

# INTERNATIONAL **MUSICIAN** AND RECORDING WORLD

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**Steve Howe**

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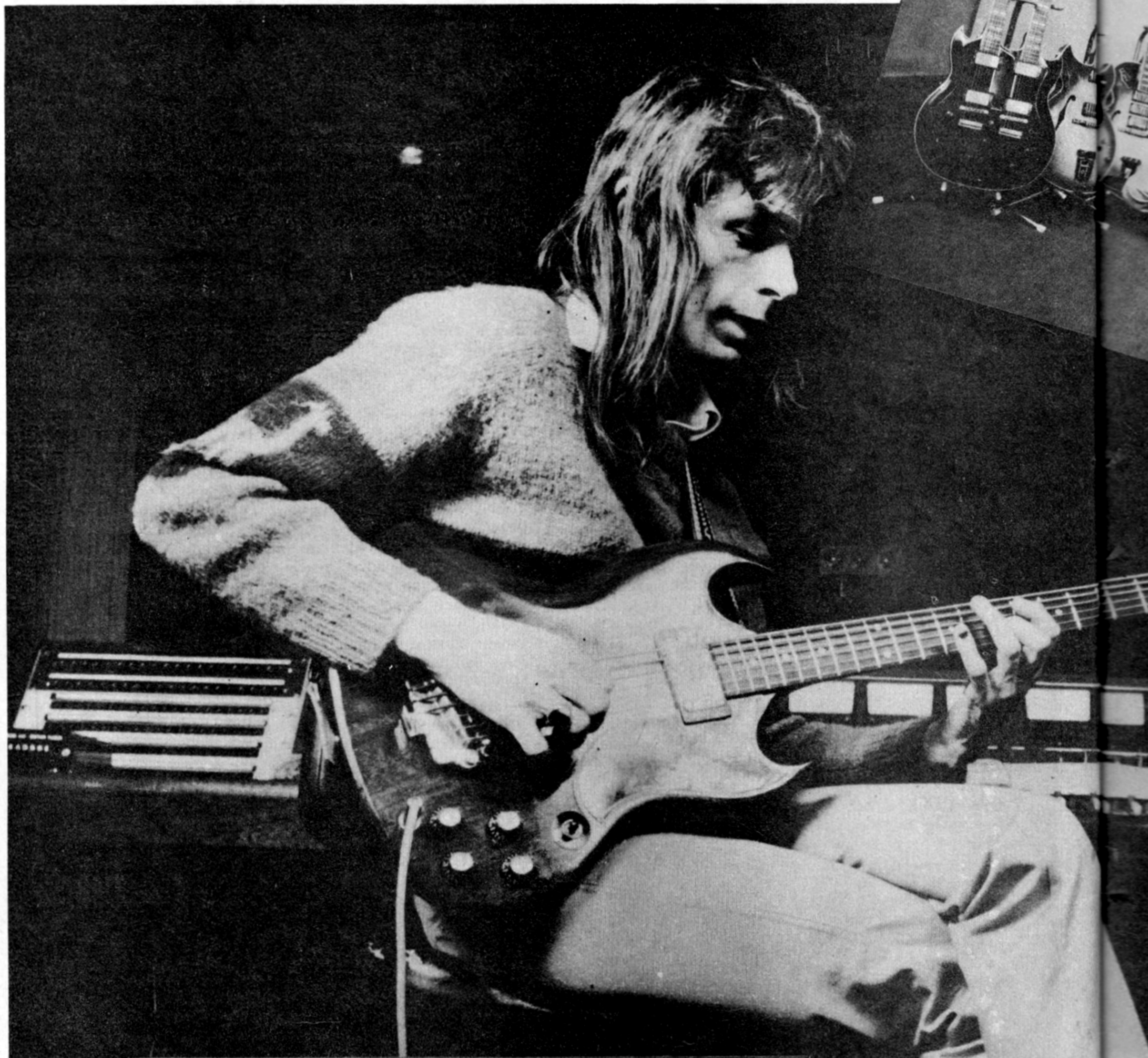
**Tests:**

