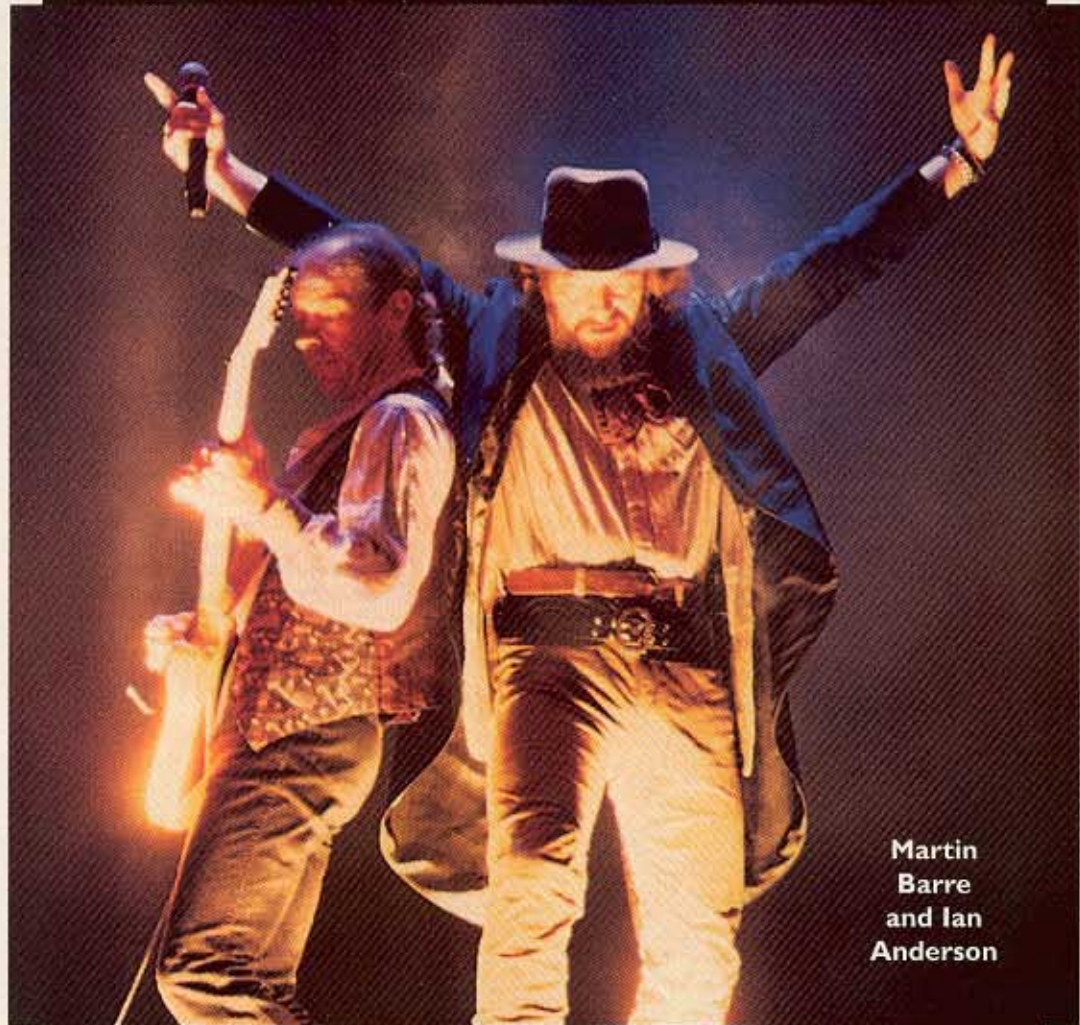


THE TWO MINSTRELS



Martin
Barre
and Ian
Anderson

OF JETHRO TULL

by HP Newquist

Jethro Tull released an album in 1976 entitled *Too Old To Rock 'N Roll: Too Young To Die!* It was the band's 11th record, and it followed on the heels of such successful and groundbreaking albums as *Benefit*, *Aqualung*, *Thick As A Brick*, and *A Passion Play*. Critics of the time, though, complained that Tull's brand of art rock was getting a little long in the tooth, and that no one really cared about bombastic artsy songs with lots of eccentric guitar playing and big meaty solos. Hence the album's title, and a story line about an aging rocker trying to stay relevant in a world of changing tastes. At Tull concerts, Anderson lambasted critics who thought it was "of an autobiographical nature—indeed, that I was singing about myself." With tongue in cheek, however, it was more autobiographical than anyone would own up to.

