

John Williams

Australia

Interview.

‘Crossing boundaries.’

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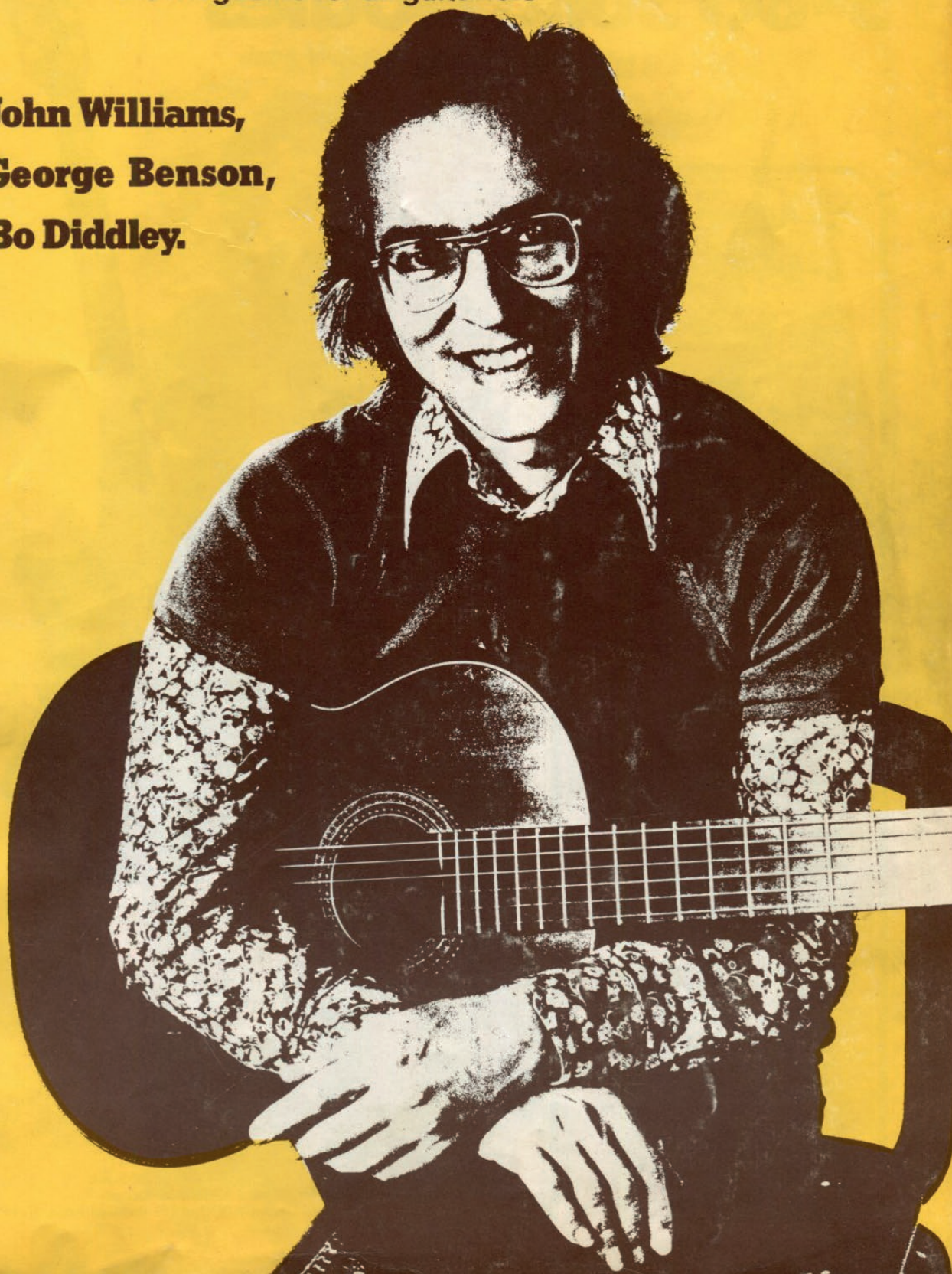
Lance Bosman

Guitar

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**John Williams,
George Benson,
Bo Diddley.**



JOHN WILLIAMS:

Crossing boundaries.

