

REVIEWS

Fame took drummer Bill Bruford out of jazz, but it could never take the jazz out of him,
writes **David Sinclair**



Ever his own man, Bill Bruford has been doing the unexpected - and going where his heart leads him, not his bank account - for more than 30 years

Photograph: ANTHONY UPTON

Closer to the edge

It seems that rock musicians of a certain age are increasingly being drawn towards jazz. Ginger Baker, once the drummer in Cream, has just released his latest collection of modern jazz themes, *Coward of the County*, written and performed in the company of the DJQ20 (Denver Jazz Quintet To Octet). Andy Summers, best known as the guitarist in the Police, has this week released *Green Chimneys*, an album of Thelonious Monk songs, while the new album by Phil Collins and his jazz big band, *A Hot Night in Paris*, reaches the shops on Monday.

Drummer Bill Bruford is well ahead of this particular field. A founder member of Yes in the 1960s, he has straddled the divide between rock and jazz in a career which has taken him from the drum stool in King Crimson and Genesis to leading his own groups - Bruford from 1977 to 1981, and Earthworks since 1985. The current Earthworks album, *A Part, And Yet Apart*, is his most orthodox jazz outing yet, a spry collection of tunes played by an acoustic quartet comprised of Bruford, Steve Hamilton (piano), Mark Hodgson (bass) and Patrick Clahar (saxophone).

"Rock is closing down for me," Bruford says. "There's very little you can do to evolve as a musician in rock. Jazz is more nimble, it thinks a lot faster, it operates better in smaller rooms, it doesn't have to go with the tempo of the slowest person in the audience."

For Bruford, the move towards straight jazz is not so much a progression as a reversion to type. Born in Sevenoaks, Kent, at the end of the 1940s, he grew interested in jazz while at school, religiously tuning in to see footage of the American greats on the BBC TV programme *Jazz 625* in preference to *Top of the Pops*, and learning to play along to the ride cymbal patterns of Art Blakey and Joe Morello rather than keep time with the faint backbeat of the early beat group drummers.

But when he started playing for real in the late 1960s, British jazz was in bad shape. Under siege from rock'n'roll, the jazz scene had turned in on itself, and a joyless notion of cool was rigorously enforced by those who had remained faithful to the cause. As Simon Puxley recalled on the sleeve notes of the first Earthworks album, "the ambience of jazz became reverential, icily restrained, introverted and cerebral . . . Even when you could dance to the music you didn't dare."

Bruford was not the only drummer with a jazz background to feel more at home in the young,

vibrant and rapidly expanding world of rock'n'roll. Charlie Watts in the Rolling Stones, Hughie Flint in John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, Mitch Mitchell in the Jimi Hendrix Experience and Ginger Baker in the Graham Bond Organisation and Cream were all to a greater or lesser extent playing jazz in rock groups. And, after a brief stint in the Savoy Brown Blues Band (three nights, to be precise) Bruford found himself embarking on a four-year odyssey with Yes.

"I was good at rock because I knew jazz," Bruford says. "The music industry was trebling in size every year. Everybody was interested in what you could do, so you could do what you wanted. The only rule was not to be like the other guy, whereas now the rule seems to be the opposite and young drummers are required to sound like somebody the record company likes. So now the Bakers, Watts, Summers and Brufords of this world are all going back to what got them going in the first place, which was Charlie Parker, Elvin Jones, Max Roach . . ."

Bruford left Yes at the peak of their progressive rock popularity in 1972 to join King Crimson, a move which caused surprise and upset at the time, but which he firmly believes was part of an essential process of artistic renewal. "You have to keep moving," he says. "Never let the audience catch up with you. Once that happens you're condemned to an endless circuit of stadiums in the States. You become fossilised and your creativity is killed by the audience's kindness."

It is a principle to which Bruford has adhered ever since, turning his back on lucrative offers to rejoin or reform this group or that, preferring instead to move on to the next challenge, whatever it might be. His long on-off association with Robert Fripp and King Crimson peaked in 1984 when the band incorporated guitarist Adrian Belew and bass player Tony Levin. Bruford refers to a concert recording of that line-up, *Absent Lovers - Live in Montreal 1984*, which was released last year, as one of the best rock albums he has been associated with. "My heart went out of rock a bit after that," he says.

The first line-up of Earthworks, which included the then little-known Django Bates (keyboards) and Iain Ballamy (saxophones), found Bruford conjuring sounds and tuned effects from an armoury of electronic percussion. But he now confesses to being "very fed-up" with the midi-programming syndrome which means you can never be sure if an instrument is going to sound like church bells or a cello, and has reverted to a classic, acoustic jazz sound.

Bruford says: "You can become obsessed with the packaging at the expense of the content. For me, jazz is a process of chipping away to find the essence of the player. Any drummer will tell you that I have a fairly limited technical ability, but what I can do is sell you the drums. I'm comfortable on stage, I thoroughly enjoy performing, and once I've got you sitting in front of me, I defy you to resist my drumming. People think that going to a jazz concert is going to be like having your teeth out. But it needn't be."

A Part, And Yet Apart is available on [Discipline Global Mobile](#)