

Magpie of music is always on lookout

Steve Hackett loves Bach, blues and everything in between. The ex-Genesis guitarist tells Jackie Butler why

IT SEEMS inevitable that Steve Hackett will forever be described as the “former Genesis guitarist”, even though the 32 years since he parted company with the famed prog rock outfit have overflowed with a wealth of solo projects and innovative collaborations.

Not that Steve is complaining; he is proud of his contribution to the mix during the seven years he spent in the company of Peter Gabriel, Phil Collins, Mike Rutherford, Tony Banks et al. And he does still play some old Genesis numbers in his live shows – to the delight of loyal fans.

But there is so much more in the musical repertoire of this highly respected guitarist and songwriter who delights in hopping from genre to genre – everything from rock and blues to jazz and classical – and taking a magpie-like approach to combining them.

Steve’s considered and skilful guitar playing lies at the centre of it all. No getting over-excited and hanging from the rafters or plucking strings with his teeth for this mild-mannered musician who started his Genesis years conspicuously bespectacled, seated and floor-gazing.

“I grew up listening to Bach and blues and I didn’t think there could be a band that combined the two, but in the 1970s it was all the rage,” he says.

“There was pressure to be a guitar hero at the time, and a lot of bands were picking up the crumbs that Hendrix left at the table. But the goalposts were changing and I was interested in things that were more tightly arranged.”

He placed an ad in a music paper looking for like-minded bandmates and Genesis, in need of a new guitarist, responded. Since parting company he has worked with countless top-notch artists, from Randy Crawford to Evelyn Glennie, and in supergroup GTR with Steve Howe of Yes, as well as ploughing his own furrow, surrounded by a changing cast of musicians.

Steve’s latest and newly released album, *Out of the Tunnel’s Mouth*, recorded with an eminent cast, mostly in the living room of his home in

Twickenham, is testament to his love for blurring the boundaries.

“We have a substantially new set and it seems to be going down really well,” says Steve, on the road in Germany ahead of his Westcountry dates this month.

“There’s a mix of ancient Hackett stuff and the more guitary Genesis from my era, too. We must be doing something right because the audiences seem to respond as well to the new songs as the old ones.”

He appreciates the emotional significance of music, with each generation responding to artists of their own era.

“For my mother’s generation it was Frank Sinatra – he could do no wrong,” he says. “It’s nice to be part of that feeling.”

Steve, who grew up in London’s Pimlico, recalls the life-changing experience of buying his very first record – by The Shadows – and later being able to tell Hank Marvin how special that was to him.

“It’s a powerful thing,” he adds. “When I went to see Buffy St Marie performing back in the early 1990s I told her that I was listening to her when I was 15.”

The Steve Hackett live show is less of a spectacle and more of a feast for the imagination, with the music at its heart – he describes his music as “a film for the ear rather than the eye”. So while the performance may be static, the atmosphere can be mesmerising.

“Our home is on the road. I have no plans to retire – in fact I’m probably getting louder as I get older.”

“I love playing in front of people and meeting them afterwards, chatting and signing things. Sometimes they turn up with 50 vinyl albums to sign, which is a bit much!”

“And then there are fans who dig up things from my past that I’d be happy to forget,” he laughs.

● Steve Hackett and his band play the *Princess Pavilion, Falmouth* (01326 211222) on Wednesday, November 11 and at *The Phoenix, Exeter* (01392 667080 or www.exeterboxoffice.com) on Thursday, November 12.



Steve Hackett brings his band to Falmouth and Exeter



Irish trio Ash hit the Westcountry

Ash are burning as brightly as ever on their alphabet trail

IRISH trio Ash are nearing the halfway mark in their unique A-Z tour of the UK which brings their crunching guitar-fuelled sound to four Westcountry venues this month, including The Hippo, Plymouth on Sunday. The tour ends with a sell-out show in the village hall at Zennor, near St Ives in West Cornwall, and also stops off at Exmouth and Yeovil.

The alphabet theme is reflected in the incredible tally of 26 Ash singles – each title beginning with a different letter of the alphabet – to be released fortnightly over the next 12 months.

Rick McMurray, the band’s drummer, explains: “It was pretty easy to come up with the concept – all the hard work in sorting out the logistics was done by our agent. The songs have been locked away in a New York studio for about a year, while the tour was sorted – our biggest worry was that someone would come up with the idea ahead of us!”

“We really like the idea of playing out of the way places where bigger bands don’t normally go because people usually really appreciate it and the shows can be really special.”

Sometimes, however, the concept can backfire.

“We once asked fans to vote on our website to suggest where we should perform and found ourselves in Ullapool in Scotland. I think there were far more votes (probably all from one fan!) than people at the gig and those who did turn up loved their whisky so much that after the show they were to be found asleep, in T-shirts, outside in the rain-drenched street...”

As for coming up with a batch of new songs, Rick says the process this time around was really liberating.

“When you write for an album, you try to make all the songs fit together somehow, but just writing a bunch of singles freed us up to create a really eclectic collection.”

They initially picked out three tracks to try out live to gauge some sort of response. Return of the White Rabbit showcases their angular guitars and growling bass lines while True Love 1980 is a beautiful pop ballad.

“True Love is very synth-driven which breaks new territory for us, though it’s still essentially guitar-driven pop. Return of the White Rabbit has been very well received as it’s more dancey, but probably most exciting for us has been Space Shot. We weren’t sure how it would go down, but it’s a bit like OutKast, infectious and dancey and seems to be an instant hit live. By the end of the song everybody’s singing the chorus!” says Rick.

This current tour is Ash’s first for two years, and their longest in the UK ever.

“Back in 2001 we had been practically written off by the press after our second album (*Nu-Clear Sounds*) didn’t fare so well as 1977. When we were writing our third album we were pretty low and all but bankrupt – we knew it was the last roll of the dice and if we didn’t get it right we were finished. We put our heads down to make the best album we could. So then to get back to number one with *Free All Angels* was insane!” says Rick.

CLARE ROBINSON

● Box office: www.hippolive.co.uk

Experience the joy of performance art

THERE’S a final chance to witness the unique Joy Collective showcase when Exeter’s Phoenix plays host to the last date of the group’s Westcountry tour on November 15. The concept is a new platform and production initiative for exceptional artists of any discipline, devised by Exeter-based, critically acclaimed, subversive electronic musical duo Kris Jager and Mila Oshin (aka Drunk With Joy, pictured).

Using latest technologies and with the aid of digital media artist Stuart Mitchell, the duo promote the work of a hand-picked selection of emerging or mid-career artists against a darkly

atmospheric soundtrack written and performed live. Joy Collective currently comprises seven visual artists, five choreographers or dance artists and three digital media artists and filmmakers from across the South West, including Alice Leach, Beth Carter, Clair Beckett, Carl Shanahan, Curt Hennells, Darren Harvey Regan, Eleanor Carr, Emma Molony, Helen Snell, Ione Rucquoi, Jane Castree, Joanna Cartwright, Oliver Hornsby-Sayer, Roger Lewis and StuM.

● Box office: 01392 667 080.

