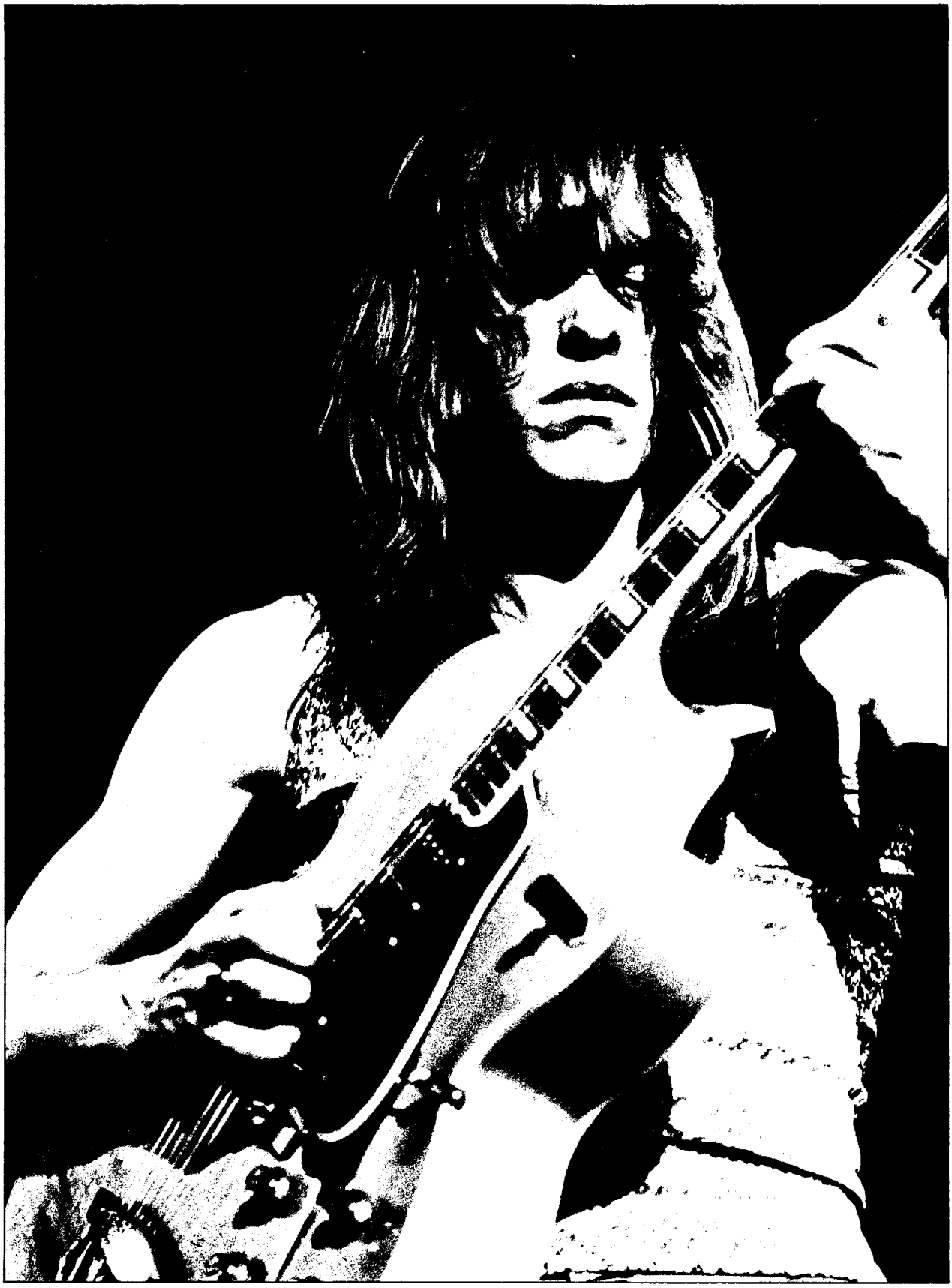

Steve Howe

The conflict over what does and doesn't constitute "rock and roll" and rock guitar is one that will probably never be resolved. Basically, it's a matter of personal philosophy and how willing you are to stretch a point. There are still plenty of staunch traditionalists for whom anything recorded after 1963 is immediately suspect. But for the sake of convenience, let's assume that the debate started with *Sgt. Pepper* and is presently led by two ill-defined, often-at-odds camps.

