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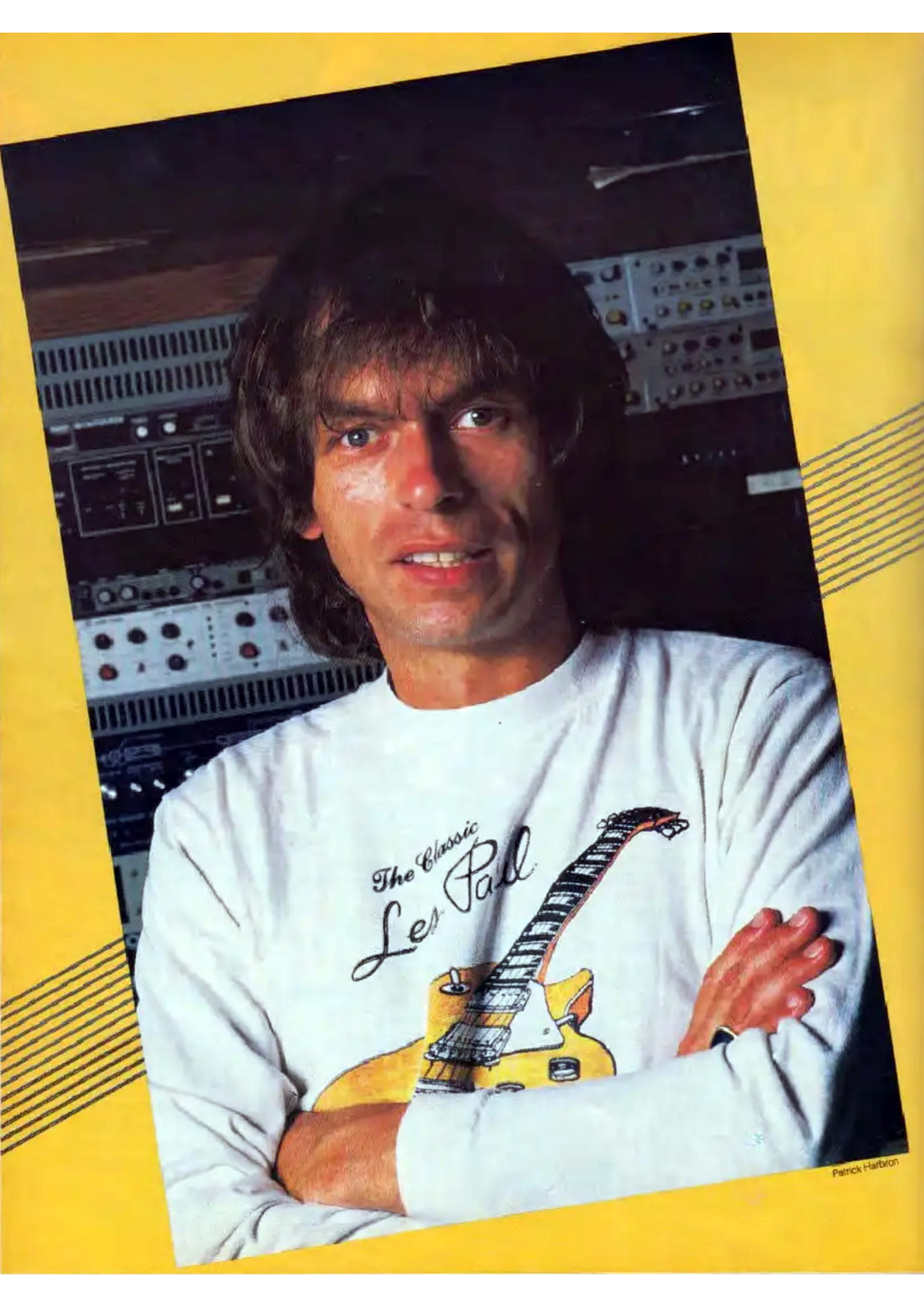
