



An Interview With Judge Smith

by Belway Thomas on 14th May 2000

Q.

Can we get one small point cleared up first? Where did you get the name Judge?

A.

I was born with it. I have several forenames and that's one of them. A friend of mine, the late John Hargrave - 'White Fox' - the writer, mystic and leader of the Green Shirts started to use it in the mid-Seventies and other friends followed suit.



Q.

What's your musical background?

A.

I grew up during the Sixties and, musically, my roots are in that decade. But I hope it doesn't show too much!

Q.

Any major influences?

A.

Hundreds, and only some from the Sixties. I could list dozens of names, but often individual recordings were equally important. Bowie, Cream, The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, Sex Pistols, Peter Hammill, Frank Zappa... I've learnt the most from Hammill and Zappa.

Q.

I can't say I hear much of that in your music.

A.

Thank God for that! If your influences can be identified from your own work, then you're not assimilating the stuff properly. It's not going in deep enough, and you end up simply reflecting your influences in the form of imitation. I'd hate to write music that people thought was Bowiesque, and fake Zappa is truly horrible.

Q.

Quite a few of the names you mentioned are involved in 'Curly's Airships' in one way or another.

A.

Yes, I've been very lucky to actually work with some people who were important parts of my artistic education.

Q.

Speaking of education, are you a trained musician or self-taught?

A.

I'm not sure if I think of myself as a musician at all. In terms of conventional musical skills, I can sing, though some may dispute that, and I'm an incompetent drummer. That's about it.

Q.

There must be more to it than that.

A.

Well, I write music, or more correctly, I make up music. I can't actually write it down in dots and bars, and I can't, properly speaking, play it. But on the other hand composing music is not the same as playing it. Music gets played by musicians; it gets written by composers. The jobs are different, even when it's the same guy doing them.

Q.

Do you feel your lack of musical skills limits what you are able to write?

A.

It hasn't so far. I find I'm able to imagine quite complex music in some detail. I can hear it in my head. And by tapping away with one finger, a keyboard and a sequencer, I can slowly build up a picture of what I'm hearing. Sometimes I'll work on this picture until it becomes the finished image, but on other projects, like 'Curly', it remains a sketch for other musicians to listen to and replace with their own contributions.

I'm sure I write better music as a non-musician than I would as an average guitar-strummer. I emphasise the word 'average'. There is a great temptation for a not-very-good musician to write things he or she is able to play, rather than the things he or she is able to imagine. A really good musician, who can play whatever comes into his head doesn't have that problem, but if I can't reach that standard, I personally feel I'm better off not trying to play that riff from 'Smoke on the Water'.

Q.

What is your motivation in spending such an enormous amount of time and energy on a project that is quite so far outside the mainstream?

A.

You make 'Curly' sound a bit weird, but it seems pretty straightforward to me. I suppose my attitude is down to a Sixties thing: the idea that rock n'roll could be a serious art form. It's not a fashionable view at the moment, but there was a brief window of time when it looked as if rock music might have a parallel development alongside regular pop-music, dance music, entertainment music, into something more ambitious, something bigger, more intellectually challenging. What we got, of course, was a lot of pretentious bombast and noodling, with a few notable exceptions. Unfortunately, the people who could have taken the thing forward tended to be also very good at bashing out hit singles. The Money Power is very hard to resist. In fact the music industry and the entire rock culture itself simply doesn't encourage considered, developmental work. I'm trying to avoid the word 'progressive' here; a good word spoilt.

Q.

But you resisted the lures of commercialism?

A.

No fear. I did my best to make money out of rock n'roll. I didn't sell my soul because no one offered to buy it.

Q.

Where did this idea of 'Songstory' come from?

A.

I've always wanted to tell stories with music. Most of my regular, normal-length songs tell stories of one kind or another. I'm less interested in doing straightforward love songs, for example. The telling of stories is a primal human activity; cavemen were doing it. And what do you have to do when you tell stories? You need to convey emotions, atmospheres, moods, excitement; and music is fantastic at doing this. That is what music does. And I think that of all kinds of music, rock music does it best of all. It's the most powerful and versatile communicator of emotions, feelings, moods, vibes... anything intangible, there is. Just add words, language, to cover the other, tangible, stuff: information, narration, facts and so on, and you get what should be the ultimate storytelling medium.

