

It's well under a year since Allan Holdsworth joined the Soft Machine, and already his dazzling guitar work has contributed greatly to the international respect in which the band is held. I met him just after the Newcastle Jazz Festival, where, as well as playing a storming set, the Softs presented an instrumental clinic, a sort of rock seminar. I asked Allan how it went.

I felt a bit ridiculous, actually, because I'm pathetic at teaching. I'm just totally clueless. There were only about eight guitarists turned up anyway: they just asked different questions – the thing that made it very hard for me was that each one of them was in a different place, each one played in a different way from the others, and it was hard to give anything that's going to be of use to all of them. So I just let them ask whatever questions they wanted and answered them, if I could, as well as I could. I felt a bit silly in a teaching situation: being self-taught, I don't know if what I do is right anyway.

Did you ever have any lessons on guitar?

None at all. The only books I ever had were chord books. I tried to learn to read in the beginning, I got books of exercises, but I couldn't get anything out of it. Just laziness really – I wanted to be able to play along with records without doing any work. I listened to anything I could get my ears round.

Do you remember listening to music before you played guitar?

Ever since I can remember, I'd been interested in music. My father was a professional pianist and he always had a lot of records lying about, so I was exposed, unknowingly, to a lot of jazz. At one time I wanted to play clarinet or something like that, but I never seemed to have enough interest in it to keep pestering people to buy me one, and I never got round to it. Then just before I left school – which is pretty late really – my father bought a guitar off an uncle who used to accompany himself yodelling and that, and he left it lying about. So I just started learning to play a few chords on it, standing in front of a mirror miming to pop records. After a few months of that, I started to really like it.

Did you practise much?

Not initially. I think I must have gone a year, year-and-a-half without realising that I wanted to play the guitar. I think everybody has that period. It was after that that I started to practise fairly hard – not from a book or anything, just trying to learn to play solos.

Copying guitarists on records?

Well, I tried that. The first group I played with – we used to play in working men's clubs and so on – I remember copying solos off records note-for-note. I usually used to get two solos in each song: one was copied off the record, the other one was mine. And mine was always terrible. Because, when you copy things off a record, you can play it note-for-note but you don't really know *why* you're doing it. It doesn't really help you play your own solo. When I realised that, I stopped copying. What I tried to do then was to listen to a song and the overall feel of a solo, and try to get one together of my own that I thought was reasonable. It didn't happen very quickly.

Do you remember, in those early days, listening to any particular guitarists and being influenced by them?

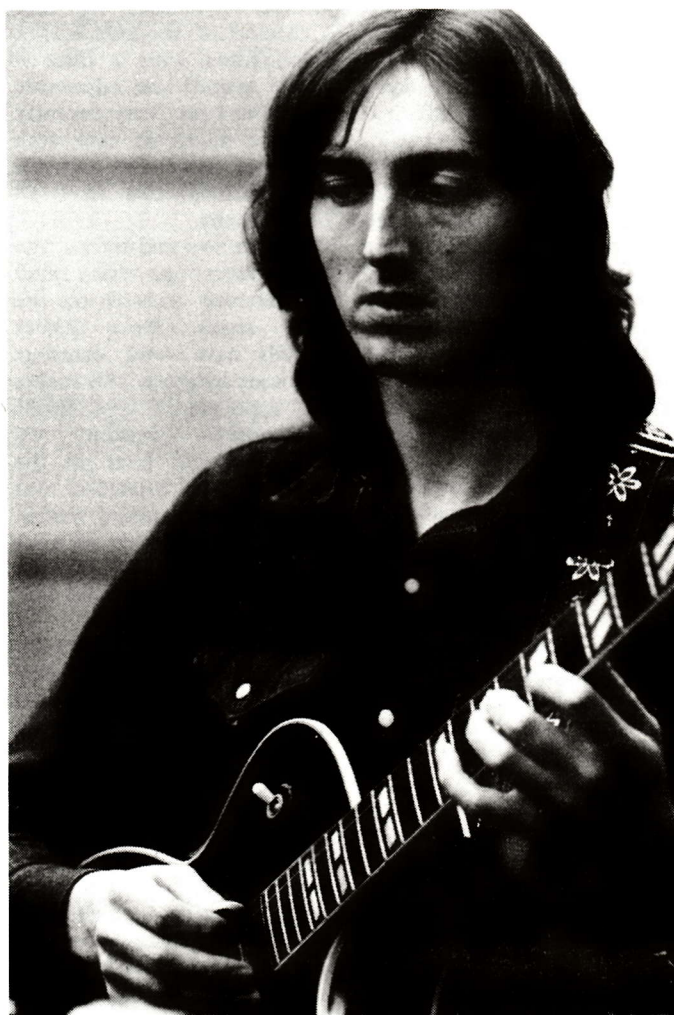
I listened to anyone who was better than me . . . and that meant I listened to just about all the pop guitar players. The first spark of jazz guitar I heard was Charlie Christian, because he happened to be on some of the records my dad had. It was then that I realised that this guy was playing guitar – when I heard it before as a kid I didn't realise what was going on. And then I started buying jazz guitar records. The strange thing is – well, I don't know if it's strange or not – I found that when I listened to these records with jazz guitarists on them, I used to finish up liking the solos that the other people played more, like the horn players. Just the way the horn sound *flowed*, as opposed to the guitarist's approach. I'm glad I did that, I listened and tried to learn something from every instrument. I think too many guitarists just listen to guitar playing and seem to ignore the rest of music. I listen to anything that's good: it's the notes you're listening to, not what they're played on.

