



TONY BANKS

From the late 1960s up to the present day, Tony Banks has remained among the elite of British keyboard players. Within the confines of Genesis he has developed a characteristic approach to playing and composing that has formed the basis for the whole generation of 'progressive' musicians. In his solo work he has furthered the fringes of his inspiration, creating a music that is wholly familiar, yet remaining completely original. The new Genesis album, 'Genesis', has taken the stepping stones of their career another pace forward and their forthcoming massive tour of America is certain to keep the band at the position they have held for almost a decade, to paraphrase the late Keith Moon, the best Genesis type band in the world.

Here Tony Banks talks about the way that Genesis songs are written and recorded, and how they manage to recreate such music live.

“Our method of writing has changed quite a lot over the years. At first we started by sitting around with a piano and we all played what we had written. That was unfair because Peter (Gabriel) could sing better than Steve or myself, so his songs tended to be the ones that were played with, while I could play the piano better and managed to lodge some of my work in there too. It was all a bit hit and miss. Up until around 'Duke' that was the way that we worked. With that album we began a slow process that changed the sound to something a lot closer to what we were actually writing. 'Abacab' as well was a change towards us

writing together — we had simply used all the ideas up on our solo efforts and we were left in a situation where we had to write the material on the spot. The new album is the result of our taking a decision to write an album and record it in one go, from start to finish.

The result, 'Genesis', is a crisp sounding step forward. The three members have delved into a collective consciousness and have unearthed yet another facet to the jewel. 'Mama' especially heralds a new approach by the band, and should, if there is any justice, be the pointer to a development in music as a whole, towards the concept of a macro musical environment that is

affected most strongly by its leading members. Certainly, the effects of almost everything Genesis have offered to us over their career has been a milestone in contemporary music, and with a couple of exceptions when they have seemingly confined their mode for a couple of albums, they have retained an edge and an art for keeping ahead of the field, though the ways that they stay there may seem time honoured.

"Yes, well, the idea of us playing together in a rehearsal while writing, and then just switching on the machines when we feel that we have something good isn't particularly new, but it is new to us . . ."

"The music and sounds that we are producing now, in fact, are a lot closer to what we would have liked, and wanted, years ago. It's much more aggressive and keeps the edge that seems to get lost sometimes. Having said that, I listened through all the old albums the other day and 'Duke' sounded surprisingly weak. It is a bit over-produced in places which was probably the result of mastering it at Maison Rouge. We recorded it at Polar in Stockholm and the process of mastering at Maison perhaps was not as close to what we actually heard in the studio. So we have progressed even since Duke."

Talking of the problems of mastering, and the nail-biting process that it is, led us on to Tony's own studio and his own way of writing and recording.

"I've got an eight track system set up at home, the Brenell, with all the keyboards set up and the Linn drum machine, which means that I can just pop in and play over a few ideas whenever I like. Everything is triggered through the Linn so that I can control the rhythmic element from a musical direction — the ideas for the reggae side (especially on 'Fugitive') came from that, using the double beat as a basis for the chord patterns. But I wouldn't like to use the pulses too much — you end up with a sound that is all a bit 'spot on' and electronic. There seems to be little emotion in there. I know a lot of young bands are using micro-composers in this way, but you get to the point where even non-electronic things start to sound electronic."

"All the backing tracks for the 'Fugitive' album were done at home, but the amount of them that were used in the final mix is really very small. The drum tracks that were done originally on the Linn were re-done by Chester Thompson and I really wish now that I had had the courage at that time to use more of the backing tapes than I did. I ended up re-recording a lot, when I could have used the takes I had already done. Phil (Collins) managed to use his own original tapes for 'Face Value' and I suppose I envy him that a little . . ."

"I was a little disappointed in the commercial failure of my two solo albums. I wanted to put myself on the map a bit, independent of Genesis, because the band is probably not going to go on forever and if the group did split then I'd have something to go on to. I was depressed for about a year after 'A Curious Feeling' and I really didn't want to anything like that again. It was a quite adventurous thing for me — trying out my singing and a few new ideas that I had. I tried to change the obvious approach to that sort of thing when I was doing 'Fugitive'. Unfortunately 'Fugitive' has done slightly worse than 'Curious Feeling' . . . The problem seems to be that people have this preconception of what it's all going to sound like — perhaps I ought to change my name . . ."