Q.

But is there anything particularly new about that?

A.

No, songwriters are doing it all the time. I just like the idea of doing it on a bigger canvas. I've always liked the few really long classic singles: 'Bohemian Rhapsody', 'Music', 'MacArthur Park', 'Mr Blue Sky', 'Wuthering Heights' and so on. Not the ones that just repeat the same tune over and over, or have long instrumental jams over the riff and five-minute drum solos, I like the ones with lots of different sections and tempo changes, and something different every minute or so.

Q.

But isn't pop music's greatest achievement the three-minute single?

A.

Of course. Don't misunderstand me; I love regular, normal pop records. Three minutes of heaven. But rock n'roll music can do other things as well. Art forms move on; they have to, or they stagnate and die.

Q.

But in this day of short attention spans, do you think people have the time and inclination to sit through two-and-a-quarter hours of music?

A.

Well not everybody. Why should they? But there are plenty of people with the interest and the capacity to follow 'Curly's Airships' through. It's not as if it's difficult music or intellectually obscure. Hundreds of thousands of people read novels, poetry, serious non-fiction that's far more demanding than this, and listen to classical music that's far tougher-going than this. As I said, by those standards, 'Curly' is pretty straightforward. It's just the scale and format which are unusual.

Q.

If not unique.

A.

Well I have to say that I'm unaware of anything else like it.

Q.

And where did your obsession with airships come from?

A.

Hang on a minute. I'm not obsessed with airships. I'm interested in airships. I'm obsessed with music... But I do think that airships are a wonderful metaphor for human aspiration: an escape to heaven from the confines of earth, a simple concept, a beautiful idea, that proves horribly dangerous and difficult to achieve. But the idea of airships has certainly appealed to me my whole life. When I was about thirteen, I met Barnes Wallis, who designed two of the airships I've written about, in his famous drawing office at the old Brooklands race-track. He was rather irritated that this boy wanted to ask him about airships rather than hypersonic flight, which was his consuming passion at that time, so the meeting was not a particular success. And about twenty years ago I was lucky enough to spend some time with Captain George Meager, one of the last surviving rigid airship pilots, and certainly the last living man to have piloted the R.101 - he made one flight and thought it was so dangerous he refused to have anything more to do with it. A great character, a real airship hero. I learned a lot about the attitude of these 1920s flying men that afternoon.

Q.

How did you set about the writing?

A.

Well, I spent about six months reading everything I could lay my hands on about airships, the British Airship Program and the period in general. I had to get the period stuff right, as well as the facts. And the 1920s language was very important to me. I ended up reading a lot of Dornford Yates and Dorothy L Sayers to get the slang and the catch-phrases, and a lot of aviators' memoirs to get their frame of mind and view of the world.

Q.

It's an interesting period.

A.

An extraordinary period. The generation that survived the First World War felt they were living a charmed life; anything was possible, and personal danger just didn't enter the equation. They were not like us; it was a totally different mind-set. Imagine the prototype of a new aircraft today making it's first test flight with it's designers and chief executives of the company on board, or filling a passenger craft with highly explosive hydrogen. This wonderful, 'Roaring Twenties' view of life was a major factor in bringing about the disaster, of course.

Q.

Presumably, with a project this size, you have to plan everything out first, the plot and characters and so on.

A.

You certainly do, but the trouble was, I didn't do it, at least not initially. I deliberately started off trying to write the words and the music just as they came into my head, without any forward planning. The idea was to be more 'intuitive' and 'spontaneous', so I just wrote and wrote, without looking forwards or back, for a period of about six months. Then I thought I'd better see what I'd done. I found I'd got an hour-and-a-quarter of words and music, and I'd barely even started the story! It was horrible. I didn't know what to do. If I carried on the same way, the finished piece would be about five hours long. There was nothing for it but to bite the bullet and scrap the lot. I had to start again. I was able to reuse a lot of riffs and chord sequences, but the bulk

of the work was in the melody lines and the words, and they were a complete write-off.