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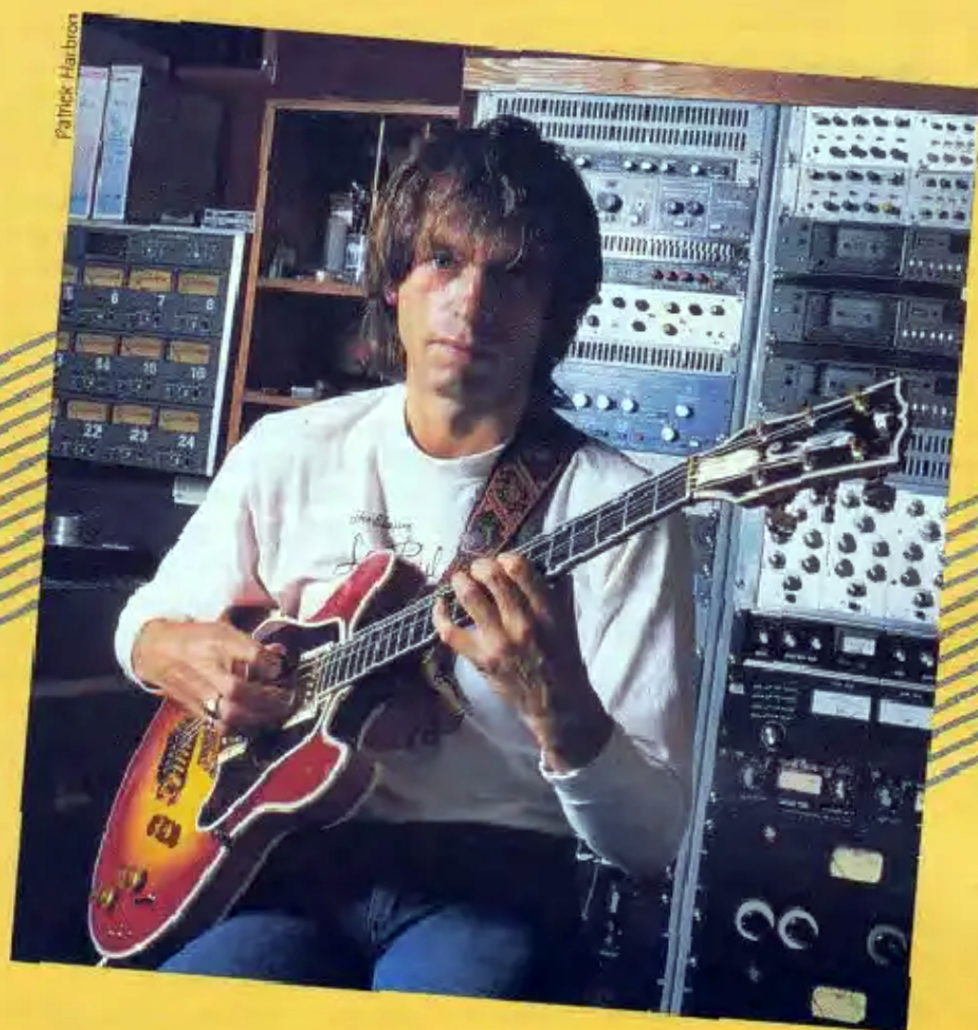
Retailers see Page 70 for Retail Display Plan