It's been a busy time for John Williams just lately. Jumping between classical and popular guitar fields, he's appeared on radio, television, solo concerts at the Wigmore, duoist with Ralph McTell and given live performances of the Rodrigo, Malcolm Arnold and Leo Brouwer guitar concertos. Recently he's formed a group which include in their repertoire rocked-up Baroque with some romantic sweeteners. Should be an interesting combo—Spanish, electric and acoustic guitars with electric piano and harpsichord. Despite the openings that this offers John to turn his hand to improvising, he refuses, considering it to be a specialised and long acquired art.

We began with the Brouwer concerto, first performed here late last year with the London Sinfonietta. A record of this, now in preparation, will present Brouwer's work in a sizeable chunk as opposed to the smaller single pieces doing the rounds. A three-movement concerto, the guitar takes solo spots and joins in multiple cadenzas with the ensemble of strings, percussion and woodwind. Characteristically, Brouwer incorporates Cuban dance rhythms, and more—a quasi raga movement, quarter tones, and muted notes facilitated by a rubber block under the guitar strings. While the notation is fixed, certain rhythmic groups are left pretty



photo by Sophie Baker

much free. As John said, with this rhythmic freedom and the complex nature of the concerto, it needed working through a couple of times before they got it really together.

Lance Bosman

To make sense of this contemporary concerto, and by contemporary I mean that it's aleatoric and in a very modern idiom, I must understand what its vocabulary means. I think in retrospect that when we did the Queen Elizabeth Room concert it was over-amplified, and we lost some of the textures. We all enjoyed it, though we weren't knocked out. But we found that when recording it the next day, we got more from it, and more still when mixing and editing. Finally, now I've got the tapes, the whole dramatic thing, the textures of solo instruments and the guitar, it's all become very clear. Little improvised bits between the flute and the guitar—well we don't totally improvise, but when groups of notes fall together, we start to feel how it's done. None of us had played it before that performance, though I had some idea of what it was supposed to mean from Leo's own tape which he sent me from his performance. Then again, that was very different from his score markings, the pauses, the boxes of notes which last a certain amount of time; they were all very different. And it's only because I know Leo very well and have talked to him, not only on music, but politics and everything, that I know his attitude towards music; and that he treats these things liberally; that his directions are a guide to the feeling. For example, where he sets pauses of four, six, three seconds, he doesn't mean exactly that; they can be longer or shorter than stated. So until we had been through it ourselves it was a bit like improvising in jazz where people are thrown together who don't know each other's styles, not the music they're improvising on; it's going to take a while to get it together. And in that way this piece is more of a challenge that say the Malcolm Arnold concerto where you've got the time set out. Given skill, you can make a lot of sense of that, but a piece like this is much closer to an improvised form even though every note is written out. It's aleatoric in that there is freedom, but the given notes are meant to be played.

I recall you saying that you didn't improvise, yet you do on this.

Well I can see how it might seem like that. I'm not an improviser, I have to be careful on this. Because I've achieved something in my own field, and I listen to a lot of jazz and rock and have friends in those fields it's important for me to find what I can and can't do. When I say I don't improvise, it doesn't mean I wouldn't be able to if I tried. I know I could and it doesn't mean I'm not interested in it, I very much am. What it means is that I have an acute understanding of what real improvising is; and to the extent I could do it, it would be dabbling. I could sit at home for three nights a week for a couple of months and improvise over standards and adequately; it would be the sort of improvising that a hundred other players could do better. A lot of people might wrongly think that it's somehow significant; because I'm doing it they either think that it's better than it really is, and/or that it points to a new direction. For those reasons I don't and can't improvise.

It's not the sort of life you can dabble in; it's like... well, take my brother, in Cornwall who has a rock group, he plays bass guitar. They make up their songs and notes, and that, in a loose sense, is improvising. But they do that like every jazzman has done it, from two to seven nights a week, year after year, finding out what they can do, what they can feel and experience, developing an improvisatory musical brain. You don't get that from being a smart-arse sitting at home. If I improvised it would be okay because I can play; of course it would be okay, but it wouldn't be important.

