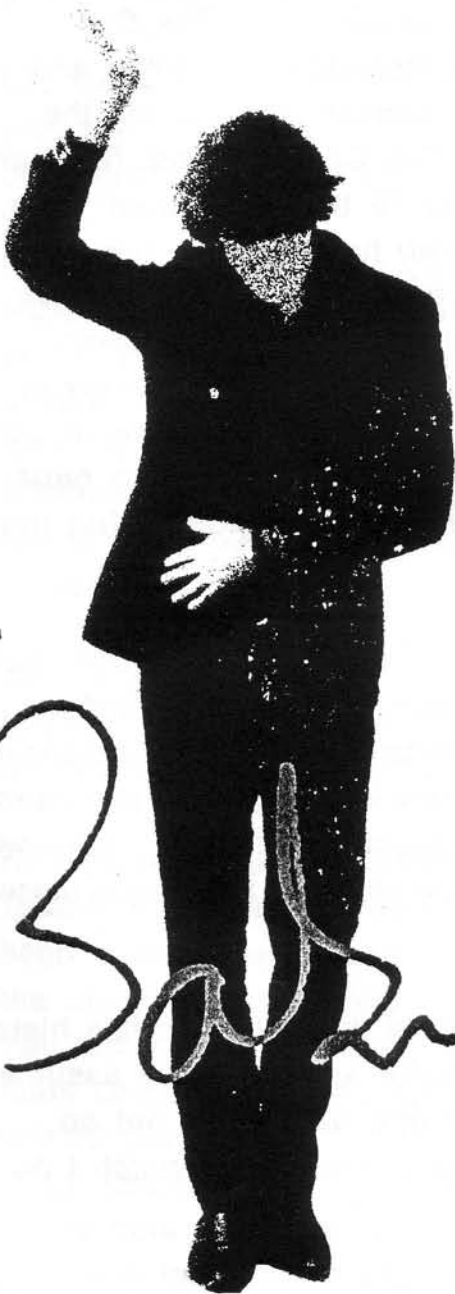


AXE

No 14 1999



Baby Stones

ROBERT FORSTER

ROBERT FORSTER

ON ELECTRIC GUITAR PLAYING

The following is a transcript of a conversation between Robert Forster and David Pestorius, which was recorded especially for AXE magazine in Berlin on 12 March, 1999. At the time, Forster had been back living in Regensburg in southern Germany since mid-1996 (he also lived in Regensburg between 1990–92, following the break up of The Go Betweens, the group he founded with Grant McLennan in 1977), and was preparing to embark on a world tour with McLennan, to promote the imminent release of two CDs, 'The Best of The Go Betweens' (Beggars Banquet, 1999), and 'The Go-Betweens 78 'til 79 the lost album' (Tag Five, 1999). A range of subjects are discussed, however, the focus of the conversation was on Forster's particular, some would say subversive, approach to electric guitar playing. Editorial intervention has been limited to that which appears in parentheses, primarily with a view to historically contextualising the discussion through the inclusion of certain additional relevant information, but also to enable the reader to better identify certain persons mentioned by reference to the groups that they are or have been associated with. DP

DP: The official history of the Go Betweens is to be primarily found in two comparatively recent sources: David Nichol's book 'The Go Betweens' (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996), and Clinton Walker's 'Stranded: The secret history of Australian independent music 1977-1991' (Macmillan, Sydney, 1997), but there is not a great deal in these books devoted to your guitar playing or the group's sound for that matter. That is what we are here today to talk about, but can I first ask how you judge the value of these accounts?

RF: I think those books just go for the historical thing, they're like history books that don't really want to go into particular sounds. They assume that the reader just wants to know the 'story' and perhaps is not so interested in the guitar sound or in the sound of the group, which I do find strange.

DP: The same criticism applies, for example, to Victor Bockris' biography of Lou Reed,

which focuses almost exclusively on Reed's personality and makes no attempt to discuss how important and influential his electric guitar playing has been.

RF: I agree with you entirely, but it is also seen as a 'muso' thing. I know what you mean, these are the details that I search for as well and I don't find them. But I think there is an assumption by certain writers that if they get into the sound and dig deep that people won't find it interesting.

DP: Its odd because these books do go into some detail on issues surrounding the producers and production values on the various Go Betweens albums, yet the nuances of the guitar playing are barely touched on.