Q.

How long did the whole writing process take?

A.

As opposed to the recording process? I suppose about two years at least, and that doesn't include a six months' gap when I had to relocate from Norfolk to the South Coast; that's to say, dismantle the studio, find a new place, do it up, move house and then rebuild the studio. It turned out to be six months to the day from switching off the equipment for the last time in Norfolk to my first day's work in the new studio.

Q.

What's your studio like?

A.

I live in a small bungalow on the edge of the South Downs. I had to find somewhere with very little traffic noise and not on a flight path, and bungalows are good for recording in because there's no one above or below to be blasted out by the noise. I have three rooms, kitchen and bathroom, and the biggest room is the studio, so basically I live in two rooms: a little cramped but I live alone so it suits me fine. As for equipment, the project was recorded on a Fosdex half-inch, sixteen-track recorder, so we're not talking high-end, big budget recording here. My set-up is about as basic as you can get and still achieve professional results.

Q.

I take it budget considerations were important.

A.

What budget? There was almost no money, and there was no record company or publisher, or producer, or management involved. If we hadn't got a small grant from the National Lottery, I don't know how we'd have finished it. In terms of budget, 'Curly's Airships' is the musical equivalent of 'The Blair Witch Project'.

Q.

Can you tell me something about the grant you got?

A.

It was from a scheme called A4E, 'Arts for Everyone', in which the Arts Council distributed money from the National Lottery for arts projects, with far less bureaucracy and red-tape than is normally the case. It did a great deal of good and enabled hundreds of small projects to get off the ground. We were very lucky. Naturally the powers-that-be soon put a stop to it, and small grants are now very difficult to get.

Q.

I take it that no one actually got paid.

A.

Out of the eighteen performers involved, only three were paid, and they weren't paid very much. I fed them though. It's one of Judge's Rules of Recording: 'Always feed the musicians.' If a good musician likes the music, they will do anything for you, but they have to eat.

Q.

'Curly's Airships' doesn't sound like a piece of low-budget recording. It's a very big, complex sound. It sounds as if it was recorded somewhere big and expensive.

A.

Thank you; I'm glad. You see, a low-budget production, be it film, album, whatever, doesn't get any points from the audience for being done on the cheap. The public doesn't make any allowances. The person who buys a copy of 'Curly' doesn't care how much it cost to make; the listener just wants it to be very, very good. This CD will be judged by the same standards as a production costing half-a-million to make.

Q.

That must be a bit scary.

A.

It doesn't bother me. This record is a classy piece of kit, made by professional artists working to professional standards. That's what makes something sound good, not the money you throw at it. I should make it clear though, that the sound quality of the final product is mainly due to the superb mixing and mastering, and of course, that definitely wasn't done by me, or in my studio. I had great musicians and all I had to do was to get good, solid recordings of what they did.

Q.

You use quite an eclectic line-up of instruments.

A.

I suppose so, but the instrumentation is pretty controlled; there's a logic to it. The main line-up is guitars, organs, bass and drums, with some saxophone touches; that's all.

Q.

No synthesisers?

A.

None, just organs, so the basic sound has a classic, and quite retro, flavour. The music isn't retro, just the sound. Then there are a couple of acoustic airship-shanties with accordion, banjo and mandolin; some tango sections with accordion and Latin percussion, and four marches for military band. There's also a piece for a 1920s dance band and some passages for sitar and tabla. That's about it.

Q.

How did you do the military band stuff?

A.

I did a deal with an arranger friend of mine, Michael Brand, a terrific composer and arranger, who wanted some help with a musical he was writing. I wrote a few lyrics for him, and, in return, he arranged my marches for a wind band and got it recorded. His company make wind band records.

Q.

And who are the Mystery Marching Band?

A.

What can I say? It's a mystery.

Q.

I can see how military marches would be appropriate for the story, and the dance band number, but how do Tango and Indian music fit in?

A.

