

Steve Howe of Yes



Born

April 8, 1947, in Holloway, North London, England

Bands

Tomorrow
Bodast
Yes
Asia
GTR
Steve Howe (solo career)

Tone

Eclectic—from round jazz tones to sharp rock licks to gentle country twang

Signature Traits

Incorporating jazz, country, and classical phrasing into rock 'n' roll licks

Breakthrough Performance

"Yours Is No Disgrace" from *The Yes Album* (1971)

History and Influences

Perhaps more than any other guitarist in '70s rock, Steve Howe has earned a place of honor simply by being different. While many other players spent the bulk of that era rehashing Hendrix and Clapton licks on their solidbody electrics *ad nauseam*, Howe approached rock from a decidedly eclectic background. He used a Gibson ES-175 hollowbody guitar—previously regarded as a jazz instrument—and he infused his playing with a multitude of non-rock influences from the worlds of rockabilly, jazz, country, and classical.

Among the diverse guitar players he credits as influences are rockers Danny Cedrone and Fran Beecher (both of Bill Haley's Comets), Buddy Holly, and Hank Marvin of the British instrumental band the Shadows. On the jazz side, he is indebted to Les Paul, Barney Kessel, Tal Farlow, Kenny Burrell, Django Reinhardt, and Charlie Christian. Also figuring in the mix are flamenco legend Carlos Montoya, classical masters Andrés Segovia and Julian Bream, and country pickers Jimmy Bryant and Chet Atkins.

On his Yes debut, 1971's *The Yes Album*, Howe made his mark on "Yours Is No Disgrace," an extended suite with several solos. What makes these breaks stand out are both the proficiency of his fast up-and-down picking and the clean guitar tone, which at the time was more often associated with jazz or country players. On another cut, "Clap," the guitarist again avoided the standard rock program with a few stunning minutes of ragtime fingerpicking on a steel-string acoustic, injecting another new concept into the rock-guitar vocabulary.



Gear List

Guitars

1964 Gibson ES-175, ES-175D, ES-345 Stereo, ES-5 Switchmaster, ES-Artist, EDS-1275 doubleneck, and various Les Pauls; 1964 Gibson ES-175, ES-345 Stereo, Switchmaster, and various Les Pauls; Fender Stratocaster and Telecaster; Steinberger GM solidbody; Coral electric sitar; Rickenbacker 12-string; Sho-Bud and Fender steel guitars; 12-string Portuguese vachalia; Martin 00-18 acoustic; Sharpach SKD acoustic; Conde flamenco nylon-string; Kohno classical nylon-string; Dobro

Pickups

Stock

Accessories

Gibson strings (electric), Martin Bronze light-gauge strings (acoustic), numerous types of picks

Effects & Rack Gear

Electro-Harmonix Big Muff fuzz, Dunlop Crybaby wah pedal, Sho-Bud volume pedals, Maestro Echoplex, Korg A3 multi-effects, Roland SDE-2000 delay, Lexicon JamMan delay/looper, Lexicon Vortex multi-effects, Roland GP8 multi-effects, Korg DTR-1 tuner

Amp & Cabs

Fender Twin Reverb and Fender Dual Showman, each with two 15" JBL speakers, Fender Tremolux

"Würm," the finale to *The Yes Album's* "Starship Trooper" suite, is a Bolero-paced chord sequence that builds into an explosive solo, this time revealing Howe's sinewy rock chops. But again, Howe didn't lean on stock blues-scale solos riddled with distortion, as one would hear in contemporary groups like Grand Funk or Mountain. Instead, the solo is filled with twisting phrases laced with rockabilly string bends and twangy country inflections that one would sooner expect to find on a Carl Perkins record than on something by a progressive rock band.

In 1972, Yes scored a major hit with "Roundabout," the single from the album *Fragile*, and its short guitar intro is what gained Steve Howe his greatest exposure. Commencing with a simple 12th-fret harmonic played on an acoustic guitar, this little lick was learned by countless young players who connected acoustic playing with electric, many in a way they'd never done before. The approach was further supported by Howe's solo acoustic piece on the album, "Mood for a Day," which is a lovely Spanish-flavored song that encouraged many rockers to take up classical guitar playing in addition to their rock 'n' roll studies.

While contemporary players may not understand the heights of his virtuosity in comparison to the technical excellence of such modern players as Yngwie Malmsteen or Steve Vai, in his early '70s heyday Steve Howe was perhaps the most skillful guitarist in rock 'n' roll—and its very first guitar virtuoso. Without his innovations, the technical standard of later guitar gods might have been far lower and far less imaginative.

Tone and Technique

To understand Steve Howe's complex guitar tone, read through the above list of his influences. It's eclectic, to be sure, but you can break it down into components. A large part of his sound is derived from playing jazz- and country-style licks in a rock context. He often uses archtop Gibson ES-175 and ES-5 Switchmaster guitars *without* distortion through a Fender amp or, at least, with less overdrive than your typical heavy rocker. Toggling between the fat, round sounds of the neck pickup and the brighter, trebly tones of the bridge pickup, Howe can generate an amazing range of sounds, from cool jazz to spankin' rockabilly twang.

