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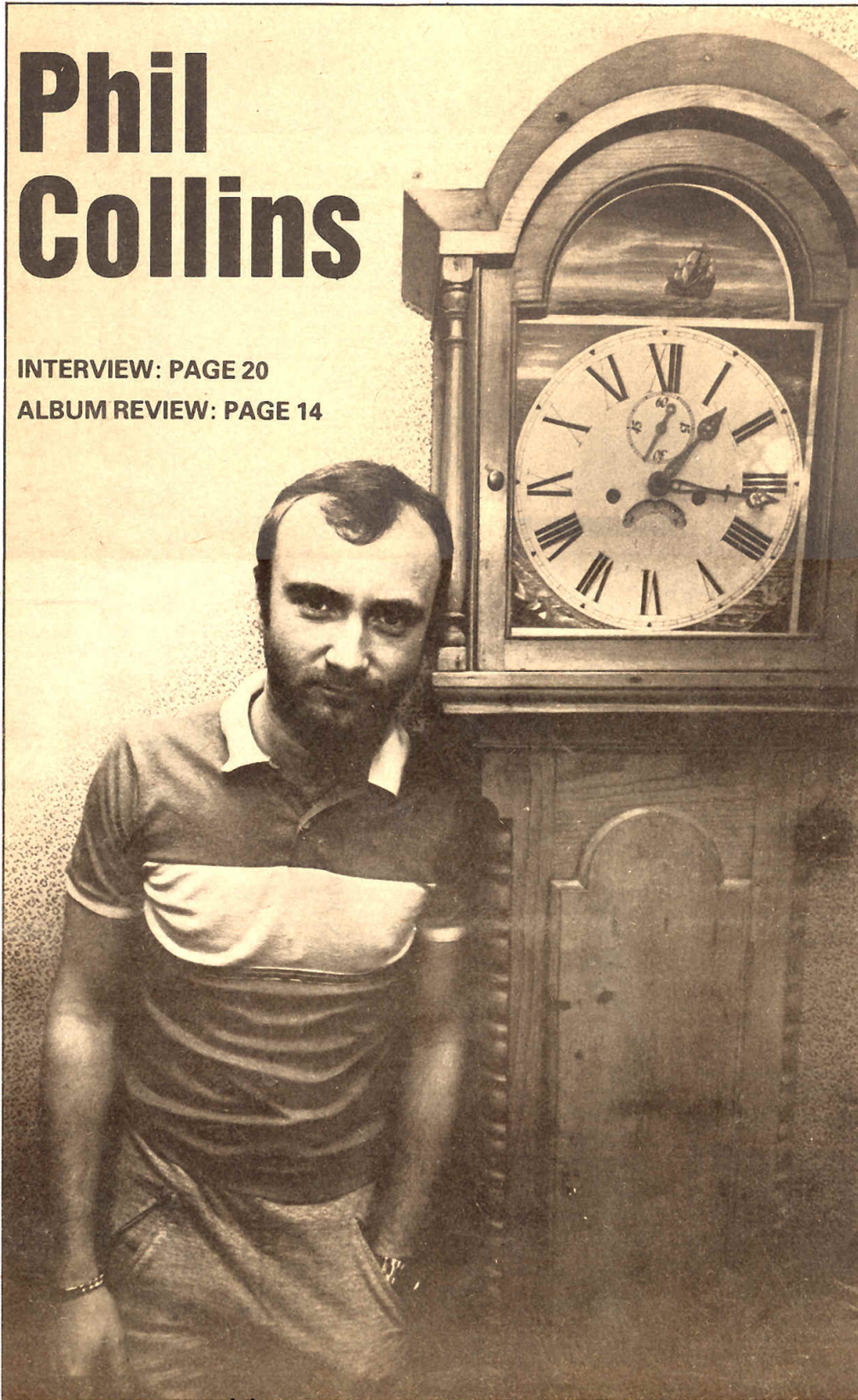
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Phil Collins

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SURPASSING even "The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy" and "Crossroads" in the bus-stop yapping stakes, the national adult pastime of watching "Tiswas" every morning of the new Sabbath has become as clichéd as the Status Quo Songbook, surrealist fag ads and the phrase "elder statesman of rock" in Pete Townshend interviews.