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*"There are so many preconceived ideas about the way everybody lives, thinks, talks. When I found music, I said to myself, I'm not having anybody tell me how to do this. Even if I do it terribly, even if it takes me to disaster it's something I want to do myself. So I didn't have lessons, I thought that was really the only way to learn. I didn't know I was missing anything because I was learning — by myself. That was more exciting for me than the whole approach of being taught, which was just like school, which was everything I didn't want. In that way music gave me freedom."*



# The Howe and why of YES

SEAN HOGBEN meets a man with 115 guitars

The speaker is Steve Howe, now acclaimed as one of the world's best rock guitarists. In some ways, Howe epitomizes guitarists from the teach-yourself school. His uncompromising approach to playing and his composing skill have helped make Yes the consistently surprising band that it is. Their originality and commitment to non-commercial album projects have brought them much praise, and at the same time criticism. Whatever the critics might think, Steve Howe has consistently been supported by his fans — they have voted him "Best Guitarist" in innumerable polls.

Steve considered the achievements of Yes and his own album work before saying about awards: "There have been a lot and it's really nice, it's really amazing. I sat for many years at number five or number six and for many years before that, not in the chart at all, thinking, well, I'd like to be top of that chart. I thought it would be a bit like winning a prize. It's not something you need but something you want. I saw it as an opportunity to pull the stops out. That's when I opened up as a guitarist, I thought it was the important step, the key in the keyhole."

Steve's start as a player in rock bands was very modest. He claims that most of his success he owes to years of paying dues. But he does not deny that he is lucky — lucky enough to be able to play Vivaldi by ear.

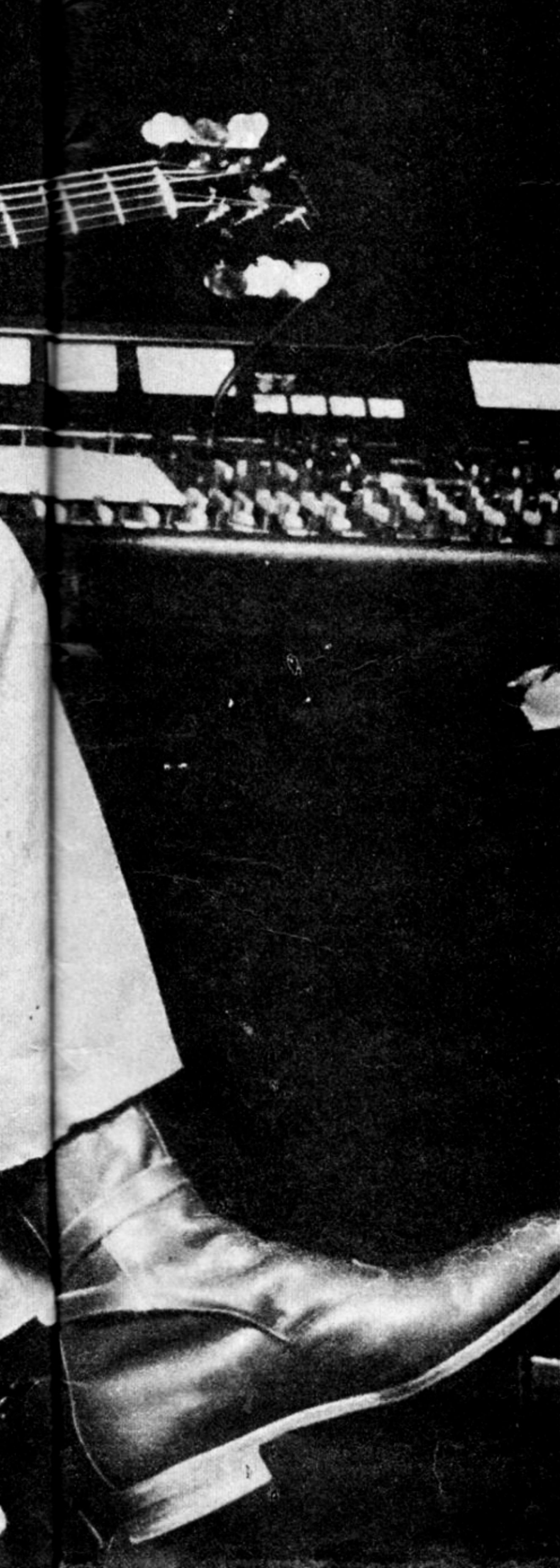
"I don't think I'm lucky with everything. If I was a successful guitarist at age 17, I would have said I was very lucky. I had the flair for it but didn't have the knowledge or the position. But I have waited and worked and done all that touring around England — I don't know how many times, but it was great, all that. When I was young I thought myself very average in thinking and not very good at lots of things. But because I felt confident with the guitar, none of it

mattered. It's a bit like an ailment: if you get something wrong, other parts of you get strong. If you get something strong going through your system and you work on it, the weak things seem insignificant."