The Tangos all relate to the character of Lord Thompson, as sung by Peter Hammill. Thompson is very debonair, very dashing and romantic, a great ladies' man. I see him as something of a lounge lizard, so I'm making a reference to the 1920s Tango dance craze by making all his music Tangos. It's not real Tango, of course, just a rock n'roll version - of a 1920s British dance band version - of real Tango.

Q.

And the Indian music?

A.

The R.101 was attempting to fly to India when it crashed, an almost impossible journey, given the condition of the ship. So each time Curly thinks about this very daunting prospect, we hear the Indian instruments.

Q.

Those passages sound very authentic.

A.

I know an excellent Dutch percussionist and tabla player called Rene van Commenee, so I contacted him and he organised his sitar partner, Tammo Heikens, to arrange my themes for the instruments. Rene was working in the music technology department of a large arts college in Utrecht and he arranged for me to give a couple of lectures there. In return, the college paid my fares and let me use their excellent recording studio to record these bits of music. They did a wonderful job, I think. It was just another one of the hoops I had to jump through in order to get the record made without any money to pay for it.

Q.

And the rest of the band?

A.

Basically all my friends have been press-ganged into helping me. I called in all available favours. Almost all the performers are chums of mine. Do you want me to run through them?

Q.

Please.

A.

The organist is Hugh Banton, who I've known since 1969, when Peter Hammill and I recruited him for the Van Der Graaf Generator. A phenomenal musician. He's one of the last of the classically trained, psychedelic-gothic Hammond organists who came through in the late Sixties: Keith Emerson, John Lord, Vincent Crane, that guy from Procol Harum, Ray Manzarek from the Doors - kind of. But I think Hugh was always the most radical. And the wonderful thing is that his music hasn't softened up or mellowed. He's now a successful organ builder; he designs and installs his own computer-driven church organs. He's a cultured man, very respectable, but underneath there's a wildman. Let him loose on some interesting music and he'll come up with extraordinary, sometimes quite shocking and scary stuff. An amazing person.

Q.

I noticed that he also does the airship engine sound effects on the organ.

A.

Yes. I spent ages tracking down authentic sounding period recordings for the engine noises; I even went to an air show with a DAT recorder to tape some old aircraft, but when Hugh heard my efforts, he said 'I can do better than that' and started experimenting with the organs. He came up with some great sounds, and I thought it was very appropriate to use instruments where possible, rather than sound effects. He created entirely different sounds for three airships, and makes them accelerate, go into reverse, idle and switch off.

John Ellis, the principal guitarist, had an equal impact on the work. I've known 'Fury', as his friends call him, for over fifteen years. He's one of my closest friends, but this is the first time we've done any serious work together. He's another master musician, the complete professional, but his punk roots are still there, and he plays with great energy and attitude. He works very fast and produces an enormous variety of work. I've never met anyone who knows more about so many different kinds of music. Both Fury and Hugh put in a vast amount of time on the project, and between them, they really defined the whole sound and character of the thing.

I suppose the next most significant performer is David Shaw-Parker. He's another one of these multi-talented blighters: a successful professional actor, a musician, singer, writer. I met him through his interest - one might say devotion - to the music of Peter Hammill. David wrote a marvellous book on the subject called 'The Lemming Chronicles'. He's very cosmopolitan and at home around Europe, and has developed this wonderful style of Mediterranean guitar. So he plays all the acoustic guitar parts on 'Curly' with this great Franco-Spanish, candlelit-bistro-style panache. He also turned out to be a cracking banjo player, so I took full advantage of that as well. Finally he sings some 'character parts' and is one of the actors who do the fragments of 'overheard' spoken dialogue. A knock-out talent.

