

RITCHIE BLACKMORE

Though understanding Ritchie's natural aversion to chat ('... it really puzzles me how people can talk about a thing for so long... I always find there's a one word answer to nearly everything. I don't believe in long conversations') it was a delight to find Ritchie Blackmore not only without the ennui that mistaken persons would have him nursing, but a lively host and candid talker. George Clinton

What were you like at school?

Athletic; I used to throw the javelin. I was the best in London and they wanted me to go in for the All-England, but I was much too young. Apart from that, I liked science; and aeroplanes — everything about them. When I left school I went into the aircraft industry and even today they still fascinate me. All those controls, and these guys can just sit there coolly, pull back the engines, and off they go.

Who did you first hear play a guitar?

Tommy Steele, I saw him leaping about on Six Five Special;

remember that? Well, I wanted to leap about with the guitar, and that's what prompted me to buy one. I bought a Spanish guitar for £7, and I didn't get on with it at all for the first year. I was going for classical lessons and although I was supposed to practise a certain piece all week, I wasn't that interested in the music we were doing and I found that I was swatting up on the Friday night and getting there on Saturday morning and playing it all wrong. I was about eleven at the time, and living in Hounslow. It was good training though, in that it made me play properly, use all the fingers and not just the usual blues thing which is to use two or three fingers and copy records.

When you say classical, do you mean fingerstyle?

No, not that orthodox. It was plectrum, but what I call classical plectrum style. It was a good grounding as far as technique went.

Did you practise a lot in those days?

Yes I did. I used to practise up to six hours a day.

What kind of things did you work at?

A lot of runs; not specified runs from the book, although I used to follow Ivor Mairants' single-string studies which I think are very good. Yes, lots of practice, and that's why I suppose I've got a fast right hand. I never find anything too hard to play fast.

Does any part of your machinery worry you?

The head; that worries me. I always thought that Hendrix had it here (in the head) but not here (in the hands). And then there are people who can really race over the fretboard and yet haven't a thing here. Somebody like Alvin Lee, for instance. He's obviously practised a hell of a lot because it's all mechanical, but he just expresses what his hands want to do. I used to do that as well. I've tried to get out of it, to slow down in the last three or four years. I found that I just raced away top to bottom in one second flat, with no idea what to do after that. So I'm very conscious of this on stage and I don't do too many show-off solos; that's not really going to impress. In my solos I try to incorporate what's been put down before, with no thought of speed. Hendrix can play just one note whereas another guy would have to play thirty to equal that.

It's hard for me to play very slowly because I always want to race about, and I've got this tendency to double up the tempo of the notes in the slow phrases. I find that Roy Buchanan's playing is very similar. I understand what he's touching on. Another thing, he's harmonically interesting. He doesn't just play a relative minor, a thing that all these blues guitarists do; always going to the relative minor. B B King, for example, a lot of feeling but it's always the same notes. Now Roy Buchanan will touch on what I call Turkish scales. I like to incorporate these if I can, though you've got to be careful, you can't play a bit of both. You've either got to go to a Turkish scale or a western scale.

Do you ever feel the need to do something solo, like Roy Buchanan?

Someday I'd like to get some blues stuff down. A lot of people say 'When are you going to do your solo album?' That's fashionable. I hate fashions, but also the answer is that I'm doing that now with Deep Purple. I spend so much time getting everything together that I haven't the time to mess around with orchestras and playing other people's sessions. But I don't think I've got enough faith in myself to play as long as Roy Buchanan does on his own. To make a whole LP of just guitar playing takes some doing. In any case, I've got loads of time ahead to do that.

Can we talk about your reputation for being impatient, refusing to play and all that?