At one extreme lies the nerve-shattering, riff-happy, volume-is-bliss contingent, whose series of boogies, get-it-ons, and rock-and-rolls could've been taken from a chapter of the rock star handbook. It's predictable, frequently boring, and above all a safe bet.

At the other end of the spectrum sulk the ultra-progressives with their introspective bundles of mind-boggling technique and artistic integrity. Wallowing in self-justified pools of obscurity with a detached air of superiority, this group usually spends much of their time figuring out how to pay next month's rent.

Somewhere in the middle lies what might be called a "neutrality zone," where musicians blend the better aspects of both camps without yielding to the embarrassing parodies of the first or the navel-contemplating grumblings of the second. Here, high musical standards and widespread audience appreciation go hand in hand. Steve Howe, one of Britain's most illustrious musical citizens, has staked out an enviable piece of ground for himself in this category.

Howe's work with Yes has established him with an audience of a size and variety that most guitarists can only daydream about. Thus, he has full rein to pursue his own musical concepts without being compromised into the sometimes stifling straitjacket of what-the-kids-want. To borrow Rory Gallagher's phrase, Steve Howe plays "modern guitar." His style is completely unorthodox when judged by the rules and cliches of rock, yet divorced from the manic, self-centered eccentricities that've made a number of otherwise fine musicians totally inaccessible in the past.

Steve didn't suddenly turn around one Tuesday afternoon to find his guitar work in a class by itself. The growth process was a slow one, occurring in the late Fifties and early Sixties. It held the same musical atmosphere that initially inspired most of Howe's contemporaries.

"Even before I wanted to play the guitar," Steve recalls, "I was listening to Les Paul and Frank Beecher [Bill Haley's guitarist]. We had them on old 78s, and I was first attracted to the pure electric guitar sound. I specifically remember this great record called "Blackberry Boogie" by Tennessee Ernie Ford. Later I found out that the guitarists were Jimmy Bryant and Speedy West. I was around ten, and rock and roll was just happening. I obviously didn't know that Bill Haley's guitarist played a Les Paul Custom. But I used to see pictures, and I'd fantasize that I'd be playing on a stage in a few years with that kind of guitar—blowing people's minds."

Like most kids, Howe gave little thought at first to actually sitting down and learning the instrument, but he pestered his parents for a guitar until they bought him one. Until then, his experience with possessions had been limited to toys. "The guitar didn't quite fit into that category," Steve admits. "I went through

that very strange period everyone goes through of trying to learn how to play it."

His inspiration was mainly coming from the Fifties rock and roll heros like Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly. However, much to Steve's advantage, his older brother introduced him to new, non-rock forms of music that very few young guitarists were even aware of. As Howe retells it, "When the Shadows first came along, which was possibly a little before I started playing, my brother would listen to them and say, 'It doesn't *do* anything. It's not very emotional. Listen to Barney Kessel.' My brother played clarinet, and was into traditional and modern jazz, so this was a bit hard to take—the Shadows *and* Barney Kessel—though I have to admit that I found Barney Kessel much more interesting. It was a very funny time. After I'd had the guitar for a couple of years, I felt that I really wanted to play well. Yet I'd hear Django Reinhardt records and I really couldn't get it into perspective. Did I have the ambition to become a great guitarist, or was I just going to sit at home and play for my own amusement?"

Howe soon realized that the guitar couldn't be mastered in seven easy lessons, but he managed to sustain his original burst of enthusiasm through the first awkward, frustrating steps. "I was the kind of person who felt it was something abstract enough for me to do," he states. "My day-to-day life at school was a bit ordinary, and my mind was always out the window. I really wanted to do something that would make life a little more exciting."

For about four years, Steve was troubled by nightmares, and found that the only way he could get to sleep was to listen to music. "By putting on Chet Atkins' *Teensville* I'd really be relaxed," Steve explains. "It's not like it was really 'deep' music either—not like somebody turned me on to Bach. I was only a kid, and I owned a record player. I had this Chet Atkins record. And I had fears—horror fantasies. Very Fellini-like. I suppose it was a few things like that, along with insecurities and a feeling that I wasn't letting off any steam, that really led me to music and the guitar."

During the first few years he felt that his playing was very inadequate and found it odd that people would ask him to join their groups. "Because of the amateurish feel about it, I just didn't want it," says Steve. "I wanted to be confident. Having a guitar around my neck didn't give me that confidence. I had to know what I was going to play. I had to be able to improvise—which, even in later years, was a very strong drive."