You've got a very fast technique: was that a deliberate aim?

My technique tends to run away with me a little bit. I get pissed off when I listen to a lot of the things I've played. It's just enthusiasm and the nerves you get on a gig – you don't

'It's the notes you're listening to, not what they're played on...'

Allan Holdsworth



talks to Jeffery Pike

realise at the time that you're flying around so fast. I haven't really worked that hard on my technique, I never practised speed exercises or anything like that. It's only in the last year that I've really got down to practising seriously. In fact, I feel that I wasted a lot of time in the past, and I'm trying to get it together now.

What form does your practice take?

I just pick up the guitar and try to improvise, by which I mean *think* of things before I play them. I don't want my fingers to take over my mind. I think the best way to avoid that is not to practise things you can already play, but to try to get into things you can't play, letting your mind control everything. That's the only practice I do now. I've tried occasionally to learn to read – but I can't. After about ten minutes I find I'm playing, I'm not reading any more.

Why do you want to learn to read?

Well, it helps in a work situation to be able to read. And also, I compose quite a lot, but I can't write it down. I have to remember everything and tell people, 'You play this and you play

that . . . ' It would be a lot easier to give them bits of paper with things written on. I'd really like to write more and arrange things — like I'd love to write something for a string quartet or something like that, which at the moment is totally impossible. I can hear the things in my head, but I can't get them down.

How do you compose?

All sorts of different ways. Sometimes it's going round in my head and I try to get it down on the guitar, sometimes I'm just improvising on the guitar and I find something that sounds OK and that's the beginning of a piece.

How did you come to join the Soft Machine?

I'd done a couple of those Musicians' Union clinic things before, and when the Soft Machine were booked to do one they asked me to join them. They said they needed a guitar player for this one occasion: it was supposed to be a rock thing, so it would have been a bit silly without a guitarist. It went quite well so I was asked to do a few gigs with the band, to see how it went. The first gig I did officially with the Softs was in January.

What were you doing immediately before that?

Nothing really. Just the odd jazz gig here and there. Before that I was with Tempest, Jon Hiseman's band.

Did you find it difficult to fit in with the Soft Machine?

I think I managed to get in quite quickly, because all their repertoire at that time was new, so it was as new for everybody else as it was for me. The only thing that was strange was that I hadn't played in odd time signatures much — but that's nice, I'm beginning to enjoy that now.

There's so much improvisatory freedom within the Softs' music: when you're playing one of those fast solos, how aware are you of what the rest of the band are playing?

I really don't know. I've thought about that often, actually — what am I hearing and what's going on? I think at the time I'm conscious of most of the things that are happening, I try to hear what the other people are playing. Because if you're fighting against them, it's very hard. I'm sure everybody else in the band tries too. I have thought about that, but I can never be 100 per cent sure, because I never know what I'm thinking about at the time. I know that occasionally if I'm feeling ill or depressed about something and I'm not *there* with the rest of the band, it's pretty awful. So I should imagine most of the time I hear what's going on.

How important is the presence of the audience? Are you equally aware of their reactions?

Oh, very important. We're always aware of the audience as well as aware of each other. Last week we played a gig in Crewe and the audience were really terrible. They were so noisy we kept thinking we should stop and listen to *them*. And that had an effect on the band: you feel that you're wasting your time, your mind starts wandering and you don't play so well. But the opposite happens of course: it's a nice feeling to know that everybody is enjoying what's going on, and it helps you to concentrate and play better. You do get some odd occasions when, however great the audience is, the band just ain't going to play well, or the reverse, when it's a duff audience but for some reason the band wails like nobody's business. But in general those things are automatic: if the people are into the music, it gives a nice feeling that spreads all around.