The improvised feel in the concerto is worked within a framework that's clearly established by Leo. The aleatoric or improvisation element comes from understanding the effect that he wants. It's reading passages set out with boxes of notes for the flute, for the guitar, and he'll allow, say, thirty seconds. The flute may continue after that, and the guitar may stop after fifteen seconds. Either way you're left with the flute and guitar deciding what they're going to do in that time from a stated compass of notes. So it's not improvisation in the sense that it's completely free. It's rhythmically improvised except that he sometimes wants the notes uneven and quick, or uneven and slow. You're limited by the fact that the piece is already a creation; he's already envisaged a succession of harmonies and notes.

Then you're closely listening to each other which may involve competition and conflict. How did you work together as an ensemble bearing in mind the individual outlets for interpretation? Elgar Howarth was conducting to keep check on note grouping and where everyone is. A lot of the parts, well the guitar part is written with indications which may say, for example, repeat such and such until the orchestra have played all their notes. The conductor will bring in, give beats for the other when it seems convincing. We want to try and aim at the same notes every time; it's not exactly a compromise, it's really improvising a performance of given notes, rather than the notes themselves. In that sense it's free, but it's got

tranquillo, accelerando and irregular rhythmic passages. Sometimes I play a passage legato and irregularly, otherwise you can produce regularity from constantly playing irregularly. The scope, the colour and the improvised feeling is enormous. I was asked to describe this piece and I could only say that it seems to express the presence or the soul of the guitar without it being conditioned by a tune or a rhythm or a formal framework. In other words, you think of the guitar without it being conditioned by a tune or a rhythm or a formal framework. In other words, you think of the guitar as having a lovely sound because it's playing a nice tune or rhythmic pattern. In this piece there are no clearly definable things; it's like a collection of sonorities put together in a guitar; it's as though the guitar is speaking not through a tune or rhythm but through itself; it relies entirely on the exposure of its own nuances. *To return to the guitar in general, I think that there's far too much classical music being taught, and that the setup's rather precious. And for my tastes, too much of the same sort of this repertoire is performed.*

I think it's awful that of all instruments that this should happen to the guitar; that a small-minded approach should be limiting everything. I don't know the way out really, it will probably be self-corrective. Maybe there'll be so many concerts of the same classical repertoire, that interest will die off. On the other hand, it might be a reaction against the excesses of loud rock. It's like a volcano of interest and determination to communicate, a shared interest and an exchange of ideas. A lot of people are stuck on keeping the purity of the classical guitar which is great in a way though I don't think it should be that way because it's a versatile instrument; but reaction to loud electric excesses is perhaps responsible for keeping people in their ivory towers.

Yet you believe in crossing boundaries.

I can only talk from my own experience. 'Changes' which I did some seven years ago seems a little old hat now, but that raised a few eyebrows. I certainly didn't intend it that way, it was as natural to me as playing the classical repertoire. Now, well times do change, and I think that people grow to accept them. A lot more's going on, I feel we are going to be very surprised. The general musical skill of the best session players would be quite surprising to most classical players; if they were faced with it, they wouldn't understand how good it was—I'm still surprised. I mean, I just like to think back to a Segovia concert or a Rubinstein and I'm just as amazed to hear those session men get the right feeling on the beat, or hear someone on steel guitar doing just the right thing on a particular track.

What might help widen the field of acoustic guitar is to encourage improvisation at an early stage to complement the classical repertoire.

It's an interesting idea, but one doesn't improvise as a thing apart from the music that's being played. I agree that there should be a study from the music that's being played. I agree that there should be a study of improvisation, but it's a very general subject. If you're improvising in jazz or Baroque there's a point to it, isn't there? I mean there would be a point to sitting at home and working over a chord sequence because you could later put that into practice with others. In the same way, there's a point to learning how to improvise baroque music, its divisions and things. Working alone I mean, there would be a point to sitting at home and working over a chord sequence because you could later put that into practice with others. In the same way, there's a point to learning how to improvise baroque music, its divisions and things. Working alone raises the question of whether you're improvising as distinct from composing. It comes down to the pace that you do it: it's not like the experience of spending years improvising with others. If you take a baroque composition and add divisions into it, you sit down with a pencil and paper and work out what you want to do. Is that improvising or not? The action would be not; but if you think of the mechanics of it, it is. It's a question of the time scale: you give yourself time to know what you would like to play, then write that down; or, with enough experience, play it on the spot. Now where do you draw a line between the two?