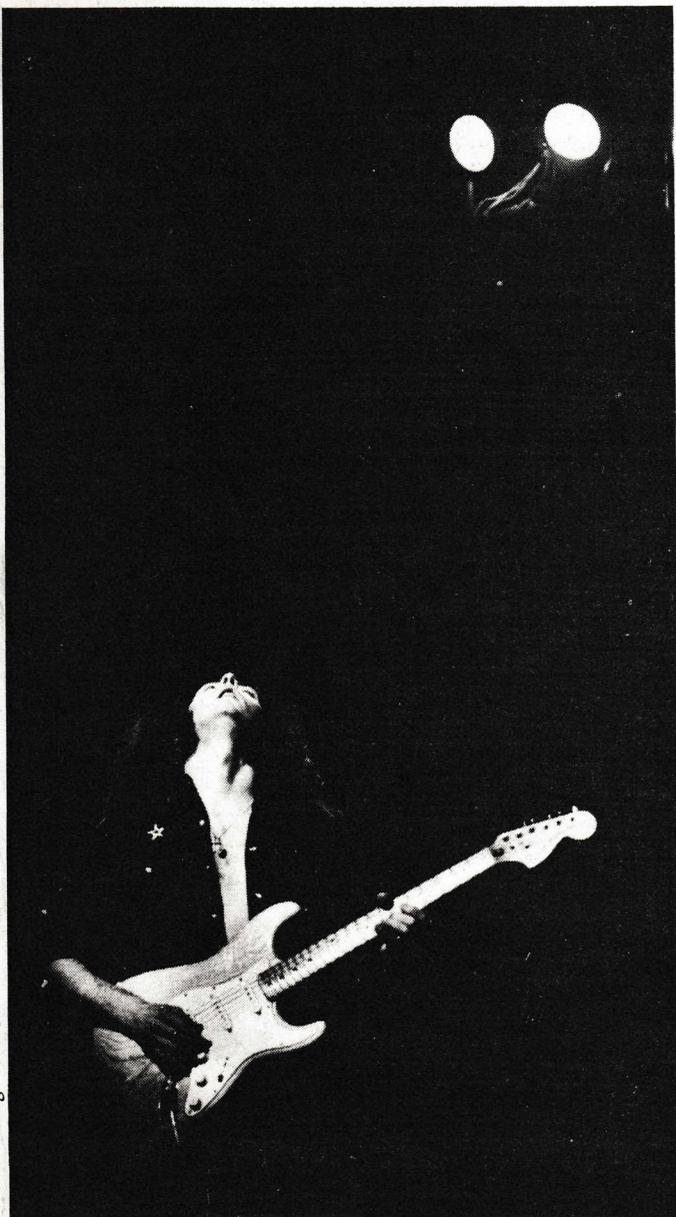
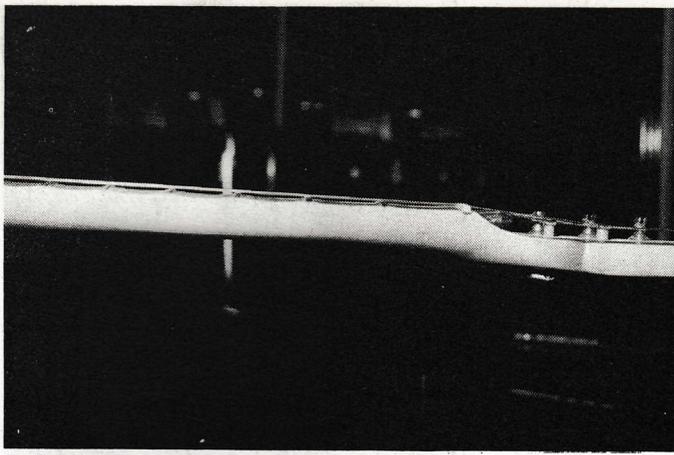


Photo: George Clinton



△ Showing the amount of wood Ritchie removes between the frets ▽



▽ The favourite blond Strat



Photos: Ian White

I do that a lot. Sometimes I play in the dressing room and refuse to go on stage. I did it once and it got round the business. You see, I hate it when a guitar will not speak properly; and things like buzzes on the amp. I'm not that professional that I can go on stage with the attitude, 'Oh well, another day, another dollar — let's make the best of it.' I can't do it. It's either brilliant to me or it's not going to happen — I'm not going to play. And this is where I get into trouble with my management sometimes. Like the time my guitars didn't turn up to one particular gig where there were about 20,000 people, and I said I was walking off. I could've borrowed a guitar, but that's not the same. If you don't play the people get their money back and go away brought down. But if you do play and you're bad, they'll remember that. It's the long-term basis that I think of. I can't stand taking people for a ride, just going on there and playing badly.