Patrick Harbron

Asia's at the top
of the charts.
Here's Howe.



Steve Howe of Asia

VIRTUOSO OF THE ROCK GUITAR

BY JOHN STIX

IN THE EARLY 70s THE proponents of Britain's Art Rock movement effectively leashed the electricity of rock and dressed it up in a tux. Groups like Yes, King Crimson, Genesis and Emerson, Lake & Palmer traded spontaneity and spunk for precision and musical sophistication. Musically, the mix was adventurous and demanding, too complex for Top 40. But while many critics and fans were shouting bravo, others cried foul. Was this really rock 'n' roll? Weren't these Elizabethan fops just a mite pretentious?

By the mid-70s, devotees of serious experimentation and sus-

tained musicianship were turning their heads away from Art Rock toward the jazz/fusion sounds of Chick Corea, Weather Report and John McLaughlin. But in forming Asia with ex-U.K. and King Crimson bassist, John Wetton, veteran Yes guitarist, Steve Howe, created a virtual All-Star lineup of Progressive Art Rockers. With fellow Yes-man, Geoff Downes, on keyboards, and Carl Palmer, as in Emerson, Lake &, on drums, Asia seemed to many nothing less than a second coming of the Movement. Yet their debut album replaced classicism with a streamlined song structure and lyrics expressly designed for modern

radio play. It was a resounding commercial success, *Billboard Magazine's* Number One album of 1982, causing purists to call it watered down sludge, while rockers made it Top 40.

In Montreal, preparing Asia's second album, *Alpha*, Steve Howe stands aloof and above the battle. He's already earned his stripes and his riches. His place in rock history is assured. With his preference for playing lines through chords, notes that suggest chords rather than the chords themselves, Howe is an architect of sound textures. His style is as unique and distinctive as that of Andy Summers or Eddie Van

Halen.

GUITAR spoke with Steve about the evolution of his guitar style, his approach to songwriting, his days with Yes and the formation of Asia.

G: Do you recall when you knew you had your own style?

STEVE: I'd always wanted to have my own guitar style, but other people said I had one before I was aware of it. I remember thinking: Are you sure I have my own style? I wasn't so sure. In 1968 I was in a band called Tomorrow when I realized there were things I did that other guitarists didn't do. I've always enjoyed not using the ordinary guitar licks, for instance. For a long time people played blues guitar. Although I like playing blues guitar, you don't hear me playing many blues phrases. In some ways it's a question of finding the most obvious things I play and then digging in around them to be more unusual and more original. I'm not limited to just one instrument. I've played a bit of mandolin, the koto and some steel guitar, because the guitar isn't always enough for me. I also use them because I may not have found the right guitar part. When you don't know what to do, sometimes it's easier just to do something completely different.

G: Do you have an approach to soloing?

STEVE: I certainly like to know the changes. I like to immediately establish something when the guitar enters. It can be a tune or a theme, but I don't like to wander in without confidence. In *Heat of the Moment*, when we get to the back chorus with the solo over it, I could have come in and improvised. But I came in with a tune. Something usually comes to me to start off an idea. The real test is in developing that idea. I also think about the climactic approach. That's why I don't hover in the same area of the neck for too long. I don't think it gives my playing enough scope if I sit in one area of the neck.

G: Do you have a problem editing yourself?

STEVE: There have been times when I've played more. A lot of it has to do with the balance of the music itself. I can remember times in the early to mid-70s when I was consid-

JOHN WETTON



Ebel Robbins

John Wetton's singing and bass playing have already become a trademark of Asia's pop sound. He started his career with King Crimson in the seventies and has been a formidable presence ever since.

G: How did you first get interested in music?

JOHN: I come from a musical family. My brother was an organist and choirmaster at my church in England. I had to learn bass lines because when he was practicing at home he didn't have any bass pedals to play on. Playing Bach pieces gave me a fascination for the relationship between melody and the bass line.

G: Did playing in fusion type bands like King Crimson and U.K. force you to study the bass in a different way?

JOHN: King Crimson certainly did. I began writing seriously for the first time. I was also shot to the front of the stage as a vocalist, which I enjoyed very much. It was a good building period for me. But after Crimson I became less flamboyant, in that I regarded playing the instrument as something that enabled the song to work. It was no longer something I tried to play as a lead guitar, which is what I did in Crim-

son. On half of those gigs I was blasting away with a fuzz tone on all the time and getting weird harmonic stuff. But there are certain limitations to being a virtuoso bass player. There are quite a few of them around. Unless they write songs their longevity is only as long as it takes for someone to come along and play faster.