No-one would doubt the strength of Steve Howe's playing. It is one of the most powerful aspects of the Yes stage performance and the provider of many scintillating recorded moments. Howe has helped Yes come back from a period where their musical aims were nebulous and their "concept" album, "Tales of Topographic Oceans," had soured many possible fans. Steve said it was just a phase.

"No group or individual performer can exist for very long in a dream world about how he is doing. One is constantly reminded by the pressures inherent in our situation — you have to face the real side maybe once a week, once a month. As a group we avoided that for some time when we did manage to go for a long time without realizing or foreseeing the pressures, or the actual end product of what we were doing. You know... five albums, 10 albums, what are we doing? We have been through that stage in the last couple of years and we are not over it yet. Yes is making a transition. It's a bit like a three-year pregnancy. It is gradually sorting out and refining what we are doing and how to get the best out of it. When you are in a group for 10 years, you grow up, you suddenly want to stay home, do something different for a few weeks.

"In some ways last year was a turning point, we have more free thinking because the new stage was something that was built around us. We got on it and worked on it and it clicked. It meant that we didn't have to do any shifting about — you know, the usual stage problems, how am I going to stand under all of that? It did give us a nice, easy feeling. We went ►►



# The Howe and why of YES

into that tour with quite a different frame of mind.

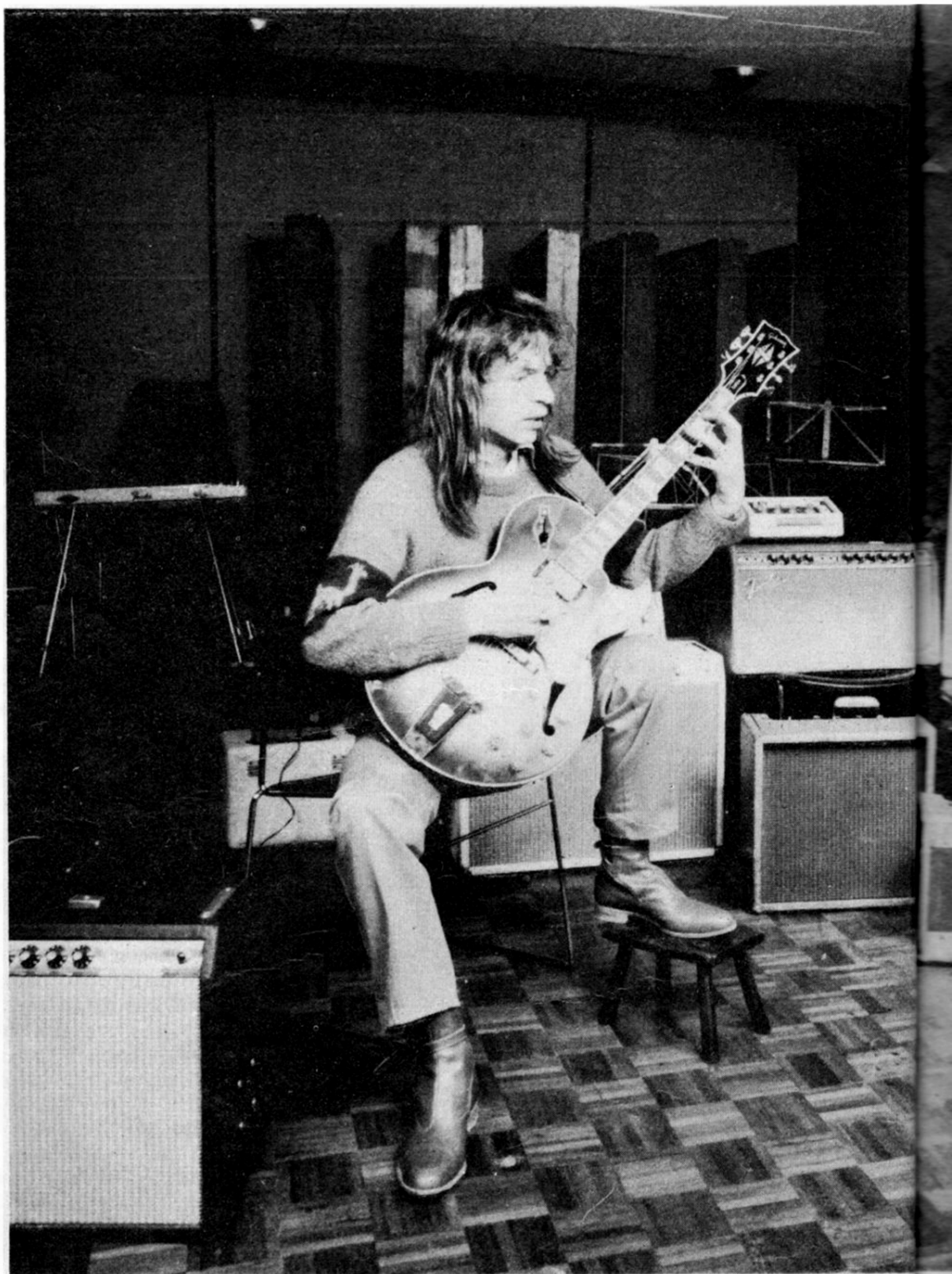
"Things had come full circle, to the point where we had the desire to have nothing – no stage at all. What we have now [the revolving stage that Yes used for the last US tour] is better for playing, better for contact and music, better for timing, it makes a lot of things better. Monitoring was getting atrocious with us. People were desperately relying on the sound mixer's capabilities to make sure they heard the other musicians, which did put a strain on things. We didn't notice it because we couldn't see it any other way."