Another secret weapon in the Howe arsenal is the Big Muff fuzz. The Big Muff-thru-Fender Twin sound creates a thick, jagged tone that can punch through concrete. It's not that warm, Marshall tube-amp tone. This is an analog stompbox sound that's edgy and fierce, something further complemented by Howe's modal (as opposed to pentatonic and blues) approach to lead phrasing.

Finally, you have to figure in his tasteful use of tape echo. Steve Howe often drops in a dash of deep echo (200ms or more) on certain notes within a solo, but not necessarily the whole break. This adds strong accents to these notes and makes them stand out from the rest of the lead. He also uses a lot of echo during his steel guitar solos. (Another of Howe's innovations was the use of steel guitar in a rock context—its classic slide sound is more often a part of country music.)

To get a handle on Howe's playing, listen to a variety of jazz and country players. From the jazz side, learn about alternate (up/down) picking, using the neck pickup of the guitar, and playing solos based on scales and chord colors rather than those based on blues-box patterns. A great solo that shows Steve's jazz influence is "Siberian Khatru" from *Close to the Edge*. It's a masterpiece of melodic, scalar phrasing in a rock context.

From the country side, investigate picking and pulling your electric-guitar strings with your fingers—an approach that can involve any number of tech-

niques known collectively as “clawhammer” or “chicken-pickin’.” For experimentation in this vein, plug in a Fender Stratocaster or Telecaster to get a feel for *twangy* guitar tones—that is, tones that are either compressed and clean or slightly overdriven—and the multi-string bends that recall the pedal-steel guitar work heard in vintage country music.

Another player who made the same jazz/country/blues connections was the late Danny Gatton (*see page 43*), so listening to his records will also help you get aligned with Steve Howe’s approach. Although they created very different styles of music, both Howe and Gatton were deeply indebted to rootsy American guitarists circa 1920 to 1960. Curiously, one can also draw parallels between Howe’s tone and that of Led Zeppelin’s Jimmy Page, who like the Yes guitarist was a hardcore fan of ‘50s rockabilly music. Many of Page’s solos have that “country twang.” (Not so surprisingly, when Howe left Yes in 1981, the remaining members of the band briefly worked with Jimmy Page in a short-lived supergroup called XYZ.)

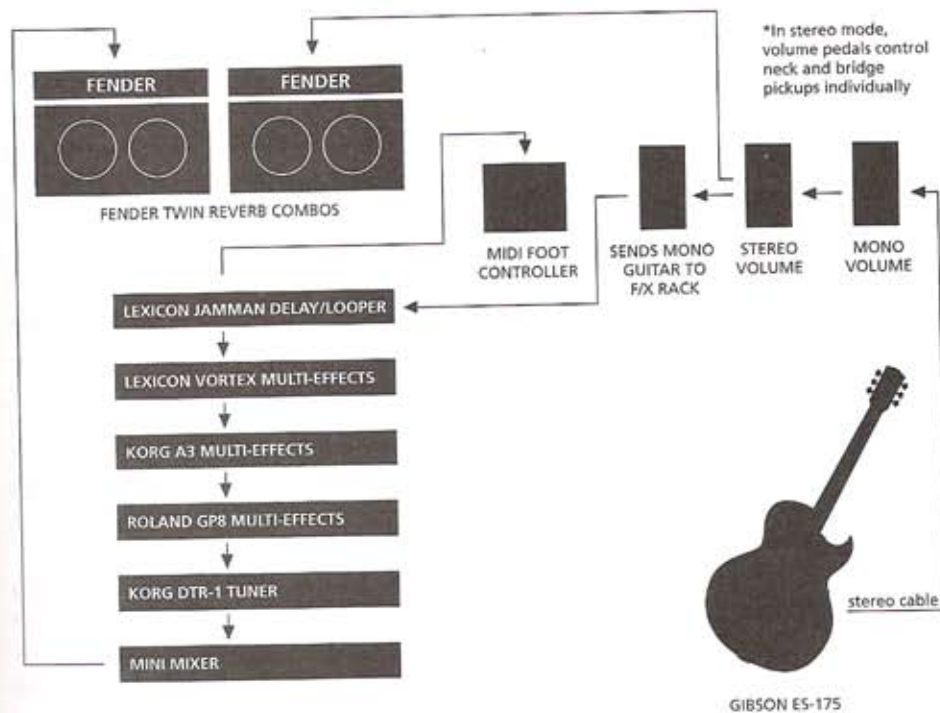
In sum, the key to understanding Steve Howe’s sound is to listen to and try playing as many guitar styles as possible, from jazz to country to classical. For the rock component, it’s especially important to zero in on pre-Hendrix players like Scotty Moore from Elvis Presley’s band, Carl Perkins, or Danny Cedrone (*see page 25*). These were early rock innovators and their individual brands of twang shine through every time Howe plugs in an electric guitar.