Assuming that you're on form, do you find that your ideas come easily when you're on stage?

Yes, and I just wish I could get things down on record that I can do when I'm rehearsing. As soon as I get into a recording studio my mind goes sshump. Got to get it right. No mistakes; let's play safe. And that's the trouble. Because there's not just one person involved. In a band like ours you've got Ian Paice who's fanatical about the drums being exactly right. Jon's organ has to be exactly right. Same with the bass, and the guitar. So you could go on forever, trying to get it right. You've got to accept a good average in recording, but sometimes you're lucky, then something really good can happen. I can always play a thousand times better when I'm jamming in the pub down the road than I can on stage. Piano, bass and drums; anything else tends to get cluttered, and I can't stand two guitars. I find I'm really satisfied after a night down there.

Do you ever listen to classical guitar?

Not too much. It tends to throw me, my whole train of thought. I listen to Bach a lot because I can relate to that very easily, but on the violin or 'cello. Pinchas Zuckerman, he's my idol. I find that with guitarists I can sit back and appreciate it and think, that's nice, but I'm not going to learn anything from this because I don't want to play that way; I want to play like a violin, not a guitar. I used to listen to saxophone players though, I always thought that they were way ahead of guitarists. But now with guitarists I feel it's all been done except for people like James Burton.

Early on I suppose Reinhart was my biggest influence. He was so unbelievable I just couldn't get near him. And Les Paul, who I idolised. I used to get his records half price because they were so much out of fashion. I had every record he ever made. He influenced Jeff Beck as well, we used to play together a lot and we often knocked out what Les Paul we knew. Apart from him? Wes Montgomery, who was beautiful. Feliciano I like, but I can't stand listening to all that dirge of singing till he plays something.

Did you ever want to play any other type of guitar than electric?

No; I reached a stage about ten years ago when I said, 'Right, that's the way I want to go.' Jim Sullivan who was one of my biggest influences as well as being one of the best if not the best all-round guitarists in the country said to me, 'Whatever you're going to play, make sure you learn just that. Don't mess about being a jack-of-all-trades.' And that's why I consider myself a very good rock player, because I've kept to just that.

But you like the blues?

Blues is my thing. I know that people must get very bored with hearing a blues group. We do one blues number, and that's my favourite, that's when I get all my things going that I want to hear. After that it's everybody on their feet, clap your hands nonsense. That finishes off the evening as a party; which is fine, I don't expect them to sit there all night listening to me, because if they wanted that sort of thing Les Paul would still be a big name as a guitarist instead of guitar. But a lot depends on the audience. They have to be really interested. If I see people bored, I get rebellious. I either go one way or the other. I either play like a demon, like, 'Right! You've never seen anything like this!' I really believe that sometimes. Other times I think, 'Oh well, I know what they mean. It's rubbish. ►

◀ It must sound awful out there.'

What part of your performance does smashing up the guitar belong to?

Our concerts are more than just that. They're concerts plus an event and breaking up the guitar is part of that. It's got to be a good gig though. I just do it whenever I want to. There's one particular guitar I won't break up, a blond Fender Stratocaster; one of my favourite guitars.

The one you had stolen?

No, that was my black one, which I got back, then went to Boston and smashed it up. I suddenly realised what I'd done — threw it into the audience — it was such a great audience. Came on stage again: 'God! That was my black one. What can I do? Get it back?' It was in pieces by then; gone. There's this little fight breaks out when you throw the guitar.

I have certain guitars to break and certain ones I'm going to play. I might buy one and think I'm not going to play this properly so I keep this around on stage until towards the end when the music's in the mould of, 'Everybody get up and clap your hands,' and not so much involved. I pick it up and if I feel like throwing it around which I usually do and playing it with my feet then my good guitar doesn't suffer.