Like Viv Stanshall with "The Sound Of Music", normally, of course, I don't indulge. This time I had an excuse, waking up on the floor of a debutante's Mayfair flat after a particularly gruelling Spandau Ballet gig at the Dorchester the night before to find the TV switched on and a vision of anarchy assaulting the brows.

It took a few minutes of face-stretching and a cup of black coffee to adjust the brain's vertical hold before I realised I was witnessing the thing that is "Tiswas". Great.

But suddenly, miraculously even, the chaos subsided and law and order returned to the shaken screen. The familiar, affable face belonged to Phil Collins; the drums thudded with the force of the car-press blues from Paul Schrader's "Blue Collar"; the ghost of a melody slipped its hands under your shirt buttons and onto your heart.

"In The Air Tonight" had hit the mass appeal button and come out with integrity unscathed. Phil Collins, the pop singer. And not a hint of Genesis to be detected anywhere.

Approximately 13 hours later about eight feet in front of a television set somewhere else in London and the eyelids were being dragged down again by that most effective of lullabies, "The Old Grey Whistle Test".

After a while a reason to postpone the pillow testing arrived though. Another familiar set of features, short and curly tangle of dark hair, a smooth and seductively appealing voice that hadn't been heard for far too long. John Martyn.

And a loose and supple rhythm section, drums that held power but which didn't want to overwhelm, that bent and shaped with the music and for the music.

Phil Collins, the drummer. On TV twice in one day, and still not a hint of Genesis to be detected anywhere.

I was impressed.

A couple of weeks later I'm being transported six-wise down a smaking dirt-strewn track a few miles from the centre of Guildford in Surrey's rockstar belt, the general idea being to talk to Collins the cosmopolitan and not Collins the Genesis member.

I should mention that I'm not a Genesis fan (cue for vanloads of letter-bombs from the hordes of exceedingly loyal fans who make up the band's following); but that's not my reason for wanting to largely avoid the subject.

It's just that Collins is always seen as the Genesis frontman first and his multivarious activities with musicians like Eno, Bob Fripp, Peter Gabriel, Brand X and John Martyn are virtually dismissed as mere extra-curricular dabbling, despite the fact that he's one of the finest drummers in Britain.

But there's no excuse for that now. With "In The Air Tonight" having reached number one in the MM singles chart in just three weeks and his first album "Face Value" due to be released in a week's time, Collins is busy etching his name on the public's heart as a solo artist, taking credits for the vocals, songwriting, drums, and keyboards.

"Face Value" is a kaleidoscopic album, comparable to Bob Fripp's "Exposure" - not musically but in the broad range of styles exhibited, like flicking through a magazine to find features on widely differing subjects on every page.

There's the Peter Gabriel-like sound of "In The Air Tonight", funky songs with the Earth Wind & Fire brass section, transcendental jazz-rock featuring ex-Shakti violinist L. Shankar, love songs, a Bee Gees soundalike ballad and a version of the Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows".

I'll leave the artistic assessment to Allan Jones (his review is elsewhere in this week's MM). In the meantime Collins has got a lot of talking to do.

Ariving at the Collins' abode is a surprise - instead of the vast, sprawling stately home I'd imagined is a large farmhouse-type building, thankfully bereft of the kind of tasteless ostentation you might expect from the *nouveau riche* (it turns out to originally have been a tied "cottage" on a landowner's estate).

After the introductions a relaxed Collins shows me his "studio" upstairs where all the backing tracks to the album were recorded, although really it's just a bedroom crammed with a drum kit, synthesizer, grand piano and eight-track tape recorder.

And then downstairs in the living room, dominated by a record collection jointly owned with his American girlfriend that would be enough to stock an average-sized shop, the conversation turns almost immediately to the new Genesis album and the studio the band have built.

But let's forget that for a while. For a start, I want to know why his album's being put out by Virgin Records and not Charisma, the usual Genesis label. A bit of a change of image? Head office in a Portobello Road mews, ever so trendy? Well, right... sort of.