Pseudonyms apart, the trademark of Tony Banks would probably still shine through. His very specific keyboard sound

is immediately recognisable. However, his actual instruments have changed ceaselessly over the years, and Tony takes a definite delight in 'finding' and using the latest equipment that is available.

"I started off on the piano and that formed the basis of what we did in the very early days. I suppose I've carried that right through to now really. Then I moved on to an organ, which was probably the most difficult step, changing between the two. I tried to play it like a piano or I'd just hold down a chord here and there! Then I got the electric piano, which again was a problem because of the lack of response. Then came the Mellotron. It was a bit limiting at the time and we had a lack of money, so we simply had to get the most sounds out of what we had. We used fuzz boxes and effects on the keyboards, and a lot of people thought we were using synthesizers before we actually had one. For the 'Foxtrot' album we invented a whole lot of new sounds. Steve (Hackett) and I would play games, one inventing a new sound and the other trying to imitate it. By combining the two we got another sound... and it went on from there.

"The main instruments that I've used on the new album are the Prophet 10, the Synclavier, the Emulator, and the Yamaha piano. I've also used the Quadra on 'Mama' and I sampled the sound of a Japanese Koto onto the Emulator which gave the 'plunking' solo on 'Mama'. The Emulator is a great way of cheating! And a lot of fun too. I think we did a trumpet piece as well which I sampled onto it - and I don't play trumpet at all... But I often feel that the use of the Emulator and the Fairlight and things like them could become a bit, well, self-conscious in a way with everyone striving to get a new sound from them and it ends up with it sounding so obviously sampled. Peter (Gabriel) seems to have got round that one and has started a new way of looking at the sampling thing. Really quite exciting.

"I'm not sure which of the keyboards I'll be taking with me on the next tour, but I should think I'll take the Synclavier and the Emulator. I had five instruments on the last tour, and that is four too many as far as I'm concerned, but that's the way it is. There was the Quadra, the Prophet, the Yamaha piano, the Vocoder Plus and the strings. I managed to get away with not taking the organ with me - instead I used the Prophet. Now that I'll be using the Synclavier on stage it will be even easier for me to get the organ sounds. That old style organ solo on 'That's All' (on the new LP) was all done on the Synclavier and it's probably the best organ sound you could ever get - it's perfect. I'm also going to try and do without the Quadra, again because the Synclavier can take over from it, and I may knock out the Vocoder and take the Emulator along. I don't actually use the Vocoder as a Vocoder on stage - it gets used for the sustained organ and vocal sounds on things like 'Afterglow', and that sort of facility is easily duplicated.

Alongside King Crimson, Tony Banks was, in part, responsible for the popularity of the Mellotron during the earlier Genesis days. The haunting vibrato orchestra sound became a fixture of both bands for a period, and then was lost to the world of solid-state instruments doing away with the unwieldy tape based machines.

"I'm no lover of Mellotrons (Novatrons) really, they became a real problem using them for the live work, but when I heard the first King Crimson album (Court Of The Crimson King) with the Mellotron crescendo on the song 'Epitaph', I felt that it would be a very useful instrument to have. It

was used to great effect by a lot of people, but it started off as a problem in moving around and didn't get very much better. The first one I had was the Mk II and we had to literally rebuild it after each concert. I had to have it because we had used it so heavily on tracks like 'Watcher In The Skies' and 'Supper's Ready'. When we came off the road I sent some of the bits back to the manufacturers and one day the whole thing vanished! Someone came up to me in Toronto a while ago and said 'I've got your Mellotron...!' Which naturally came as a surprise, but it is reputedly quite famous. It was used on some of the King Crimson tracks as well as albums like 'Foxtrot'."

Monitoring keyboards on stage is always a tricky problem, and with stages the size that Genesis tend to play - it becomes something of a nightmare...