How many guitars have you got?

I've only three left now out of twelve when we started the American tour. I did nearly all of them in on that tour. But I do a lot of work on my guitars. I groove out the wood between the frets so they're concave. I can get a really good bend to the note this way. Also I change the frets to Gibson frets. It takes me a couple of days and I leave in the old frets till I've got the effect just right.

How did Deep Purple get together in the first place?

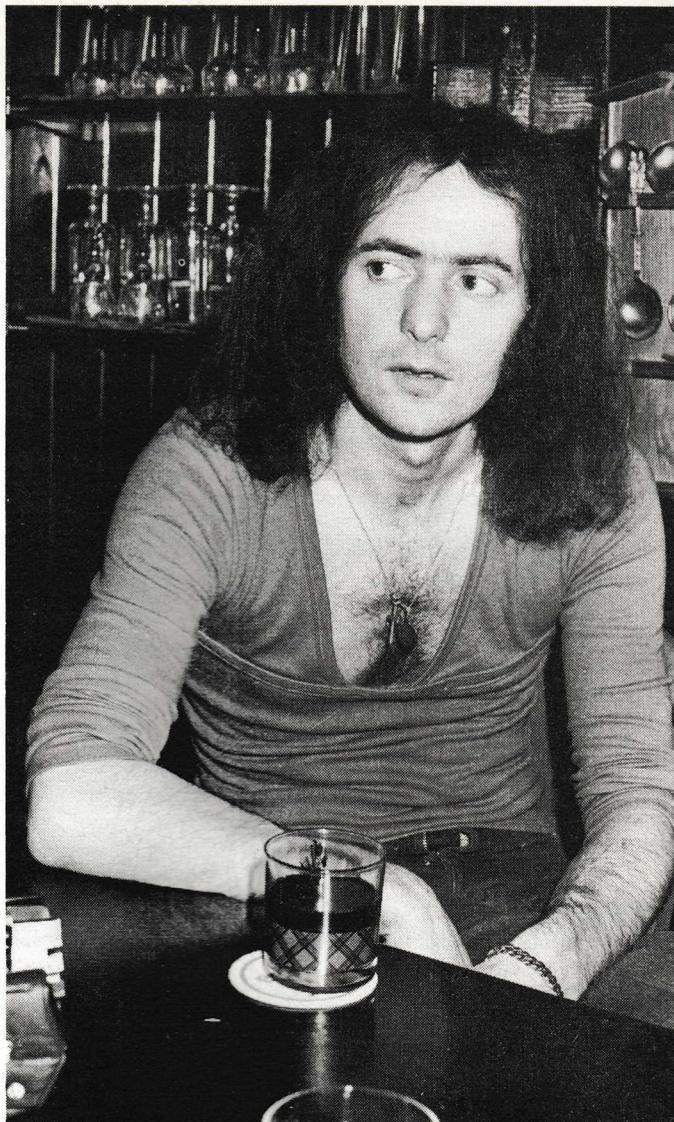
It was started by Chris Curtis; remember the Searchers? I was living in Hamburg and he sent me a couple of hundred telegrams. That was in '66. I'd got disillusioned with the English scene. If you played a good solo it didn't really matter, nobody was interested. It was all, 'Can you sing, can you write?' That was what it was all about — the Beatles. You never heard a guitar solo in any of their numbers. Up till then I'd been doing session work playing rock, just as Jimmy Page was doing. Anyway, I came over to see Chris and we got Jon Lord and started from there. Then Chris disappeared and left Jon and me to form a band with our managers John Colletto and Tony Edwards. I'd seen Ian in Hamburg in '67 and said I'd phone him if I got a good offer. Then we got in the bass player from Johnny Kidd's group. He stayed with us for about a year.

As far as you're concerned, which has been the most satisfying period?

I should say right now.

Purple's music hasn't changed a lot over the years; do you ever get fed up with the sound?

