

# BILL NELSON

GUITARIST, KEYBOARDIST, COMPOSER, AND RECORD PRODUCER, BILL NELSON HAS COME A LONG WAY SINCE BE BOP DELUXE, AS EDITOR NEVILLE FARMER FOUND OUT

'I'm against categorisation. Variety is the only way to sustain yourself in the Eighties but the idea of someone who can appreciate several different areas is almost heretical these days.' If Bill Nelson is in danger of being categorized it's as the guitar hero of Seventies supergroup Be Bop Deluxe. But Bill has achieved far more since the band broke up. He's an accomplished record producer, film score writer, and composer of a vast quantity of arcane and commercially unsuccessful music. He also finds time to draw, write and practice a number of forms of intense French masonry which, he says, makes British Freemasonry look like that activities of a troop of rather dangerously corrupt boy scouts.

In becoming a Yorkshire renaissance man he has been right the way through the musical mill and, were it not for the erudite manner in which he explains his feelings, one could be excused for thinking he has a huge chip on his shoulder.

Bill started playing guitar when he was very young and although he had little thought for professional musicianship he played for a number of local bands and released a self-financed album called *Northern Dream*. This was heard by someone at EMI who was sufficiently impressed to per-

NEW HI-FI SOUND JUNE 1987

suade Bill to go professional. This was when Bill was about 23. It was the start of Be Bop Deluxe and the change from northern lad to pampered pop star and jaded avant garde artist. 'It seemed like a good way to further what I believed in without compromising myself, but the more I got into it with Be Bop, where I was under pressure from the record company — and touring — the more I got absorbed into the mythology of the man under the spotlight, the man in the magazines. It's a kind of perversion of reality, and it's the kind of thing the industry thrives on. Let's face it, there's nothing honest about the pop music business. It thrives on fantasy and calculated lies.'

Ten minutes with Bill Nelson could leave you convinced that (1) listening to pop music is now a mindnumbing experience designed to wipe the brains of Britain's youth, (2) he's a manic depressive and has a damned good reason for being so and (3) there is little point carrying on and you might as well throw yourself under the police car whose siren is right outside the hotel window smothering whatever Bill is saying into my tape recorder.

Luckily for me I had about two and a half hours in which to interview him — long enough to discover that contrary to initial impressions he's essentially opti-



# THE PRODUCERS

mistic about life and merely disillusioned with the current state of pop music.

Furthermore, with a financial sword of Damocles hanging over him — the Be Bop fortunes long since eaten away — he is acutely aware of the economic risks available to anyone who steps outside the mainstream pop domain. Yet as a record producer he is equally wary of the fast buck merchants.

'It's flavour of the month stuff with producers. I'm signed to CBS and they rang me up and said how would you feel about working with another producer because we feel we need to iron out some of the lumps in your music for FM radio in the States. Which I understand, because I'd like that success and to have my music played on FM radio. They said "How about working with someone like Daniel Lanois?" and I said "Fine! What made you say that?" They said "Well he's just done this Peter Gabriel album and it's doing really well in the States". So I said "Right. But if I'd said to you three years ago that I'd like to work with Daniel Lanois you'd've said "Who?" And when I said that he was the guy who worked with Brian Eno you would have said "No way! That's not commercial stuff." It's only because of Peter Gabriel and U2 that you think he's a commercial proposition.

'They'll say, "So and so had six hits last year. He should produce you". But if you're flavour of the month you've only got a short run at it. Say your last record was a Number One. Then people are going to play it. "Ah another Trevor Horn production, we'll put that on the radio." So it'll have a chance of getting in the charts. But even he's had a lot of flops'.

So although the financial rewards for being slightly obscure are few, the chances of prolonging your career in production are better. Mind you, if you ask Bill Nelson what makes him a good record producer, he'll tell you he doesn't know.

