

Howe about some old guitars.

By Ray Hammond

THERE is seemingly no way that Steve Howe can escape from music. After a lengthy and tiring U.S. tour, holidaying in his new Hampstead mansion, his head is still filled with guitars and recording. As you talk with him a Martin is draped carefully against his chair and you get the impression that speech is really no more than an interruption of his more favoured form of communication.

Howe the musician has nearly cut the throat of Howe the businessman. Over the past three years he's been poking into the dusty corners of secondhand dealers in Dallas, Cincinnati and Ohio buying early electric and acoustic guitars in all states of disrepair. Originally the guitars went into the Howe collection but in recent months Steve's had a slightly more mercenary aim in mind.

RENOVATION

The Howe guitar shop is due to open about now.

'The idea really came to me because we had some space above a shop that Alan (White) and I had bought. I'm a health food fanatic and we used to shop at this particular health food shop in Hampstead. When we heard it was going to close down we decided to buy it, just to keep it open, not really as a money-making thing.

'Some space over the shop was vacant and I originally thought that





I might just start a guitar repair workshop there. My interest in old and unusual guitars has really grown too big for my own collection and I'm quite sure that there are many guitarists who would like the chance of buying a rare instrument. Sam Li (see the May issue of *Beat Instrumental*) is an old friend of mine and he's looking after the repair and renovation of the instruments. Wherever possible the guitars are being restored to their original condition.

'For that reason I'm afraid they aren't going to be cheap but I think that if a guitar is rare it has to be valuable, quite apart from the fact that nearly everything is imported from the States.'

The instruments that Steve doesn't bring back with him are shipped to London by a New York firm who specialise in the freighting of valuables. Nevertheless, it must be a risky operation.

'We've been very lucky so far. The people who pack the guitars really know what they're doing. They can get half a dozen instruments into a very small space and they're really packed well enough to stop them being damaged. We have to take a lot of them completely apart anyway when they arrive.'

'I'm trying to avoid the usual guitar shop type of atmosphere. I don't want to have any usual shop furniture like a till, I just want it to

be like somebody's front room.'

Steve maintains that he doesn't want to become a business head, but it seems that it's going to be difficult to avoid.

'It's a fact of life that you can't spend money unless money is coming in. The Health Food shop has had a hard time. I feel sorry when we have to say "we can't get a new carpet" to the people who work in the shop, because there isn't enough money coming in. The balance sheet at the end of the year has to be observed.'

UNKNOWN

Steve's mainstream career with Yes will enter a new phase in the autumn when the band's next release appears on the Fragile label.

'The label is only a subsidiary of Atlantic records really. The idea stemmed from the fact that we had our own management company which we had all forgotten about really. We all thought we were going to take on other artists, but we found we just weren't ready. In five years' time, when we're not touring any more, we'll have the time and I'll be able to work for other people. The idea of the record label was an easier way of getting other acts involved with us, finding people we really like, offering them a good deal and saying: "We're a good time record company!"

'We were hoping to get some

really outstanding artists together but I think that'll wait a while. I'd like my own album to be the first release on Fragile. There's likely to be three of our four artists joining around that time. I'm not worried about getting involved with the business side of a label. We're going to get somebody to run the label and because Yes can jump so easily from the black to the red at the bank we think we can balance things out. We're not pretending we can lay out thousands of pounds on unknown groups because we can't, we're really after established artists.'

The album to which Steve obliquely referred has been scheduled for some time. A year or so ago he was planning that his debut solo album should be a guitar work record in concert conditions. Now he has very different ideas.

INSTINCTS

'My songs are now bursting with a semi-blues feel. I'm mostly involved in five-minute songs now. As much as I used to say in interviews "those boring blues guitarists", I was always after becoming a blues guitarist myself, but something of a different blues guitarist. I was very surprised. I've been merrily recording on home tapes and then I listen to them and I realised "they're bloody blues, man". One can never hold back on

one's instincts. Things are just progressing.'

In general guitarists go through periods, rather like an artist might have a red period, in which they are developing their acoustic or electric skills. Is Steve concentrating on one or the other now?

INTROVERTED

'I really don't want to concentrate on one style or the other. At home I only play acoustic guitars and when I'm called on to work I usually feel that it's easier to work on an electric because I've been playing all these monster guitars. I work well on ideas on the electric guitar and someone who shall remain nameless thought I was an awful acoustic guitarist but a phenomenal electric guitarist. Possibly he was trying to hit me below the belt because the challenge of playing an acoustic guitar is far greater really. I started playing recorders and I've started playing a bit of keyboards and drums and I don't want to get too introverted about my music. I thought I was a guitarist — and basically I suppose I am — but I developed this kind of sideline about writing songs and words.'

The first session for the Howe solo album has already been booked and on his own admission

continued on page 9

STEVE HOWE

continued from page 7

Steve will be happy to come out with nothing but the experience.

'The system I'm using is that Alan (White) and I are playing bass and drums, we're going to do a couple of songs like this. The album is going to be a variety of my possibilities with a guitar in my hand. We've thrown these songs around the group and we're hoping they're going to develop in the studio. Other people's opinions on my songs concern me a great deal. As soon as any one shows any interest in my songs I'm in there saying, 'Well, what about this bit, or this bit?' I thrive on enthusiasms.

WEIRD

'It's very much a guitar album, because there's a lot of sections which are just guitar improvisation. I'll be lifting different guitars out of my collection and taking them along to the studio to get different sounds, I enjoy doing that. I got a kind of format together. There's one or two of my solo guitar pieces, three or four of my songs, and one of my rock instrumentals.