I get fed up with everything sounding the same. Fed up with churning out riffs. But that's the best way we've written so far; we don't seem to be able to do it any other way. I do most of the writing and it's the only way I can write; that is to write guitar riffs and progressions, and give a vague melody to the singer. As I don't consider myself a good writer I get completely disillusioned about it. But I think Purple is a very good band instrumentally. There aren't many other bands that have so many good musicians; and that's being objective. I think Led Zeppelin have got it. I admire Jimmy Page because he's shrewd, but he's not exactly my favourite guitarist. The Who, the Faces, they've got one guy and the rest of them are average. Yes aren't bad, they've got Steve Howe. The bass player and drummer — they're good. I don't like the singer, he sounds like a choir boy to me. King Crimson? When I heard their first LP it just shattered me. I thought, 'Oh no; who's this?' It really blew me apart. I played it to Jon and he collapsed when he heard the mellotron effect. And I loved the guitar part of Robert Fripp in *Schizoid Man*. That was the first thing I'd heard on record that I knew I wouldn't be able to play. I'm not being big headed, but whenever you hear something you think, 'I wish I'd done that first.' You never think that you can't play it. But that was the first thing I thought that even if I sat down and tried to play it, I could not get that timing. Apparently there was a slight trick in it; they'd



Photos: Ian White

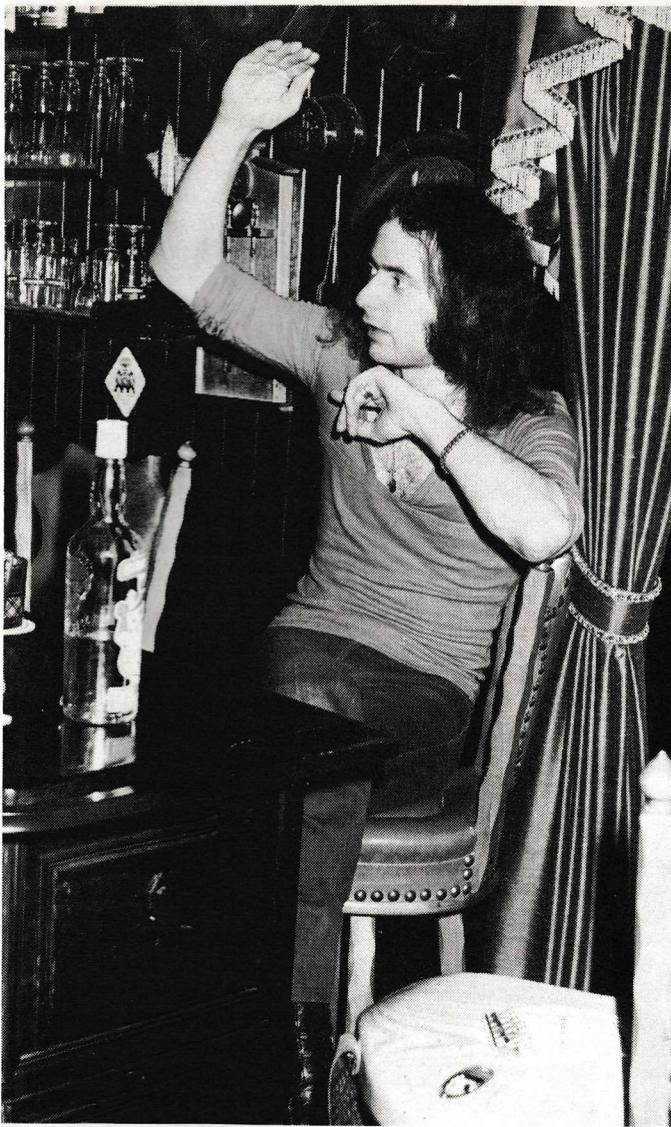
'I get fed up with everything sounding the same.'

taken out the drum beat that was in-between to keep it all together so that you thought, 'Christ, where are they getting the timing?' *Schizoid Man* was such a good production, so out-and-out rock, like, 'We'll show everybody how to play rock.'

How important are your tours?

