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## GETTING TO YES

# Guitar wizard Steve Howe has the licks and keeps on ticking

**THE DOORS** of the elevator opened onto the lobby of the Hampton Inn in Des Moines on a recent August morning. A woman stood opposite the entryway, sizing up the august and exotic creature opposite her: an ascetic-looking man with angular features, Scrooge McDuck spectacles, and a lithe, boyish frame that might have seemed in contrast to his snow-white mane with tendrils flowing nearly down to his waist.

In short, a wizard. In Iowa.

"Can I get your autograph?" the woman asked Steve Howe, whose band happened to be lodging there in the midst of a grueling 27-gig, 37-night North American tour. Howe, 68, was about to politely demur when the woman pressed further: "Are you somebody famous?"

The wizard smiled. Is Steve Howe famous? No...and Yes.

No: In its 46 years of existence, Howe's band, Yes, has never made the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Yes has not been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and faces no imminent need to prepare an acceptance speech. This summer,

as 70-something rock stars such as the Rolling Stones (and 60-something rock stars such as Donald Trump) flit across the country on private jets, Howe, the band's legendary lead guitarist, is literally traveling under the radar, driving with an old buddy from gig to gig in a rented Mercedes (and staying at a Hampton Inn).

"We're fairly anonymous," says Howe, who has written some of the most recognizable and iconic guitar riffs in rock history. "I'm little bothered by that."

A short list of guitar wizards whose names are as familiar as their signature riffs: Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Pete Townshend, Keith Richards, Eddie Van Halen, the Edge, Slash and Jack White. Steve Howe is not in that pantheon. His artistry has always been so much more renowned than his name.

To say that the London-born Howe is almost famous is to note that his opening instrumental from Yes's classic 1971 tune, "I've Seen All Good People," appears in a key scene of Cameron Crowe's 2000 film, *Almost Famous*. He can be as

**+ YES, HE DID:** Though he isn't as recognizable as his contemporaries, Howe's guitar riffs are classic. Still, *Rolling Stone* did an entire book on rock music in the '70s and only gave us three lines," he says.

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subtle as the 40-second finger-picking in E minor that opens Yes's signature 1975 tune, "Roundabout," or as bodacious as the power chords that open "Heat of the Moment" by Asia (you may remember it from *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*), the early-'80s supergroup he was in.

As a guitarist, Howe has always had an appetite not for destruction but for eclecticism, playing everything from blues to classical to jazz to rock—occasionally all in one Yes song. He lacks a signature style, unless you define excellence as a style.

"Steve won our annual readers' poll for 'best overall guitarist' five years in a row," says Mike Molenda, the editor-in-chief of *Guitar Player* magazine. "That, for guitarists, is like winning the Oscar five years in a row. Steve was the first guitarist we put into our Hall of Fame."

"You'll never see Steve playing the guitar slung low in that sexy way," says Molenda. "He keeps the strap tight and holds the guitar up closer to his chest. It doesn't look cool, but it's more ergonomic." Nobody does a Steve Howe air guitar improv, primarily because Howe does not comport himself like a preening "golden god" of rock. Never has. He has been married to the same woman, Janet, since 1968 (they have four children). He owns one car (Janet has one too). He has strictly adhered to a vegetarian diet since the early-'70s and cannot recall having taken any unprescribed pharmaceuticals for at least three-plus decades. "I like a nice French wine now and then, but I don't like getting wasted," says Howe. "It doesn't get you anywhere but closer to death."

He meditates daily, a habit he picked up from a group of U.K. contemporaries who ascended to a slightly higher degree of international fame than he has. "The Beatles said you could get high without drugs," says Howe, "and I thought, Well, I have to try that."

Of course, John, Paul, George and Ringo got high *with* drugs too, but that's another tale.

Howe is as much of a guitar geek as he is a guitar god, as someone who has put out 17 solo guitar albums—plus a few more live ones—is prone to be. His beloved 1964 ES-175 Gibson never leaves his home in Devon, England. When Howe used to travel with it, he'd purchase a ticket so it would have its own seat. He is his own Guitar Center, having owned as many as 155 guitars at once. Why? "I want to have all

the colors of the palette," he says.

Howe's obsession with guitars began early. "When I was 10, I started this, 'Mom, Dad, I'd like a guitar' whine. They made me wait until I was 12. My dad took me to a shop in King's Cross, and we picked out an F-hole guitar for Christmas, 1959."

A few years later, he and some school mates played their first gig at The Swan, a pub in Tottenham. "We were underage. I was painfully shy. I stood on the side of the stage, played my songs, never looked up, and when it was over I thought, Well, that's enough of that."

But it wasn't. Howe is still somewhat shy, but if you ask him a question about guitars or guitarists he becomes almost comically garrulous. "When I was 16, I sat in the third row to see [legendary jazz guitarist] Wes Montgomery, and I'll never forget the smile on his face after he finished the set."

