

GTR HEROES

Two guitar legends meet. Two STEVES, surnames of HOWE and HACKETT. 'Combined visions' and 'almost psychic ideas' flash from their supercharged brains. They immediately form a band called GTR. Boring or brilliant? Tedious or terrific? MICK WALL finds out

TOWNHOUSE RECORDING Studios in London, a sprawl of corridors, kitsch and decorous, AC vents humming in my temples, while neon colours flash and fast-forward on a TV screen mounted high above the recording console.

"Do you want to hear it on the sensible speakers, or do you want a blast of studio noise?"

Producer Geoff Downes is huddled at the desk, flipping switches, killing lights, waiting for an answer. I take a smoke, roll up my sleeves, and tell him . . .

"I haven't done anything sensible in my entire life, and now is not the time to begin . . . gimme the studio noise!"

Fade on . . . guitars wink into life and a rhythm starts to swing. The drums, high-tech and fast, complex, cutting out the beat, dig in and take the whole thing up off the ground from there. When the voice begins the hook is already sunk deep into the back of your neck, your blood starts to swing, and then the guitars come back and waste you with fire.

It's called 'Here I Wait' and, apart from the obvious intricacies of the performances, it's commercial as hell; I can hear it now blasting out of a thousand car radios on some distant Californian freeway.

The principal creators of this music are Steve Howe and Steve Hackett, posing within their newly formed group entity, GTR. An intriguing new partnership, I was nevertheless surprised when I first read of them working together, a year or so ago.

Certainly, the similarities between the two are quite traceable. In the so-long-ago Seventies, while Steve Howe was living on a strict diet of brown rice, American tours and gold albums decorated in Roger Dean sleeve designs, making a name for himself as one of England's newest and most dazzling rock guitar stylists with Yes, Steve Hackett was also out there, earning the esoteric title of 'guitar virtuoso' with that other mid-Seventies classical-rock orchestra, Genesis.

By the time the Eighties finally took hold, Steve H and Steve H had long since departed their respective line-ups: Hackett chose to resolutely go it alone with a string of solo albums, including several satisfying recordings like 'Please Don't Touch', 'Highly Strung' and his last, in 1984, 'Till We Have Faces', while Howe re-emerged with his own all-star cast in Asia,



HOWE (LEFT) 'N' HACKETT: These men wield axes that KILL!!!!

releasing two mega-platinum albums, 'Asia' and 'Alpha', before finally quitting the band late in '84. And now comes GTR.

OF COURSE, as Howe and Hackett would be quick to point out, at this stage of the game, seven months into the recording of the band's debut album, GTR is not simply about guitars. There is ace bassman Phil Spalding, young and American techno whizzkid drummer (and former member of Marillion for one gig) Jonathan Mover, and there is vocalist extraordinaire Max Bacon, previously with Bronz and, before that, Nightwing, all in there stuck into a groove of high-class musicianship, spiked with the champagne taste of strong melodies and left to brew in the candid hot springs of pure commerciality. And, of course, lots and lots of guitars throwing shapes over everything.

I hear two more tracks; the first is called 'Tow The Line'. A lonely acoustic guitar washes in, like the sea at night, neo-classical, probably Steve Howe, then Max

Bacon's splendidly lyrical lead vocal grips the song by the throat, encompassing magic choruses dosed in the manic thrall of the guitars, moody and silent in places, mean and hurting in others.

We're still plugged into the insensible sound-system when out sneaks what will be GTR's first single from the album, 'When The Heart Rules The Mind'. Pow! Big statement! Big single! Big guitars, big choruses, big hearts in every department!

But is it big?

I dunno. Could be. I expected something much more introverted, something more inclined towards an array of experimental pieces. Instead, they hand me wondrously unindulgent Super Rock: a sound made up of humming songs and howling virtuoso performances, digitally recorded dexterity, and the fierce slow glamour of the music's two principal creators vying hungrily between their twin roles of spectator and star. Which H is playing what isn't always easy to hear, not at first, and then suddenly something strikes out

of the mix so individual it could only be the one. Which is a buzz, but it's as a band, without names, just a band and some songs, that the GTR thing really worked for me.

THREE SONGS is all I got, nothing else had been mixed yet, so I could be off course. Sitting with Steve Hackett and Steve Howe in the studio later, I asked them if what I'd heard was a fair representation of the whole album, or were there a couple of mini-operas stashed away somewhere on *Side Two*?

Hackett smiles and says: "I think the three tracks you heard are a fair representation, yeah, but there are other moods which we haven't gotten to yet in the mix. Every track sounds different to me; there are certain similarities on the surface, but they're all in a different bag really."

Am I wrong in figuring you for a chart band, you know every track a hit single? Are you shooting for the Foreigner market?