Very important, even if it's just to let people know we're still around. We certainly don't get any air play on the radio. People like John Peel won't play us, yet he loved us when we started, but once we made it we were, Oh, commercial rubbish to him. I know they've got this big hate thing against Purple, but they could play Emerson Lake and Palmer, Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin; those groups aren't that bad compared with what they do put on. It's all for housewives. It mustn't be too heavy and too involved. It's got to be short, sweet. It's got to be music you can talk over and have a cup of tea to. They played some Paul Rogers the other day. I rate him. I think Noel Edmunds came on and I thought, 'I wonder what they're going to say about this record,' because it really got to me. He sang well and his tone was fantastic. Well, he said something like '...this is a load of wandering noise.' I couldn't believe it. I went 'Thank goodness he said that because it doesn't bring me down so much when they say that about us.'

We thought when Capital Radio came in that they would give a fair deal to everybody. Like, why not have an hour of rock, an hour of classical, an hour for the housewives of rubbish, an hour of folk — anything? Just so you can say, 'Ah, today they've got an hour of my music.' But they play trash from nine o'clock till six, and then they start, when no-one's listening, the 'in' concerts and rock shows. And it's not fair. Maybe that's why we get so many people at our concerts, because they never hear us unless they know about our records. In Germany we're played all the time, and a lot in



'Hendrix can play just one note whereas another guy would have to play thirty . . .'

America. Here, it's just a closed shop. It's just these certain groups all the time. Anything that's watered down, played badly and sung out of tune; they lap it up.

They've got it all their own way, these DJs. If there was a movement to get DJs out, I would gladly back it. We're just thinking about that, actually the whole band, and getting other top names. If everybody got together, all the serious groups and got a petition or something, I'm sure it could be done.

How are you getting on with your synthesiser?

I don't use it on stage, it's too contrary. It seems to do what it wants to do. You put it on one setting one night and it'll give you phasing and this and that and the next night you leave it on exactly the same setting and it will give you something else. I only use it on record when I can keep moving the controls.

Is the difficulty that you don't understand it thoroughly?

Oh no. I think there's room but it'll take another year before they come up with something. This one was one of the first. I noticed other players getting the same trouble. You can get the phasing and then you might get no sustain. So you lose one and gain something else. Our own boffin is fixing me up with some nice things though, like a switch on the guitar whereby I can get a variety of phasing very easily. Also what I'd like is to be able to get that double note that you get when you scat sing. I can scat sing but I'm always a bit too shy to come up to the mike. Nobody's thought of it yet, but it's so obvious. I'm sure it can be done electronically, and he's working on it.

You used to be a bit of a jazzer, do you still like it?

Not so much now, in the way that 'What is jazz?' It borders very closely to rock at the moment and so you can get a lot of snobbery, like, 'I only play jazz. I don't play rock.' Whereas

you can't say that now. But I'm so much into rock now that I think that it would be a bit of a strain for me to go onto jazz, especially since I've been slurring notes; it's very hard to play jazz and slur notes. There's a good guitarist out now called Tommy Bollan who can do that very well. McLaughlin tries, but apart from this horrible fuzz tone he puts on everything — I can't stand his tone; he slurs a note to a kind of bad ninth and it doesn't quite fit. He hits a few quarter tones that just jar, sometimes. I just find his arrangements brilliant. I love Gerry Goodman because he has tone and I think that music's got a lot to do with tone.

But in jazz you have a very broad construction. You can hit ninths, fifths, flattened ninths; thing like that. In rock you're limited, and that's the challenge. This might sound silly, but I feel jazz is too free. You can be playing with a jazzier and be up, and down that fingerboard and you can hit any note you want, it's going to work out a flattened ninth, a tenth, a thirteenth — it's going to be something. Even in a different key it'll fit somewhere; I've done it. Take a progression like A, F sharp, D, and E, and they're experimenting and hitting diminisheds and augmenteds, so when they hit that A, you can play any note you like and it'll either be a flattened third, a flattened fifth, an added sixth or a suspended ninth. They can get away with murder, some of those guys. Great runs and things but because there's so much going on in the background it's bound to be related somewhere along the line, so it always fits. This is probably what they get off on. Whereas in rock, you can't. If somebody's hitting an A, you've got to stick around that A somehow.