"I thought that anybody who would see an album by me out after I've been with Genesis for ten years and Brand X for five would think 'Oh, another Genesis album, thank you', whereas I think my album has great potential to appeal to more people than those who like Genesis," he explains, racing his words at full throttle. "I thought for the casual buyer it would certainly help if it was on a different label."

Facing up to m



Interview: Lynden Barber
Pictures: Adrian Boot

It soon becomes clear that only having Genesis as an outlet for his songs was frustrating his musical vision. Although he strongly denies any dissatisfaction with the band, it's obvious that Banks and Rutherford weren't keen on changing the band's established white English style too much just to fit in with Collins' taste for black musical influences. And to an extent, they were unable to do so anyway.

"I had an awful lot of songs that were not really Genesis-ey, and songs that if I brought into Genesis would not end up sounding like I wanted them to. 'Misunderstanding' (the band's last single) was one of my songs, it was a song that everybody liked and we didn't change it. But had they wanted to change it I probably would've said 'Hang on a minute'."

"I played them 'In The Air Tonight' and 'If Leaving Me Is Easy' but it was kind of too simple for the band."

And then, worrying that he's sounding too critical he adds: "It's very hard for me not to sound like 'the other side of the fence', but I'm not really. When I'm in the band there's a group thinking, but outside the group I'm a free man."

"I think that I wrote the things on the keyboards, and I like to play keyboards on them. Tony (Banks), bless his heart, is a classically trained pianist, and if you ask him to play like 'that' or 'that', or play the wrong inversions or something, instinct will tell him not to do that."

"Instinct will tell him to play the 'right' inversions, and sometimes the 'right' inversions just don't sound right."

"I'm not a pianist, I just write music on a piano, and if you don't know the rules you don't

know whether you're breaking them or not. If you do something you just do it because it sounds nice."

Considering that Genesis and Brand X are both bands not exactly noted for being basic, "Face Value" is a remarkably - perhaps surprisingly - simple album. Collins is quick to acknowledge this and puts it down to his taste for black (or multi-ethnic) music.

"I really like the simplicity of some of the music of Weather Report... melodically. The chords are sometimes complicated, but basically it's a simple format. A lot of the black bands that I like, it's a very simple idea, they don't mind staying on two chords for ages, as long as the groove is there."

"Up until recently with the band, if anything was simple it would be 'let's complicate it a bit', whereas I'd prefer to simplify it even more."

One story Collins relates demonstrates how keen he was to capture a "black", soul feel on the record. Not just being content with having ex-Weather Report bassist Alphonso Johnson, the EW&F horns playing, and on one track black Los Angeles children singing, he was determined to get the right sound, even making sure the record was cut by the right person.

"The first cuts of the disc, he says, sounded like Queen, big, British and upfront."

"I was getting pissed off, I'd put on a Jacksons album and I'd put on my album and say 'It doesn't sound the same'. I mean obviously it's

not going to sound the same because I'm a white bloke who arranged it and they're all black blokes, but somewhere along the line there must be some common ground."

He looked at the sleeves of some of his soul albums and found the common link was a technician called Mike Reece working at an LA mastering lab, so he rang him and got him to cut the album, finally coming up with the desired effect.

"I'm not pretending - don't get me wrong - to be a black white man," says Collins, suddenly getting defensive. "But the things about my album that I like, I found Alphonso and the horn section were all in there saying 'yeaaaahhh!', liking the same things that I like, so I was convinced it had more potential than just a Genesis solo album, that it could be taken into a different area."

The radio people at Atlantic are going to put out a "black EP" with four of the tracks on it to black radio stations, because there's an awful lot of connotations with Genesis that people will not give it a second chance."

Originally he'd wanted a producer to oversee the album - predictably George Clinton, of Parliament and Funkadelic, Maurice White of EW&F, or Phil Ramone... "either a really heavy black producer or a really good sound bloke" - but rejected the idea because all he was seeking was somebody to endorse his own ideas anyway.

