

BERT JANSCH

by HP Newquist

One of the few British acoustic guitarists to influence almost as many British electric rockers as American bluesmen did is Bert Jansch. Over the years, guitarists as seemingly dissimilar as Jimmy Page and Neil Young have sung Jansch's praises, claiming that he was a major influence on their playing. Today, Bert Jansch is regarded as one of the most important British guitarists to have ever picked up the acoustic guitar.

Jansch made a name for himself in the 1960s and early 1970s playing with Pentangle, an unusual and progressive folk-rock outfit that combined elements of traditional British folk, jazz, and blues. Pentangle created a style of music that would eventually be played and popularized by rock groups such as Zeppelin, Jethro Tull, and Pink Floyd. But, like Fairport Convention (another progressive folk-rock group, which featured guitarist Richard Thompson), Pentangle's popularity never quite spread across the Atlantic.

Jansch's roots go back to the early American acoustic blues pioneers, and folk players like Davey Graham, who brought Celtic folk to popularity in Britain. "I listened to the skiffle stuff when I was very young," says Bert, a native of Scotland. "I saw my first show around 14. I used to hear players like Lonnie Donegan and Big Bill Broonzy, and at the summer festival in Edinburgh I would see Brownie McGhee and guys like that. I got my first lesson from Davey Graham's sister, actually. She was playing in Edinburgh, my hometown, and I got some lessons from her when I was about 15."

From there, Jansch (who pronounces his name with a hard "J") played the clubs around London that produced guitarists ranging from folkies like Al Stewart to psychedelic rockers like Syd Barrett. Bert's performances of tunes like "Angie" and "Needle Of Death" established him as a virtuosic player a cut above the run-of-the-mill coffeehouse guitarist. He gained notoriety when he teamed up with guitarist John Renbourn in the late 1960s and formed Pentangle. The critically acclaimed band produced several guitar-driven albums in the late '60s, notably *Sweet Child* and *Basket Of Light*, before its members parted ways to pursue solo careers.

While Bert has released solo albums, culminating with the recently released *When The Circus Comes To Town* (see Tracks, Feb/96), fame has eluded him in America, even though Neil Young claims that Bert's music inspired him to become a guitar player. Part of this is due to the fact that he hasn't toured the U.S. in years. It was widely rumored that he couldn't tour due to arthritis. "That's bollocks, isn't it?" he sneers.

"The reason I haven't been to the States is that I've been so busy here that I haven't had time to get to the States. There's a resurgence in appreciation for the acoustic guitar, especially here. I'm not quite sure why, but I think it might have something to do with the audiences getting older. Japan is the same way, and my tour there went really well." Bert is, however, finally making plans to come to America for a series of shows this year.

Despite this revival of the acoustic guitar's popularity, Jansch has taken to experimenting with new technology, but only for composing. "I use a Roland GK-2 MIDI pickup with my old Yamaha guitar, and then I use a sequencing program called Notator, which I think used to be called Atari Notator. It really helps me with my songwriting and trying out new ideas. For me, it's not so much style and technique that I want to seek out or improve, it's my songs and the songwriting process. So I've started to use a computer to help me with that."

Such adventurousness, however, does not extend to the electric guitar. "I had a Fender Telecaster last year for about six months. Of course, it was borrowed," he laughs. "It was quite nice, but I really couldn't keep it in tune with the way I play. I know I could have put heavier strings on it, but it just wouldn't be the same." Instead, he sticks to his six-string acoustics, and probably always will. His fingerstyle playing (which incorporates a lot of arpeggiation) is uniquely suited to the acoustic, especially since his playing accents drone strings. However, outside of tunes like "Black Water Side," Jansch

rarely uses alternate tunings. "Ninety percent of my stuff is in standard tuning; the other 10 percent is in tunings like DADGAD," he claims. His version of "Black Water Side" was adopted almost note for note (without vocals) by Jimmy Page as "Black Mountain Side," which appeared on *Led Zeppelin I*.

Page has also cited Jansch's fingerstyle and arpeggiation style in several interviews as being the pinnacle of acoustic playing. But for all the public admiration, the two had never been introduced until recently. "I just finally met Jimmy this past fall of 1995. He was performing at Wembley, along with Robert Plant, and a friend of mine had gotten tickets and backstage passes and all that, and so I went along with him. It was my first time meeting up with Jimmy and it was really quite nice."

Those who find their own inspiration from guitarists like Page and Neil Young would do well to spend some time listening to the man who influenced them. 

