

# TALES FROM A TOP BAND

Product – one double album; title – *Tales From Topographic Oceans*; time spent in studio – five months; estimated cost – £35,000, the most expensive album ever made in Europe. Question – where can Yes go from here?

'I suppose everybody must be asking you that,' we prompted, as an exhausted-looking Alan White faced *B.I.*, over a mug of mint tea. 'Yeah, it's really hard,' he replied. 'I can't see it myself at the moment.'

Six weeks of rehearsals, then five months eating, sleeping and breathing a single piece of music. One wonders if Beethoven ever laboured that hard! As a matter of fact, there were times during the first gig of their recent British tour, at London's Rainbow theatre, when it didn't take much stretch of the imagination to make believe one was inside a classical concert hall.

There was the same air of hushed reverence amongst the audience, the same kind of audible sigh when a tricky musical passage was successfully navigated.

'There were a lot of teething troubles on the first night at the Rainbow,' Alan admitted. 'We were all pretty nervous. All the Press were there, scattered around in little bunches, our bank manager was there and some executives from Hemdale, who own us and that's what created a kind of cold atmosphere.'

Most groups consider that the Rainbow is a hard gig to play. Even for a band of Yes' status apparently, because, in Alan's opinion, 'the Rainbow audience seem to think, "we're the Rainbow audience, you've got to really turn us on"'. Not individually, but as a whole, everyone trying to be cool.'

Yet Yes, only three weeks out of the studio after over-running their time schedule in order to perfect the album, deliberately chose the Rainbow to kick off their longest British tour for over two years.

Not just one gig, either, but a series of *five* at the Rainbow before an unsuspecting audience who had never heard

## WHERE TO NOW? BEAT ASKS THE YES MEN

the music from their heaviest album to date.

Alan explained the reason for this was that they had tried to think of a bigger place in London to play, but 'we all decided we really did like the vibrations at the Rainbow and we decided that we'd do more nights there, instead of two big concerts somewhere else, we'd do five with an audience of three thousand.'

As Alan mentioned, there were teething troubles that first night. Roger Dean's amazing scenery wouldn't all fit on the stage, didn't work exactly as planned and, the worst thing was that Rick Wakeman had a terrible night owing to power failures in his equipment. He hovered over his mass of keyboards in a silver lurex cloak looking like a disgruntled angel Gabriel in drag.

### REVIEWS

In retrospect, Alan commented: 'I thought the Rainbow was far too early in our tour to play that piece of music to a London audience. Hence, we got reviews like this.' He passed us a copy of a well-known daily paper.

'I mean,' he continued, 'the album wasn't out either, so people didn't know the music. We've never done a tour before, without an album being out, because the music is so different that it's always nice if the audience do know certain parts, so that they can communicate with it.'

Did he think that perhaps a massive work such as *Tales From Topographic Oceans* might be a bit too much for an audience to take at one sitting?

'No,' replied Alan. 'This is the ultimate in playing, one piece of music, a double album, that's like one song with four movements. But it is a heavy thing to lay on an audience.'



▲ Steve Howe (left) and Jon Anderson

How about the atmosphere it creates at live gigs? The night *B.I.* went to see the band, not a finger or toe was tapping in the audience, there was just a sea of wondering faces. The only time the audience stirred was when a couple of familiar numbers from earlier albums were played as an encore, though apparently there were ravier people at some of the other gigs.

'The whole new album is a very serious piece of music,' answered Alan, in reply to our comments. 'It does create an aura of seriousness which we're going to try to overcome. It's a very serious thing for Jon and we're going to have to try to overcome it because it does make the whole thing sound sinister.'

Particularly the second movement, we suggested. 'Did you like the next movement after that?' he inquired. We did. 'The primitive section – I really like that. That's the one the band likes as well. We find difficulty getting into the swing of performing parts one and two on stage. It'll come eventually, it always

does.

'It has been freaking the audience out, this big, long number,' he continued. 'Their mouths are open, gaping, "how on earth do they remember every little piece of all that?"'

'Well, how do you?,' we inquired. 'I don't know,' he replied. 'We've lived with it for about five months and it's just another part of life now. I don't even think about some of the sections which would be very difficult for some other people.'

### NATURAL

'It's kind of natural for all of us, we've lived with it for a while and it's got pretty easy. But if I'd just joined the band and someone said, "look, you've got to learn this", I would really freak out.'

White has been in the band for a year-and-a-half now. Does he find it fulfilling, we wondered, compared to the things he's done in the past for Cocker and Lennon.

'Yes, I'm really getting a lot of enjoyment out of play-

ing with a band that's as adventurous as Yes. For my personal satisfaction, too, as far as being a musician is concerned. I was known as a funky drummer, I played with a lot of people and I got hired as a funky drummer and I still have basically the same feel, which is what I wanted to adapt into Yes.

'This is kind of happening now, after I've been in the band a year-and-a-half. You see, I'm not a very technical drummer, at least, I wasn't before.'

