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Interview with Robert Fripp in Rock and Folk

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Subject: Fripp interview in Rock & Folk (Rock & Folk n°333, mai 1995)

Fellow Parleurs en Elephant!

The May 1995 issue of the French magazine "Rock & Folk" has a interesting 4 page interview with Robert Fripp about himself and King Crimson. It includes an arty photograph of the new band. Az iem shorr mozt eettee ridders arr nit fluint whiz ze language Francaise, I thought it would be good fun to translate and transcribe this interview into English for y'all (and to practice my very rusty French).

(Disclaimer: The following is an example of what you get when you translate English into French and back again into English (especially when I do the translating!). I have tried as best I can to choose words that Fripp would most likely have used when translating, but at the end these are as much my words as they are his, so I question the value of quoting any of this - paraphrasing would be more appropriate. Still, it is an interesting interview that I hope ET readers find was worth the effort to translate - beaucoup d'heures et quatre dictionnaires.)

Following the usual interview introductions and habitual musician's bio, and an explanation that Fripp was against doing interviews but that he was making an exception here, Fripp begins (note: all ellipses are copied, not added):

Fripp >> I began playing guitar December 24, 1957. My mother and I were shopping the day before Christmas, in a little town near Wimbourne, and we found an Egmond Brothers. A lady had returned this guitar to buy another more expensive one. It was a terrible instrument, and impossible to press the strings beyond the 7th fret. It demanded a colossal physical effort that I had to integrate into my technique. It took me more than 13 years to get rid of the damage that could have been forever irreparable. The beginnings were primordial. One year with this instrument was enough to mess up my playing.

Don Strike, my future teacher, lived only a few minutes from my home. If I had known him earlier, he would have found me another instrument, but unfortunately the shop keepers were only there to make money. After three months of self-teaching, I met Kathleen Gartell, a Christian woman in the Salvation Army, who ran a music school to keep young children with nothing to do busy. A few weeks later I had already mastered everything she could teach me, and she recommended Don Strike to me. Three years ago, I received a letter from her, following the death of her husband, to congratulate me on my marriage to Toyah.

At 12, I changed guitar to a Rosetti a little less atrocious. Don then taught me the basics of the guitar, since Kathleen being a pianist, could not teach me any technique. Don's teachings were based on the Big Bands of the 20's. A multi-instrumentalist, he also mastered Hawaiian guitar, banjo...His wife would often appear in a flashy skirt to do a little hula-hoop...A real character who taught me a great deal by connecting me to tradition. One can only learn the guitar alone, all good teachers know that. But a good teacher puts an apprenticeship in an historical perspective. I remember from the very

beginning having developed the technique of cross-picking, that no one was using at that time. At 14, Don Strike told me it was time I played in a band, and the Ravens was my first; since then I've spent 33 years and 9 months on the road. I also started giving guitar lessons at the age of 13 at Mrs. Gartell's school. At 17, another music store asked me to give guitar lessons. There was a convivial aspect, with all these musicians gathering at Don's home, discussing things...He then asked me if I would like to handle all his students.

At the time, the importance of this request didn't seep in. He was a very proud man, and what he had just done must have cost him. From the age of 16 to 19 I worked with my father in real estate. At university I learned economics, political economics, history and political doctrines. To survive I played in a Jewish hotel in Bournemouth. Andy Summers had just left this big band to play with Zoot Money. At 20, I realized that I had to make the decision to become a professional musician and to dedicate myself completely to it. I played with The League Of Gentlemen in the region of western England. I'd close the office at 6 and jump in the truck for some far off town. At 8 we would be on stage, playing our takes of the Beatles and the Four Seasons, complicated instrumentals of the "Orange Blossom Special" type by the Spotnicks. I ignored the fact they had sped up the tape and tried to play as fast...I was rarely at home before 2 in the morning. On the way back I'd practice my technique, diatonic arpeggio exercises, I'd fall asleep and often wake up with my hand still in the process of playing...

Rock & Folk >> In your life as well there has been a need for a break, when in 75 after the dissolution of King Crimson you declared: "the time has come for mobile units..." Is it really possible to start from scratch in music?