I write these weird instrumentals that don't really bear much relationship to anything I've heard, but they're structures with guitar melodies and incorporate

really all the instruments, guitar bass, drums, moog, etc., really all playing together, not in an orchestral way, but almost back to when the Ventures used to play their instruments together. I like to get the bass and drums doing their line and then have a middle section of different guitar sound or moogs as a kind of backdrop and then the lead instrument being the guitar having lines to play and improvisation to fill.'

Some might feel that most of the Yes men have been rather slow about getting out their solo albums. The only exception being Rick Wakeman who had a responsibility to the record label he signed to during his time with the Strawbs.

PUSHED

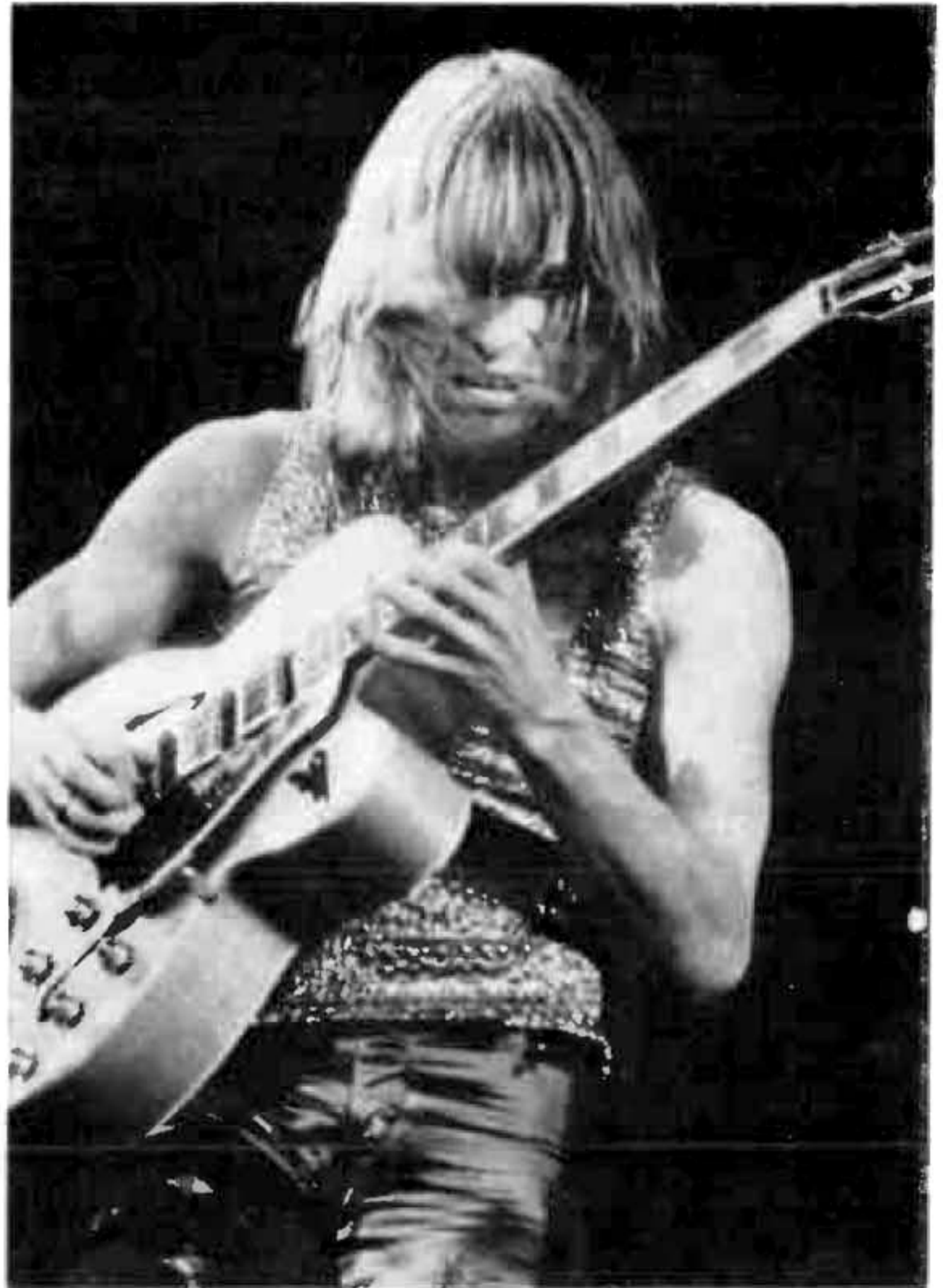
'The record label has been really fantastic, they've been waiting for me to be ready. They've never pushed me at all about it. There was a philosophy in the group that the longer we waited the better they were going to be. That's why none of us, except Rick, have rushed to do them. As soon as record companies have commitment on you they're talking about two albums, not one. I think like that, I think about doing my albums. If I only had the chance to do one it would have to be so good. Thinking I can do one this year and one the next makes it easier.

SPIRITUAL

Like all cycles, the Yes trail has to have a peak. Some might feel that it has yet to come, others that it has long gone. Isn't Steve frightened of delaying his album release until it's too late?

'The peak's a very hard thing to judge. I thought we were at a peak when we did *Close To The Edge* and then *Yes Songs* wasn't a peak here but it was in America, because America seems to like having the whole lot thrown at them in one package. Obviously I see me making albums long after Yes has

ceased. I thought we were at a peak with *Topographic Oceans*, but I think there's another one coming. We want to take music even further. We constantly try something, we're not sure what it is ourselves, but we hope it's going to move more towards a spiritual thing for us to be together.'



Steve: 'I see me making albums long after Yes has finished.'

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