From Montgomery, Howe launches into an extended soliloquy on great players, a guitar solo of sorts, that references everyone from Chet Atkins to Les Paul to Steve Morse to Martin Taylor to "this new guy, a world-class guitarist from Italy, Flavio Sala—S-A-L-A."

After at least two minutes of uninterrupted exposition on the history of criminally underexposed guitar legends (excepting Paul), Howe stops to laugh at his own expense. "I'm big on



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**HOWE'S WHY:**  
Howe, pictured in 1985 performing with supergroup Asia, has a sense of humor about his lack of celebrity. "We don't have as many lemmings following us," he says, "but we have most every kind of albatross."

MARIO RUIZ/ZUMA

guitars,” he says. “You shouldn’t have asked me about them, because I’m prattling on.”

Not unlike a Yes song. If any band ever exposed itself to parody—and there is more than a whiff of Howe and Yes in guitarist Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) and Spinal Tap, respectively, in the 1984 film *This Is Spinal Tap*—with its earnestness and prog-rock leanings, it was Yes. The band’s 1974 release, pretentiously titled *Tales From Topographic Oceans*, contained just four songs, three of which clocked in at 20-plus minutes and one of which was titled “Ritual (Nous Sommes du Soleil).”

“This has always been a pretty damn weird band,” says Howe. “The idea of complexity was inherent in us.”

As far as chord progressions or melodies went, Yes never wrote a book report when a doctoral thesis was possible. Former keyboardist Rick Wakeman once recounted a show that involved a 10-minute percussion solo in which his role was so minor that he had a roadie bring him Indian takeout during the show. Howe recalls Yes opening for The Kinks and one of the Davies brothers becoming so irritated with Yes’s expansive artistry that he pulled the plug on the amps.

“We had a fight backstage,” says Howe.

Yes changed its lineup almost as often then as the New York Knicks do now. The band has had 20 different members, not including studio musicians, since its 1969 inception (bassist Chris Squire, the lone member to play on every studio album, died of cancer in June). Howe, for instance, left for 14 years. Only one man from its current five-member roster, drummer Alan White, even played on the band’s biggest-selling album, 1983’s *90125*.

“Yes is kind of like a French farce at times,” says Howe good-naturedly. “There’s a door slamming shut behind one guy as another door opens and another chap walks in. But if you join Yes, you’ve got to show respect for everything that Yes has ever played. Basically, if you say no to playing a song, that could get you the bullet.”

Being the flag-bearers for prog rock has long been a mixed blessing for the band. At its peak, Yes drew more than 100,000 for a show at John F. Kennedy Stadium in Philadelphia on June 12, 1976. And yet, as Howe notes, “*Rolling Stone* did an entire book on rock music in the ‘70s and only gave us three lines.”

If rock music appreciation included bonus points for degree of difficulty, Yes might be more revered. “Some bands just jam for seven minutes between vocals because they have nothing better to do,” says Molenda, of *Guitar Player*. “What Yes was doing was writing mini-symphonies.



This was sophisticated. This wasn’t, ‘Baby, baby, baby.’ Granted, we’d sit around in long-sleeved sweaters, sipping tea and saying, “I think what Yes was trying to say here is...”

Howe is more blunt. “We’ve only ever attracted the people who have the intelligence to appreciate our music,” he says. “We don’t have as many lemmings following us, but we do have most every albatross.”

In its current incarnation, Yes has replaced lead singer Jon Anderson, 70, with 44-year-old Jon Davison, who looks as if he was just abducted from the cast of *Godspell*. Davison is able to hit all the high notes Anderson hit 30 years ago. At one point in the show, Howe sits onstage alone and plays an extended instrumental piece. We’ve all been exposed to masturbatory guitar solos—and used them as an excuse to hit the restroom—but Howe’s virtuosity is dazzling. Watching his fingers dance along the frets is like following Gene Kelly’s footsteps in *Singin’ in the Rain*.

“Steve Howe is a dedicated, obsessed musician,” says Molenda. “And he keeps himself in top shape because he cherishes every moment.

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**“IF YOU SAY NO TO PLAYING A [YES] SONG, THAT COULD GET YOU THE BULLET.”**

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It’s like Cary Grant staying thin into his 70s just in case a movie role came up. Why is he still practicing three hours a day alone in the dark? Because that’s who he is.”

The combination of Davison’s spry vocals and Howe’s genius on the guitar makes Yes an outlier, yet again, this summer: a band from yester-millennium that sounds exactly like its vintage self.

“None of us are millionaires,” says Howe. “Nobody joins this band to get wealthy. I’m still that shy London kid. I just want to stand onstage and play. I’m not a rock star; I’m a guitar player.” 