Fripp >> Why guitar lessons? Because I had the time to give them. I gave them at age 13, 17, 21 and 28...I know I will give more lessons or reform King Crimson. Every 7 years there are some changes in my life, it is irrational but it happens in music too. Two things allow us to characterize these changes. The effect of surprise: "how could that have happened?" And the sense of the inevitable: "how could that not have happened?" One recognizes the change by the sense of surprise, the rationality then constructs a notion of inevitability. At certain moments in my life, I pulled back from the noise and the confusion to allow the future to present itself and it has always worked.

When King Crimson finished touring in 84, I isolated myself for 3 months. The result: I met my wife, a wonderful surprise, and the Guitar Craft seminar, another wonderful surprise. People asked me, "Why did you propose to marry this woman?" Well, because I knew it was my wife. "How did you know?" How could I not have known, there is a resonance...I proposed to my wife who very kindly, and generously accepted, and May 16 1986, the day of my 40th birthday, we were married at the Fripp family church where my great great great grandfather died in 1752, and my father is also buried, joined by my 92 year old mother...Since 86 until 91 when Guitar Craft played in Europe, I only dealt with personal affairs, I was not making any money from my record company. In 91, EG, my own label, took me to court and menaced me...I've spent these past 4 years in judicial battles with BMG and Virgin Publishing, and with my management, EG, who betrayed all of its artists by selling its catalog without compensating any artist with royalties.

Four years of my life on the brink of bankruptcy, because my record company EG was also my manager since 69, a judicial aberration that could not happen today. These people had access to everything related to myself and totally controlled my interests. My tour with David Sylvian in 93 was a breath of fresh air, the first in many years. In July 93, my dear mother passed away while holding my hand. Following that I put King Crimson back on its feet. Bill Bruford still being managed by EG, I had

to wait until he was freed...That was four years of darkness, of nights spent faxing the world until dawn, of holding together with coffee...I made it through thanks to Discipline Global Mobile, my new label, putting into practice my theories from 20 years ago...When I spoke of leaving the prehistoric world, of the need for new mobile units, of reducing production and distribution costs, I was hoping that EG would understand that I was also addressing myself to them...But there you are, too bad...My label doesn't have the money to do promotional work, but one of these CDs can, by selling for 10 times less than a disc produced by Virgin, bring in as much money. Furthermore, the artists on my label give me nothing, they pocket 100% of the earnings...

Rock & Folk >> "In The Court Of The Crimson King" was a real stepping stone in the agonizing pool of Swinging London. What was that monster on the cover?

Fripp >> Barry Godber was not a painter but a computer programmer. That painting was the only one he ever did. He was a friend of Peter Sinfield, and died in 1970 of a heart attack at age 24. Peter brought this painting in and the band loved it. I recently recovered the original from EG's offices because they kept it exposed to bright light, at the risk of ruining it, so I ended up removing it. The face on the outside is the Schizoid Man, and on the inside it's the Crimson King. If you cover the smiling face, the eyes reveal an incredible sadness. What can one add? It reflects the music. I was never impressed by heavy metal. Nobody at the time sounded like us in concert. For me "Schizoid" was the first heavy metal track, that sound of an electric saxophone going through a Marshall amp...As for Michael Giles, he was a phenomenal drummer. No rock drummer could touch him in 69.

Rock & Folk >> What was rock like back then?

Fripp >> I was a young man without work signed to Decca. I arrived in London in 67 with Sergeant Pepper's bubbling inside of me. Hendrix, Bartok string quartets, an experience of passionate music...That was the power of rock in those days, without money, without the support of record companies. We were punky, like each new generation. It was the time of the student demonstrations in Paris, of Vietnam...Rock music spoke directly to youth. There was a sense of community, not yet of distance between the public and the artist...It didn't survive 1970.

Rock & Folk >> Did you know that Kurt Cobain was a big fan of your album "Red"?

Fripp >> I found out through John Wetton last year. The producer of the first Nirvana records told him: "I saw King Crimson in 74, I was 16 and I thought I saw God." He told John that "Red" was an important record to Kurt.

Rock & Folk >> Why did you release "VROOOM" on a small label?