After Crimson broke up, I felt very frustrated. I went with Uriah Heep and Roxy Music over the next two years simply because I couldn't find the right people to play with. It was better than sitting home starving.

G: Has Asia tried to divorce itself from the 70's progressive movement?

JOHN: We've not ignored the fact that we were part of the 70's movement, but we decided that the main strength of our band now is not in taking extended solos. We wanted to go back to songs.

G: Do you have a particular bass that feels like home?

JOHN: I still use the same Fender Precision that I've used for the last 16 years. I bought it in 1967 for \$70. On *Alpha* I also used a Rick-enbacker and a modified Gibson Victory bass. But the Fender is still the king. I don't know what I'd do if I lost it.

G: What modifications did you make on the Victory bass?

JOHN: It has a wider and flatter neck and frets, so it's more like an EB3 neck. The real modification is the addition of a trigger device so I can play the Taurus Bass Pedal from my bass. Robert Moog set it up so I can play the same note on the pedal as I'm playing with my hands. I also have another Taurus Pedal for my feet. On stage I use the Victory 50/50 with the Fender. The Fender has a Vega Wireless so I can be mobile. Part of the last rehearsals were to decide which bass I'll be using on each song.



ered too fast and flashy by the critics. I disregarded them. I was just going along my own little course, which I was happy to do. We had so much going on in Yes that I daresay I was overplaying because everybody else was also doing it. That's what made the production a lot harder with Yes than with Asia.

G: Have you ever thought that you may never play the Yes material again? A whole chunk of your musical career is gone?

STEVE: Some of it Yes never played again. In time I'll be doing things that recapitulate my career. I'm sure I'll do a couple of songs from Yes. Let the others play bits of Yes. For me it lives in a different world now.

G: How do you feel about Yes getting back together?

STEVE: I have mixed feelings. It's a bit like putting a mask on. It depends on whether there is a creative rebirth. I wouldn't want it to sound like the old Yes. It's too easy for them to do that. They will need something musically exciting.

G: What do you remember from those days?

STEVE: Time and memory change things greatly. I think of Yes in '72 and '73 with **Fragile** and **Close to the Edge**. That's when we reached our highest point with the best intentions. I would also say those were the definitive band members. I remember when we recorded *Roundabout*, that we thought we had made one of the all-time epics. Jon Anderson and I wrote that in Scotland. It was originally a guitar instrumental suite. You see, I sort of write a song without a song. All the ingredients are there—all that's missing is the song. *Roundabout* was a bit like that; there was a structure, a melody and a few lines. When the Americans wanted us to edit it for a single, we thought it was sacrilege. Here the song was so well-constructed and quite over the top—but in the end we had to edit it. The song did very well. In fact Jon and I won an award for it in 1972.

G: What did you do in the interim between the breakup of Yes and the formation of Asia?

STEVE: There was no interim. As soon as things went sour in Yes, I got this together. It was low profile. I was just feeling around to see who

was available. John Wetton and I played with a few other musicians (Simon Phillips was originally considered for the drum spot) and picked the best of what we had. We didn't have a supergroup concept in mind when we formed Asia. It just happened that the quality of the musicians I needed and wanted to play with were of this ilk.

G: Are you a better guitar player now than you were five years ago?

STEVE: I would like to think that after 25 years my technique is very good. Now it's more about who I am and what I want to do with it. I'm not saying I know all there is to know, because I don't. I do hope my technique will continue to improve, but it wouldn't worry me if it didn't. There's a great deal more I can do with what I've already got. What I look for now are certain leaps. For several months I'll be at what I call the normal standard. Then one day I'll think of a shape or some way of moving on the fretboard that I hadn't thought of before, and that will start a leap.

For example, side three of **Topographic Oceans** was my 1976 leap. I went from thinking that I shouldn't play certain clichés, to realizing I could twist some of them in different positions and related keys. There were intense sections on that album where I went back in and made my playing less jazz and more rock 'n' roll. Sometimes a lot of notes don't work well in rock music.