Is it necessary to draw a line when the aim is to nurture creativity along with standard pieces? That way you're forced to listen to what you are doing, however simple the improvisation, as well as learning by rote.

Yes, but let's not forget that understanding a work, its interpretation is a form of improvising in the sense that you're not just playing those notes; you respond individually to that work. Now I'm not saying that one should draw a line; you can't. The great composers of the Baroque were all improvisers; what they wrote down was improvised. You can hear that in Bach's toccatas and free fantasias. He's simply written down what he's improvised. If he hadn't written

it, he would have improvised it.

I think that the thing that killed improvisation in its general form was musical developments in the 18th and 19th centuries; the subjective factor where the performer became an interpreter of what the composer improvised or composed. In my definition, the act of composing is the same as improvising. So you then have the person who's the interpreter, and they concentrate on that side which I think is very creative. You give attention to the means of communication which the composer or improviser can't. The person improvising hasn't got time, by and large, to think of the tone quality, the emphasis on each note; when improvising, the main thing is the inventive aspect.

Do you think that the emphasis on interpretation gives rise to comparative assessments of player's performances? It can be its own worst enemy when guitar buffs consider that player A played it better than B, and so on.

By no means is this confined to guitar concerts. What this interpretative thing from the 19th century has cultivated, and it goes right through concert life, is an obsession with standards of performance: with who plays it best, who's going to record the best version of a Mozart symphony or Mahler, who's got the definitive version of this—who the fuck cares! What's important is that you enjoy the concert—do you enjoy the way they played it, yes, great.

I don't blame reviewers whether it's about me or anyone, because they're victims of this ridiculous situation; of having to supply copy, and I'm only generalising now, but it suits some people's mentality to do a nasty job, you know what I mean. I don't blame critics or reviewers, it's the nature of our system that we want to read the press, someone's judgement. If you're at the concert you know what you thought of it yourself, and you get an idea of what others thought of it too; so what do you care what some guy says in the paper the next day; and if you weren't at the concert there's even less reason to care what he said.

I suppose reviews help with publicity, exposure.

I think the whole thing should be — it never would be, given the

society we live in — it should be reported more. I mean, if you think of the amount of space that's taken up in a page of reviews, and you replace that with reports of events, think how much that would stimulate interest. I've been tuning in a lot lately to Capitol and LBC; I used to be dubious of these when they first started, commercial radio, being an old fashioned socialist. But the actual amount of community arts reported is fantastic; papers could do much more of that. There's a good reason for reviewing plays, films and things which are continuing; but for any of those one-off things, that's happened, well it's gone.

As another angle to your activities, have you considered recording easy contemporary pieces or jazz arrangements?

I have thought of it and it's been suggested, but I've specifically not done it. There are other players, and for them there's not a lot of work. If there's any work, for example, like sessions which other players can do as well as I then there's no reason why I should; because in a way it's pinching work from them. One of my passions, hopes, is to encourage players to do similar things to those I do. If I do 'Changes' or whatever, I hope that those activities make it more right, more acceptable, for others to do the same. I don't want to do that very work that I want them to do. The same applies to contemporary music; I know at least seven or eight other players who could make as good a job of all the repertoire, contemporary or otherwise, maybe with not that degree of virtuosity and all that, but who could manage just as well. I think that they should do it.

Whoever, it would be a help in encouraging contemporary music and jazz if the music could be heard and the dots purchased by a player having, say, a couple of year's experience.

Like solo arrangements of evergreens and things. I suppose it's a question of getting them together and played by someone quite well known. This should be: a catalogue both on record and in publication. Our guitar repertoire should consist of these things.

Your recent television show, when you played with Paco; did you improvise then?