As his confidence grew, Steve made the transition from bedroom guitarist to semi-pro musician, moving into the thriving pub-band circuit. "I was suddenly on the road in a spiritual sense," he explains. Howe's listening and playing habits became heavily grounded in rock and roll. He took particular fascination in searching for records that most British teenagers would've considered obscure: Link Wray's "Rumble," the Champs' "Midnighter," an assortment of Ricky Nelson, Conway Twitty, Muddy Waters, and Arthur Crudup waxings—virtually anything that had a potentially intriguing guitar solo buried in the middle of it. "There were some things I never heard of again, like Roy Clark's "In The Mood," Steve recalls. "I mean, there's an incredible solo in there. It was a time when people around me couldn't believe that Chet Atkins could play two lines at once—his thumbpicking and all. That was because people were looking at me, and I couldn't play it!"

Although the ability to improvise was a major objective in his search for a style, Howe didn't rule out copying other guitarists' solos note-for-note. Steve recalls, "I worked out some great Tal Farlow solos, and for the life of me I'd love to play them again. They were great. They gave me inspiration, but I can't play them now. It was useful though, because you find out how the guitarist went about constructing a solo, and what passing chords he used. All those things fascinated me."

During the early Sixties, Steve was thoroughly immersed in London's newly spawned rock scene, which centered around the music shops lining Charing Cross Road and the Tin Pan Alley district of nearby Denmark Street. For Steve, this was a vague period of hanging out and playing when and where the opportunity arose. He sometimes stood in for absentee guitarists like Albert Lee, of Chris Farlowe And The Thunderbirds, playing a very basic, rudimentary style of rock and blues guitar. "All the stuff they played was in twelve bars," Steve notes. "People have often asked me if this was inhibiting, since the things I do with Yes aren't twelve-bar blues

things. We do play things that often make use of very rudimentary ideas, though. I still have strong feelings about the blues. I still enjoy playing in that kind of situation. In fact, I wasn't consciously playing blues—just the kind of style that Albert Lee was playing. He was really the first guitarist I associated myself with."

Eventually, Howe began doing pub gigs more steadily, playing with his first professional outfit, the Syndicats. His new-found abilities were channeled into an onslaught of Chuck Berryisms. "We had the 'Chuck Berry Appreciation Society,' or something like that, painted on one side of our van." Steve reminisces, "We actually got fired from a residency for playing fourteen Chuck Berry numbers in a single night. It *was* a bit too much, I guess."

Producer Joe Meek led them through a brief recording career that produced a 300-mile-an-hour rendition of "Maybelline," and a reasonably well-received Howlin' Wolf number. "It was 'Howlin' With My Baby,' or something," Steve recalls. "Georgie Fame reviewed it in *Melody Maker*, and mentioned that he liked the guitar solo." There was also a Ben E. King number that marginally made the charts, although Steve admits that he can't even remember the name of it. The success and satisfaction of that band was considerably less than lofty, and Howe began casting around for something better. As he puts it, "I had a really good guitar, a Gibson ES-175, and I felt that I wanted to be in a really professional group, because all this was still a bit amateurish."

He joined the In Crowd, who, after a bit of shuffling around, evolved into the group called Tomorrow, and released an album of the same name in 1968. "People said that we had a lot of promise, and there was a lot of enthusiasm generated for us in London at the places we played," Howe declares. "The stronghold of our stuff was really a raving, three-piece-group sort of music, though the influences weren't clearly defined. We were just going off in our own direction."

Changing attitudes within the group and record company indifference got the best of the situation, despite the fact that they had a hit single called "My White Bicycle." Many people, including one Chris Squire, placed them in the same league with Pink Floyd. Steve admits, "The group might have hit some heights, but there were some irreparable things going on that we couldn't come to terms with. The singer had made a hit record on his own, and we were all supposed to do the same. It was a bit like Yes, though we all had different ideas of what we wanted to do. There was no coordination. We split up."

Steve's musical influences had broadened considerably during this period. He was noticeably veering away from rock and venturing even further into jazz, although the Beatles and the Byrds were prominently heading Howe's list of favorites. "I was also hearing things like Miles Davis' *Sketches Of Spain*, which is a record that's still with me." He goes on, "I began listening to Vivaldi—not especially Vivaldi—but he seemed to be the center of the more classical side of my listening. The thing is, I started to enjoy listening to other instruments as much as I enjoyed listening to the guitar. I can listen to violin music all day long. I like Stravinsky, and I also like much older music from the Middle Ages—lutes, harps, and recorders. I listen to a lot of harpsichord music as well."