Do you practise much now?

Not so much. I try and think mentally more than I play. You get to such a stage after about fifteen years where you're pretty sure of the guitar — where the notes are. So it's better to just sit down and think about notes rather than pick up the guitar and think, 'Where are my fingers going to go today?' I find that this can happen. The mind's a blank and you go racing around the fingerboard. You can always play a better solo if you thought a quarter of an hour before. Just had silence and thought, 'I'd better have this in, and construction wise I'll do this.' That's what makes a good guitarist. That, and someones who listens to what the singer is doing, and the bass, and puts it all together in *bis* solo with *bis* technique, as against somebody who says, 'Right, I've got my bit worked out,' before anyone else has done their bit, and he's just going to play that.

You mentioned Jimi Hendrix back there. How was it when you first heard him?

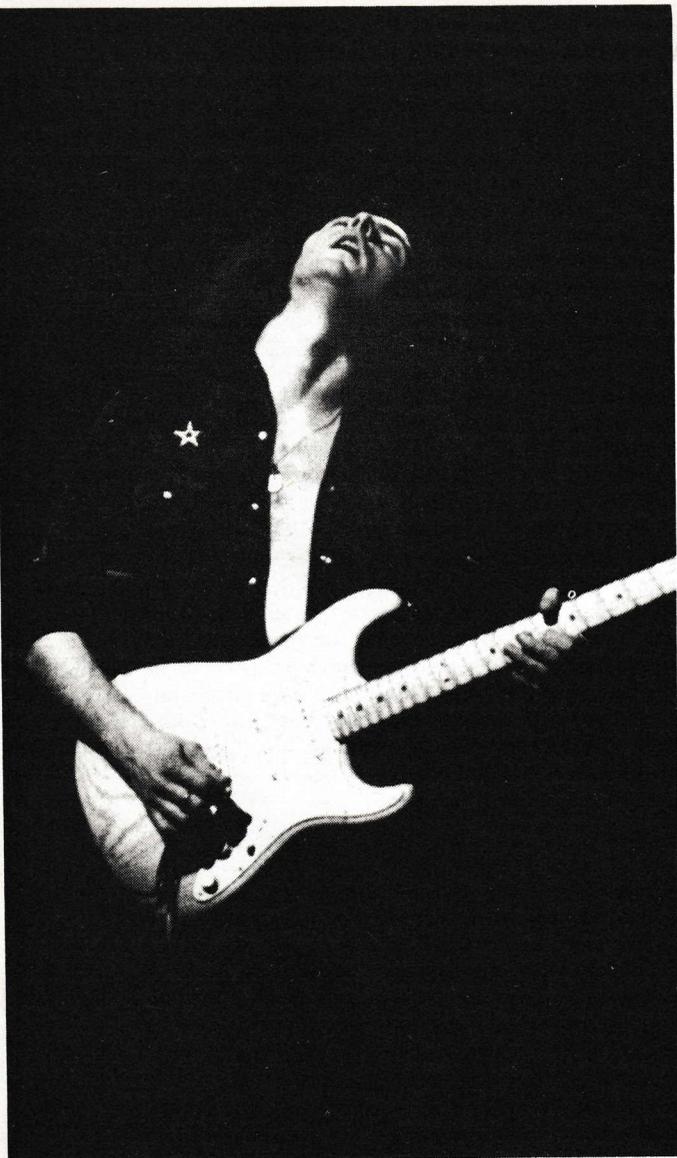
At first I thought he was a load of rubbish. All my mates told me about him, you know, plays with his teeth and all that: 'Oh, great — very musical.' And then I heard his first LP and thought it was distorted rubbish. I was into Les Paul and the rest of it. And then eight months later I thought, 'I like his song writing — *Manic Depression* — I like those progressions. Then he became my idol. Up till *Electric Ladyland* and he put out some bilge after that. Hendrix could play a lot of bad notes and guesswork, especially live. I don't know how a musician could be that bad, being so good on things like *Electric Ladyland*. But he was very good at all those intros using fifths going into and around chords; very original.