RF: I know that when I go back and hear those records, the guitar playing, especially on something like 'Before Hollywood' (1982), really comes out at me. I recently saw a video of us playing in 1983 and I was just stunned at how Television-like the guitars were between Grant and me, and I can remember that we definitely worked on, especially at that time, a lot more riff-orientated guitar playing. We were right into that ... we were just 'laying guitar lines on top of each other to type of 'weld' it together ... but I'd forgotten about it.

DP: I think I know the video you are referring to ('That Way') ... it was a show in Bradford in April 1983. The dynamic between the two guitars, I remember 'Your Turn, My Turn' in particular, is really quite beautiful ... they just bounce off one another.

RF: We had just got Robert Vickers (Go Betweens bass player, 1982—1987), into the band and Grant and I felt really liberated. We'd been a three-piece band for 5 years up to that point and, in the end, in the studio doing 'Before Hollywood', Grant was playing tonnes of guitar. You know, when I listen to that album I just go 'thats Grant, thats me, thats Grant, thats me', just on guitars. When we got Vickers in and we started playing live it was like 'well now we are the most traditional rock band: drums, bass, two guitars'. It was very liberating ... Grant and I were finally able to play guitar together on stage, him doing this, me doing that ... it was fantastic. It changed later when it became more 'normalised', but at the start of '83 Vickers had only been with the band a couple of months

and Grant and I were very excited about it.

DP: During that show in Bradford, there was a silent film projected on the wall, just to the left of the stage, as the band was playing. What was the story with that?

RF: I have no idea. We didn't take it on the road and I don't know where it came from. I can remember that club ... it was a small provincial English club, like a working-man's club ... velvet and mirrors behind the bar ... quite the opposite of the sort of place where you'd expect some sort of visual presentation, especially involving what to me looks like some sort of Chinese Maoist thing.

DP: There is an interesting passage in Clinton Walker's book where he effectively revises his own earlier criticism that you and Grant were musically 'incompetent' and played the same guitar solos for 10 years. He does it by quoting John Willested (Go Betweens bass player, 1988—1989) , who apparently said '... Forster was the one ... you never knew what he was going to do' . Clinton doesn't elaborate so its very loaded, particularly because it appears at the close of a chapter ... its given a lot of space ... to me its like he is almost conceding an error and according your guitar playing a special status. How do you feel about that?

RF: To take Willested's point, I guess it comes down to how I think about lead guitar playing which is non-virtuoso based. Its never been something that has particularly interested me in terms of say Hendrix or Clapton ... I hear what they are doing, but I'd never want to do that. Its always been quite playful as well, because to me its like well 'I'm doing a lead guitar break now', and its a little bit ridiculous. And its space that has to be filled, but at the same time I enjoy it. Also, my lead guitar playing can never be sustained over a long period of time because I can't build it anywhere. If you say 'You've got two minutes to play lead guitar over a section', I'd go 'Give me 20 seconds' ... (there is, nevertheless, a classic Forster guitar solo of 45 seconds duration on 'Long Lonely Day', a track from the just released 'lost album').

DP: This reminds me of when you say 'guitar-break' just prior to David McCormack's solo on 'Drop' (from 'Calling from a Country Phone', Lagoon, 1993) ... its an old Rock

cliche for the singer to introduce the guitar solo, but its totally ridiculous in this instance because the solo is so brief and understated, and also because its followed by a really dramatic chorus. At the same time, it gives emphasis to that little piece of space that had to be filled ...

RF: Yeah, but as far as Clinton goes and this statement that 'The Go Betweenes can't play', its something I have absolutely no problems with. I just laughed ... I just went 'So'! It wasn't something that I'd even begin to be upset by. The thing is that The Go Betweenes came out of the New Wave/Punk time, which I felt close to and 'about' to an extent, so the whole concept that we can't play was fine ... it was the impetus! So Clinton saying that didn't really bother me, but the chapter ending like that was very nice and I know what you mean by it being given space ... its like they live on after what he had said earlier. Its also interesting because Wilsteed was the most traditional 'musician' in the band ... its something that Grant couldn't have said, its not something that Lindy (Morrison, Go Betweenes drummer, 1980—1990), or Amanda (Brown, Go Betweenes violinist, 1986—1990), could have said. But Wilsteed could because he would know all the rules that I was by-passing.

DP: One of the things that we have discussed before is the sense of space in your playing and songs generally. Can you just outline what is it that you aim for particularly in that regard?