In Steve's view, the new stage setting revitalized the band and saved them from slipping into a quagmire of attention-getting devices. "We had more control, that came out of the stage, we were a bit more commanding, more focused, rather than having to use things to focus us. The only reason Yes progressed stage-wise is that Mickey Tait has progressed stage-wise. Before that it was very much Martin and Roger Dean doing the stages. That obviously came from the album sleeves, the whole direction of the art that went with Yes. Mickey Tait has taken over more recently because he knows what we do and is more able to design things for us."

"Normally when you are playing at the end of a 20,000-seater, my God, you need a hell of a lot of lighting. The group didn't start using lights to be extravagant, it was because we needed them. The revolving stage was a good idea, not ideal but better overall. You always have to please the people who are down on the floor. When we opted for the middle we solved a lot of problems and saved expenses"

It is quite obvious that Steve regards his guitar collection very dearly. Not only is it a source of songwriting inspiration, it is an almost vital entity that will soon be the subject of a book. He claims having a 115-piece collection is a minor obsession that may pass one day but at the moment he admits: "I couldn't part with any of them".

Steve once took his obsession to the



point of spending \$900 having a \$14 guitar rebuilt because it was the same model as his first electric guitar. The job was done by Sam Li, a London luthier famous for his exacting work.

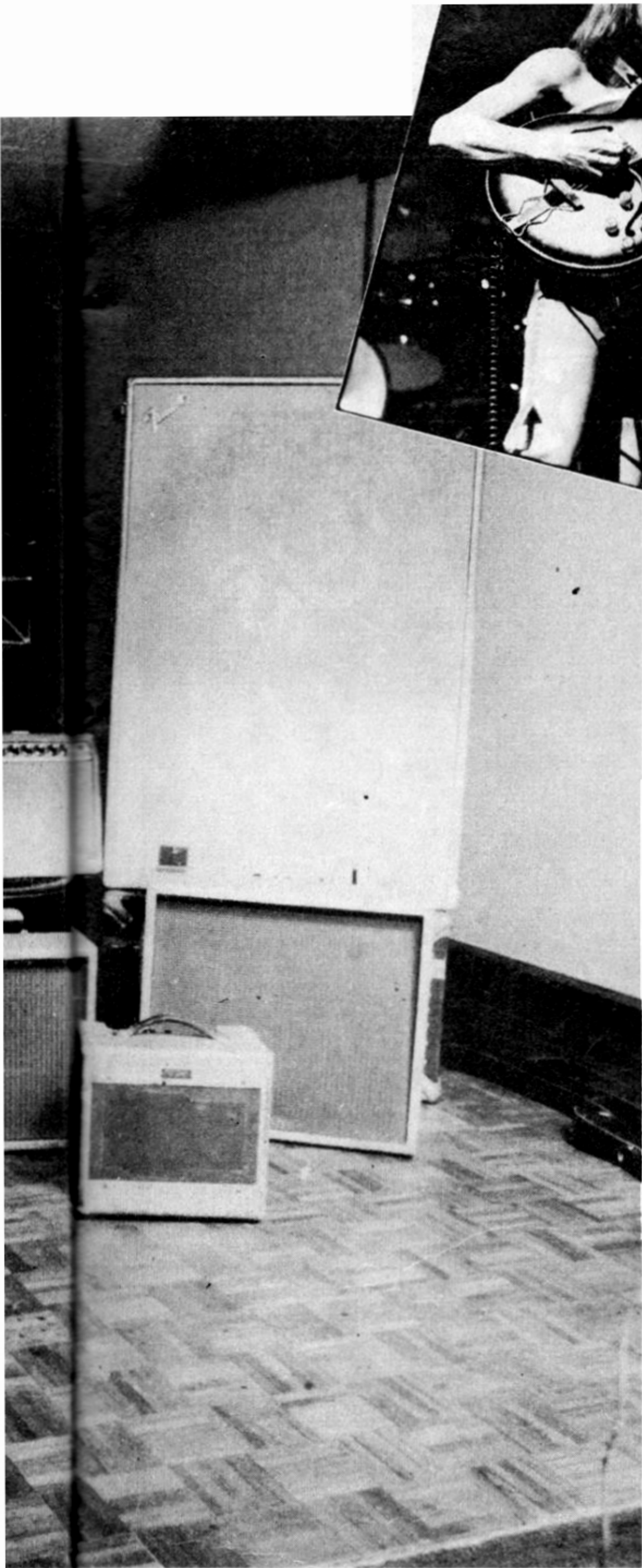