Do you approach a recording session in a very different way from a gig?

Yes, I think recording messes me up a bit. The biggest problem I have with recording is getting engineers to understand what sort of a sound I want. Obviously every player has in his head the sort of sound he wants to get; and often I feel that I achieve that live, but I can't often achieve it in studio conditions.

Can you put into words what that sound is?

Well, I hate a sort of dry, lifeless sound — but that's often what happens in the studio. I like a sound that's liquid and flowing, wet and fruity — it's hard to describe. A watery . . . sort of rippling sound . . . lots of rolling legato. In the studio conditions are strange: usually they stick everybody in little boxes and somehow the interplay bit disappears slightly.

What guitar do you use?

An SG Custom, with no modifications. The only thing I've done to it is to take the pick-up covers off to stop the feedback. I use Gibson strings, custom gauges: 009, 012, 015, 022, 032, 042. They're fairly light. Sometimes I use even lighter, starting with 008. I've never really made my mind up. The one thing I don't change from is Gibson strings. On the other brands I've always found that the 3rd string is loud, being plain steel, and the 4th, for example, being a wound string and fairly thin, is not so loud, even with the pole-piece pulled right out. But the Gibson wound strings are very loud; they seem more magnetic for some reason. They're round wound, like the old-fashioned ones, they're squeaky. Picato as well, their wound strings are wound in the same way and they're quite loud too. Strangely enough, they seem slightly thinner than others, even if you get the same gauge. Maybe the winding's thicker and the core's thinner, I don't know, but they *feel* slightly thinner than the equivalent American size. But they sound good.

How about amps?

Usually an AC30. I've got two: an old combination amp and another AC30 with a 4 x 12" cabinet. I take them both to a gig and try them to see which sounds best. Then use one or the other.

How important is it for you to play on the right guitar, with the right amp, etc, or are you happy playing on anything?

I used to be totally obsessed with the hardware — guitars, strings, plectrums, amps, you know. First I had a Stratocaster, when I lived in Bradford. One day I went to Leeds to see what they had in the music shops there, and they had an SG Standard, the first one I'd ever seen. I picked it up and played it and thought, 'That's it!' So I bought that guitar and I used it right up until I came to London a couple of years ago. That's when I started messing about with guitars, chopping and changing from one to another. I got obsessed with the mechanics of them all, and the pick-ups and so on — but it didn't really make any difference, though I thought it did. It probably messed me up in fact, because I couldn't decide and settle down on anything. Then one day I realised that it wasn't making any difference and I went back to the SG. That's what I'm going to stick with.

You could be called a 'progressive' electric guitarist; how do you see the future of the instrument? Will it continue to develop along electronic lines, or is there still a lot to be said using just vibrating strings amplified?

Both really. I think in the next few years you'll probably tend to get a lot more electronic things, but also there will be a lot more straight-ahead players who don't use anything at all. Because most of the young guys I speak to now, at the various clinice and things, they start playing straight away with a big amp and sustain and all that. They just don't know about the other things that happened before that, in the early days of electric guitar. So I think you'll get these people starting to want to know about what happened before, and you'll also get people who are interested in electronic development. There's still a lot that can be done just using the amplifier as an extension of the guitar — I don't mean like the old jazz players, who just played acoustic guitar with the amp as an afterthought to make it louder — I mean using the amplification as part of the instrument, but without any pedals or anything. Electric guitar is becoming more and more a separate instrument from acoustic guitar. Lots of people now are starting to play guitar on an electric, and not going through the acoustics first. They are beginning to find an electric guitarist's approach.

I've found that people who have played a lot of acoustic usually don't play electric very well. I don't know why: it seems to run away with them, they pick too hard or the strings are too loose . . . Then again, people think that you can't approach acoustic guitar with an electric guitarist's approach, but I think you can in some areas. A lot of flamenco guitarists use lots of things that electric guitarists do, slurs and hammers and that. They sound incredible on acoustic guitar. Even so, things are bound to divide into two: most people will go for one or the other — straight-ahead playing acoustic or simply amplified, or heavily electronic things. Obviously you'll get some guys who will be able to extend into both areas, but apart from them, I think there will be two different breeds of guitarist. ■