RF: A bit of it goes back to early Rock 'n' Roll, which I like ... '50s Rock 'n' Roll, Buddy Holly, the sound of Chuck Berry or even the Sun Records sound. A bit of me, when I heard those records when I was young, grasped and understood far more than late '60s and early '70s Rock, which I found very clunky and very the three Marshall amps, that thick sludge ... it came back, to an extent, with Grunge in the early '90s ... to me its just a pedal being pushed — anyone can do that, its not particularly playing ... if you can get three Marshall amplifiers and a volume booster pedal ... its a 'made' sound ... and its a thickness of sound that, to me, its so easy and doesn't have all that much to do with Rock 'n' Roll, which is a thinner thing ... at the same time, I find it very full. I find Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry and the Sun sound very, very full ...

other people find it thin. I'm also not really interested in padding ... I'm not interested in having every corner covered with sound.

DP: There is, in this regard, another interesting quote early in Clinton's book, which again he does not elaborate on, where you say that your approach to playing and performance is 'ideas-based' and that you are interested in the idea of energy and impact manifested in ways that weren't to do with the scale of the equipment or the light show.

RF: I like the audience to be able to see that too. I like the audience to see how fragile it is, but also to see how simple it is. I like the look of minimal equipment on stage and that people can actually see it. I like that nothing has to be hidden by curtains or amplifiers going up to the ceiling to present this overwhelming power and aggression coming off stage ... one of my favourite shows I ever saw was Talking Heads live at Festival Hall in Brisbane in '79. When they came on stage they had the same size amplifiers that we were playing with, with just a drum-riser. For the first time, to me, Festival Hall looked sparse. This looked like a band that was playing to 300 people had suddenly decided to take all their gear inside Festival Hall and set up, which I thought was just incredibly fantastic ... it wasn't like 'we're playing to 4,000 people, lets get eight trucks of equipment and show people, even before we start playing, how powerful we are'. The Talking Heads just threw that out the window and subverted it all. It was fantastic.

DP: Around that time there was also a shift in electric rhythm playing to a predominantly down-stroke approach. There is a show which, for me, defined this moment ... it was one of the ZZZ Joint-Efforts held at the Queensland University Refectory in '80 or '81. I think the line-up was The End, The Go Betweens, Laughing Clowns, with The Cure headlining. The Cure had just released their second album, 'Seventeen Seconds', and I distinctly remember thinking that there was something very interesting and new about the way both you and Robert Smith were playing guitar.

RF: At that time, I think, it was a break from '60s guitar playing, which was a full strum, but it was also the first development on from punk guitar, which was also very chunky. What then happened, I think, is that punk

fast guitar playing got fractured as people started to experiment with slower songs. It also comes back to what you were saying before — a little bit more space started to come into music as well. I think it was a combination of those two things in the late '70s and early '80s.

DP: Brett Myers (Died Pretty), also developed, at that time, a new guitar approach to slower songs and slower rhythms, however unlike you he was interested in volume. But then, like you, Brett grew up in The Gap (a suburb of Brisbane).

RF: Brad Sheppard (Hoodoo Gurus), also grew up in The Gap ... Brett Myers is a guitar player I like ... I recommended that Grant get him to play on his last album ('In Your Bright Ray', Beggars Banquet, 1997), but he is a lot more the traditional guitarist than I am. He also plays with pedals and I'm against pedals ... I've never ever played with pedals because to me, and this is at the real base of my guitar playing ... Chuck Berry doesn't play with pedals, John Lee Hooker doesn't play with pedals, Muddy Waters never played with pedals. To me, a lot of the downfall of Rock guitar playing is to do with pedals. You could say, although I don't believe it, that I subvert Rock guitar playing ... I've always liked guitar players where you are playing rhythm and then lead comes when you don't touch it and what you do is you start to play harder, you just dig in. You then go from that back to your rhythm playing ... its a far more organic shift. What I hate about most Rock guitar players who use pedals is that there are two volumes ... there is their rhythm playing, hit the pedal, go up ten notches, their lead guitar playing ... there is no shading in between. What I love is the shading, its all to do with fingers, the action, the string against the neck. This is real guitar playing ... when they go back to rhythm they just ease off ... its all done with the hands.

DP: Ed Keupper ...

RF: Great guitar player! Ed is a great guitar player ... he is also a Brisbane guitarist. He is like Bo Diddley ... Ed has got this little shuffle ... he's got this whole rhythm thing. I don't know where it comes from ... I have a vague feeling he'll hate this ... its a German influence. He's a German guitar player that somehow just landed in Brisbane ... its almost

southern German as well ... its really weird, I hear music down there, and he has got this sort of rolling style. Its not staccato and its not standard Rock. Its a little bit the Velvets too, he's got it. Thats the other thing ... its Myers, Ed and myself. We've all listened to the Velvet Underground and I think you can hear it, I can hear it. Ed has got a certain period, Brett has a certain period and I have a certain period ... what do you think of Ed's playing?