"I can't really complain if people don't like it, because that's really what I wanted it to sound like. And doing it upstairs, in the same way as Eno, if it's done at home and you lose a bit of sound quality it doesn't matter, because you're

going to gain on emotion anyway. "And if it's not working you can just knock it on the head and forget about it and maybe come back the next day, which I did an awful lot."

The reasons for working on a new batch of songs go far beyond the desire to break out of writing Genesis material though. Some time ago Collins suffered a breakdown in his marriage, which gave him a need for an emotional outlet and left him with time to kill.

The song title "If Leaving Me Is Easy" and its opening lines of "I read all the letters/ I read each word that you've sent to me," give you a good idea of the openness of many of the songs (he wanted to call the record "Interiors" or "Exposure", but "Woody Allen and Bob Fripp got there first").

"When I was here with the wife and kids, between Genesis, Brand X and anything else I wanted to do, I felt obliged - quite rightly, I suppose - to not go up there and lock myself away and write," he says.

"But when they're not there you haven't got much else to do, and obviously it was depressing so you tend to write songs like 'If Leaving Me Is Easy' and 'You Know What I Mean' and I guess all the songs really, to a varying extent."

"The lyric to 'In The Air Tonight' were improvised, as was the tune, and the words are kind of bitter, I guess, but they're not really related to my domestic situation."

Having laid down the basic outlines of the song at home, Collins was in the enviable position of being able to call up his favourite musicians to help complete the album (not all of his heroes, though, but more of that later).

Phil loves the work of American singer-songwriter Steve Bishop, so guess who turns up on one track? (He met Bishop when he was visiting neighbour Eric Clapton, who also plays on one track).

He knows Alphonso Johnson from when he was with Weather Report, and although he didn't know anybody from one of his favourite soul bands, Earth Wind & Fire, he was able to ring their hornsman (Don Myrick on tenor sax, Louis Satterfield on trombone, Rahmlee Michael Davis and Michael Harris on trumpets) and get them to play on the album. Sickening, huh?

"I was very flattered with the horns," Phil affirms. "They do the EW&F things, the Jacksons and the Emotions, but they don't do anything else. And here I was, young white boy, and they're playing with me. I was really chuffed."

"They rang me just a few days ago to find out if I want to do any gigs - they're coming over in April."

He perhaps the biggest surprise is the presence of the master Indian violinist L. Shankar, who plays on the brief but uplifting "Droned" Shankar (the brother of Ravi) used to play in the Indo-Jazz group Shakti, led by John McLaugh-

New values



lin, and met Collins when they shared a bill with Genesis in Germany once.

"He'd never seen a rock show before," says Phil. "He was sitting at the side of the stage looking at all the lights like a kid with a new toy."

Later, when Genesis were touring America, Shankar rang Collins and asked him to produce his next album. Collins turned it down, due to lack of production experience, but Shankar agreed to come over to play on "Face Value".

Phil sees "Droned" as being in the same area as Eno and Weather Report, who are "very close together in as much as it's based on little soundtracks based on hypnotism, a sort of circular thing," and now Shankar has asked him to write some lyrics, sing and possibly play drums on his next album.

"What he's doing is more like Joe Walsh or early Who, but with violin solos instead of guitar solos," (?) he says, explaining that the project isn't one of his greatest priorities at the moment and shaking his head at musicians like Billy Cobham and Alphonso Johnson who just want to ape white rock groups so they can make a load of money.

It's a situation rich with irony - here's the white Collins, who's got the cash, trying to get his album to sound as black as possible. The grass, I guess, is always blacker... or whiter.

But then, as Collins has already said, it's not really a case of being a frustrated white man trying to shed his Caucasian skin. If he's at-

tracted to black music it's not for any ideological reasons but simply because of it's conviction and looseness.

And that's only one side of Collins' musical personality - European attitudes and influences are the other side. Taking into account his feeling that Genesis are becoming looser, they're nevertheless a band who have relied heavily on arrangements and classical influences... and (I bet you were waiting for this) he says he's not going to leave.

The possibility has obviously crossed his mind though.

