THE YES PROFILES

Part 2 CHRIS SQUIRE

If you've been reading *Beat* over the past year or so, you'll probably remember our comments on the electric bass as 'Rock's Neglected Instrument'. It's a corner of rock musicianship that boasts comparatively few card-carrying virtuosos — the number of noteworthy and innovative bassists being but a few drops in a *very* large ocean, teeming with the proverbial Big Names of the guitar, drum and keyboard worlds.

Right in the topmost strata of that small brotherhood of Highly Esteemed British Bassists however, you'll find Chris Squire — considered by many (as the recent *Melody Maker* poll shows) to be *the* finest bassist on the planet. Of course, Entwistle Enthusiasts and Bruce Devotees might voice a differing opinion on the matter, but it really can't be denied that Squire has (over the eight years he's played with Yes) become one of the most influential forces in breaking down the barriers and generating a greater *public* awareness of the possibilities and potential of the instrument.

Foreground

With Yes, that distinctive Squire Buzz remains a constant, and probably *the* most instantly recognisable facet of the band's music. It was right there at the beginning, weathered out the musical changes caused by the arrival and departure of various band members, and is still there today (albeit in a more 'refined' form) — providing an underlying continuity to a type of music that's constantly undergone changes from one album to the next.

To some ears, Chris' approach isn't really bass-like at all. In a sense, his playing has always been extremely 'lead' oriented — something of a dirty word among more traditional bassists, and a point that Chris himself has somewhat hotly contested in the past. In that case then, the word 'melodic' might be a better choice of description, for in an instrument that's more often than not an exponent for needlessly simple, functional, and sometimes maddeningly repetitive three note riffs, Chris has always tried to push (and, of necessity, bulldoze) his way to the foreground, to stand on *equal* musical footing with *all* the musicians he plays with. Not hiding behind the stage curtain. Not lurking behind the amps, thumping away and staring at the ceiling. But right *there*. Out front. Aggressively steering his

bass lines in, around, and through the lines and layers set down by the others.

True, he did start out on guitar years ago — only to junk it in favour of a big Futurama bass, when he found its dimensions more suitable to his lofty stature and the size of his hands. Looking at it that way then, there might well be a vague shadow of what the cynics like to call the frustrated guitarist unconsciously buried in the depths of Squire's whole reason for playing. But that's just splitting hairs, isn't it? Call it what you will, Squire's bass work is in a class all its own. Lots of imitators around, mind you, but that just serves as a further indication of exactly how important a player he actually is.

Mature

The aforementioned 'Squire Buzz', coaxed from his familiar Rickenbacker bass is justly famous — the aural trademark of Chris' overall approach — a trebly, biting rasp that sidesteps the muddier, less-distinctive lower frequencies of the traditional bass sound to cut through with surprising clarity and strength.

On the inaugural Yes album, Chris' bass is perhaps at its 'trebliest' and most prominent level, though the sound seemed to mellow out considerably with each successive album. The more mature tone he uses on 'Roundabout' is probably what most people hear in their mind's ear at the mention of Chris' name but by the time *Tales From Topographic Oceans* and *Relayer* came along, a deeper, denser tone (with fewer of those 'toppy' highlights and substantially more depth) had come to the foreground.

Bassier? Well, yeah . . . to a degree anyway. Chris has never particularly favoured the floor rumbling, bottom-heavy Motown approach anyway, but there's definitely been a marked change in outlook over the past couple of years.

But the *piece de resistance* definitely has to be Chris' epic solo album, 'Fish Out Of Water, — virtually the first time any rock bassist has built an entire work around his chosen instrument. Although the album makes extensive use of drums, keyboards, a bit of electric 12-string, and a full orchestra, the *bass* is the cornerstone of the whole operation. It's the centre thread around which all the other instruments are arranged to complement and embellish the full gamut of styles and sounds Chris has developed — from the sharp, wooden attack of 'Lucky Seven' (he used a Fender Precision on that one), to the low, menacing rumble of 'Silently Falling', to the biting grandeur of 'Safe'. Much of it isn't 'typically' Squire-ian but, there again, it's that constant search for something new that's put him on the top of the list in the first place.

Chris once said that Patrick Moraz' approach to electronic keyboards is "very human". In response, but not merely to return the compliment, Patrick made the same observation in Squire's playing, explaining that the one major point that sets Chris apart from the crowd is his habit of using vibrato on his notes (not a particularly common bass technique) to add that extra layer of warmth (time alone can tell how Rick Wakeman's return to the band will affect the bass/keyboard relationship). Then too, the lengthy, smooth sustain that Chris is particularly fond of (listen, once again, to 'Fish Out Of Water') tends to round off the sharp mechanical edges, so the notes aren't churning out with a staccato, machine-like relentlessness. Earlier on, Chris did often go for the staccato effect (as on 'Roundabout') if the situation warranted it, but nowadays, he seems to have more of a tendency to colour his sound through sustain, vibrato, and subtle volume and dynamic changes, with a sensitivity that isn't normally associated with the bass.

Mood

He's one of the relatively few musicians who view the bass as a proper solo instrument (within limits) in its own right. Though he's made it known that he isn't particularly enthralled with his performance on 'The Fish' (off the live *Yessongs* album), his feel for light and shade, along with his penchant for dramatically altering the mood of the piece from one bar to the next is probably easiest to hear on that particular track.