Then we come to my four guest-star vocalists. Don't know who to start with. Alphabetical order! Arthur Brown sings the part of the Chairman of a Whitehall committee which keeps appearing, and he's also the tormented airship commander, 'Lucky Breeze'. This was really amazing for me: to work with a real idol of mine. At the end of the Sixties, I saw most of the great, classic performers of the time, including Hendrix, the Stones and so on, but I've never seen anything as completely mindblowing as the Crazy World of Arthur Brown. It really opened up a world of possibilities to me. To describe his show as theatrical is misleading; it makes him sound posey and posturing. Arthur is performance art. And what a singer! I got to know him quite recently when he moved back to this country from the States, and it was so nice to find that an idol need not have feet of clay. He's a wonderful man, very spiritual, a guru figure in many ways, and, best of all, his voice and energy are undiminished. When I told him about the project, he asked me if he could be in it. How lucky can you get? It's high time he was a world star all over again.

Pete Brown I knew of in the late Sixties as one of the country's leading young poets, and of course, as the lyricist for Cream. He took an interest in the Van Der Graaf, and we've been in touch intermittently ever since. He's also an excellent singer and all-round percussionist, and, these days, he's in demand as a record producer specialising in Blues. He's always taken a kindly view of my stuff, and when I realised that I would need some good, 'real' percussion, and that there were a few extra bits that needed singing by a different voice, he was the obvious choice. He added a completely different vibe to the tracks he played on. He's a big personality and it comes over in his music.

What can I say about Peter Hammill that hasn't been said before? I've learned an enormous amount from him, not only as a composer but about the way an artist should approach his work. I've known him for a very long time, and it was an obvious thing for me to ask him to sing on 'Curly'. He's pretty easy going about doing little

one-off projects and guest appearances, as long as the projects are what he would call 'honourable work'. They're probably a bit of light relief from his constant recording and touring. He's done more than fifty albums now, you know, and within those records, in my view, you can find some of the most profound, advanced and perfect music that has ever been made under the name of pop or rock. Anyhow, on 'Curly' he's just singing, and he takes the part of Lord Thompson, the villain, or perhaps the tragic hero, of the piece. He does it perfectly, of course, with that wonderful, saturnine voice of his.

Paul Roberts I've known for a much shorter time. I met him through John Ellis, of course, and their work with the Stranglers. Paul's a great rock singer and a really dynamic front man. The Stranglers live shows are very well done indeed; it's a tight band. Paul does a variety of bits and pieces on 'Curly', including the important big-ballad 'It's the Silence that Kills You', which he does solo and then again, later, as a duet with Arthur Brown. Good combination! There's another bit where he had to do some singing in a 'helium voice', you know, a very high, munchkin voice, in a section about the dangers of inhaling the gas these airships were filled with. Rather than fake it electronically, we decided to do it for real, so the studio ceiling was covered with gas balloons for him to inhale. By the time we got it done, he was passing out on the floor. He's a professional.

I should also say something about David Jackson, the saxophonist, who I've known since 1970. He was in a band I had after leaving Van Der Graaf Generator, and when my band broke up, he joined VDGG. On 'Curly' there was always going to be a horn or woodwind part doing odd lines throughout the piece, and I'm delighted that David was able to do it. Of course he's a great improvising musician, and this project doesn't give him much scope to cut loose, but his sound is unique; it couldn't be anyone else playing. Only really fine sax players develop a unique voice. On one track he recreates the sound of the entire sax section of a 1920s dance band to perfection. He also loves playing penny-whistle and he's very much to the fore in the shanties.

Q.

What about the other main voice?

A.

You mean our Tenor. One of the original sounds I had in my head at the very beginning of the project was a classical tenor voice. I could hear this high, rather unearthly, male voice in various different contexts: a very particular kind of voice, not an operatic tenor - frankly, I dislike that bellowing and braying intensely - it had to be a church voice. They call it a 'soft tenor' but to me it's a different animal. The problem was that the worlds of choristers and of rock n'roll don't interface very often, and it was some while before I was able to find a singer who was good enough to do the stuff I'd written, which is not easy to sing, and who would have some sympathy and understanding of what we were trying to do. I think we did very well to find Paul Thompson. At the time, he was principal tenor with the choir of Christ Church College, Oxford, and he's now doing post-graduate studies at the Royal College of Music.