"No!" Steve Howe shakes his head. "We've both got a solo track on the album. Instrumentals. I think you'll find that within the melodies we've written together there is a great deal of experimentation going on, and very successfully so."

"Maybe the difference is that we've deliberately avoided what people might expect from us in terms of a follow-up to the kind of fusion albums that have usually been associated with us in the past," Hackett suggests.

Maybe. Seven months recording a debut album at the Townhouse is not inexpensive, and I've heard it said that this GTR LP has already cost over half-a-million dollars to record. What's been taking so long?

"When we first arrived in the studio we reasonably expected to be here about three months," admits Howe. "It's taken us just over twice as long to finish it, but so what? That's how long it took to get it just the way Steve and I—and the band and our producer—wanted it. We're all very proud of what we've accomplished here over the last few months." Two such individual and established guitar players don't idly walk blindfold into groups who take seven months to record their debut album, or not usually anyway; first they must establish a good working relationship. How have the two of you enjoyed working together?

"First of all there was the

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it's a privileged position."

WHEN STEVE Howe says that GTR isn't a supergroup, I smile a bit. Not because he's wrong, but because they may as well be in the eyes of the media. Howe and Hackett getting it together on their guitars in the studio is bound to harbour a number of pre-conceived expectations, my own included . . .

Whatever obscure, hard-to-define reasons these two complicated musicians had for getting their combined act together under the GTR banner, it's plain when they speak of 'combined visions' and 'almost

challenge of working together, when we first started playing sounds to each other, and writing bits and pieces down," says Hackett.

"So by the time we entered the studio, with a proper band, and all of the hard writing done, we'd already laid the foundation stone. Really, the rest, once we got in the studio and started recording together, may have been in the lap of the gods," says Howe. "We left the rest to chance, but it's really come together. There was no master-plan or anything bogus like that behind this band - GTR isn't a supergroup. GTR is about having songs, lots of harmonies and lots of musicality, but without dragging in an orchestra or a choir; just a really strong in-house rock guitar record."

"Also, it's a privileged position that we find ourselves in, Steve and I," says Hackett. "Because we're known doesn't mean we have nothing left to learn, nothing left to say to each other as creative musicians. This amount of intense concentration on guitar sounds . . . I don't think any other band is working like that at the moment; I don't think there is any other band that has worked so long and so hard and so high-tech as GTR. Like I say,

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psychic ideas together' that they both treat the band very seriously. *How close has the (finally) finished album come to these 'perfect visions' in rehearsals nearly a year ago?*

"The picture I had in my head before we went in to record as a band has steadily grown," says Hackett. "It was a new band, trying very hard to find a cohesive group identity, and that will always take time. It was very important that people interacted as musicians, and so, of course, things change, hopefully always for the better."

Howe nods his head in

agreement . . .

"All the same, our group sound came together very quickly. Early on, there were songs Steve and I had written that were dropped because they didn't fit the emerging group sound. I always think those things are good, though; it means you're working, getting it together."

Alliances of famous 'name' musicians over the years have resulted in heavily publicised more failures than genuine successes. The minute it happens, as it has done in the case of Steve Hackett and Steve Howe, aka GTR, the critical finger points accusingly and asks, 'But for how long will it last?'

Steve Howe grins and says: "How long did Culture Club last? How long does a group like Wham! last? Does anybody really care how long anything lasts?"

"You can't put pressure on yourself by asking questions like that too often; you'd never try your hand at anything," remarks Steve Hackett. "You have to grab the moment, it may not come again . . . if it feels right, it feels right. Do it."

GTR'S FIRST album is scheduled to be issued in America a good three weeks upfront of its British release. By

the time the LP is available here (on Arista) the band will already be out on tour in the US.

"We don't know if we're talking about playing in huge arenas yet," says Howe, "that can wait until next year or the year after that, it's not the most important thing. Musically, we'll obviously work out some things that we can really play well together, and we'll both have a solo spot, and the show will probably contain a couple of older things from Steve's past and mine. I think that blend, performed and presented within the sort of context we're thinking of, should really gel onstage."

So when can Britain expect her first proper onstage introduction to the GTR project?

"Realistically, not until September, I should think" says Howe. "At this stage, we're not planning the world's biggest tour of unknown places, and England would be my favourite place in the world to make GTR famous. But America comes first because there are already people there waiting to hear what we have to offer. England's next, with any luck."

"In America, they find it interesting because we're famous English rock guitarists from the Seventies," he grins again. "But sometimes that image works differently for us here, in Britain. You get tagged by your own success sometimes, though none of these things are obstacles for us; they're only obstacles in other people's minds. I think you'd have to have a very closed mind not to hear that we're both alive and well and working our way . . ."

SHADES

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