With Tomorrow not-so-gently ushered into an early grave, Steve was out on the street again. However, it wasn't long before he planted himself in the midst of a struggling group of unknowns called Bodast, who for the next two years provided him with a musical focus, but little money to speak of. They recorded an album for MGM, but the company closed its British operation just as the sessions were completed.

Some American companies showed a passing interest as Bodast plodded through a succession of gigs, from the Speakeasy to the Royal Albert Hall no less, playing second on the bill to Chuck Berry. "These American film producers were going to make a film on us, because we were the epitome of the struggling group," Howe explains. "We lived in a very depressing house at the End-Of-The-World. I guess they thought we were ideal material for the film."

Unfortunately, nothing happened. Steve had already turned down a number of offers from more established bands hoping that the situation would improve. Finally, he set off on a European tour backing Pat Arnold who was second on the bill for the Clapton/Delaney And Bonnie tour. Near the end of 1970, Steve left Bodast for good.

"I spent a month doing absolutely nothing after that, and the next thing I got into was Yes," Steve recalls. "Chris Squire called because the members of the group were following up their own ideas about Yes' next guitarist, since Peter Banks had left. Chris remembered me from my days with Tomorrow, and [vocalist] Jon Anderson had seen me with Bodast. So we got down to rehearsing, but the first impression I gave to the guys didn't completely settle them down. I think [percussionist] Bill Bruford was a bit wary of me, because I was a bit of a hippie. But it became very cohesive overnight."

The past six years with Yes has broadened Howe's style immeasurably. His approach is to incorporate flavors from many different musical worlds and ages. Some merged into new hybrid forms, others were left in their original state. "As I said, my brother used to play a lot of music for me, and I'd always be willing to sit down and listen to it," he continues. "With any kind of music, everyone around you has certain records that they like, and you get to hear them. One pleasure I have is hearing music for the first time. If I like a particular piece, it's quite possible that I might like something else by the same composer, so I've always tried to tune into other things."

Steve's most obvious contribution to Yes is his electric playing. His angular, yet flowing approach to melody often seems closer to modern jazz than to rock and roll. Steve finds it difficult to describe his playing objectively. If there's a recognizable Howe style (and there is), he himself is basically in the dark as to exactly what it is. He asserts, "What I'd like to get through to people is the improvisational side of my solos. Like on *Beginnings*, every number has a bit where I didn't have a clue as to what I was going to play. I knew I was just going to walk into the studio and find something to play."

The inherent complexities of Yes' music, in which you have, in effect, five individual soloists, makes improvisation a tricky proposition at times. Particularly onstage, arrangements have to be set so that at any given moment each man knows what the others are going to do. Steve tries to step around the problem at every opportunity. As he puts it, "Onstage, I'll often get the feeling on certain nights that I'll attempt not to play the same lick as last night. Even with the type of music we play, there are some nights when you can pull it off. You'll be looking around at everyone else in the group, and they'll be thinking, 'Are you going to play something different? Because if you do, I think I'll be able to keep it together; and everybody's keeping it together for each other so that we can jump off the deep end at certain times.

"At other times," he continues, "it's a case where Yes will perform a song that's rather like the records because we feel we've come up with a good arrangement for it. We can play 'And You And I' right down to a line, exactly like it is on record. But I like to do an improvised solo in it. I think it adds something to the way we originally did it. When we're onstage doing a selection from our recorded work, I occasionally don't get off on it. When that happens, you'll find me playing in the dressing room after the gig. I won't just finish a set and say, 'Well, that's okay,' because when I feel like that, I've *got* to play something. I might just plug in my Telecaster, turn the amp up, and go crazy for ten minutes playing very elementary guitar. Because of the complexities of performing a big number where this has to be right, and that's got to be just right, you get to the point where you'd just like to play anything. That's why we get into encores. We can play and not feel paranoid or inhibited. It's not really performing. It's more like we're just playing in a club and letting off steam.

"Somebody reviewed *Yessongs* in *Rolling Stone* and said, 'Steve Howe used to play much better when he was with Tomorrow, because they used to give him ten minute solos.' I knew what the guy was thinking, but at the same time, the guitar is an instrument that many people overindulge in. When I see guitarists play, I can't believe how carried away some of them get with so few notes."