I've told you about the Dutch sitar and tabla players, but not about the accordionist. His name's Joe Hinchliff, and he's with a band from Brighton called 'Tragic Roundabout' who do music from Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East: 'Klesmer' music and that sort of thing. I was in Lewes with Arthur and we saw them busking. It's great get-up-and-dance stuff, a terrific band. So Joe was able to add some authentic gypsy flavours to the tangos and some folk-roots credibility to the shanties.

Rikki Patten is another Brighton musician; he plays quite a lot for Arthur Brown. He's really talented at guitar and organ, but on 'Curly', he has a very specific role as Supplementary Guitarist. My tunes, my vocal melody lines, are pretty complicated in places, and they use quite a lot of unusual notes, so I like to double the more surprising bits with another instrument. It makes the tunes easier to listen to and follow. So once the principal recording was finished for the whole thing, I went through

it and identified the places where the tunes needed a bit of extra help. Hugh added some of these phrases on organ, but others would sound better on guitar. John Ellis was, by this time, up to his neck in other projects, so I recruited Rikki for the job. He plays a Gibson, while Fury uses a Fender-type guitar, and, as any guitarist will tell you, they make completely different sorts of sounds, so this added a nice extra dimension. Rikki brought a lot of individual style to this very unpromising job, and I hope to work with him again in a more substantial way.

Where are we now on the list? Yes, Ian Fordham on Bass Guitar. I did most of the bass lines myself, with sampled sounds, but there were a few tracks where I couldn't get it just right, so my old chum Ian, who I've known since the mid-Seventies when he played bass in my group 'The Imperial Storm Band', came in. In fact he'd already devised an excellent bass part for one track, because the tune started life years ago as a prospective theme tune for the TV show 'Spitting Image'.

Q.

Which track was that?

A.

Not telling. Guess. Oh yes, and he plays Double Bass for the 'Hughie Banton's Mayfair Aviators' track.



There are three remaining performers, all professional actors. Nick Lucas is involved in the little pieces of 'overheard' control cabin dialogue, and he also sings as a member of the awful Committee. I've known Nick since I was thirteen! And he brought his chum Mike Bell to help out. I had an actors' day at the studio, with mics set up in different rooms and people running about to get the effect of movement. The only woman performer we have is Gwendolyn Gray, a most remarkable lady whose stage career started in the 1930s. She was a leading lady throughout the Forties, and did some of the earliest British TV commercials, amongst other things. She's been a close friend of mine since I wrote a musical about her late husband about twenty-five years ago.

Q.

What was that?

A.

'The Kibbo Kift', written with Maxwell Hutchinson. Gwen is now almost ninety, and was in her late 80s when she recorded the part of the Medium for me. She's now partially sighted, so when we did the recording, I wrote out her lines for her on huge sheets of card. She was brilliant, I think: very convincing.

Q.

Was it a deliberate decision, not to have any other women in the project?

A.

Good Lord no! But inescapably, the story is about life in the Services in the 1920s and, regrettably, women at that time were not directly involved in the events we're dealing with. Of course it would have been extremely interesting to explore the domestic and romantic lives of more of the characters, but I think it would have been wrong to put in a number for Curly's wife Suzie, for example, or Lord Thompson's exotic mistress, just for the sake of having more of a female presence. I was cutting, cutting, cutting all the time, and it's still a long piece. There just wasn't the space.

Q.

So once you had your band and your singers, how did you organise the recording?

A.

As I've already said, it was a long drawn-out process. Once I'd got through to the end from the writing point of view, I edited together a super-rough demo of the whole thing, with very simple accompaniment and my voice singing everything, just to see how it worked and whether all the separate bits joined up properly. As a result of that, I made a few changes and amendments, but, surprisingly, I found I didn't have to do any major rewrites. Then I divided up the music into sections for recording purposes. These aren't the track divisions on the finished CDs; they're smaller sections, and each one was recorded separately. In one of those spooky coincidences, it turns out that there were exactly one hundred and one of these.

Q.

As in R.101...Now, the CDs are divided into 'Chapters' and also tracks. What is the thinking behind that?

A.

