

With Io Pages, Holland, November 2007

1. With Absolute Elsewhere, Pavlov's Dog, Yes, Genesis, King Crimson, UK and Bruford you worked together with the best of the progressive rock scene. With Earthworks you deliver pure jazz. Was it because you tried to inject jazz within the rock format that you joined the aforementioned bands ? Or were you looking for musicians who would constantly deliver battles what complexity is concerned ?

Last sentence doesn't make sense, but generally I get the drift. When I was 18, I didn't have any set plan, other than to join a group – any group – and get playing. We didn't care about fine distinctions between jazz and rock – everything was in a state of flux anyway. I knew jazz, which meant I was likely to be good at rock. I wasn't trying to inject jazz, but naturally, in a collective where everyone is contributing, you bring what you know; you draw on your background, which, in my case, was jazz. I was, I believe, about the only prog-rocker who knew anything about that subject at all. Rick Wakeman, for example, has to my certain knowledge, never played a note of jazz in his life.

2. Your early influences are Max Roach for his economy, grace and melody, Joe Morello for the odd metres and Art Blakey for sound and grooves. Was/is it your ambition to contain all of those elements within your own playing ? Are there any current drummers which get close to the complete picture ?

Only in retrospect, and for the sake of simplicity in interviews such as this, have I been forced to reduce all my influences to Blakey, Roach, and Morello. Of course, everything that came out of my record-player was an influence, and as a perpetual student, I learn from everyone I hear, good, bad or indifferent. My favourite drummer right now is Mark Giuliana, but he has his own influences.

3. King Crimson was probably the nearest you came to completion ...

Don't understand – no question there.

4. Every single King Crimson concert was different, night after night there was plenty of improvisation going on. One night "21st century schizoid man" would last 3 minutes and the next day half an hour. Was that the pure jazz idea within a rock context ?

Yes, in the early 70s Crimson we wanted to improvise, but in a more European New Music sense of timbre and sound and noise and atonality, than the Afro-American sense of the blues pentatonic scale, much loved of Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page and all. We also were always short of written material, so necessity became the mother of invention. We saw no reason as to why improvising in the context described seemed to be by people with pianos and saxophones, rather than electric guitars and basses.

5. Funnily enough there are plenty of rock bands who at one point performed at Ronnie Scott's. Is there so much jazz hidden in rock without us actually noticing it ?

Depends on your definition, but there is, in my opinion, very little jazz in rock. Soft Machine, Hendrix, Cream and Crimson came about as close to jazz within rock as anyone did, prior to

the hybrid known as jazz-rock. By the time we came to my band Bruford, we still thought we were a rock group with fancy harmony.

6. Can you compare the skills of the current drummers with that of the early musicians as of course today there are special schools, you have sublime recordings, tuition on DVD, books, magazines, better equipment, more knowledge about the technical side of things both regarding the instrument as well as the recording techniques, the miking, etc...

Generally, the skills are of a higher level, I think, than my day. I have to run fast to keep up with the brilliant young guys, like Giuliana. We knew less, the general public understood less about what drummers are for, and general comprehension about the art of the drummer was lamentable. Much has happened since, transforming the context in which a drummer works; digital automation and editing, a rising comprehension globally that drumming is the longest serving and most ancient of arts, a blurring of boundaries between genres. All this makes it more exciting, but also more difficult for drummers.

7. For a lot of us the integration of Annette Peacock within Bruford was not an evident one.

I was looking for an intimacy of the almost-whispered female voice over the grit and volume of a full-steam rock band. And if you wanted that, you'd try Annette. She was a precursor to Patti Smith, Debbie Harry and all the other upcoming and challenging female performers. An early proponent of half talk / half sing – more subtle than rap – she was slightly too far ahead of her time. My only regret is that we didn't work together a bit more.

8. Do you think that UK (or British Legion as it would have been called) would have sounded the same if Wakeman would've stayed or did the inclusion of Eddie Jobson change the sound drastically ?

I'm not sure Eddie changed the sound that much, but we would surely have missed his violin and his great compositional input.

9. Was Allan Holdsworth the soulmate you needed to introduce jazz within mainstream ?

Well, Allan was not only my favourite guitarist, but it was screamingly obvious that the Americans had never heard anything like him, a fact subsequently picked up on by Eddie Van Halen, Al Di Meola and others. I was just lucky to have the right vehicle available at the right time for him to do his thing.

10. Stories go that you once had a huge poster of Earthworks in your living room whilst a Yes gold album hung in your toilet 😊

An untrue story, then. Neither my living room nor my toilet contains anything to do with my profession. If the implication is that in some way I am less proud of my contribution to Yes than Earthworks, then the implication is wrong. I'm proud of my work in all the bands I've been in, including Yes.

11. Someone who chooses for pure improvisation and jazz undoubtedly must have some idols in the genre. Who put a big mark on the current incarnation of Earthworks ?

I don't really do 'idols'. There are so many people doing great work that it is invidious to select one over another. In band-leading and writing, I am a great admirer of Dave Holland's work. The greatest influence on Earthworks right now is composer and multi-instrumentalist Tim Garland, and he's in the band.

12. Do you think it was the right time to switch from rock to the Earthworks approach or should you have done this much sooner ?

You do things when you are ready to do them. No sooner, no later. Eventually I felt excluded from rock – it's too restricting. There are too many expectations from too many people - singer, producer, record-company - as to what constitutes a good drum part. Everyone in the mainstream does roughly the same thing, differentiated only by cosmetic post-productions and 'ear-candy'. It's a trivial world for the drummer.

