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JON ANDERSON AND YES:

STILL CLOSE TO THE EDGE

Jon Anderson has resided at the forefront of musical technology since he founded the band Yes with bassist Chris Squire in 1968. The boundary-breaking spirit of Yes’ two-dozen albums is also apparent in Anderson’s collaborations with electronic music pioneer Vangelis and various Latin American musicians. We spoke to Jon about his current endeavor, an as-yet-untitled solo album. It’s his first play-everything/sing-everything project since 1976’s *Olias of Sunhallow*.

You’ve been pushing technology to its limit since the ’60s.

Yes has always worked with the latest technology, which has been both good and bad. Technology can be painstakingly slow, and to some extent our music was dictated by the sophistication of the equipment we used.

The number of tracks available, for example?

Exactly. We always used to run out of tracks. When we started, all we had were 4-track machines. When 8-tracks came in, they seemed amazing, and by the beginning of the ’70s, we had 16-tracks and then 24. But even then, we still felt limited. We started experimenting with slaving tape machines together, which meant perhaps starting the machines 40 or 50 times until they played in sync. We must have recorded *Close to the Edge* in a dozen different parts, editing together all the separate pieces of 1/4” tape. We dreamt of having 100 tracks at our disposal, but we had to wait for the arrival of hard-disk recording in the ’80s.

Are you satisfied by today’s technology?

The modern equipment runs pretty well, though I still wish it provided even more freedom for the musician. You don’t want anything to get in the way of the creative force. But I must say that the new Yamaha AW4416 system I’m working with is a lot easier than the other hard-disk recorders I’ve worked with. It’s a very logical and simple system. I hate looking at manuals — it drives me crazy. Yet I’m working with the Yamaha, even though I haven’t opened the manual once.

What are you creating right now?

A wild piece of music that I’ve been working on for over a year. Every ten years or so, I go through a new epiphany about music, and I’m definitely going through one now. My current goal is to make many sounds at the same time spontaneously, just me on my own, and record them as I perform them.

Are we talking MIDI here?

Yes. For ten years, I’ve dreamed of creating a matrix that would let me do this. Now, thanks to some equipment I’ve devised, I can control ten or fifteen instruments simultaneously from a MIDI guitar. The idea is to actually record the music I create in performance, as opposed to the traditional way of looking at recording, whereby you, say, put down a drum

track, then a guitar, then a bass, and so on. To me, this alternate way of recording represents the future. I’d like to be able to record at least 30 tracks at the same time. I’m driving myself crazy here! (Laughs.) But the Yamaha system puts me exactly where I want to be. Two days after I received it, I just plugged it in, and everything clicked. It was the perfect addition to what I was doing.

When you create dense overdubbed textures like that, do you have a specific result in mind from the beginning, or is it a process of gradual discovery?

It works both ways. There are times when I know exactly what I want, and it’s so hard to get it — I can hear it, but the act of formulating it in the material world takes away from what I’m hearing. The other side of the coin is having a blank page — you just lay down a rhythm idea and work at something for the fun of it. One technique I use a great deal is to record two or three things every day for several weeks, but not listen back to what I’ve done right away. When I return to the ideas, I’m often quite surprised by what I find.

Are you hopeful about the music of the future?

Absolutely. I relate to the current culture of space music, the people who make electronic music related to early Stockhausen and Vangelis, but adding hip-hop beats. That music appeals to me because it’s truly music of the present day — it literally couldn’t have been made 50 years ago. I also find that the rap world has become an exciting area for musical juxtaposition. Obviously, there’s a lot of crass, commercial stuff, but some of it, like Eminem, is really amazing. Actually, I’ve written a rap opera that will come out one day, believe it or not.

When you created those early Yes albums, did you have any idea you’d still be playing those pieces in concert in 2002?

Well, I remember a few people during the *Close to the Edge* tour saying, “In ten years, people will still be talking about this music.” I would laugh and say, “I don’t think so!” But 30 years later, we’re still playing that music, and we have thousands of fans around the world eager to hear it. It makes me thankful that I was part of a group of musicians that would even attempt that sort of music.”