

'I play to enjoy myself'

TERRY SMITH

by Jeffery Pike

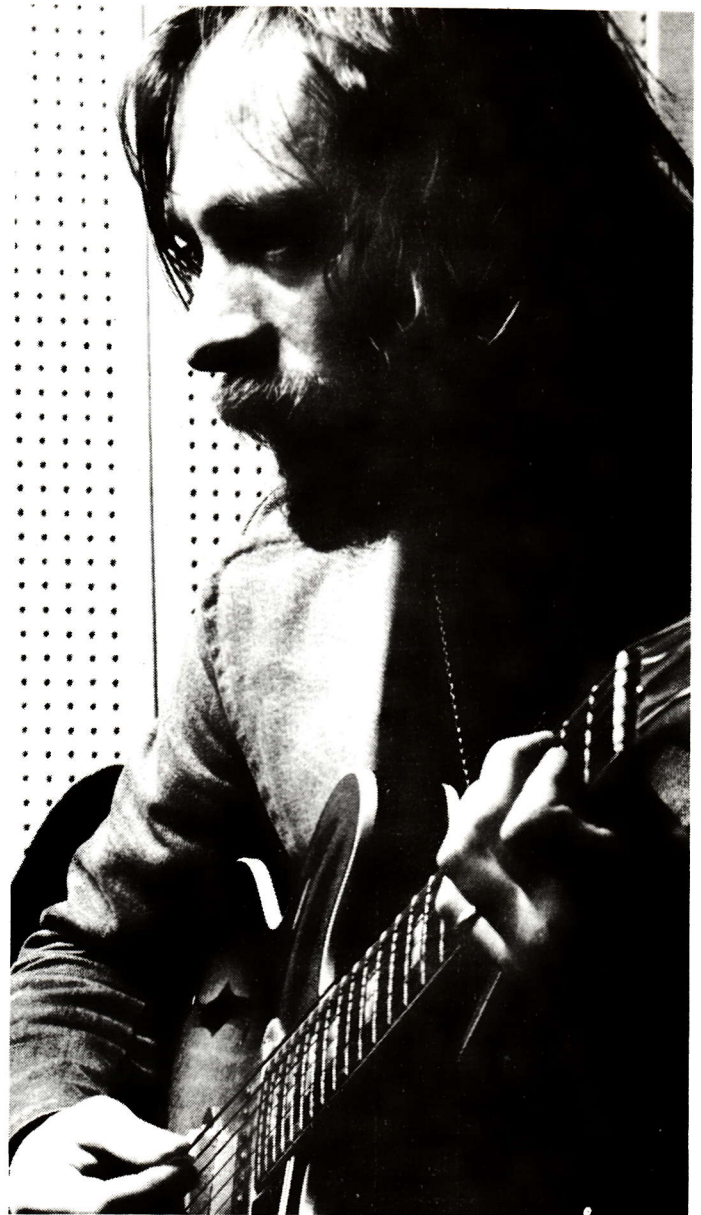
Terry Smith has been playing guitar professionally since the early sixties. By 1967 he had acquired such a reputation in the jazz world that he achieved the questionable honour of being voted No 1 British Jazz Guitarist in the *Melody Maker* readers' poll. Since then he has made a painless transition from being a highly rated jazz guitarist to a highly rated rock guitarist, and is now working with an exciting, newish band called Zzebra, whose first album, *Zzebra*, should have been released by the time this appears.

The transition was probably painless simply because Terry didn't recognise it as such: 'I never strive to change my style of playing for the sake of change,' he told me. 'I would say that when I do a basically jazz gig, it hasn't changed much from what I was playing six years ago. But then I like that period and style of jazz, which in this day and age may make me a mainstream player. I do like the newer effects I use now — the dirty sound, bent notes, the feedback sound — I don't find that irritating at all. In fact that's the only way I could have progressed in my particular style of guitar playing, because I do not like the avant-garde thing, never have. You know, four people sitting around just playing anything, and out of twenty minutes' music it might gel together for about 30 seconds. I think that's very pretentious. A few people have made it work, obviously, but there are a tremendous amount that haven't. I've got to admire Derek Bailey: he's obviously very sincere, and he's obviously very clever with his use of the instrument. But that's not my kind of music.'