"I have a system that I have evolved over the years that lets me hear what is going on on the rest of the stage, while managing to keep a good idea of what I'm doing. I have a pair of full range monitors linked to a twelve channel mixer which is beside me. There is another speaker in between the other two which is fed from the monitor mix so that I can choose to hear what I need. It means that I can leave the mixer pretty much alone, and the only thing left to do is boost up certain passages for solos, and that is done from the main desk. For the rest of the output, all I really have to do is add the echo or the chorus, which I add to the Prophet and the piano."

But even with the system he has built, there comes a time when he has to return to using headphones. This is a last resort, or gets used when Tony is forced to move around the stage a lot. When landed with the spot next to Chester on stage you need a damn good monitor.

"I try not to let the sound get too loud on stage, but there are times when there is a lot of sound coming back from the hall and we have to boost the monitors a bit, but you get to the point where it is painful and you can't hear what's going on anyway because it gets too loud. As a band we've reached the point where every tour seems to be in bigger and bigger places. Last time we played in some really awful halls. I think they send out a guy and tell him to find the biggest places - regardless of the sound. Places like an ice rink and even a converted bus depot (which didn't sound converted to me!) Hopefully they might burn down by next time - its already started - Cardiff Hall went not so long ago."

The Revenge Of Genesis, owners of halls with poor acoustics should hide the matches now...

"For the stage show I suppose we have to play venues that are so big. It is a spectacular. We have slimmed and streamlined the show down in order to play places like The Marquee club, but the demand is so very great we are forced into the huge places and have to endure it really."

So much for the rigours of the road, getting back to basics, how do you go about actually writing a song.

"There are various processes I use, but the commonest is just setting the Linn up for a certain rhythm and then improvising. That gives me time to just play around and find something interesting, often when I start making mistakes the odd idea will crop up. The great thing about the rhythm thing, apart from the way that it can dictate the mood of a piece when you are writing, is that it goes on and on and on, relentlessly, until you can get it right. Before the machines came in Phil made some drum loops for me. It also relieves you of the need to keep up the momentum of the piece. It can be really easy when you are playing like

that to get a few things through that sound good. Then I put them away for a while, either to resurface as part of something else, or on its own. The problem at that stage is to have some sort of control so that what comes out is something that other people are actually going to like. You have to remember that at the end of it all you have to be in a position where you can sell it to someone else.

"With 'Mama' we were so lucky in selling it to someone else if you like. We managed to get a lot of radio plays, and suddenly it took off and there was a hit! I find it very strange to see our picture on Top Of The Pops, it seems so inappropriate... we took just the same as we always have, no glamour or anything, and we really do look rather dull! Then next to us there's Culture Club and Kajagoogoo with all the image that they use. It is so pleasing for us to make a success in that sort of environment.

"It's a recent thing for me listening to the charts. I did it mainly to hear 'Mama', and also 'The Wheels Keep Turning' from Fugitive. What struck me was that there is so little there that is of merit. There's plenty which is just OK, but not a lot that is really outstanding. I liked the New Order single 'Confusion', but later I heard the 12" version and that just dropped on and on."

Many musicians have a habit of listening to their own instrument when listening to other people's music, to the exclusion of all else. Not so Mr Banks, who manages to keep his ears open for everything...

"I don't actually like keyboard players as a rule! There are obviously odd moments that make you sit up a bit, but as far as the old 'keyboard heroes' went, I was no fan. In the early days I suppose there was Keith Emerson with the Nice but after a while I lost interest, or going further back there was always Alan Price with the Animals... No, I tend, if anything, to ignore the keyboards to make them blend in with the whole piece, and judge the whole thing."

At this point in our interview I took a deep breath and plunged in with the burning issue of the moment... what about Marillion?

"I've never actually heard any Marillion. They're supposed to sound like us aren't they?"

Well, er, yes!

"Well, Phil heard them the other day and he said he can't hear where the comparisons come from. I'm sure I'll hear it with time and make my own judgements."

So, from 'Genesis To Revelation' to 'Genesis', there weaves a path of music so distinct and innovative that it remains supremely above the transient fads of the music industry. Take a little trip back and listen to 'The Fountain Of Salmacis' from Nursery Crime, or 'The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway', 'Ripples' from Trick Of The Tail, or 'Burning Rope' from the matchless Then There Were Three. In all there is a certain panache, a style that cannot be quantified or calculated, but which points towards a timelessness from the shy, unassuming professional that is Tony Banks.