The fifteen Chapters are the main divisions of the story, like the chapters in a book, hence the name. They relate to the story rather than the music. If you didn't want to listen to the whole work, then one or more consecutive Chapters would make a logical chunk to hear. The tracks, on the other hand, divide along musical lines, each track tends to make sense as a piece of music; although with my style of writing, most tracks are made up of several contrasting fragments. Now, how technical do you want me to be? Can I talk nerdy?

Q.

Be my guest. We are on the Internet after all.

A.

OK. Here comes the science. Each of these mini-tracks, which might be anywhere from 30 seconds long to three or four minutes, started life as a piece of half-inch, 16 track recording tape with a strip of SMPTE time code on one track. My guide tracks were composed on an Atari computer sequencer, using simple sampled sounds from my old Emax sampler. These covered all the basic guitar and organ parts as I thought they would be, and I recorded these, one at a time, to tape, using the time code off tape to drive the sequencer. Then I'd devise the bass lines and the drum parts using a Peavy Spectrum Bass module and an E-mu ProCussion box of sampled drum sounds.

Q.

The drums sound very realistic, not like a sequencer.

A.

Nice of you to say so. It's quite possible to achieve a very realistic drum track, but it takes an awful lot of button-pushing. It's very time consuming, and of course you have to be a drummer, even a bad one like me. Modern dance music is built on the shortcomings and limitations of drum machines, and of course exploits their considerable advantages, but if you want to create the sound of a real drummer playing a real drum kit, you have to put in a lot of work. OK, so the bass and drum parts I've just done, are intended to be the finished article, but I just record them roughly, as a guide.

Q.

Why is that?

A.

Because to record the drums onto tape properly would take up around eight tracks, and the bass would use up another two, and I haven't even started on the guitars or organs or vocals. So for this reason, the bass and drums never go onto the finished multitrack tape at all; they are added at the mixing stage. Right, so then I do some rough vocals, and then John Ellis would come down and the real recording could begin. He'd stay for a couple of days, and we'd work through fifteen or so of these little pieces. I'd have the chord sequence written out; he'd listen to the piece and interpret what I'd done. He might come up with several different ideas which I would never have thought of in a hundred years. Most of the rock-based pieces had several different guitar parts, but we worked very quickly, recording over the top of my rough tracks. John used just one guitar, a Fender Strat clone, and a Q-verb GT effects processor which went straight into the desk and onto tape, mostly without any further processing. He is an excellent programmer and would create new effects with the Q-verb, on the fly, for every track.

Q.

What about the organ?

A.

We had to be quite innovative about this. Hugh lives in the North of England, and I'm on the South Coast, and it would have been quite impractical for him to have to bring these large instruments a very long way for the dozens of recording sessions it would take to record his stuff. However, he has a Session-8 hard disk recording system of his own, so we decided to use that. Once the guitar tracks were done for a worthwhile number of short pieces, I would do a rough, mono mix of them onto the Left hand track of a DAT digital cassette tape, with their bits of time code going down from my multitrack master tape onto the Right hand side of the DAT. I'd send this to Hugh in the post, along with chord sheets and cassettes of my rough ideas, and he would transfer the DAT tape to two tracks of his Session-8. He could then work at leisure, working out and recording his own parts onto the remaining tracks, and sending me cassettes of what he'd done, for me to listen to.

Finally, when we had a worthwhile amount of material covered, I would put the 16-track in the car - which was quite a job in itself; I had to install a block-and-tackle to hoist it into its box, and ramps to get it out of the house - and take it up to Hugh's place. Then we'd link my machine to his, to make his Session-8 run under the control of the time code on my master tapes, and we could transfer Hugh's organ tracks onto my 16-track, in sync with the guitars and everything else. That was the idea; in fact we had problems with the synchronisation, which tended to drift out on the longer pieces. Hardly surprising really; regulating a computer with an old-fashioned tape recorder is like trying to control an electric clock with a steam-engine. Still, it all worked eventually. I had to make eight or so visits, of a couple of days each, to get the job done. This was, in fact, a very agreeable way for Hugh to work, as he could experiment far more without me breathing down his neck, and I think the organ work is stunning.

Q.

Do you like to keep a firm control over everything?