So who, I wondered, *does* Terry enjoy listening to? 'My style of guitar, basically, has come from listening to saxophone players. I've listened to Django, of course, I've got a lot of his records; and when the first Wes Montgomery record came along, *The incredible jazz guitar*, I felt like giving up. But there are not really many guitar players I like listening to. There are three people I've always said that I've liked: Django, Wes and Joe Pass. I've been thrashing out this Joe Pass name for years, and people were saying "Who's this fellow Joe Pass?" Now people are coming up to me and saying "Have you heard Joe Pass?" People are so fickle. Terry Kath of Chicago is another guy who helped me out: he made me realise that you can use a very lyrical, melodic style of guitar playing in rock.'

'Certain people say to me that my style of playing is old fashioned. I don't know if I agree or not. It might be old fashioned, it might be that they're the kind of people that like a totally different style of music from what I would like anyway. They might even call John Coltrane old fashioned. But I can't switch and change my style of music to match what's going on in the present day. I've always played first of all to enjoy myself. Which may be a bit selfish, I don't know. If my enjoyment comes across to the audience, I think I'm winning.'

Terry's first music-making consisted of playing skiffle on a £3 Army and Navy Stores guitar. But he was listening to jazz too, first Chris Barber, then Humphrey Lyttleton, and then he discovered Django. He had no ideas of becoming a professional musician, and in fact studied for five years at the London School of Printing and Graphic Arts. But when he got his indentures at the age of 21, he was already doing jazz gigs in local pubs for beer money. Then, within four months, he threw up his job 'in the print' to work in a resident Top Rank band in Doncaster. He was offered a summer season in Jersey with the same sort of band, which he accepted, then turned down at the last moment to form a quintet with Dave Quincy to play in a club called the Cool Elephant. (Hands up who re-



members the Cool Elephant? It's now The Speakeasy.) It was supposed to be a residency, but it lasted a week. Let Terry explain why: 'We got the sack because . . . well, being typical musicians, we started the week with bow ties and white shirts and ended with rolled up sleeves and roll-neck jumpers. So I found myself without a summer season, without a regular job, nothing.'

Fainter hearts might have been tempted back to the security of a job in printing, but not Terry: 'I'd got the taste by then, it was too late. I enjoyed the freedom, getting up at midday and so on. So I started sitting in at the Bull's Head, Barnes, and places like that. In those days (1965-ish) there were quite a few jazz venues—little clubs in Beckenham and Bromley, some in Streatham, the Dive Bar in Chiselhurst. So I was making about £7 a week and living with my mother: it was all right. I'm very lucky. I've never had to play music that I didn't enjoy. Even in the palais band, we used to do a few things that featured guitar. So for a couple of years I was doing more and more jazz gigs. In '67 I was voted Number 1 guitarist in the Jazz Poll and all that rubbish, and I was making a good living as a jazz guitar player. There weren't that many about then.'

In 1968, he made a solo album with a big band (*Fall out*, produced by Scott Walker, band directed by Harry South and Jimmy Deuchar). It's deleted from the catalogues now, but still selling. As Terry points out, 'I'm still getting royalties, so there must be someone around who likes that sort of jazz.' Paradoxically, 1968 also saw his first serious venture into rock music. 'The jazz scene began to get a bit quiet and the clubs started disappearing rapidly. Dick Morrissey, another musician I've known for about 12 years, got an offer to do a soul band. Obviously they got wind of the new jazz-rock movement in

America before we did here — I mean the Blood Sweat and Tears, Chicago thing — and this 21-stone black soul singer called J J Jackson wanted a ten-piece band like that to modernise his show. So we formed this band and kept it going for about a year.'

Out of this band, Terry, Dick and Dave Quincy formed If, a highly respectable jazz-rock unit which never seemed to get the appreciation it deserved, at least in Britain. Like most rock prophets without honour in their own country, If sought fame and fortune across the Atlantic. I asked Terry how he liked working in the States. 'It's a funny place. When you're there, you can't wait to get home; when you get home... I feel very insecure, personally, in the States. It's a very frightening country, with the violence — you never know what's going to happen next. If you do get a good audience there, it really is a beautiful peace-and-love scene. It may be because everybody is absolutely stoned out of their brains, but if it does come across in the States it really does. And of course, for the most basic reasons, that's where the money is. There's no money to be made in England.'

Terry stayed with If for nearly three years, then left because he felt unhappy with the managerial set-up. He plunged back into the jazz scene, played with Jimmy McGriff, Esther Phillips and Mark Murphy at Ronnie Scott's, and finally set about putting a new band together. At Ronnie's he had met Loughy Amao, ex-Osibisa percussionist/saxist, who used to sit in on congas with Jimmy McGriff and Esther Phillips, and together with Loughy and Dave Quincy, Terry started to sketch the format for Zzebra. 'Our idea was to have a very simple African background to the music, with Loughy providing what he called "the borrom" (the bottom), with Dave's writing ideas and my solo ideas on top. Starting from last June we tried out a few rhythm sections that were not right: either they were too jazzy or they were people you couldn't work with — superstars, or on ego trips, or people who were doing something detrimental to their body and couldn't be relied upon to turn up for rehearsals.'