DP: I saw him play a lot with the Laughing Clowns in the early '80s and have occasionally seen him play since then. For me it comes back to the space thing. I have always felt that Ed Keupper had a tremendous sense for space in his playing, even when there was a lot of people on stage. The song that I frequently think about in the context of his guitar playing is 'The Prisoner', the old Saints number that he often played with The Clowns. The little riffs played almost as he was singing, the rhythms, those melancholic minor chords ...

RF: I had that song in my head today ... one of these days I am going to play that ... its such a great song.

DP: Two other guitar players who emerged in Australia in the late '70s and early '80s that I wanted to talk with you about are Angus Douglas (Tactics) and Rowland Howard (Birthday Party). In different ways they too, I felt, had a sense of space in their approach to playing.

RF: Rowland I very much like as a guitarist. As soon as I heard him I knew that he had listened to Tom Verlaine and had almost taken Tom Verlaine on. He also played a Fender Jaguar, the same guitar as Verlaine. I remember looking at his guitar amp one time, very early on when we were playing with the Birthday Party, and seeing that everything was on 10, which amazed me. I think what I liked was that he played the opposite of me ... we both use Fender Twins ... I have distinct settings that I set an amp to: volume 3 or 4, treble on about 9, bass on about 8, middle down to about 5, reverb on 2 or 3. Its a distinct sound, whereas he just had everything on 10. He might have had pedals, but you didn't notice, which I like. His guitar playing also did not go 'lead break, here I come'. Rowland Howard walked on stage and started at a certain volume and

stayed at that volume all the way through and brought it down and up just through his hands, which is a masterful performance and is something I appreciate. I really like to hear great riff playing, six note riffs, three note riffs, completely his style. I thought Rowland was a great guitarist. Angus from Tactics ... I was never a great Tactics fan, mainly because of Dave Studdart's voice, but I really like one album of theirs, it had that song 'Buried Country' ...

DP: 'My Houdini', the first one.

RF: 'My Houdini', yes, which I liked and the band I thought was OK. People I know like them more than I do. I saw them play live a couple of times, but they never really caught me. The guitar playing was good ... they were a band that reminded me a bit of Neil Young and Crazy Horse.

DP: Going back to Rowland Howard for a moment, there was a time, I'm not sure I've got the facts right, when you were to replace him as the guitarist in the Birthday Party or in Nick Cave's band for a tour which, for some reason, you ultimately weren't able to do. The idea of you replacing Howard or playing guitar for Nick Cave strikes me as a little bit incongruous?

RF: It was Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, around the time of 'The First Born is Dead', I think ... doing songs like 'Tupelo'. Rowland Howard actually replaced me in the end. They didn't have a guitarist or something had happened, I think maybe Blixa (Bargeld, guitar player with The Bad Seeds), was doing something with Nuebauten, I'm not sure. Mick Harvey asked me to play. This would have been in '85 and I went down and rehearsed with them for 4 days. I was as intrigued by my selection as anyone and I found it a little daunting because there was no way I could compete sonically with what Rowland or Blixa had done. If I had stayed the whole thing would have gone in a very different direction.

DP: Its pure speculation now, of course, but do you think they would have been happy about you taking it in a different direction?

RF: To tell the truth I don't think Nick Cave, at that stage, really cared. In

the practice room he was singing between songs ... we'd finish playing a song and then he would start singing something else. It was very intense. When we were practising he was giving a complete performance ... he was like on stage in the practice room. We'd finish a song and he would keep singing or start playing the piano. It was quite inspirational for me, but within the Bad Seeds then Mick Harvey was totally in control of the music side of things ... I wish I'd have done the tour.

DP: Another guitar player that you have had a long association with ... it goes back 20 years to the early days of Orange Juice, is Edwin Collins, but he also produced and played on your last album 'Warm Nights' (1996). His lead guitar playing is all over the single from the album 'Cryin' Love' and I just wondered how you feel about that and his playing generally?