A small leap that I'm doing now has to do with clarity. I'm able to think clearly about what I'm actually playing. When I let myself go, I can wander off into the dark corners of music. At the same time I can relate to what is needed. It's like hearing any piece of music and knowing I can play on it. I expect myself to be able to do that with anybody now. It's a basic talent that I want to keep very much alive. I think I lost that feeling of total flexibility at the end of Yes.

G: Are you a heavy practicer? I'm talking about practicing what you can't play?

STEVE: I'm not studious in that sense. I find progress happens through discovery, not through that

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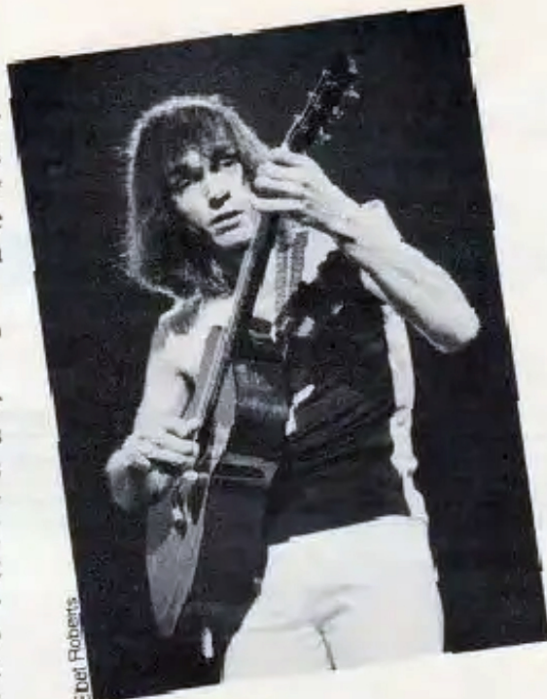
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sort of discipline. I obviously know the value of learning scales and chord inversions. That's how I originally started on the guitar. I enjoy the instrument. I don't look at it as a work piece.

G: Do you ever sit down just to explore and discover new sounds?

STEVE: If I'm going to practice or rehearse with other people there's got to be a certain amount of sounds at my disposal. Whether I'm at my home 8-track or in a real studio, I overdub in the control room. That way I play a competent role in developing and contributing ideas to my guitar sound. So yes, I do look for all the tools of the trade. How the guitar sounds fit in is very important. I also use sounds that are not always musical. I never lock up a song and say it's only just music. I tend to think about the sound and what I can do with the guitar besides building the musical structure.

G: A moment ago you mentioned writing "a song without a song" can you elaborate on that?



Edsel Roberts

STEVE: I develop particular sections before I nail everything together. It may be a chorus or a verse, but I know I've got the simple musical idea down. We put the backing track down and I fill in a certain part of the picture. Other parts may still be needed, so I will be looking at either unusual sounds or a part that expresses to me something about the song. Often your experience will guide you through. Other times you've got to use more inventiveness and pursue your idea. Mainly I come up with the right textures and colors. I try not to combine lyrics and music until I've got a substantial idea on either front. I used to write the words and tunes together. That's the way you get spontaneous songs. After doing that for many years I found the songs took too long to write, because I'd become so careful about each arrangement. Then there is the identity thing. You have to sound interestingly different, but at the same time not far removed from the personality that signifies who is playing. I like songs to be different. It's not very ambitious doing an album where all the songs sound the same.

G: What is your favorite composition?

STEVE: Without thinking deeply about it, *The Ancient*, from *Topographic Oceans*, is quite a high spot for me. I never tried to play a piece quite that challenging with a group in the studio and then on stage. When I played it on stage, all the care and gentleness that was re-

STEVE HOWE: "I'd always imagined that a player's sound was synonymous with their guitar. Now I know that it doesn't matter which guitar I play, it sounds like me."

quired to play it was there. During the first Asia tour I occasionally played that piece and enjoyed it immensely.