Rhythm section problems solved, Zzebra went on the road and have already won a lot of friends, especially on the college circuit. There is an undeniable happiness about their music: six experienced musicians plainly enjoying each other's company and experimenting gaily with a mixture of styles. There is jazz in there, and rock, and underlying it all, Loughy's conga and exciting African-inspired bass riffs.

Throughout this chequered career, Terry's guitar voice has

changed remarkably little. He's his own man, and doesn't change like a chameleon according to who he's playing with. His choice of guitar, too, reflects this confidence: 'I've had the same Gibson 330 for about ten years. That's the only one I've ever used on all the records — on the solo album, the If albums, the Zzebra album.'

Using a semi-acoustic guitar in a rock band puts Terry in a definite minority. What does he feel about solids? 'My wife's got a Les Paul Custom, a very old one. I don't think you get the response, certainly it's very hard to get the feedback, and on top of all that it's too bloody heavy. When you've played an hour-and-a-half set with that round your neck, you know it! Also, if I practise at home, or just playing to myself in the band room, I never use an amplifier. Which I think is a good way of doing it, because you're not relying on the amp. You've got to hit every note to make it ring. But you can only do that on a semi-acoustic. It's quite a vibrant sound, actually, the 330 unamplified.'

'I think some of the old solid guitars are overrated. Like, my wife took her old Les Paul in for repair and they offered her £350 cash for it. Which probably meant that they'd sell it for £500 to someone who's already got a few guitars anyway. I literally do not see the point. You wouldn't expect a saxophone player to have twelve different saxophones. When he's decided that he's got the right reed for the sound he wants, the right saxophone that he's comfortable with, even the right sling, then he's fine. Should be the same with guitarists.'

Even more unorthodox for a rock guitarist is Terry's choice of strings: 'I use flat-wound Rotosound heavy gauge. They're very hard to get now. I suppose I could use other makes of string, as long as they were flat-wound and heavy gauge. I find heavy strings are very positive: you can't get away with notes by slurring them down, just lifting off the finger, you've got to play them all. The original reason I used Rotosound was that they were about half the price of Gibson flat-wound. They're scarce these days too. It's amazing, you just can't get hold of them. I suppose there's only a few session players and a few rhythm guitarists who use that sort of string. I tried using light gauge strings — what I call banjo strings — and I just couldn't do it. It's a waste of time for me.'

Another aspect of that positive, play-every-note approach of Terry's is the sort of plectrum he uses: made of ivory, amazingly thick and quite inflexible. Unfortunately, his present stock of picks is running low, and sheets of ivory are even harder to come by than flat-wound heavy gauge strings. Any reader with a suitable chunk of elephant's tooth lying around the house can contact Terry through *Guitar* and will earn his undying gratitude.

As you may have guessed by now, he doesn't belong to the school of rock guitarists who aren't happy unless they've got a thousand watts of amplification behind them. 'No, at the beginning of If I had an Orange 250w thing with two stacks. That was a waste of time and money, it wasn't my set-up at all. Then I had a Fender Showman, and it's been Fender all along since then. I've always liked Fender amps, I think it's a good coupling with the Gibson. At the moment I use a Fender Pro Reverb, 40-45 watts I think, with 2 x 12" speakers. It's ideal because I can still do jazz gigs with it, it's not too loud for a small club, and at the same time at a Zzebra gig I can put it full on and get the screaming feedback sounds that are necessary on certain tunes — not just necessary, I like it too — without blasting everybody in the band stone deaf. As for pedals and things, I'm not really into the use of fuzz and octave-droppers and those buttons and switches. Wah-wah I think is nice; I don't use it a lot on solos, but I like to use it to get a brittle attack on chordal work.'

Terry Smith has come a long way from skiffle, through big bands and jazz-rock into Afro-rock. How does he see the future of Zzebra? 'It's an interim period, really. It's difficult to know how it will go from here until the album's released. It's hard to say what will happen to the music when we start preparing material for the second album. I'm well pleased with Zzebra so far, for a number of reasons. I'm pleased with the way a number of styles go together to make the music. And for the first time since I've been working in the rock business I'm happy with the managerial set-up. And above all, everybody is having a good time on stage. If you can get that across, without playing down to audiences, then you can't go wrong.' ●