No, that's as I learned it two years ago and I play it the same every time. In fact, in that piece there's not a lot of scope even for Paco to do large-scale improvising.

A criticism I have of that programme is the Rodrigo extract; I thought it was very abrupt.

Yes... I wondered about that. The Rodrigo nearly wasn't there, it was a question of time. If it had been a minute longer it would have been cut out. A piece was actually cut out, we overran, it was a fifty minute slot. I wanted a South American piece to end with and the Rodrigo seemed to slip in okay. There was a point to it, though; it comes under live entertainment, not that it's not a good programme anyway, but it is meant to be middle of the road — the whole series is, a very sort of family kind of thing. So in a sense I wasn't being over-critical from a musical point of view. Not that I was being slap-happy about it, I was rather concerned that I had good chunks of guitar playing which is why we had the Bach Prelude in, the Spanish and two movements of Vivaldi. I thought that if I could get all that in, I could contrast it with things that people would expect to hear. They do expect Cavatina even though I've done it to death, so I thought of that as a signing off; and it may seem strange for a guitarist just to have a bit of the cadenza from the Rodrigo, but I'm always getting asked to play it. If it hadn't been me doing the programme, if I was watching someone else doing it, I would probably say exactly what you said, in that case not knowing what my attitude was and why I'd done it. Saying that, I would still do it again, limited though it is. It's one well known piece for Cavatina and it was a way of getting into the duet with Paco from the songs with Cleo Laine. In a programme of fifty minutes you've got Cleo doing two spots, you've got Paco, then Paco and me, and Andre Previn. You've got to separate them, you've got to have the music following in a sequence which doesn't jar; it's difficult, like playing one of those games where you avoid getting two things together. At first we had Andre appearing at the beginning and Cleo later, but Andre's jazzy piece was quite long for the beginning of the programme. It had to be a scherzo piece for half way through. It's just one of the problems. My final format had a chat in the centre with Paco—and it was obvious we were friends—Cleo at the beginning and end, so it all worked very well.

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John Williams with Leo Brouwer

I got the impression that you were itching to improvise during Andre's number, especially as he was freaking out.

I couldn't improvise, not as well as he's written out. It might be fun for you and me to hear J W make an idiot of himself. I mean, that could be fun, I've got no vanity about it. But sure it's frustrating. I really wish I had the experience and know-how to say, right we've done the tune, now I'll do 24 bars of my own.

Your latest sessions at Ronnie Scotts, could you have included some jazz arrangements there?

If I knew any yes; but people expect me to do my usual thing anyway. I'd have to play them really well to make them worthwhile. It would be really nice to have a whole group I know, even if it's not a whole set, like quarter of an hour, three or four numbers, Nuages and a couple of Beate numbers; Just a quarter of an hour group in the middle of classical pieces. Speaking of those classical pieces, I've never been at all worried about seeming to be popularising in that way, you know. When that series first came out there was an immense amount of criticism here in the record industry of it, especially amongst the magazines about Bach's Greatest Hits; That was Paul Myers project at CBS who's now gone back to New York. I always thought that it was terrific because people do come to the classics through that sort of popular approach. It's like saying to people, look don't be frightened of it, these are the composers' greatest hits, listen to them.

What attacks were levelled?

Well, the idea of being a bit tasteless, this was the American approach to classical music packaging it up into attractive little bits, the popular bits of Bach, the popular bits of Beethoven, quite forgetting that the people that the series is aimed for, those people that might otherwise be frightened off classical music altogether. There was criticism of 'Greatest Hits' because it's like taking one movement of a Mozart symphony, one movement of a piano concerto, a little of this and that. I've got nothing against taking the nicest movement of a concerto and leaving the two dull ones out. As a classical musician I think it's a great idea. When you think of all the Bach suites, it's all great music if you like Baroque. But in these suites, there's two movements that are terrific tunes and the rest are a bit of a bore. They're great if you're really into Bach, but if it's just a piece, what's wrong with taking the best bits out?

About your new record 'Travelling' that's just out.

