

On Allan Holdsworth: January 2005 with Christophe Coureau

1) Do you remember the circumstances in which you first became aware of Allan as a musician ? I was surprised to read a Melody Maker interview from November 1972 in which you already cited Allan as one of the guitarists that impressed you most, alongside John McLaughlin and Robert Fripp. Where did you first see him play, and with whom ?

I can't quite remember. Maybe a Soft Machine album, and certainly he was very strong on "Gazeuse" by Gong. No-one else had that liquid style and the octave leaps and the whammy bar and the rest of it...

2) As far as I know, your first collaboration with Allan was a demo for Virgin of "The Abingdon Chasp" in, I think, the summer of 1976, alongside Dave Stewart, Francis Moze and Ray Warleigh. Is this true? Do you remember playing/recording more tracks? Just Allan's compositions? Was this the first time you ever played together? Did that session leave you a strong impression, an inkling that Allan and yourself could form a strong musical partnership ?

I don't remember anything about that demo, but Allan had certainly asked me to play in a pub in Putney (South-West London) some time around then with Ray Warleigh. of course, by now I knew enough about his talent to be hugely impressed, and to think that if ever the opportunity arose, if ever I could find a vehicle big enough to contain him, I'd give him a call...

3) Although you had found Jeff Berlin as early as 1975, it seems you didn't think of asking Allan to join your band and that he played on "Feels Good To Me" as a last minute decision. Why ? In retrospect (perhaps only in retrospect), he seemed the obvious choice. According to one source, it was he who called you to ask you to join his band - would you say there was a mutual desire to play together ?

Obviously you know more about this than I do...I cannot remember the order in which I asked the musicians to play on the album. I didn't think Allan's invitation to join us was "a last minute decision", other than the fact that everything in the music business is a last minute decision..

4) That first collaboration was convincing enough for you to ask Allan to join you in UK. That band had a complex genesis: first the trio with John Wetton and Rick Wakeman, then the aborted King Crimson reformation which Robert Fripp declined, supposedly because he didn't want to play with Eddie Jobson; then a trio named Alaska, which became UK after Allan joined (please correct me if any of this is inaccurate). Since it was really your decision to bring Allan into the band, what did you think he could contribute to the project : his impressive and innovative playing style ? his jazzier background and harmonic sophistication ?

You make the complex genesis sound too organised. There were of course a number of suggestions and alliances and possibilities, some no more than an idea in a phone call, some no more than an idea in somebody's mind, and some that actually got as far as a rehearsal room. My recollection is that John Wetton and

I had a discussion in a hotel room somewhere, during which he proposed we ask Eddie Jobson, then with Frank Zappa, to do something. Sensing, correctly as it turned out, this would drive too far in the pop direction for my taste, I counterbalanced that idea with the idea of hiring Allan, to act as a counterweight to Eddie. Essentially two guys of a pop / rock sensibility, balanced by two of the jazz persuasion. So long as the ship stayed upright, and didn't tip over, I thought, it would be bound for an interesting journey.

5) A couple of tracks on the UK album were co-written by Allan ("Nevermore" and "Mental Medication"). Was that a real collaboration or were some of Allan's ideas integrated into a collective "patchwork" ?

What's the difference? If your ideas get used in the finished piece, you receive publishing credits , and are deemed to have "collaborated" with your colleagues. Allan's ideas are a substantial part of both those compositions.

6) Looking back, why do you think the UK/Allan Holdsworth partnership ultimately didn't work out? Because John and Eddie were only interested in one aspect of Allan's talent ? Because Allan couldn't adapt or relate to the band's musical approach (too much structure, too little room for improvisation) ?

Allan's talent is astronomic, but is not easy to include in the most patient and subtle of organisations, let alone a major rock-group behind which there was a record company rocket, and of which everyone expected immediate success. Allan was, as I remember, immediately unhappy, but then he is always immediately unhappy, usually about every aspect of the musical circumstances in which he finds himself, but most particularly with his own performance. This can be wearing on collective morale. After a spectacular night at Penn's Landing in Philadelphia in front of a 50,000 crowd, John announced to me that he and Eddie were going to take the thing in a more pop direction, of which Allan would not be a part, and did I want to continue with them? I declined, and said I would continue my own thing with Allan.

7) In early 1979 you recorded the "One Of A Kind" album with the same line-up as "Feels..." but this time as an integrated band, with absolutely amazing results. That particular combination of musicians worked incredibly well, and although Allan left after the British tour, this band gave him the opportunity to express the full extent of his enormous talent. In your opinion, was this because the music had been written and/or arranged with Allan in mind (unlike the music on "Feels Good To Me" ?), and/or because the chemistry between Allan, Dave Stewart, Jeff Berlin and yourself provided him with the right musical and sonic setting ? What are your most vivid memories of working with Allan on this album ? Was his well-known perfectionism sometimes a hindrance ?

My memory with Allan, as always, was that he was unhappy---the complaint was, I think , that he was boxed in by the compositions, and he was probably right. I wrote too much and didn't leave enough space. This indicates a lack of trust, as if somehow I could not rely upon the musicians to come up with strong improvised material on the spot. That's partly true, and these studios get very expensive very quickly. I "directed" Allan as a movie

director might direct a movie-star, and he didn't like that much. Plus the clock was ticking.

8) What did you mean to convey with the title "One Of A Kind" ?

Just sounds nice.

9) Do you have specific memories of recording the title "Fainting In Coils", which is my personal favourite, in particular with respect to Allan's playing ?

None. I was producing as well, so the pressure was pretty intense. On those record, my own playing was like an afterthought. I just worried about everyone else, and would they show up tomorrow.

10) Lastly, have you listened to many of Allan's solo albums and what do you think of them and Allan's evolution as a player, composer, etc., since the days when you worked together ?

I've always loved Allan's playing--the whole thing--although I see why some people find it all a bit indigestible. He's taken the guitar trio format a long way, and personally I'd love to hear his music opened up for a larger ensemble. Claire Fischer could do the orchestrations.