G: How do you approach performing a song live as opposed to recording it?

STEVE: Playing on stage has got to be as much like the record as we feel is necessary. Careful consideration has to be taken for how you make the step from recording to playing live. Many groups moan when they make records, saying how great it was in rehearsal. Other people reverse the situation and say they shouldn't have done so much overdubbing. I say if a record is a pleasure to listen to then it's totally irrelevant how it was recorded. In some ways once you start overdubbing you have to do a considerable amount on the track to get it to sound right. On stage there are decisions to make, but the decisions are usually more about sounds than parts. Usually I'll mix up the parts, but as a rule I will stick with the lead. For many years I did a mixture of lead and rhythm. I played in three-piece groups with an added lead singer. We played soul music and before that, Chuck Berry songs. My favorite groups relied on a limited number of people playing with limited technical prowess, but they were tight and exciting.

G: Looking into the future, what would you like to be known for as a guitarist?

STEVE: Virtuoso is a word I adore. It's a tall order and one I attempt

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Steve Howe

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to dream I could fulfill. In my own way I am a rock virtuoso. But I would like to be known in many spheres of music. Rock opens huge doors, but it also closes others. If I could get acceptance and give pleasure to other people beyond the rock world, that would be very nice.

G: What do you think is your greatest strength as a guitarist?

STEVE: I used to think I was changing guitars to find a style. Now I know that it doesn't matter which guitar I play, it sounds like me. I always imagined the sound was synonymous with a guitar and a player. I was relieved when I kept switching guitars and didn't get a different sound. I started to realize that the sound I was making was the sound I make. I can alter and update it, but it remains my sound.

G: Is the Gibson E.S. Artist still your main guitar?

STEVE: Yes, the Artist seems to carry on in that role. There are two or three tracks on the new album where I used a Les Paul. There's also one track which is totally the Roland Synthesizer guitar. I use their Strat copy. On stage I use the Artist

exclusively. It's very powerful, beautiful and practical. I do everything on them because I got tired of having to look after so many guitars that only on some nights sounded right. This guitar sounds right every night. I've customized it with double scratch plates, and the Gibson pickups are very carefully positioned so the pole pieces all get the same volume. The neck is crucial to me. It's slightly wider than the 335 or 445. It's a very clear neck. There are no fret markings except for dots on the side. The most important thing to me with any electric guitar is the positioning of the neck. It has to project from the right place. For example, if you take a Gibson RD guitar and put it around your neck, the top fret is almost past your navel. I can't have the neck around my knees. I started on a Gibson 175 which has a high neck that sticks out a lot. That's what I'm used to, so that's what I need.

G: What about your acoustic guitar?

STEVE: It's a 1953 Martin OO18, which is the same guitar I've played for years. It's a dear old guitar and I don't care that it's got a piece of wood stuck in it. It's very much my acoustic sound.

G: You've been a Fender Twin fan for a long time. Does that still hold true?

STEVE: I don't use Twins anymore. I've gone back to using Fender Dual Showmans. I've got two here in the studio and two cabinets, each with two 15" speakers. They work better with the high top end of the E.S. Artist. The bass is also more pronounced, while the mid-range takes a loss. For the Asia tour I'll use Twin Reverb amps with Dual Showman cabinets. I also used Marshall and Gibson amps on both Asia albums.

G: Any plans beyond Asia?

STEVE: I'd like to make an instrumental guitar record. Realistically, I can't think of getting it out until something like mid-1984. It's just an idea I have in mind. I've got quite a long way to go before I'm ready. My development now is toward more clarity. I want my playing to have a sense of economy, efficiency and purposefulness. I'm talking about attitude and key thoughts. Clarity comes from not worrying or thinking about music. You cannot be clear if you worry about money or contracts or record company demands. I'd rather think about experimenting.