RF: I like Edwin's guitar playing ... I like his sound ... he has a nice reverby, trebley, twangy sound that is not piercing ... its always been a very warm sound. He is, in a traditional sense, a better guitarist than I am, and a little bit more souly, which I like. He could also have come from The Gap ... someone else who has listened to a lot of the Velvet Underground. I can always hear Edwin and I playing together, but I had to push him, in a way, into the studio to play. We had exhausted all possibilities before he would play ... like on 'Cryin' Love', the track you've mentioned, he wanted to bring down Bernard Butler from Suede to play guitar on that track, but that didn't happen so Edwin, by default, played. But I can always see him and I playing together. Me rhythm and him just rhythm and those little notes, those little things that he does ... just four notes and sitting back. Me rhythm, him licks, rhythm, maybe he takes the lead break ... I can see that.

DP: I want to talk a bit about Warm Nights, not the album, but the three piece band you assembled and played with in Brisbane throughout 1995 prior to doing the album. On its night, that band was sheer magic the way it could really get that hypnotic southern groove going ... pure Creedence ...

RF: Thats what people would say. When I got into the studio to make the album and put down the songs 'I Can Do' and 'Warm Nights', and one or

two others, David Ruffy (drummer on the album 'Warm Nights'), was going 'this is Creedence' ... he was completely surprised by this. But that was another reason why I did the album in Edwin's studio, because he had this thing about that southern Creedence sound. Edwin's studio was made for that sound. But the Warm Nights, with Glenn (Thompson, drummer, now with Custard) and Adele (Pickvance, bass player, now playing with Dave Graney), was a dream band. I really liked that show ... you were there ... we did in that clothes shop Scrabble. It was a band which we almost didn't need a PA for ... we just needed a little vocal PA. A lot of it was Adele, she is a such great bass player.

DP: Just going back to the Creedence thing, from the earliest days of The Go Betweens you've quite openly acknowledged John Fogarty ... you even go so far as to quote him in the guitar intro of '121' (from 'Calling from a Country Phone').

RF: I think he's a great guitar player and, to me, he's a very Brisbane guitar player too. When I'm in Brisbane ... you can just turn on the radio and you'll find a Creedence song. Its also to do with ... when I think of Creedence ... when I think of John Fogarty and Brisbane ... its almost this tag, this ridiculous thing that has been put on him, the 'Swamp Rock' thing ... to me, that 'Swamp Rock' is so Brisbane. When I arrive in Brisbane at the airport and I'm driving through Toombul, and I'm driving through Nundah, and the the paint on the wooden houses is peeling, and its so green its almost psychedelic ... Brisbane to me is always that floaty, swampy, but sparse sound that Fogarty got ... and Warm Nights got it too ... but its weird, you can't trade on it ... we got it at a particular time ... I've often thought of going back to that sound again ... and I will. Warm Nights was also the closest approximation of the early Go Betweens, '78 — '79 Go Betweens (cf. the just released 'lost album'). When I came back to live in Brisbane in '92 and played with David McCormack (Custard), Robert Moore and Glenn (Thompson), it was different. That was a bigger band and a bigger sound, but then it got refined after a period of confusion ... there was actually a pre-Warm Nights band that I played with that created the sound, although we never played live. I did two rehearsals with Jeffrey Wegener (Laughing Clowns), and this guy who played upright bass who just phoned me up. I'd done 'Calling from a Country Phone'

and the covers album ('I Once Had a New York Girlfriend', Shock, 1994), and I wasn't happy ... I was just lost ... and I practised with Jeffrey and this guy, in Jeffrey's house, and immediately that sound was there. I just played two chords and forgot about songwriting. I got into a room with those two guys and just went E to D ... played that for ten minutes and it was beautiful, the most beautiful thing I'd heard for ages.

DP: That must have been around the time you did that semi-impromptu performance with Jeffrey at the opening of Leni Hoffmann's exhibition in April 1994. I remember you playing what sounded to me like an instrumental version of 'Heroin', which would connect with the two chord thing you just mentioned?

RF: That was the start of it. Thats right ... Leni invited us to do the thing down in your gallery in Brisbane and I must have told Jeffrey then about this bass player ringing me up, so we made an arrangement ... and that was just me not trying to write rock songs for a four piece band or go down to Melbourne to make a record like I'd made ... after that I got Glenn, found Adele, and we just refined it, refined it, refined it ... it was really beautiful.

AXE

A SPECIALISED ROCK MUSIC JOURNAL

EDITION No 14 INTERVIEW BY DAVID PESTORIUS COMPILED BY JOHN NIXON

EDITORS

JOHN NIXON

MARCO FUSINATO

ISSN 1441-4309

PO BOX 1029 POTTS POINT SYDNEY 2011 AUSTRALIA

4/28 WANGARATTA STREET RICHMOND MELBOURNE 3121 AUSTRALIA

mfusinato@hotmail.com