That was 20 years ago. Since then, Jethro Tull has released 17 records, including the brand new *Roots To Branches*. Guitarists Martin Barre and Ian Anderson, who were 29 and 28 when they were originally decried as being "too old to rock," are now 49 and 48. Unlike most other bands of their ilk and age, they have never broken up and they are not reuniting just for this record. Instead, Jethro Tull has released, on average, one record a year for the past two decades (including compilations), and despite a myriad of drummers, keyboardists, and bassists that have worked their way through the band, Anderson and Barre have remained the foundation of Tull. Together they have propagated a sound which is equal parts hard rock and Celtic folk, and they have rarely wavered from the formula since the early 1970s. So successfully have they championed and refined this style that at one time they were considered the major musical competition to Led Zeppelin, which had begun extensive experimenting with British Isles folk on the *Led Zeppelin III* album. "We opened for Led Zeppelin for a bit," remembers Anderson. "Jimmy Page was always nice to us, and seemed like a very decent guy. I have to give them credit for sort of leading the way, even if it was only by a few months, when it came to breaking away from the three-minute orgasm of rock. The fact that they were trying different things in front of audiences gave us courage to go out and stand our ground."

It's hard to believe that Anderson and Barre have been doing this together for 27 years. The band has matured and thrived in a world that has seen the rise and fall of glam, punk, techno, grunge, and punk again. "When we were doing this in the '70s and '80s, you couldn't give acoustic guitars away," says Anderson, pointing to an acoustic in the corner of the room. "No one wanted to hear them; all they wanted were synthesizers. So I used to buy up all the Martins I could find while everyone else was buying Roland synths. Today, everybody has to have an acoustic guitar, and you can't give synths away. I find it interesting that after all these years, no self-respecting band would think of taking to the road without

an acoustic guitar."

Surprisingly, Anderson has always been the band's primary acoustic guitarist, although people think of Barre as being the band's lead guitarist—which he is. It is an interesting relationship, and it's tempting to dissect it. After all, Anderson is the embodiment of Jethro Tull, to the point where many people still think that he is Mr. Tull (who was actually a 17th-century farmer and inventor). Yet Barre has been the only constant apart from Anderson. On the surface it would seem that Barre is the perfect sideman, the quiet partner who plays what is necessary when duty calls. But the reality is much more apparent when talking to the two. Even though Anderson is a maniacal showman, in person he is much more serious and given to thoughtful, careful conversation. Barre, who rarely takes the spotlight onstage, is actually humorous and animated, a "nudge-nudge, wink-wink" kind of guy who is more than happy to be playing guitar for a living. "I was originally going to be a surveyor or an architect. Then I failed some courses, and I was going to have to go back and take those courses again, and the thought of that made me sick. So I packed up a guitar and a saxophone and a suitcase full of food, and moved to London to try and join a band. At the time, I wasn't very good, but neither was anybody else," he laughs.

Then he found Tull (after the band had gone through Mick Abrahams and, briefly, Tony Iommi), and ever since he has been the electric foil to Anderson's acoustic muse. "Oh, sometimes I'll play a little acoustic, and Ian will play some electric," says Martin, while Ian claims that "about every two years I get the urge to plug in an electric, and pretend that I'm Martin."

Neither of them admit to any rivalry or dividing up duties or defining guitar parts in advance, such as how much electric vs. acoustic shows up in their songs. Yet, their approaches to the instrument are as different as their personalities. Anderson favors the use of a capo, while Barre can't stand them. "Because my voice is pitched about a 5th below the average male voice, it kind of suits me somehow to sing against that higher guitar sound," says Ian. "So I'll play with the capo all over the place, even as far up as the seventh fret, which I did for 'Life Is A Long Song.' It just sounded more buoyant up there, especially with the small-bodied guitars which I rather like. But Martin will never use a capo—he thinks they're for girls." The thought sends Anderson off laughing.