Fripp >> The deal with Virgin simply wasn't signed yet. We recorded our rehearsals and we have already sold 50,000 copies in the States. The major labels are dinosaurs, a big body and a little brain. Virgin is headed by someone I admire and who is a little more human than the others. The problem is that it doesn't do any good to promote the music, you have to let it speak for itself and make it available...There will be other new King Crimson records on my Discipline Global label..."THRAK" released on Virgin is my best record since 79. But a live record will soon be out of the band recorded in Argentina. Since people like bootlegs, let them at least buy a good one, recorded and mastered in digital in three weeks by Robert Fripp and David Singleton...I started recording our concerts in 72 with magnetic tape...

Rock & Folk >> Why was "THRAK" recorded in Peter Gabriel's Real World studios?

Fripp >> It's the only place in the world that I like recording. The studio was built with thought to the quality of the music and it shows. Gabriel spent 5 million pounds on this studio. Thank you Peter Gabriel.

Rock & Folk >> What will the new live show be like, will there be a retrospective dimension, inasmuch as "THRAK" renews a lot of the 70's Crimson sound?...As if one shouldn't be ashamed any longer of being progressive...

Fripp >> In 81 I had a very clear idea of the way that Crimson should have sounded, but at the end of a year of touring, Bill and Adrian wanted to make changes. I asked Bill to use an electronic drum kit and to no longer hit the cymbals. As for Adrian, I asked him to modify his approach to the guitar...But at the end of a year, the cymbals had reappeared...Some people say Fripp is a dictator, but see, I've always made concessions, and in any case you can't tell musicians of that stature how they should play...Especially since the money is split equally by each member of the band. As for your question about being progressive, during the 81-84 period, there were in fact some things that one couldn't envisage anymore. Certain prejudices against the word "progressive" (which is not one for me and that I never use) have since disappeared. When we started we didn't say that we were punky, but in 77 that became possible, the same is true concerning progressive music...

The act of musical performance in a commercial context is quasi impossible. No book exists to address the complexity of this question. If I walk on stage with the idea that I am in the process of promoting my latest record, then the music is already dead. The same goes for interviews. I cannot conceive of interviews as a means to promote my music. All that matters is the quality of the performance, which involves a number of things. If I'm in a classic 3000 person theater hall, how do I play knowing that I don't hear the musicians well, that a part of the audience is too far away to see? Not to speak of the people on the sides who can't hear well...The traditional post-napoleonic theaters were created to separate audience and artist, so as to ease the idea that the artists are gods, but also to make distinctions within the audience itself. The rich in front, the poor behind, the very rich people with mistresses in the little boxes above. The traditional theaters were created so that nothing and no one communicates. Its catastrophic...

Rock & Folk >> That leaves drugs...

Fripp >> They open the door an instant, but afterwards that door closes itself, the musicians know the price they must pay, the public does too...

Rock & Folk >> You still have no idea what you are going to play in less than a month. Of what you would like to play/not play, will there be more from "Red", more psychedelia, more world-fusion?

Fripp >> These past four years I negotiated. These past 18 months, Virgin treated me like I was an enemy. I went to the USA in a bad state, to give one week of guitar classes and performances. I came back with lots of music, and then Virgin demands that I spend days and months doing promotional work in the USA and Europe. I put my guitar down and I haven't touched it since...I said to Virgin: "There's a price to pay. Do you want a new King Crimson record in 18 months? Well there won't be any way that will happen if you continue to harass me." There's a whole lot of new King Crimson

music that we won't be playing on this tour because I'm currently doing an interview with you today. King Crimson has never done a Greatest Hits Tour. Will it ever? No. King Crimson plays music that is governed by three essentials: the time, the place and the people.

Rock & Folk >> Will there ever be a reunion of former members of the band?

Fripp >> I'm constantly getting calls from former members of the band due to legal affairs with EG. Every former King Crimson member has always expressed the desire to work together again. In theory nothing would please me more. In reality I already have new musicians and my idea of a reunion of former King Crimson members would probably not suit them. These people think that they were part of the only real King Crimson. I have my own ideas as to how we could use these former members of King Crimson, but I have other priorities...

Rock & Folk >> Have you heard "Testing To Destruction", the new David Cross solo album?