"Sam set up my guitars for many years," said Steve, "up until about two years ago. It took him nearly nine months to do that last job, it eventually cost me 50 times what the guitar was worth. It was a lovely guyatone guitar or an Antoria, I can't remember which, they are virtually the same. They sound very much like Strats but not identical. That was my first electric guitar. Somewhere along the way I traded my Antoria for a Melody Maker. It was what I thought to be a very good trade at the time."

"Before that, Sam was setting my guitars up, changing heads and bridges, occasionally putting a new neck on. He

was very good. He did a hell of a lot of things, at one stage we went through my entire collection."

Though he has fine examples of a vast range of guitars, Howe only keeps the ones he enjoys playing. He did not buy his first flat top acoustic until 1968 and still shies away from dreadnought-style bodies – "I never could play them and still can't."

One of the most notable of his guitars is a brand new custom-made "Steve Howe" model Gibson that had just arrived from the makers in Kalamazoo. Steve convinced the Gibson company that this guitar was the epitome of what he wanted in semi-acoustics. He described it this way: "This guitar was built in imitation of a Switchmaster. I found the three pickups on the Switchmaster was a very good idea. I used it a lot in the studio and on stage



suited for what you are going to play on it. I needed it to be like a 175, a Switchmaster, a Les Paul with frets up to D, a stereo guitar with an out of phase position. They were my requirements and that was the guitar that came out of it." When he puts aside his guitars and comes back to the reality of being a member of a band who have just celebrated their

tenth year on the road, Steve regards the future with calm. He said he will never be absolutely sure of any change in his present working lifestyle because he wants to explore every facet of live performance. He would not entertain thoughts of becoming a "musical director" figure because he simply has too much fun playing gigs.

