

# Bowing out

**Bill Bruford** surprised us all earlier in the year by announcing his intention to retire from active performance. Given that he's only 60 next month, and in recent years an active bandleader and mentor to a new generation of jazz musicians the news will come as a disappointment to his many fans and those who have charted his playing back to the far distant days of the early years of Yes. **Andy Robson** talks to Bill about his reasons for this life change as Bill's new autobiography hits the shelves.

**I**t's gifted to few, whatever their profession, to quit at the top of their game. For every Nasser Hussein, leaving Test cricket with a match winning ton, there's a score of Muhammad Alis or Paul Gascoignes going one bout too far or tragically spiralling down the leagues as their talents decline in public view.

Bill Bruford would smile at the sporting similes. His preferred analogy, as pointed out in his own erudite autobiography, is with Max Roach. Roach was a boyhood hero for Bruford, the epitome of all that summed up the art of percussion. Elegant, effortless, economical. That description did for Roach and it was what Bruford aspired to. But fast forward through the decades and Bruford heard the master just before his death and "there was daylight" between Roach and his bassist. "How the mighty are fallen", thought the now mature Bruford who perhaps caught a vision of his own potential decline and fall.

Yet there are always exceptions. Bruford himself recognises the genius of Roy Haynes, whom he saw perform as an 83-year-old and was still "the music".

So on one level, Bruford's decision to retire from public performance is one to be celebrated. Here is an artist who started at the top of the tree, certainly in the rock world, and has remained there for over 40 years. Against the odds, he's sustained his family, earned a beautiful home, yet rarely compromised his art. Even amid the riches of the rock world he's always taken the tougher decision, following art rather than mammon, leaving Yes for the stormier waters of King Crimson. Though as Bruford liked to put it, Crimson were "the one band you could play in 13/8 with yet stay in a five star hotel". Bruford took on more challenges the more time passed, playing a range of musics, especially over the last 20 years, that have pushed boundaries sonically, be it through his embracing of the electronic drum kit or his kick starting of innovative bands like Earthworks.

Bruford has also supported young jazz artists such as Django Bates and Iain Ballamy, taking on an almost Blakey-like patron's role for the likes of Steve Hamilton or Patrick Clahar, giving them a secure platform on which to flourish. What's more this success has been international. As Bruford proudly told this correspondent on more than one occasion, Earthworks were one of the few bands who not only hit the European circuit but could regularly fill halls on an American tour – and that wasn't all down to confused Yes fans turning up at 'jazz' gigs.

Add to this that Bruford is one of the few artists to reclaim his recordings from previous record

companies and then repackage it under his own labels – check out the current anthology releases from Winterfold and Summerfold – and you can't blame Bruford for wanting to enjoy the (summer and winter) fruits of 41 years of labour.

And yet, and yet, and yet... why should that mean complete retirement from public performance? After all, in jazz terms, Bruford could be counted a youngster: Blakey and Billy Higgins all but died in the drum chair. Even as this piece was being written, the legendary Louie Bellson went on to the great gig in the sky, well into his eighties and, until recently, still teaching and giving clinics, an inspiration to future generations.

Even amid Bruford's rock contemporaries, Robert Plant has just gone home with a rack full of Grammys and Dylan and the Stones still pack stadia. And age doesn't necessarily impair talent. In classical music, age, notably in conductors, is revered. Even Bruford recognises the genius of Casals was untouched by the years, while his enthusiasm for the instrument kept him practising scales every day of his long, rich life. Even our own Prime Minister likes to compare himself to Titian who, working at his peak well into his eighties, felt that at that age he was only just learning to paint.

But then Titian didn't have to book the airline tickets, find a dep for a last minute drop out and then face down the crazed promoter who's refusing to pay you what was only a modest sum in the first place. And Titian certainly didn't have to do CD signings.

Bruford dedicates the closing chapter of his autobiography to retiring, and, naturally, assumed that would be justification enough. But although he's been putting his art into the public domain for decades, even the professional personified, Mr Bruford, has been flummoxed by the response to his announcement.

"It's opened up a can of worms," he admits. Musicians, he told *Jazzwise*, "for some reason I was unaware of, are not permitted" to retire.

Well, at least not when they are as loved and respected as Bruford. If it had been a health issue, perhaps the response would've been different, but, as Bruford notes, "my health and sanity have both been questioned recently. But both are fine, the last time I looked..."

So how does Bill Bruford rationalise his 'retirement'?

"We can talk about this, so long as you promise to bear in mind that everyone feels differently about these things, that this is an entirely personal point of

view, and none of this is in any way a complaint... but here are a few reasons, off the cuff, and I don't want these to come over as soundbites, but... 40 years of me is quite enough for anyone, especially me. Every stage I'm on is one a younger player isn't on. I'm more interested to hear what the kids can do, rather than what I can't do. I'd rather stop before I've become irrelevant rather than after. All this relentless self-promotion is just so 'unseemly', as the great Meryl Streep said the other day.

"The artistic way can lead to a very self-obsessed sort of existence that may cause heavy wear and tear on one's nearest and dearest, who's patience may already be exhausted. If I don't put it down now, it'll kill me sooner rather than later. 'Compulsive perfectionists finish last' as someone said.

Who wants to be a 'Heritage Act'?

Okay, you don't want to choke in your sleep or die in a hotel room. But is cold turkey a la *Artie Shaw* the way? And even Shaw was partial to the occasion come back...

"For me, yes. The standard I want to play at cannot be maintained without the frequency of work. The broader picture is that jazz is traditionally learned by playing with other people on the bandstand six nights a week for about 10 years from about 17-27 years of age. That's the apprenticeship which I never did, and now I'm paying for it. The vernacular is only third nature to me, while second nature to others. If I don't use it, I lose it."

Your autobiography talks about the 'cost' of being in music. Have you managed the work/home balance successfully – your marriage has lasted extraordinarily, especially as jazzers are meant to have notoriously lousy relationships...

"You'd better ask my wife whether I got the work-home balance right, although of course when I started that hadn't been invented. We're still married, so something must be going OK. I started as a rock musician and there was plenty of money around, and trust me, that helps no end when you have three kids.

Did you see enough of your boys growing up?

"Plenty. We did tours, with definite beginnings and endings. In my experience children are OK with more or less any plan, so long as you stick to it. If you say you're going to be home on a certain date, best to be there. That may have impaired my ability to hang after the gig, in the time-honoured musicianly way, but not by much."

You've mentioned more than once being too jazz for the rockers, too rock for the jazzers. Is that really true?