and improve it?" So the entire demoing process was very rough. But that process also bred albums like *Fragile*, *Close to the Edge* and *Tales from Topographic Oceans*. I think that had we not done that; perhaps we might not have distinguished ourselves from the Pink Floyds of the world.

Do you still view the guitar as your ultimate means of expression?

I think so. But part of the challenge is balancing that with creating music for a world with a shorter attention span than ever before. Then again, things are different now. Back in the Seventies, we toured like mad and didn't always have success. And then, with Asia, I was part of a massive record that sold 4 million copies. I couldn't believe that it could be so seemingly effortless. So, I've seen both sides, and now, I'm more driven by what music means to me than anything else. I've often said I'd rather be a Chet Atkins back-room guy. I'd be quite happy with that. But certainly I'm an opportunist, too. So, if the spotlight keeps falling on me, I'll have to rise to the occasion.