"I actually asked Townshend if I could join the Who at one point," he casually remarks, seemingly oblivious of the heart attacks such a statement might cause Genesis and Who fans.

"When Moony died, I was doing some sessions with Townshend and I said 'if you need a drummer I'll make myself available,' and we got on very well, but he'd already asked Kenny Jones."

Collins reckons there's a chance he might play on Townshend's next solo album, though. He says he was supposed to be playing on "Empty Glass" but, you guessed, Kenny Jones came back off holiday and did it instead.

Not that Collins lets his ambitions end there. Bowie's another person who he wants to work with, and after playing on Eno's "Another Green World" he was hoping for the Thin White Duke to ring.

He didn't.

"The sun suddenly shone out of Eno's arse, and the putting together of what he did, with the hip rhythms and stuff, was me and Percy (Jones, bassist with Brand X). I was hoping to get a call from Bowie because he had then got Eno to do his album.

"What Bowie does is like respectable disco, and it's a good area. It's disco without the (pounds first in hand, several times) bass drum. Bowie and Townshend, I've got great respect for, Bowie for the way he handles himself, and Townshend, I guess, for the same reason."

WORKING with Eno on "Green World" and "Before And After Science" influenced Collins' attitudes a great deal and he says this has in turn influenced Genesis, making them work more loosely.

"It's the spirit; never mind the quality, feel the width," he explains, "I liked his idea of just getting people together and working off the top of your head."

"In Genesis, we used to know exactly what we were going to record and we went into a studio and who was going to play what, whereas with Eno I used to go in there... I remember one classic, he gave us all a bit of paper and we made lists from one to 15. Eno said 'Number two, we all play a G, number seven we all play a C sharp,' and so on.

"So it was like painting by numbers. And it's that kind of bravery... he was prepared to waste an awful lot of time and money just to find out what it sounded like. He used to love me and Percy, we'd go in and run through our dictionary of licks and he'd record them and make a loop of them.

"It's the attitude, - 'I don't really know what I'm doing, I'm not really a musician, but let's have a bit of fun anyway'. I thought that was great, and I still do."

Having also worked with Eno's erstwhile colleague Bob Fripp, playing drums on "North Star" and "Disengage" on "Exposure", Collins reckons it's this element of chance which separates their approaches, Fripp being a very meticulous worker and Eno a risk taker.

Collins has known Fripp since the Mel Collins-Ian Wallace version of King Crimson when they used to go to each other's gigs, and they still meet up occasionally.

"I think Fripp's got a much stronger personality than I have," says Collins. "I could sit and listen to him talk and laugh without having



to say anything. But the same thing that you find funny can put you off him as well because he doesn't give you a chance to breathe.

"Bill Bruford was telling me the other day that when he was in Crimson he'd play something and Fripp would say (in West Country twang) 'Yeah Bill, oy loyk that!', then he'd play exactly the same thing and Fripp would say 'No, you've changed et, oy don't loyk that as much. But every time I played with Fripp we got on famously. He loves my cymbals, he said."

TALK of the Mobile Unit leads us on to Peter Gabriel. Fripp of course produced the ex-Genesis singer's second album (the one with the cat claw sleeve), and although Phil didn't play on that album he did get back with Gabriel for one track on "Exposure" and some of the third album, providing the earth-shattering drum sound on "The Intruder" which opens the record.

It's this same paleolithic thud which makes the single version of "In The Air" so magnetically compelling (added at the suggestion of Atlantic maestro Ahmet Ertegun); on the album the drums don't enter until near the end.

Was the song influenced by Gabriel?

"It's six of one and half a dozen of the other," reckons Collins: "I thought it was a very brave idea not to have cymbals and it made you think. He's always been a man of principles and sometimes he's too much that way for his own good and will stick to his principles dogmatically, really sort of stubborn with it."

"He influenced me in as much as I found his studio (Virgin's opulent status symbol The Townhouse in London's Shepherds Bush) and his engineer Hugh Padgham was very good."

But getting away from technicalities, what about Gabriel's conception, the exploratory attitude that characterised "Gabriel III"? Has that rubbed off?