'I don't know because the last thing I wanted to do was produce other people. I mean to me it's strange to sit there and watch other people having all the fun. You may make a few observations like "Er, that's a bit out of tune" or, "Maybe we can take a couple of chords out" but most producers today make their money out of bluff. There's no mystery to producing records. The only thing is that often, when you're in the process of making a record, you are so concerned with the playing that you can't stop for a few seconds and say "Hang on a minute. That verse isn't necessary". All the producer is is



THE ECHO OBSERVATORY WHERE BILL'S WORK IS CREATED

someone who tags onto the band as a sort of extra member who has the luxury to sit there and say "Yes" or "No" to certain ideas. And because he's been hired at great expense by the record company, everyone feels obliged to listen to him.'

Bill does see some value in being there to help an inexperienced band with tricks of the trade and to act as a buffer between the band and the record company. But trying to get him to sell himself as a record producer was about as difficult as trying to get blood out of a stone.

It took till the very end of the interview to get him to admit that he had something to offer over and above telling musicians when to speed up or slow down. Bill Nelson's real talent seems to be in bringing out the performance in a musician and helping a band to experiment.

## ■ THERE'S NOTHING HONEST ABOUT THE POP MUSIC BUSINESS. IT THRIVES ON FANTASY ■

Experimentation is what he loves most. While the production work he's done with more mainstream pop artists like A Flock of Seagulls and Gary Numan was a little too obvious for his taste, working with various hi-tech Japanese bands fascinated him. He soon found himself to be in demand from the likes of Masami Tsuchya, Sandii and the Sunsetz and the Yellow Magic Orchestra — the latter resulting in a lasting musical relationship with Yukihiro Takahashi.

'The Yellow Magic Orchestra took technology to a degree of sophistication which I don't think, even now, has been hit in this country. It's about four years since I last worked with them in Japan, but even when they first started making records they were doing things with percussion programming and synthesisers which are only now becoming standard.

'I think the Japanese have a much more natural feel for the technology because they developed it, whereas we feel overawed by a box with lots of buttons on it, feeling that that is all it is. With the Japanese it's more organic — they record it as a means to an end.

'The westerner, given technology, is so overwhelmed by the fact that when you push a button you get an enormous noise that that is enough and he doesn't think "Well, how can I put this in context?"'

Much of Bill Nelson's music since leaving Be Bop Deluxe has been synthesiser-based and he admits that he sometimes feels a bit of a traitor to his art, not playing guitar. But much of his more complicated arrangements are so much easier to put together on keyboard than guitar that synthesiser has become the dominant instrument.

Bill's guitar-playing is still much in demand, though, and his mastery of the acoustic shows itself through the six tracks to which he contributed on David Sylvian's double album, *Gone to Earth*. Messrs Nelson and Sylvian would probably have come across each other sooner had it not been for some reticence on Bill's part. Japan had always been a pet hate of his. He saw much of the bad side of Be Bop Deluxe in their pretentious, pretty boy image. So when

his old lighting engineer called and said he was working for Japan and that they were interested in using Bill to produce their album, *Tin Drum*, he turned them down, partly because he was busy and partly because he didn't like them. When *Tin Drum* was released, he had to admit not only that it was brilliant, but also that he couldn't have done it as well. Yet he retained his doubts about Sylvian's integrity until a TV programme asked him to review David's first solo effort, *Brilliant Trees*. Nelson's only criticism was that Sylvian needed his mates to take him to the pub and say 'Don't worry mate, life's not that bad.' Other than that he loved the record. Sylvian saw the programme and asked to meet Bill and so they started working together.

Interestingly, it was Steve Nye who produced *Gone To Earth* and *Tin Drum*. Bill speaks very highly of him.

When I met Bill Nelson he was in London completing the vocal overdubs for the score he had written for *Brond* a Channel Four drama about a sadistic swine played by Stratford Johns who seems to spend his time persuading other people to bump each other off. To enhance the offbeat nature of the story Bill has written the music for a combination of modern electronics and classically trained voices. For this he enlisted the help of choral arranger Darryl Runswick and his group of classical singers, Electric Phoenix.