Howe views the guitar hero business with a slightly skeptical eye. "It seems as if England has more great guitarists than America now. While none of them play particularly badly, many of them don't play brilliantly. If one thinks about cliches, which are so strong in rhythm and blues and rock and roll, you're allowed a lot of things in the overall arrangement that have been heard before. You can usually get away with it. But when you come down to the actual idea of an instrument like the guitar in a 'free' solo, one doesn't expect to hear cliches. Yet I constantly hear

them. The whole concept of being a top guitarist has become very ill-defined. And there seems to be a shadow of an old trend coming to the front again. If you're good looking, you're going to make it. It sounds cynical, but I really think it's come back to that."

Steve doesn't feel that there *is* a guitar boom anymore, because no one person is really out in front. "When Clapton was really up there, pushing and playing all the notes," says Howe, "he was the one that everyone looked up to. Now, instead of one guitar hero, there are dozens of them. And a lot are playing the same kind of music—doing the same kind of things. It's not that I'm cynical about the guitar. I just feel that it really needs a shot in the pants."

The short-but-sweet, chart-oriented guitar snippets gave way to the marathon solos of the Cream era by around 1967, and Howe feels it marked a massive change in outlook on the concept of the solo guitar. He explains "Both have their strong points, but I don't see enough of either now. I don't see the great thirty-second guitar solo, and I don't see much of anything that's whipping up a storm in terms of new guitar directions. That's something I'd like to achieve someday. It's something that I know the press would love to latch on to: 'Steve Howe wants to be the greatest guitarist in the world.'"

Actually, Steve is already considered one of the world's finest rock guitarists, and he has no real imitators. The concert stages and recording studios of this world are jammed with carbon copies of Clapton, Beck, and Page (not to downgrade the three, mind you), yet Howe seems to have a corner all his own.

With his love for blazing solos, Steve occasionally lets his enthusiasm get the best of him. Even then, his melodies avoid the cliches that make many other guitarists indistinguishable from one another. "I tend to shelter myself from most of the ordinary rock guitar work that goes on," he says. "I don't listen to the stuff basically—I did go out and buy some records recently that I wouldn't ordinarily listen to, thinking, 'I've got to hear all of these guys.' But usually, when I hear something that sounds as if it's going to be full of cliches, I'll give it a few extra minutes anyway, until it turns out exactly the way I thought it would.

"My interest in music has always been the sort of thing where, even when I was playing in pubs doing Shadows tunes, I was also doing things that were really crazy—insane, odd things that were unknown," he goes on. "In some cases I did standards, but certainly not in the context of rock and roll. I still wanted to play them. Maybe this has been the healthiest thing for me—being allowed to virtually do whatever I like. No producer or group has ever said, 'Look, you can't do that,' to me. I feel that I've been a very free individual when it comes to music."

The end product of that freedom is a razor-sharp sense of spontaneity, and while Steve will often sit in the studio "drifting around for a while, trying out some licks," it's only to provide himself with a basic spark of inspiration. He never maps out a solo from start to finish, but prefers taking the basic seed of an idea and simply elaborating on it. The concept of using first takes is one that he's particularly keen on. He's found that first impressions generally turn out to be the freshest and that technical and artistic nit-picking can often kill a perfectly respectable piece of guitar work. Not surprisingly, the Yes method of assembling albums piecemeal is something that he utilizes and enjoys to the fullest.

"There was a piece on the first side of *Topographic Oceans*, right in the middle of the track," he avers. "Chris had contributed this idea of changing chords, and I'd done quite a few different solos on it. Some of the guys said, 'Yeah, I like that one,' and I wanted to do some very commercial things on the album—although everyone took it uncommercially. I was thinking that I wanted to make it clear, especially on the first side, that if one was going to play in a certain commercial style, then here it was. It was like the whole thing about Zappa doing long solos because the audience wanted it. I was thinking at one stage, 'I'll just do that. They'll love it.' I was playing on the 175, and it came in three main bits. I did the first one, which was a kind of bursting-out style, really high up on the neck so the strings were jumping around a lot. Then I stopped because I couldn't play anymore. I came in, listened to it, decided to keep it, and then went out and played something else. It was right off the top of my head. But because I had that breathing space to stop and think about it, I did the second section like a completely different song. The third section was different again. When we put the

whole thing together, it wasn't just a guitar solo. It became, to me, a piece of music."

While much of Steve's musicianship seems to flow with little friction, it's inherent sense of ease is somewhat belied by the hard, physical approach he seems to take to the actual process of playing the instrument—particularly onstage. He physically throws himself into the music with a savage picking and fretting technique that might, at times, appear slightly incongruous in light of the fluid sounds he's actually producing. Howe feels that this comes from playing f-hole guitars during his first five years. "I suppose it all has to do with strings and trying to get more sound," he notes. "When you're playing an acoustic and don't like light strings, you tend to take a tighter, tenser approach.