Collins is less than clear on this, first of all saying "There's a lot of things on my album I don't think he would like, so I don't know how much he rubbed off or not," and then: "It's very hard not to be influenced by things you like, and I do like his music a lot." Basically he doesn't really know.

BACK to the star of that "Old Grey Whistle Test", John Martyn. It's not the first collaboration between the two - Collins played on Martyn's last album "Grace And Danger" and has gigged with him several times.

"I love John Martyn, we're very close," he says, speaking of the man who always seems to be forgotten when electronics in music are discussed. "We're in touch once a week."

I wonder how Collins feels about stepping into the drum stool vacated by the master jazz percussionist John Stevens, who used to play with Martyn, but it turns out that he never

heard any of the collaborations.

He did, however, play in a large band led by Stevens on one occasion, a gig at the Roundhouse as part of the Camden Jazz Festival, after being introduced to Stevens by Martyn in a Camden pub.

"It was chaos, but it was great," he reminisces. "I don't know John Stevens well, but I know him well enough to think he's a loony... his attitude. He doesn't mind what he says or does, he's a bit like John Martyn, he'll just come straight out with it."

"Describing this music he would say (puts on Stevens' cockney voice) 'Trevor, you've a conversation with him and in the background we're gonna be murmuring. Then me and Phil are gonna 'ave a chat, then you can all shuddup, alright? And if you don't know where you are, just STEAM IN!' and the attitude was great."

"I'm sitting there, don't know where the hell I am, playing with all these people I've heard of but never met. And everybody enjoyed it, we played for about 45 minutes and all agreed we should do it again and it was much too short."

So as Collins got so much out of playing in Stevens' band, does that mean he's generally interested in other areas of jazz outside of the rock influenced groups like Weather Report and Brand X?

"Not really. I'm not a jazz buff. I went to see Woody Shaw at Ronnie's one night and that was great. I really enjoyed that. I put that Art Ensemble album on when I got it ("Fantasy For The Warriors") and I couldn't make head nor tail of it, in the same way that I didn't know what to make of the first Tony Williams Lifetime album.

"I'm not really into that area of jazz. It's good fun to play, it's not far off what John Stevens was doing, to be honest. But it reminds me of what Phil Seaman said once, 'avant garde is great to play but painful to listen to'."

THE Brand X phase, always a loose arrangement rather than a regular band, seems to be over now that all the other members live in different parts of the States.

As for Collins' current ambitions; besides wanting to work with Bowie and Townshend he'd like to play with Weather Report for a couple of months - although it seems unlikely since the band have now found a permanent drummer they seem to be happy with, Pete Erskine.

"I imagine it's a band of egos now with Jaco Pastorius in it, I'm sure my illusions would be completely shattered by that, but it would be a great experience. And more than that, I'd like to gig around with the EW&F blokes, with two drummers."

He also hopes to get his own band on the road if the right people are available. "But it's not a Genesis-split job, or anything like that."

Talking of which... after all this talk of black music, taking chances, spirit, looseness and "grooves", I'm amazed that Collins isn't more dissatisfied with the heavily arranged music of Genesis. Didn't he always feel he was pulling in an opposite direction?

"No, I felt that around the time of 'And Then There Were Three'. And there was one track on "Duke" called "Cul-De-Sac" by Tony, and Tony's a very white writer. As soon as I have trouble playing something, he knows he shouldn't have played it and he should have kept it."

"And there's a couple of things on this album we're doing now he's taken back. 'Cos there are some things I just can't get into any more. All the stuff on the new album - it could be a double because there's a hell of a lot of material - has all been group written, you don't have to play anything you don't want to play, so there's no frustration at all really. I don't have to play Tony's material and he doesn't have to play mine and have this battle around it not being quite what you want it to sound like."

I'm still not a Genesis fan, but after talking to Collins for nearly two hours I'm convinced his enthusiasm for all the music he's involved in is genuine. And I guess it's the price of being an eclectic that nobody's going to love everything you do.

Yeah. I know it sounds pompous, but Collins deserves at least some of your respect... whatever your tastes.