Steve Howe will go on producing his own songs and making his albums entirely solo projects because he can't find "anyone who is as knowledgeable about my music and what I'm doing with it to produce it. I am waiting for stage stage to come along. I'd like to alleviate as many responsibilities as I can. I'm not copping out or being lazy but I'm aiming for the goal of doing what I do best all of the time. You do that first and then you experiment. I don't really want to experiment — though a small part of me does. Another side of me is totally stick-in-the-mud, it tells me to just go and play a 175 through a Fender Tremelux in a pub."

Though Yes have come back to touring with a vengeance and with "Tormato" have produced (by their standards) an unusually accessible album, Steve has continued to pursue his solo projects. Rather than making solo albums because his tastes are different, Howe does so because of "creative overflow."

He says: "Yes accelerated my possibilities and the others' possibilities but my career began a long time before I joined Yes. All that time I have worked towards the solo recording side of what I'm doing, as much as working with Yes. It's a question of ambition, if you have it then you damn well are going to try it. 'Close To The Edge' was a good time for me because I was doing so many different things, it was such a buzz. I had just recorded 'Close To The Edge' and I was doing all these other concerts, a concerto, gigs with other musicians like Stone the Crows and Terry Reid. It was good, that's how I'd like to be working. It is another side of me that is obviously raring to go. But I can't go all the time!"

He wants to continue as a solo recording artist but he does envisage a time when he will be writing and producing material for other artists. "I'm starting to see that more now. At the end of 1978, when I was doing a song with Claire

Hamill [renowned English vocalist] I appreciated the excitement of passing songs on and having other people sing them. You can become isolated with your songs, just working through them but as soon as someone else comes along and sings one, then 10 other songs come alive."

Not having ever learned to play guitar by conventional teaching methods, Steve's playing technique is purely instinctive. When it comes to playing a piece of improvised music, he does not think of a melody or borrow from a vast memory of licks — he just plays it.

"I go into that control room and listen to guitar breaks and solos and it actually takes more listening time when playing to find something that is really right. I go for it because of its strength, whether it takes up every space or leaves a lot of them. My judgement is based on the weight of what I'm playing coming through. I'm not saying you have to *compose* a solo. There is an awful lot of improvising one has to do. I never write a solo at home and come into the studio to play it. What I have done is to have a structure to work from, something to put a solo on top of."

Does that mean a chord progression or a solid arrangement, even something scored? "The only thing that I bother to write down is a chord sequence, but that is mainly on tape. These are things that I can keep at hand. Occasionally, if I'm finishing off a song or trying to get something together, I scurry through a tape to find a 'forgotten riff.' I try to use my tapes constructively."

With his fantastic 115-piece guitar collection, Steve must sometimes be inspired to write a song simply by picking up a little-used instrument. He agrees that an instrument is often his composing inspiration.

"There are different guitars with different sounds so I get a clue from that. There are lots of factors. Chord structure, whether or not you want the 13th fret... When you play a blues on three different guitars, well, you play so differently. That's what I thought when I used to look at the early Gibson catalogues — oh, to have a Stereo. Would I play like the Hollies or something? I had an image of sound. That's why I got the Gibson Barney Kessel. It is such a striking guitar and a lovely one to play on if you are used to a big guitar. I have impressions, some real and others false, hunches about what will be right. I believe everyone lives with this chance factor.

"Sometimes I am quite a blind improviser. Quite often I work inside an idea, going from a piece of improvisation into a lick that I play every night, out of the lick, back into the improvisation. When it's live, I need a steady tempo, otherwise I don't know what that hell I've played — I've just become swayed by the musical event of the night. But it is a nice point for me..."

and found it had a nice selection of sounds. I had always thought of a 175 with three pickups, partly because the Les Paul Custom has three. Nowadays there is not a custom full-bodied guitar. There is the Gibson Super 400 and the L5 but they are really big guitars. I wanted the smaller 175 body which I find most comfortable. The neck is identical to the '63 model 175D. As for the top, well, I always find machine heads to be too close together so I said, put the Super 400 head on it. Then we looked at the pickups. The Gibson people said, the best pickups we do now are the Super Humbuckers. So I tried them out on the new Les Paul Anniversary. I always thought that if you have a quantity of guitars, you don't need one to imitate another. I modeled this one around the songs we were doing on stage because a guitar has to be best