"I still prefer big guitars," Howe goes on, "and when I play 'Roundabout,' for example, that guitar really shakes. I use a very heavy plectrum, and the whole thing builds up to a very heavy kind of playing. I really *hit* it, which is a positive way of playing to me. To some it might possibly seem excessive."

The bizarre, wedge-shaped pick that Steve calls a plectrum, apart from making a good doorstop, is largely responsible for Steve's noticeably energetic picking technique. As he describes it, "They're custom-made out of thick, heavy plastic you see on signs in shop windows. I had twelve, I gave a few away, and then the worst thing happened in Fort Wayne. The thing I treasured the most—the thing I had to have—was that plectrum. I had only two of them by then, and I lost both of them on the same day! I mean, I turned my hotel room completely upside down, phoned New York to see if I'd left them at the hotel there, but ended up playing the gig with a really worn-out plectrum. It was like playing with a plastic sixpence. I had built up a great relationship between my guitars and those plectrums. Once I've really got one going, I'll use it for as long as two years. It becomes an extension of the hand. Even when I'm fingerpicking, I'll use it as a thumbpick, along with the middle and sometimes the 3rd finger—when I can get it to wake up."

Howe finds it practically impossible to play with standard thumb- and fingerpicks, and says that he really can't come to terms with the traditional method of using the fingernails for Spanish-style guitar. He often relies on the

plectrum-and-fat-of-the-fingers technique for that style of playing. As for his picking approach, Steve explains, "I'm still very open to change and experimentation. I've had a lot of flashes about picking recently. When I was in Nashville, I went into a country and western store. I went absolutely crazy buying records and things. Consequently, I have more Merle Travis records than before. That really sparked off a lot of the old enthusiasm. It brought back quite a few memories of when I only had a few records. Like back around the time of Link Wray's 'Rumble.' I had only been playing for two years, but suddenly I became aware of the fact that I wanted to do that kind of thing. A lot of people around me used to say that I couldn't do it; I couldn't play two things at once.

"This sudden idea of the guitar needing no accompaniment just seemed incredible," he continues. "I'm still getting off on some new Chet Atkins records I've got. The potential is really endless, even if all you are dealing with is the spatial relationship between the notes. I think this is a whole other side of picking—using several fingers at one time to play chords or figures—developing in a way that, if I felt like putting in an octave instead of having to change my position into a stroke, I can play it in exactly the same position without moving very much. The most pleasing thing to me is to suddenly enlarge the guitar from the single note—not into straight rhythm chords—but into a unique picking style. When I listened to Kenny Burrell and [organist] Jimmy Smith years ago, it again had a big influence on me. Smith would keep a top note going, but he would be doing all this other stuff also—which you can do on a guitar as well."

Harmony is something that Howe tried to read up on, because "I find it really fascinating. One of the things I want to do is play totally in a harmonic style. I do a bit of it here and there—two strings, two notes, one going one way and one going the other. But I'm gradually coming to terms with the idea of playing harmony *all* the time. It's like playing inside chords all the way around."

Steve seems to be searching for a style that will merge the harmonic possibilities of fingerpicking with the fluidity of his usual single-line approach. "Many guitarists have done the octave thing, and then there's the idea of two guitarists playing together—like Delaney and Bonnie when Clapton was with them," Steve explains. "I'd like to hear more of that double-note thing. Of course, it's easy when you're recording. I'll sometimes play something in the studio and then do the same thing in another octave and then mix the two together. This can give a nice brightness to the sound. If I'm into something a bit out of the ordinary, I might delve into it more and do a harmony thing, rather than simply repeating the first track in a higher or lower octave. Some harmonies are pretty easy, and though I usually want something out of the ordinary, I can accept the obvious sometimes. It can be very pleasing. Once, I bought a harmony book, but I found it unreadable. Unless you have a good knowledge of music notation, which most rock guitarists don't, the books aren't any good. Yet harmony itself hasn't got that many barriers. I hear harmonies in my head. Occasionally I'll play some that just aren't obvious. Therefore, to be able to sit down with a book that will help you understand some of the formulas is a revelation—provided you can read it."