13. Was it your ambition to introduce jazz to a bigger audience by means of Earthworks?

I wouldn't credit myself with such large ideas. My general guiding principle remains the same now as it has done since the beginning; how can I best contribute to the art of the drummer?

14. Was the name Bill Bruford immediately accepted in the world of jazz or did you have to start completely from scratch ?

I had to work twice as hard to overcome the natural defensiveness about "rock musicians who are on vacation" or "who can afford to do it". After about twenty years, though, it was no longer a problem.

15. If we mention jazz we automatically think of very small, intimate venues which must be a big difference from playing stadiums.

Big difference. In a stadium you must certainly play with clear articulation if you want any reasonably interesting idea to be intelligible at the back of the room. And preferably, at a tempo no faster than Pink Floyd, for the same reason. Again, very limiting for the drummer. In a jazz club however, or any room up to about 500 seats – you can do what you want, all is intelligible at any speed, any dynamic. If you hold concerts in an aircraft-hangar, the most effective music will be Music for Aircraft Hangars, whose most noticeable features will be slow tempo, clear articulation, and nothing happening in a hurry.

16. Is it because you can approach smaller audiences now that DVD steps in kind of like an alternative for people not getting in or Earthworks not performing in certain areas ?

Don't understand.

17. Are there certain musicians you wanted to include in Earthworks who have declined the offer?

No.

18. Was it obligatory for Earthworks to have a steady line-up from day one or could it always be a loose collective from which you could pick whenever you felt like it ?

Heck no, I like steady line-ups. First of all the music is tricky to play, and it's going to sound a whole lot better with players who are familiar with it. Second, I hate finding new people and having to work them in. I'm tired enough as it is!

19. In the end was it a must to launch your own Summerfold and Winterfold labels ?

Absolutely. After 40 years I wanted to gather my life's work around me. All those CDs that may or may not have been released in various parts of the world, may or may not be available, and for which I may or may not have been paid. These two labels have some 30 titles now, and I know each one of them is out there earning its living and easily available from the shop at www.billbruford.com. The labels also deal with my current and future releases, and next up is the new CD with Michiel Borstlap called 'In Two Minds' – see below.

20. Is jazz pestered by mp3 and illegal downloading like other genres or is the public more loyal, more honest ?

I don't have any statistics on this, but generally the jazz demographic is older than the rock one, and so a tad slower to steal, a whisker less computer-savvy. Older people still understand the notion that someone somewhere spent time and energy making the music, and would like to be paid for it. A society gets the music it pays for, as they say.. Pay peanuts, get monkeys.

21. Was what you did with Patrick Moraz really as far as you could go at that given time ?
Are there any plans to explore this collaboration any further or is this a closed chapter in the Bruford book ?

This is a closed chapter of the Bruford book. Everything I do is as far as I can go at the time.

22. you collaborated with Michiel Borstlap. Again do we have to see this as a closed chapter or will this collaboration continue ?

On the contrary, this collaboration is very much continuing. I am writing the liner notes for a new CD of fresh material, provisionally called " In Two Minds", for release late 2007 or early 2008. We have concerts in Paris and London upcoming. Improvised music comes with an honest in-the-moment attitude which gives you the quickest access to the musicians motives, choices, and abilities, and is very much my preferred area of work right now.

23. with Borstlap it was piano and drums yet a nice combination which would result in more dynamic and probably more accessible material might be the pairing of organ and drums. Working together with say Rod Argent or Bryan Auger or John Novello might well be a great idea ?

Might be.

24. has a collaboration with Pat Metheny ever been discussed ?

No, although Michiel Borstlap is close to Metheny and has worked with him on several occasions.

25. Although you constantly switch between Tama and Ludwig drums surely one of them has to be your favourite ?

I don't constantly switch. I started with Tama in about 1980 with the new King Crimson of that year, and have been using their excellent acoustic drums exclusively ever since then.

26. Has there ever been a Bill Bruford signature kit ?

No, I'm not sure anyone outside Bonham or Rich has had whole kits modelled on them. But there is most certainly a Bruford Signature Snare Drum

27. You always stay loyal to Paiste cymbals. Why not Zildjian or another brand ?

Historically, when I started playing in Europe in the late 60s, Paiste were the European brand, and Zildjian, from the US, were effectively unaffordable. I fell in love with the Paiste sound, and being a loyal sort of fellow, have stayed there ever since.

28. Whilst you are constantly trying to progress in every single way you nevertheless joined the Anderson, Bruford, Wakeman & Howe project which looked more like a financial move rather than an artistic one.

That's because it was. In the music industry you quickly learn to get a balance between being paid too much for doing practically nothing, and being paid too little for working your rear end off. Like Sean Connery doing James Bond in Hollywood followed by the Royal Shakespeare Company for 300 € per week. I had a creative end use for the money from ABWH, which was to buy airline tickets for Earthworks. It's how it works.

29. Having been around as much as you have, what would be your ultimate rock line-up and what would be the perfect Earthworks line-up bearing in mind you could even include 'dead' musicians.

No idea – I can't do those games.

30. Have you reached the ultimate you ever wanted to reach or is there still that something you are aiming at, that icing on the cake which will make sure that Bill Bruford really sees his life as being completely succeeded ?

I feel after about 40 years, I've had an extremely good hearing, and gone about as far as I'm likely to go. There is a strong argument to say I should move over and let someone else have a turn now. The music industry has been extremely good to me – so far. I've generally been completely involved emotionally in the music I'm playing at the time, and not a lot of musicians can say that.