E&MM





Genesis The Album

"The old days are gone/And they're better left alone/But I still miss you'll keep it to myself"

(from Taking It All Too Hard, 'Genesis')

Well the old days may be seen to be gone, but they linger. While Genesis may have, for themselves at the very least, shaken off the last vestiges of the progressive movement, with the attendant myths, murk and lush production, there still lingers the edge of the heritage.

'Genesis' forms a new direction again for the band, after their unobvious U-turn from the music of the seventies to the music of the eighties. A string of hits and an international acclaim that places them solidly into the league of the mega mega band, they now turn their attention not only to the production of their work, but also to the development of their writing. The stark reality of Abacab and the open hearted pourings of both Duke and Collins' solo work are tempered here with an inkling of the obtuse. They allude rather than comment, they paint tissue canvasses with words that convey all of the feeling but little of the real meaning. To have reached this level is a great achievement.

'Mama' opens the album with a statement of intent. The fierce drive of Phil Collins' vocal attack is breathless in its sheer power while the apparent musical ramblings conclude in conjunction at exactly the right moment - order from chaos indeed. (The video showed to promote 'Mama' though seemed somewhat out of place and added yet another dimension to the track which, if you read it, holds about as much literary content as a phone directory...)

The Beatish 'That's All' with almost C&W overtones makes up where 'Mama' fails. It's

a 100% solid gold tearjerker. Wonderful way of putting things down in a song - forget the transient reality of the situation and strip it down to the bare bones of emotion. Musically this is absolutely intriguing. Tony Banks develops the initial theme over and over, a subtle change each time, to create a woven pattern of sound. His piano work here is placed against the solid, masterful bass and guitar work, which is itself overlaid by Phil Collins' inspired vocals.

To strip down the individual efforts the band have offered here is impossible. They now work as a well oiled machine. After twelve albums together they have hit the climax, or perhaps just another peak, in their advance.

'Illegal Alien' is the strangest, and strongest, track on the album. Tony Banks takes up the Synclavier and provides the perfect foil for the wailing guitar and rumbling bass of Rutherford. Banks earmarks this track simply through the multitrack work he puts in - almost a different style with each overlay he adds. The synth is his visual sweeping style, while the almost sequencer-sounding rhythm is tight and contains a Motown type feel, such is its backbeat. The repeated vocal line of "It's no fun, being an illegal alien..." while looking clumsy on paper, flows out of Phil Collins majestically. The intense feeling of the track is furthered by the very compressed drums that clatter away in the background. This is going to be dynamite live! (This is also, I imagine, where they got the steamy central American imagery for the video film for 'Mama' - could they be hinting at some sort of concept here?)

'A Home By The Sea' is a compilation of a clever piece of keyboard work and a delicate vocal. The symmetry on the stereo separation coupled to the natural dynamics of Collins' vocals provides a neat and effective 'call and reply' style of track construction. This is quite a step on for Genesis and the only question I would pose is how on earth they got such a powerful track from such gentle components.

'Another Home By The Sea' is the instrumental which follows the first track. With a chord and musical structure similar in some ways to 'Duchess' the rolling gait of the tune slips through a mesh of fine keyboards (Emulator?) and emerges as probably the most memorable melody they've put on record.

So, to conclude then, here is another peak in the Genesis range. Can they topple here? With such a powerful and emotional album as this it seems unlikely, contrary to the popular grapevine. Forget the rumours and listen.

Tim Oakes

E&MM

Tony Banks Discography

With Genesis:
From Genesis To Revelation
Trespass
Foxtrot
Nursery Cryme
Genesis Live
Selling England By The Pound
The Lamb Lies Down
A Trick Of The Tail
Wind And Wuthering
Seconds Out (Live)

And Then There Were Three
Duke
Abacab
Three Sides Live
Genesis

Solo
A Curious Feeling
The Wicked Lady (Film score)
Fugitive

With Mike Rutherford:
The Shout (Film score)