"I never said that!" counters Barre. "Weird little things, aren't they, though? I don't like capos, never touch them. In some ways they're frustrating, because if someone writes a song in concert pitch, you can go right into it, you can see what they're playing on the fretboard. But when Ian comes in and says, 'This song is in this key with the capo

on this fret,' we all go *agh!*," he laughs, "and start working out our parts. It does seem to work to our advantage, though." He smirks. "Sometimes."

The differences extend to their selection of instruments. Even though they both use Manson guitars, they have different brothers making their instruments. Andrew Manson makes Ian's acoustics, which are intricate creations resembling semi-hollowbodies but are in reality acoustics with thick tops and backs and honeycombed bracing inside. They are even fitted with fake soundhole plates to make them resemble more traditional acoustics. Martin's electrics are made by Hugh Manson, who constructs stereo solidbodies for him. Martin had played Les Pauls in the 1970s, and then Hamers, and now has the Mansons, some Tom Andersons, and a custom Schecter Strat. "The Les Pauls were

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—Martin Barre

just too expensive to take out, plus technology and neck design has moved on, I think," says Martin. "I'm also not one of those guys that has to have a '59 Gibson that was made in July on a hot summer's day by the third guy from the left of the line. But I did own them, and over time they became valuable and irreplaceable, to the point where I had to buy an airplane seat for them. It was like being married to the thing. Then I decided that was unacceptable. I needed a guitar that, if a roadie dropped it, I could get on the phone and get one that sounded exactly the same the next day."

Anderson downplays his own guitar expertise ("Talking about my guitar playing should take up all of about five minutes," he laments), which he feels is simply adequate. He actually gave it up for more than a year after Jethro Tull was formed, leaving the blues playing to original guitarist Mick Abrahams. "Even though I listened to Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry when I was young, most people were stuck on Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters, the folk heroes that we had all grown to love at art college. I found it a bit confusing, because intellectually, I couldn't understand why everybody was stuck with the same 12 bars of blues. That wasn't me, being a middle-class white boy from England as opposed to a black American musician liv-

ing in Chicago—those weren't my own roots. I do think that Eric Clapton offered a way forward for me, and refined the guitar to the point where I could understand it a bit more. But during that time of not playing guitar in the early days of Jethro Tull, I checked out Roy Harper, who was of the post-Bert Jansch school, and some others, like Al Stewart. They were all sort of this club of folkies who were doing interesting things with the acoustic guitar. And Paul Simon was doing the same kind of thing in America at the time. So I bought a small-bodied, cheap Yamaha while everybody else was playing these huge country & western-type jumbos and dreadnoughts, which I thought had more of a *brannng* sound. With the acoustic, I began playing things that seemed more comfortable for me."

Barre listened to "Clapton, and all the Kings—B.B., Albert, Freddie," but didn't follow the obvious white-boy blues path. "I can't see the point of listening to and copying other guitar players, unless you want to learn what they're doing. Why? What's the point, unless you can play it as good or better? I'd rather listen to the oddball solo. Actually, I'd rather listen to a saxophone player."

Barre is getting a chance to stretch out on his own with the imminent release of his second solo album, called *The Meeting*, wherein he plays music more reminiscent of heavier Tull, and includes plenty of acoustic guitar. But his solo career has been fraught with the same perils that seem to hinder most "new" artists. "My first record was released by a German label last year, and while distribution was fine in Europe, it was hopeless in England and America." He shakes his head. "You know, all you ask of life is to get your product out in front of people so that they can make the choice whether to buy it or not. That's all. The record company wasn't even doing that. So we parted ways—surprise, surprise."

There are female vocals and various non-Tull musicians on *The Meeting*. "I've never wanted to do pure instrumental albums where straightaway you're in a category where there's a frightening competition and—call me a coward—so many guys do it so well, including my heroes and everybody else's heroes. It's a dangerous area. With a lot of solos, lots of noodling, it's too predictable. I wanted more than that."

Anderson has had several solo albums as well, including the recently released *Divinities*. "I had a lot of fun making it," he laughingly chided the concert audience later in the evening, "but unfortunately, you didn't have a lot of fun buying it." Thus, for both men, Jethro Tull is their primary creative outlet, and neither of them has a problem with that, nor with their respective roles in the band. In the future, maybe Ian will play a little more electric, and maybe Martin will play a little more acoustic. "It doesn't really matter to us who plays what after all these years," admits Martin. "At this point, perhaps Ian would even let me do a flute solo." ☐