Theory is certainly one aspect of the musical process, but the actual performing side of the process hinges largely on the instrument itself. At the moment, the center of Steve's formidable (nearly seventy) guitar arsenal is the '55 Telecaster, rigged with a Fender pickup in the back and a humbucker front pickup. This guitar has been used on *Relayer* and is currently his most-used guitar. His Gibson ES-175 is generally reserved for some of the more vintage pieces Yes performs onstage, while his Gibson stereo ES-345 is carted out for numbers like "Close To The Edge." Then too, there's his Gibson 6/12 double-neck, a Danelectro electric sitar guitar, a mid-Fifties Les Paul Junior, and two acoustics—a Martin 00-18 and a Kohno (a handmade Japanese guitar). Two steel guitars: a Sho-Bud and a Fender twin-neck, round out his onstage array of instruments.

Although the switch to the relatively tiny Telecaster is a fairly recent development, he still has a soft spot for those gigantic, full-bodied Gibsons that have become a Howe trademark over the years. "I find that once the end of the set comes and I put on my 175, I can do as many encores as I like from then on." Steve feels very comfortable with that guitar, and though he's always wanted to play other guitars, he was "so narrow-minded that I

thought everybody should be playing full-bodied instruments. I didn't see the point in solids, because they didn't seem to have any personality. Now that I've got my Telecaster and my Broadcaster, I've changed my mind a little bit. As much as I'm using solids now, I still get much more involved with a guitar when it's full-sized. It's more complete. While you depend on the amplifier, you're not totally conscious of it because a large guitar has certain acoustic properties."

He often makes minor alterations in his intruments such as installing new machine heads, control knobs, bridges, or perhaps turning a pickup around for a bit more warmth—still, he's rarely made any extensive modifications. "Occasionally," he states, "I'll experiment by putting a Charlie Christian pickup in a certain guitar, but I've rarely found it successful. I seem to revert back to the original form. Altering it isn't that helpful, unless you have a very strong idea of what you want. I altered a Les Paul Custom that had the Black Beauty pickups on it; I stuck four humbuckers on it instead. That turned it into a very individual instrument."

The Telecaster is re-strung every two days, while the Les Paul Junior and the 345 are re-strung every four days, all with Gibson 340-Ls. He attests, "I don't find any other strings loud enough for the way I play—especially the bass strings." The double-neck is strung with medium-gauge Ernie Balls—a .008 first and a .010 second on the 12-string, for example, while the 6-string neck gets strings that are almost exactly the same gauge as the 340-Ls. "I don't like loose strings," Steve explains, "But what I do like are medium-gauge Gibson Sonomatics, done the old way—first, first, second, third, fifth, sixth [two high *E* strings, a *B* in place of the *G*, *G* in place of the *D*, and an *A*, and an *E* string]. It's unbeatable provided you can tune the bridge to handle it. That's what I use on the 175 and the rest of my big guitars."

Howe goes on, "I find that on the smaller, thin-bodied guitars, the strings bend more easily, so I use wound thirds. If it's a big guitar, I use a thick third—something like a .017 or a .018. As I said, I don't like floppy strings. Just a few years ago, I ventured to use a .011 onstage, because .012s are really my mark for a first. I feel that the first string has really got to strike you. You really have to be able to hear it. Until I got into Gibson .011s, everything was much too light. Then too, I'll sometimes use a Clifford Essex banjo string for a very light first."

The Martin acoustic is strung with Martin lights, while the Spanish guitar is strung with D'Addarios. The Sho-Bud steel gets Sho-Bud strings, while the Fender steel is decked out with Gibsons.

For amplification, Steve still depends on his old 65-watt Fender Dual Showman, which is run through three Dual Showman cabinets, each fitted with two 15″ JBLs. The system is run in conjuction with a Fender Quad amp with four 12″ speakers. The Quad input is reserved for the steel guitars, since plugging more than one instrument into the Dual Showman cuts down on the power and drive. When it comes to stage control settings, the volume on the Dual Showman is set at *7* or *8*, bass and midrange at *3-1/2* and *4*, with maximum treble and the bright switch on. On the Quad amp, Howe sets the tone to maximum treble, with the volume at about *8*. This is a setting system that he's primarily organized for the Telecaster, though it works equally well with a few minor adjustments for his other guitars. With the 175, he generally takes the middle off and adds a bit more bass. With the Stereo 345, he uses both channels with the volume at *7-1/2* and the treble at *10* for the treble pickup, while the bass pickup gets *7* on the volume and no bass or treble at all.