Fripp >> No...

Rock & Folk >> What do you think in general about contemporary guitarists, from The Edge to Steve Vai?

Fripp >> I never comment on other musicians. There is however an extraordinary rebound of the instrument...In 69 there was a great hostility and great prejudice toward technique and intelligence in music, as if one had to be stupid and incompetent to matter in British rock. Today it's like athletics, where people are ready to lose a competition to make money. The athletic spirit is dead, the guitarists, although more and more technical, play only on the surface...But there are some extraordinary young musicians...

Rock & Folk >> There is a big return to the idiomatic in music, blues, country, forms of expression simple and "pure", that you have never encountered in your 25 year career...

Fripp >> I've never thought in terms of categories. "Starless And Bible Black", "Red", "Larks" don't sound like the blues...

Rock & Folk >> Unless one considers the sometimes fretful nature of your playing as a personal interpretation of the blues?

Fripp >> The vocabulary of the blues is very limited, but some musicians with a great expressive ability know how to live with it. Take for example the English language. There are a thousand ways to pronounce the same word by using different accents. The same with words of the same sentence...This is also true of the blues. In 67, I wondered more what would have happened if Hendrix had interpreted Bartok's string quartets, or Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring". Hendrix with his power, his distinct style, his cutting edge in a totally different framework. The merging of the Afro-American culture, the blues and jazz, and the tonal harmonic European system. For me, "Larks Tongue's in Aspic" tried to answer this question: later I tried to enlarge the framework of African music with "Discipline"...So, o.k. I'm not a blues guitarist, but I think I've met the Spirit of the blues several times...

Rock & Folk >> Do you at least play the blues at home, to relax?

Fripp >> No. In 73 I was good friends with Robin Trower. He played me the blues, made me tapes...He educated me in the blues vocabulary, that I adore. Clapton, Mayall with the Bluesbreakers...But that's not my path.

Rock & Folk >> An idea comes to mind. Would the solo on David Bowie's "Fashion" not in fact be the most bluesy thing you ever recorded?

Fripp >> Yes, that's a wonderful example. There's blues-rock played with a contemporary grammar. Yes, a very good example, thank you.

Rock & Folk >> Krishna-Murti, Gurdjieff...?

Fripp >> I don't know any of these people, their names say nothing to me...

Rock & Folk >> Of course, of course...Has the gurdjieffian theory of multiplicity not modified the question of harmonic intervals, and your scales in half key?

Fripp >> If the question is to know if I have a discipline of life, the answer is yes. But I don't see things in categorical terms...

Rock & Folk >> We know that you are sensitive to the oriental way of thinking, not centered around a subject that represents the world...

Fripp >> Yes, exactly...Let's take the example of karate. Is it something that each time is new and different? Yes. If I don't think that each situation is different I lose the fight. A lot of people in Guitar Craft have done martial arts. As for me, a little tai-chi...The question is to know if one is interested by a consciousness of this discipline, no? You must not think during the confrontation, discipline is always present within me, all those names that you mentioned to me as well, but I must not think about it...

Rock & Folk >> Will you ever write about your method of playing?

Fripp >> No. Everything that I can think of that would seem important to me does not give me the impression it could be recorded in a book.

Rock & Folk >> Hyde Park in 69 with the Stones, rock in its satanic sense, does that say anything to you?

Fripp >> There were a lot of people (laughs). It was a big event, and it was free. If the estimated 700,000 people had paid for their tickets it would have been a disaster, with riots, etc. Since it was free it left the door open, people didn't expect much of anything, and were ready to graciously welcome the unknown. Rock was a way to reunite people. We could be considered as spokespersons.

Rock & Folk >> Is this quasi religious vision of rock dead, and do you regret that?

Fripp >> The spirit of 69 never made it to 1970. But to say that rock is dead, certainly not. Every day there are young musicians of all ages that continue to play rock. The spirit of this music is alive. Even

if the industry has closed a lot of doors to the music. The means and possibility that music can still be produced in this commercial culture has been very reduced, with all that conspires so that the music cannot be produced. These interviews that I'm forced to do, risk to compromise future concerts. But everything can still happen. I am here.

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