This is another record with Stanley Meyers, but not only Stanley this time—two of the arrangements are done by other people. Richard Harvey did an arrangement of 'Sheep May Safely Graze'

and Francis Monkman, a fabulous harpsichord player, who's also an arranger of keyboard music, he arranged a Bach gigue from one of the French Suites. There are six Bach numbers and four of Stanley's pop tunes including 'Romance'. Everyone seems to have done this last one recently and I've heard a couple of versions that are so awful, I thought that we might as well do one simple, tasteful arrangement of it. It's a bit soupy but rather nice. I played the part straight, no faster or slower than anyone else does it. We've got backing strings, which in the long term I'm not very enthusiastic about; but in terms of this record, it's fine. I use a Fender electric on one track, the Gigue, but mostly I'm on Spanish guitar. Herbie Flowers did the record, Stanley produced it but we all had a hand in the mixing.

Most arrangements and the sort of style of that record I'm very keen on. And in fact later in the year — and this has come out of the record — I'm putting together a group. I'm very much decided on the sound of it which exists on two or three of the tracks of this disc. I'll concentrate on that sound for this group. We've talked about it and now want to put it together. The group will comprise six of us, and we're going to do a week at Ronnie's at the end of the year and some concerts. There'll be three guitars, Kevin Peek and Tim Walker, and we'll all play electric and acoustic; Francis is going to play harpsichord and electric piano, Herbie will be on bass guitar, and almost certainly, Maurice Pert will be on percussion. Electric and acoustic guitars will be together, electric steel and acoustic steel and Spanish guitar are so fabulous. And we all feel that with our combined experience if we can't do something really special, then we should all give up.

What sort of numbers are you going to play — classics, jazz arrangements?

Well we're going to find our way a bit, but basically we are working around a sound which is the most important. From my point of view I was thinking about it when I went away to Sydney in January to do some teaching; I went away with it on my mind. I was thinking; shall we have two keyboard players and two guitarists or three guitars, thinking strongly about the sound; came back and said right, that's it; phoned Kevin and Tim, hoped they'd do it, and they're highly pleased. With that instrumentation there's the sound on two or three tracks from 'Travelling' that I want to keep; so we'll do some of those tracks. Do you remember 'Bach Changes', the first track on the Changes album? If you just had the bass guitar and the drums and the acoustic guitar part you will have some of the feeling I want to keep. The idea of the sound is really around the guitars and the rhythm and keyboards. And there's old favourites like Cavatina and that, rearranged without the strings but just accompanying electric guitar parts which will be beautiful. A guitar is fantastic on sentimental romantic tunes because it never sounds slushy. I'm working slowly, taking my time on an arrangement of a song without words by Rachmaninof, it's just made for guitars. Kevin has played to me a few tapes of the arrangements he's done, rather punchy, rocky sort of things; and Francis has got ideas on Bach and Scarlatti; that baroque music is so suited to a rock treatment rather than a jazz treatment, given the right material. When we sifted out pieces for this record, we excluded a lot for it would have messed them up without adding to them in any way.

When you said that baroque music lends itself more to rock than jazz is it because you think that it tends to sophisticated jazz too much?

I don't know what it is, I just know that jazz Baroque, especially the Bach that I've heard, and let me say that far be it from me to disapprove of messing around with Bach, I'm all in favour of that, but what I've heard just becomes bad Bach for me and bad jazz. It's something to do with understanding the fundamental rhythm of baroque music; and I think it's to do with it being objectively very strong — quite apart from how subjectively you feel about it. And it's on-the-beat rhythm, not that the beat should be accented necessarily all the time. All I know is that most of the jazz and that obviously that includes the famous trio is atrocious. As I say, it's bad jazz and bad Bach. When I'm listening to it I want to hear the original, that's the cardinal point. When I hear a prelude messed around, that Air on a G string — I call it that loud-lizard style — while you smoke a cigar. I want to hear the original, for that had a lovely feeling of improvisation. Anyway that's my feeling towards it and I find generally it seems to be shared amongst jazz players; it's not on principle, I just don't think it's worked. But the rock thing I think has worked marvellously if you pick the right numbers. Wrong though I may be, I'll stand by what I've done myself.