The Dual Showman also turns out to be Steve's favorite studio amp, operated through one (or sometimes two) Dual Showman cabinets. He reveals, "We've found some different ways of recording a guitar. If you really want it loud, the best thing to do is record it that way. By standing in the studio with the mike miles away, getting all the ambience you can out of it you can do it. That's really when you want to drive your amp, and when you're using a couple of speakers. If I want a really clean sound, I'll put it straight into the board. All the bass on *Beginnings* was half direct and half amp. We've even recorded acoustic guitars direct, using Barcus-Berry pickups. I also used a Pignose amp quite a bit. You plug the guitar into the Pignose, and then plug the Pignose into a larger amp. It's really great."

Steve's legendary assortment of pedals and effects boxes has been pared down

considerably over the last few years. When he's working onstage nowadays, he uses four to six Sho-Bud volume pedals: one for each steel guitar, one for his main guitar (usually the Telecaster, though it varies), one for the sitar guitar, and one that is used with a Barcus-Berry for his acoustic guitar work. The latter is fed direct into the PA. "I don't use any effects anymore," Howe affirms, "except for an Echoplex, which is a Group Master—an old four-channel one. It was the first one Yes ever saw, and we went crazy and bought three of them. I also use an original Electro-Harmonix Big Muff that's mainly for sustain. It's not the regular Big Muff sustain unit, because that doesn't seem to work at all. It's just a big old Big Muff box."

The Dual Showman is nearly always locked in an amplitude war with Chris Squire's Marshall and the hundreds of watts that are at Rick Wakeman's disposal. As Steve describes it, "The only way I can counteract this is to be directly in front of my speaker, though the Mellotron will still come in at 500 watts while I'm standing there trying not to lose the thread of everything. I'm not a nervous guitarist. I don't worry about things before we go on. I do become very aware of whether we're playing well or not, and whether the number is going along at the speed that I like. I consider a number to be perfect only when it's played at the perfect speed. When I'm playing on my own, I often find it quite difficult to judge if the speed is right, because it's totally within me.

"I've never had any big problems hearing myself," says Howe, "except that Chris has always been too loud. I did get him to cut down to four speakers, though he insists on using the same cabinet he's always used. I've always told him that he should use a Dual Showman cabinet that has the speakers he wants. He and I have had many cold wars about it.

"I like to hear Chris," Steve admits. "I like to hear *everybody*. I like to hear an even quality in Rick's keyboards, where things aren't jumping out at 300 watts. When somebody's playing a solo, you've got to be able to hear it. Alan White has a good monitoring system for my guitar, because he never used to be able to hear me over his drums. He would hear a cassette tape afterwards, and only then find out what I was playing. Everybody can hear everybody else, but it's up to the individual. If they can't hear somebody, it's up to them to arrange it so they can. I can't sit around worrying whether Chris hears me right. He can do what he likes, as long as he doesn't put my speaker offstage! The same applies with his sound, really. He sometimes won't bend like I'll bend. I'll say, 'Do what you like with my stuff,' but Chris has a very ah-no-I-want-to-use-that attitude. It's not a big deal to me. I really do like to be as close to the drummer as possible, however. That's where it all happens for me—the whole sense of time and speed."

Through Yes, Steve has achieved fame as well as respect for his musicianship. But he continues to seek new ways of expression, experimenting with different concepts of instrumentation (he just recently received a Walter Sear guitar synthesizer), incorporating his fascination with all kinds of musical styles, challenging himself both technically and creatively. Howe states, "One of my ambitions has always been to be a very professional musician. I want to be the epitome of a certain kind of guitarist. It's a result of all the influences I was exposed to in London, particularly in jazz guitar, and the longing for a guitarist to do solos the way James Burton and Scotty Moore used to do them. When those two stopped doing their kind of solos, something stopped altogether, though, immediately afterwards, you had George Harrison doing really nice, well thought-out solos. But even George started getting into that blues wailing thing, and there was a huge gulf. Zappa jumped in with *Hot Rats*, and he's never really looked back. Possibly, it's consistency that people are after. That's what I'd like to offer.

"I made many mistakes early on," he goes on, "and it's something that I can't alter. That's why, in some ways, I'm a limited guitarist—in my imagination. I don't want to stay that way. I want to keep moving and do different things. But because of certain things that I can't budge from—like not growing my nails to play Villa-Lobos better—I feel closer to the fact that rock and roll is what I'm really doing. I can hear all these other types of music, and I can play a bit of some of them, but there are restrictions that are keeping me within the framework of a certain kind of music that's not easy for me to classify. It's turning me on to my own music and my own guitar playing—which is probably more of a surprise in my life than anybody will ever know."