Do you agree that he was the first electric guitarist to use the instrument as an electric guitar? I'm thinking of the sound as it is today in rock.

I would say Hank Marvin; quite honestly. I think more people got turned onto Hank Marvin than Jimi Hendrix. There was also Eric Clapton who I never really got off on. I thought some of his solos were good, but, I mean, two out of a hundred. Eric doesn't mean a lot to me. Hendrix, he's the one who got me back to England, because I'd given up before Cream and Hendrix came on, and that was it, like, 'Thank goodness somebody's doing something musical.' It started everybody off again.

You've said that one day you'd like to do something else. How would you like to play a few sets at Ronnie Scott's?

I don't know. One minute I tend to think I'm a great guitarist and the next that I'm just average. I seem to jump from one to the other. I'm not stable in my thinking. What I'm



Do you ever get nervous?

On stage? Never. I get nervous off stage. Life frightens me more than music. I like my solitude, that's why I don't socialise as much as people want me to. I keep to my own dressing room. I like to tune my guitars up – I've so many to get in tune. I like to sit back and relax, have a drink and go and watch the other band. I go and sit in the audience. I always have to do that then I can get a vibe of what they want just by looking at them. You know that if they're sitting forward intently, every one of them, then you've got to prove yourself that night. Whereas if they're all up and out of their seats bopping away, you know that it's going to be a walkover. So I *can't* just walk on stage and play. I've got to know where I am, to get the feel of the theatre. Walk around and look at the audience because when you watch the people you realise that they're normal people, just like you, and you get the sense that they're not strangers.

Now Dave is just the opposite. I'll say, 'Why don't you go out front and watch the band?' And he'll say, 'I can't. If I get out there it's going to blow me; shatter my nerves.' I can't understand how he can come straight from the dressing room onto the stage and all the people are there, and those faces suddenly looking at you. I've done it a few times and it's so hard to do. I did it in Cardiff once and it took me about five minutes to get on stage. I lost my way. The group had gone on and everybody clapped, and I thought, 'Where the hell am I?' I walked round the back, in the dark, through the curtain, falling over things with my guitar, knocking it out of tune and gradually I found myself on stage next to Jon Lord. I was completely dazed. That was because we had no time to see the audience! Besides, you can learn a lot from the other band, even if they're the worst band in the world; you can learn what not to do. And I don't like all this snobbery, like, we're the top of the bill so the other band just can't be any good.

Playing obviously takes a lot from you. On stage how deep are you into the music?

There's this place where sometimes you find yourself playing away, and if you're playing really well, your mind is a hundred per cent concentrating on what you're doing. But it's very hard because usually I get on the border of being drunk before I play, otherwise I'm too aware of what people are doing around me, so I can shut out those people and think solely on what I'm playing. It's a funny state to be in. You could never live a normal life if you were in that way all the time. I believe you reach a stage which you go into but you can't reach it very often unless you trained the mind. I think it's scaring sometimes, because you tend to be like a zombie. You're in this other world and you're playing and you think, 'Ah, got it.' But it's like astral projection, you don't really want to stay there. You can get back to normal life. And that's why I don't dedicate myself to the guitar. I look on it as a pleasure instrument. I could master it maybe much better than I have if I got up every day and thought of nothing but music. But I think I'd go crazy. I like to enjoy life. ●

◀ searching for is a sort of plane that I can set myself on and think positively. I seem to think negatively quite a lot. Things come along in life where you think, 'I'm fed-up with this.' If you could discipline yourself to cut out everything that's around you and just meditate you would progress and progress. But you don't. You tend to pick up the guitar, play something and think, 'I'm not on a good day today, I'll leave it.' Or you'll come down next day and go, 'Oh, I had a bad night last night and got drunk. I feel ill today; I can't be bothered.' And I have the both attitudes, so it's hard.

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