'They do everything from traditional classical to the work of Stockhausen and Cage and are very skilled technically on vocals.

'We are using the Angel Studios in Islington. Darryl chose to use the studio because the room is very good for recording voices. But it's not been quite what I'm used to in terms of outboard

equipment such as digital effects. So I can process the sound.

Back home in Yorkshire, Bill has his own studio, the Echo Observatory. It's a fairly straightforward 16 track in a leaky outhouse but it's the place where much of his composing is done. The *BronD* soundtrack contains dozens of short pieces of music to fit certain film sequences. Some of them are no longer than two or three seconds in order to fit a piece of action, but they still take a long time to record. Because the budget was fairly low, problems have arisen with things like synchronisation of sound and film. Bill's 16 track and the 24 track he is using at the Angel run at slightly different speeds and the machines in the film sound mastering are probably going to run at a different speed to that. 'If we were using a proper digital system we could have proper time coding but this is rather hit and miss.'

Of the 80 or 90 pieces and short snippets of music Bill has recorded for *BronD*, about half have actually been used, which is actually a good percentage. Each bit was written to fit certain parts of the film which Bill watched over and over on video.

■ MOST PRODUCERS TODAY MAKE THEIR MONEY OUT OF BLUFF. THERE'S NO MYSTERY TO PRODUCTION ■

'This has been the most complex thing I've worked on. It's almost like working with handcuffs on, because the director has his own ideas and the script is rigid and the characters have certain personalities. So you're trying to pour your music into a mould that's already been made. I found that kind of difficult.'

He would like to use the combination of classical voices and high tech instruments in future projects, perhaps adding maybe some unusual percussive instruments.

Despite his continued lack of commercial success he is convinced that, at the moment, people are more prepared to listen to a wider variety of music than at any time before. 'If there's going to be any furthering of music it's got to be through the elimination of boundaries, not the building of them.'

Again his irritation at the effect of record company meddling rears its head. 'One of the things I was always aware of, in the early days with Be Bop, was the presentation of the band but I feel that that has

become such a preconceived and marketable commodity and the music has become so secondary that I've reversed my views and thought that it doesn't matter what the band looks like — what category, age or fashion group the musicians belong to — what matters is what gets through to you and touches the heart. No matter how much more technically advanced pop is than in the earlier days or how much better recorded, if we're not moved by it, it's no longer a true reflection of the state of mind of people in our country. If it is, and if I'm wrong in that, then I feel I should live somewhere else because I can't hear anything in it any more. It's like being fed baby food all the time.'

Record company's treatment of Bill Nelson's early work on CD annoys him, too. Since leaving the EMI stable several years back, he has been consulted on nothing that has been released and often hasn't received copies till months after they were released.

'When I had the EMI contract I tried to keep a close rein on everything — artwork, quality of pressings etc. But once you leave a record company it's very hard to insist on quality control and to attend cutting sessions because they own your past and they can do what they like with it. If you look at the things that have been released by the band since the contract ran out, the quality of the sleeves and the artwork, the pressings and certainly the selection of tracks has been diabolical. But there's not a thing I can do.'

Battle scarred he may be but battle weary he is not. For all his ranting about the state of the music business, he still wants to be a part of it and to help push back its frontiers. He certainly isn't a great financial success — the Rolls long since made way for the 2CV — but despite facing near bankruptcy at one stage he has kept a nice house where he can think and develop his ideas. He enjoys the idea of wide acclaim but wouldn't wish to sacrifice his principles for it. 'It sounds like I'm trying to find an excuse for having done so many obscure things instead of more obvious stuff but I think that to pursue the ideal at the expense of the immediate financial gain is to have a longer career in the end. It's vital to me to be able to hold that torch in front and say "that's the way to go" instead of "Wouldn't it be nice to work with those people because I'm going to get lots of money and press?".'

'I didn't start out for that. I still find it hard to think of me standing on a stage. At the moment the obscurity and the ability to still make records is important.'