Steve Howe: In His Own Words

“My main guitar over the years has been a Gibson ES-175. It’s a 1964 model and I bought it in a shop called Selmer’s on Charing Cross Road in London. I’d been playing a Guyatone (a cheap Japanese electric guitar), but sometime in ‘64 I went into the store and asked for a 175, to which they replied, ‘Sorry, haven’t got one.’ So they had to custom order my guitar, because not many people were buying them. So the guitar arrived a few months later and it cost about 200 guineas,

Essential Listening

- “Yours Is No Disgrace”
- “Clap”
- “Heart of the Sunrise”
- “And You and I”
- “Siberian Khatru”
- “Soon” (the finale of “Gates of Delirium”)
- “Awaken”



Discography

Yes

The Yes Album (Atlantic, 1971), *Fragile* (Atlantic, 1971), *Close to the Edge* (Atlantic, 1972), *Yessongs* (Atlantic, 1973), *Tales from Topographic Oceans* (Atlantic, 1973), *Relayer* (Atlantic, 1974), *Yesterdays* (Atlantic, 1975), *Going for the One* (Atlantic, 1977), *Tormato* (Atlantic, 1978), *Drama* (Atlantic, 1980), *Yesshows* (Atlantic, 1980), *Classic Yes* (Atlantic, 1982), *Union* (Arista, 1991), *Yes Years* (Atlantic, 1991), *Keys to Ascension* (CMC, 1996), *Keys to Ascension, Vol. 2* (Cleopatra, 1997), *Open Your Eyes* (Beyond, 1997), *The Ladder* (Daman, 1999), *House of Blues* (Beyond, 2000), *Magnification* (Beyond, 2001), *In a Word* (Rhino, 2002)

Steve Howe

Beginnings (Atlantic, 1975), *The Steve Howe Album* (Atlantic, 1979), *The Bodast Tapes featuring Steve Howe* (1981), *Turbulence* (Relativity, 1991), *The Grand Scheme of Things* (Relativity, 1993), *Mothballs* (RPM, 1994), *Not Necessarily Acoustic* (Herald, 1995), *Homebrew* (Herald, 1996), *Quantum Guitar* (Thunderbird, 1998), *Pulling Strings* (Resurgence, 1999), *Portraits of Bob Dylan* (Cleopatra, 1999), *Natural Timbre* (Spitfire, 2001), *Skyline* (Inside/Out, 2002)

Asia

Asia (Geffen, 1982), *Alpha* (Geffen, 1983), *Then and Now* (Geffen, 1990), *Aqua* (Geffen, 1992)

GTR

GTR (Arista, 1986)

Anderson, Bruford, Wakeman & Howe

Anderson, Bruford, Wakeman & Howe (Arista, 1989), *An Evening of Yes Music Plus* (Herald, 1993)

which was not a cheap price for that time. After that, I basically sat in my room and looked at it for two years! I was simply mesmerized by that guitar. It was like a romance. I still feel the same way.

"I've hardly done any modifications on this guitar, other than original '50s speed knobs—we used to call them 'high hats' because they're the big knobs. And a new ebony bridge base. The rear pickup was wound the wrong way for about five years—from my band Tomorrow through *The Yes Album*—mostly because I didn't want to sound trebly. Then I played it for about seven years solid until the *Fragile* album, which I recorded completely on the Gibson Switchmaster, except for "Heart of the Sunrise," which is the 175. So the 175 was still in the picture, but then on *Close to the Edge* I used an ES-345 Stereo. Still, the 175 has always been there, even if only on the periphery.

"Here's an interesting story: About a year after I bought the guitar, I was using two guitars onstage: the 175 and the Guyatone. And it was the only night that I ever had a pint of beer before going onstage, and I dropped the 175—which makes you understand why I don't drink anymore. I dropped it and broke the input jack. So I took it to Selmer's to be fixed, and when I went around to collect a few days later I saw a Les Paul on the rack, took it down, and really liked it. So I said to the guy, "Look, if this 175 isn't perfect, I'm going to buy this one." Then he brought out the 175, opened the case, and it was like a bell rang out and the guitar said, 'Don't ditch me here—I'm yours!'

"I didn't know if other people felt about their instruments the way I feel about the 175, but I guess it's like violinists who have Stradivariuses because there's a special sound they want. The 175 did that. Plus, when I sat in my room playing through a Fender Tremolux, I could make it sound just like Kenny Burrell, which to me was heaven! I didn't care if I sounded like Hank Marvin or Duane Eddy—I wanted to sound really cool like Burrell. And I don't mind at all that the guitar has become my trademark. I use it for most of my cover shots, too. I think of it as the best Gibson I've ever played, the guitar I'm most comfortable on, the best jamming guitar, and the best *ideas* guitar because it won't let me be anything but Steve Howe when I play it."



Howe's backline: A pair of tilt-back Twin Reverbs.