But what else is there to say, that all those Yes albums, 'Fish Out Of Water', eight years worth of live gigs, and a stack of 'Best Bassist' awards don't *already* say? Chris Squire's gotten to the enviable point where he doesn't have to prove himself to anybody — a stage very few musicians ever reach — and he's done it without brag or bluff. Skill and sensitivity have always been the key. And it shows.

Next Month:
STEVE HOWE

ABC OF TECHNICAL TERMS

Digital Delay Line (D.D.L.)
A Delay "Line" consists of a number of 'black-box' delay modules with fixed or variable time-delay characteristics, which may be switched in or out to achieve a delay of the required length. The great advantage of *Digital* Delay lines is that this factor, the actual delay time, can be fixed at a certain point with great accuracy. This is because it is far easier to delay digital information electrically than it is to delay analogue information. Without going into excessive detail, what actually happens within the device is the following: audio signals enter the unit in analogue form, are changed by an a-d converter into digital information, are stored for a predetermined period in the machine's digital memory, and are then released and changed back into audio via a d-a converter. D.D.L.'s are usually only to be found in recording studios because of their rather expensive prices — upwards of £1,000! Some very rich groups can afford to use them 'live' — but delay lines can have applications other than as a "super" reverb/echo effects unit when used with P.A. systems. Delay lines were used at Woodstock (remember Woodstock?) to delay the sound from the widely spaced loudspeaker towers at the festival, so that it arrived in the same place at more or less the same time (avoiding that dreadful 'railway station' effect.)

Disc-Cutting
This term refers to the process of using a cutting lathe to convert the sound from a master tape into grooves on a blank disc, which will then be used as the "master disc" for pressing vinyl records. The blank disc is usually made of aluminium coated with a lacquer of cellulose nitrate, of about 0.15 mm thickness, and containing various lubricants, plasticisers and other materials to prolong the life of the cutting stylus itself and to give a smooth "cut". The cutterhead is moved across the blank disc by a screw-thread, operated by a pitch controlling system, which varies the type of groove being cut according to the loudness and pitch of the musical signal. The complete cutting lathe has many critical variables which affect the final product, and very precise adjustments are required to get the ideal cut. Rock producers are just beginning to realize quite how vital certain qualities of the original master tape are to the disc cutting process, and that, despite his skills, the cutting engineer is not a wizard who can turn any taped sound, however badly recorded, into the perfect disc!

dB
Decibels — means one tenth of a Bel. Often encountered on amplifier specification sheets — for instance — "Signal to Noise ratio: X dB". Decibels are not a measure of amplifier power themselves, they merely express how big or small one power level is when compared with another. 'Times one' is 0 dB, hence 0 dB means 'no change in level': to know how much power a Decibel level expresses, the level of 0 dB must be expressed. A useful guide is that 3dB is a power ratio of 2, so ⅓3 dB is twice as much, and —3 dB is half as much, as whatever level has been set for 0 dB. Thus 6 dB represents a power ratio of 4, 9 dB a power ratio of 8 and so on. The standard level for 0 dB signal input is 0.75 of a volt, so the example given earlier would mean that the self-generated amplifier noise was X dB below this — a fraction of the input voltage represented as a more easily expressed 'power ratio' of dB's.

Driver
A sort of "accepted slang" term for a loudspeaker or audio transducer, derived from the term "Compression Driver". Compression Driver basically means an audio diaphragm with a sealed airspace behind it, as in a high-frequency horn pressure unit, or a cone loudspeaker horn enclosure with a completely airtight chamber behind the loudspeaker.

Dynamic Range
Batman's IQ rating — or the signal handling capacities of an electrical device, ranging from *pp* to *ff* (very soft to very loud.)

De-Esser
A piece of studio equipment used to tame excessive high-frequencies in audio program material. This gadget is very useful for film dubbing, where the engineer might need to correct very "ssshhy" dialogue recorded on location; it can also be used to achieve an effective balance between presence and excessive sibilance when recording vocals. The exact mode of operation varies from unit to unit: some older 'de-essers' merely offered constant broad-bandwidth attenuation of the high-frequency range, whilst more up-to-date devices work in a similar fashion to compressors. This means that gain reduction of the high-frequency range only comes into operation when a sound is present, and the engineer has the facility to adjust the attack and release times of the 'automatic' attenuation.

D.I.
Stands for "Direct Injection". The term is rather self-descriptive, meaning that instead of sticking a microphone in front of an instrument's amplifier, the instrument itself is plugged straight into the P.A. system or recording console. This technique usually requires the use of a "D.I. box" to boost the relatively weak signal of the instrument, and to match its impedance to that of the recording or P.A. mixer. D.I. boxes usually have two jack sockets and one Cannon socket (3 pin) on them: the output from the instrument should be plugged into the other and connected to the instrument amplifier, and the cannon socket outlet (usually 600 ohms impedance, balanced via a small transformer) used to connect the instrument directly to the mixer. Sometimes a resistive network is included in the design, allowing the D.I. feed to be taken from an instrument amplifier's loudspeaker outlet rather than from the instrument itself. In this case the jack sockets should be marked "From amp" and "To loudspeaker", or there should be a switch marked "Amp/Pickup"; if there's nothing on the D.I. box like this, then don't use it to connect an amplifier's speaker output direct to a mixer — otherwise expensive damage may result! Some amps are fitted with sockets on the back marked "Preamp outlet" or "Mixer output": unless these sockets are of the 3 pin Cannon type, a balancing transformer will still be required to interface with a mixer using multicore and stage-boxes, but the feed will be O.K. for ordinary P.A. amps with high impedance inputs.