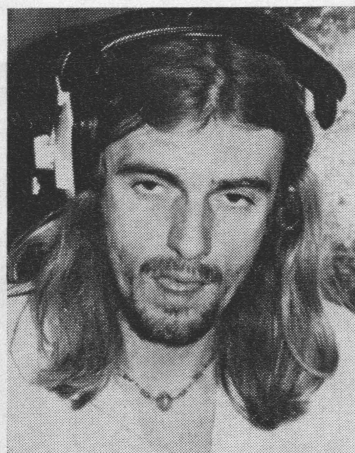
We commented that we'd heard him referred to as a good technician. 'It's strange,' he replied, 'because I'm basically a "feel" drummer. I really feel a lot of things more than other drummers.'

'That's what Bill Bruford had, the technical part of drumming and I've got the feel part and Yes wanted to move in the feel kind of direction which is why they asked me to join. Plus, I knew a couple of them and we were very good friends, so it all fell together.'

He is now getting into tune percussion and is also developing his skill on keyboards, which he studied for many years. How much say does he, as a musician, have in the evolution of a work like *Topographic Oceans*?

'I'm only the drummer,' he said with a grin. 'At least, that's what I keep saying to everybody. Jon conceived the whole idea but I was around while it was being done.'

'I wrote the section in part two where Rick plays by



▲ Alan White

himself with the Moog and strings and I wrote a couple more pieces here and there which I just put into the whole thing. But Jon wrote most of the songs.

'I don't know what to say, really, about what I feel about it. I speak my mind a lot but everybody listens to everybody else. Jon is such a strong person that he is Yes. He is the creator of the music for Yes and he is the whole concept of the band doing what he's completely into. He doesn't want to be a solo performer leading a band. Everybody has their say, everybody has their opinions about what we do.'

## PERFECT

One thing that the band have sometimes been criticised for is being, if anything, too perfect on stage. This happened last time they appeared at the Rainbow, during their previous tour. 'All the reviews said: "note perfect, sounds just like the record". I mean, what do they want?' complained Alan.

Do they, in fact, try to reproduce the exact studio sound, a note-for-note rendition of every recorded number?

'No, not personally,' Alan replied. 'Being a "feel" drummer, as I said before, I like to add a lot of things on the spot. I do change a lot of things from the album, breaks and things, but basically the arrangement's exactly the same.'

'It makes it more interesting for me to mess around with a couple of things. The arrangements are pretty tight.

Jon sticks to what's on the record pretty much. Steve improvises a little here and there and Chris and Rick, too, but I think I improvise the most.

'I like to change something and freak out somebody else in the band who's not expecting it. I definitely believe in the moment and if I want to do something like that that's not on the record, I'll damn well do it!'

The band are now in the States, with their arrival at every venue heralded by a hot air balloon moored above every town. There, they'll be faced by rather more knowledgeable audiences, for the album has been on sale in the U.S.A. for a month and, in fact, earned a gold disc on advance sales before they'd even finished recording the second movement.

It's their fifth American tour. 'The band's reached such a status now that we can control where we play, what we play and how we play it,' Alan informed us. They have clauses written into the contract with the promoter stipulating that health food must be on sale at every gig (Alan and Steve Howe own a health food store in Hampstead) and setting down the size of stage needed to accommodate their extensive equipment and scenery.

They are taking over with them all the scenery they used for the British tour and we were particularly interested in the kind of 'temple' Alan was enthroned in on stage.

'The reason I had it built

was nothing to do with the stage set or anything, but because in America, with the different size of auditoriums, the acoustics affect the drum sound every night,' he explained.

'It really used to hang me up, like I'd get on stage and because the people had come in, the drum sound I'd had in the afternoon had completely changed. So I had this kind of hood built over me so I'd get the same drum sound every night in every place I played.'

'I've got my own acoustics, it's all miked up inside the hood, which is made of fibreglass. And then, of course, Roger Dean got into it and designed this thing which opens up.'

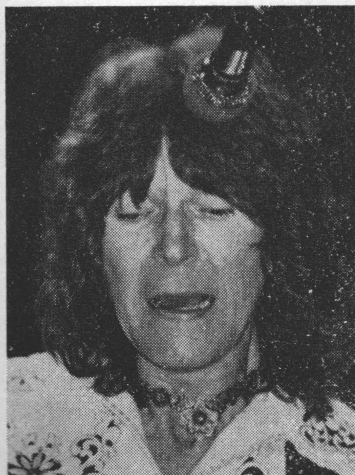
Five months in the studio, three weeks' rehearsal, the British tour, six weeks off, then straight into the American tour. No wonder Alan remarked that the band needed a holiday. Will they be prepared to go through it all again for the next album?

'Not in the next couple of years,' he replied. 'This has been a very heavy thing.'

Has Jon Anderson, then, come to the end of a theme he has been pursuing throughout his work with Yes? Obviously not, because as Alan informed us, 'Jon's solo album will represent more of that theme than anyone else's solo album. Next year we're all doing solo projects. I doubt whether you'll hear another album from the band for a year at least...'

It certainly seems as if Yes are getting further away from the kind of songs they started out with and more into orchestral rock music. What, then, can we expect from their next album if, as Alan mentioned, they are not intending to record another major piece of work for some time?

Alan thought a moment, then replied, 'I think the next album by the band will be like nothing you've ever thought of. It'll possibly be about eight tracks of rock and roll or something like that, really strange, but done in a Yes kind of fashion, short numbers instead of one big, massive one.'



▲ Chris Squire



▲ Rick Wakeman