A.

In some respects, yes, I'm a control freak. I know when it's right, and I know when it's wrong, and when it's wrong, it has to be put right. But otherwise, I hope I'm pretty open to the moment and to other people's ideas. There's no point in having great musicians if you don't give them the space to do their thing. Far more often than not, they'll come up with something better than you originally had in mind. Of course, it depends on the material. I try very hard to write music with strong bones: real chord sequences that go somewhere, riffs that stick in the mind, big tunes - even if I don't always succeed. And if music has strong bones, it will take any amount of weirdness

or wildness or anarchistic creativity that a musician might throw at it.

Q.

Would it have been better to have everyone working and recording together at the same time?

A.

Possibly, but I rather doubt it. That situation, of a band recording everything at the same time in the same room, doesn't happen as often as you might think. And it usually ends up with each musician going back and re-recording their parts again, separately. But it is true that this project was done in a particularly fragmented way. Hugh and John, in fact, never met during the entire recording process!

Q.

Was it hard to keep motivated for such a long time?

A.

Motivation isn't really a problem for me; once I get my teeth into something, I don't let go. I'm very tenacious. But it was very exhausting, very demanding. I won't do anything so big again without outside support. There were some major setbacks to deal with as well. I managed to do the classic computer goof of not backing-up my work often enough. I filled a floppy disk with drum and bass parts, about three months' work, and thought I'd better back it up. Got out a fresh disk to format, and put the wrong disk in the machine and re-formatted my original disk! All gone. No excuse; as my girlfriend sometimes has to point out, I can be a complete plonker. Just had to go back and do it all again. Still, I'll never make that mistake again.

On another occasion, I was held up for weeks because I had to give up my best microphone. I'd been using a beautiful old 1950s RCA ribbon mic, the kind Elvis Presley used, which I'd been lent years before. Then, in the middle of recording my finished vocals, I got an urgent call to say that the owner needed it back double-quick. Good mics are not cheap, and I had to sell my beloved Hammond organ to buy a replacement. And of course the Hammond had to be serviced and advertised before it could eventually be sold etc. etc. Still, when I got low, I found that listening to what we'd done soon cheered me up.

Q.

Are you still pleased with it?

A.

To be honest, I'd have to say yes. It still gives me a buzz. But who knows, I could be deluded.

Q.

Not all the recording took place in a studio, did it?

A.

No. You mean the location recordings?

Q.

Yes. What was the idea behind recording at the churches and the hanger?

A.

This is what I call the Conceptual Art element of the project. I thought it would be fun to try and record some bits of music at places that are associated with particular parts

of the story. So, for one section that takes place the night before the R.101 starts its final flight, we recorded the organ part in Cardington parish church, which was the local church for the Airship Works. You can see the airship sheds from there, and the mass grave of the R.101's passengers and crew is in the churchyard. Members of the crew worshiped there, and the organ is the same instrument that was in use at the time. We use it on a setting of the 'Ave Maria', which seems appropriate.

Then we had a dramatic organ solo which happens as the R.101 is flying low over Beauvais Cathedral, shortly before the crash. So Hugh and I went to Beauvais and recorded the solo on the gigantic cathedral organ in this astonishing building. We combined this mission with a pilgrimage to the crash site and the huge and impressive memorial, put up by the French. We also visited the splendidly eccentric R.101 Museum in the town.

The third location we used was the R.101's shed at Cardington. This is still there, though pretty shabby today, and mind-bogglingly huge. Nothing gives a better idea of the size of these airships, particularly when you realise that the R.101 fitted into the shed with only six feet to spare at either end. There's a whole section of the piece that describes Curly's reactions when he first sees the half-finished airship inside the shed, and this section features sound effects of the thing being built, with drills and riveters banging away, and a grand guitar solo. These were already recorded on tape, and so I made a cassette tape of the construction sound effects and another one of John's guitar solo: just his guitar, nothing else. Then we took a cassette player and a battery-powered guitar amp up to Cardington, and played these tapes loudly in the middle of the shed. We recorded the amazing echoes and reverberation on a portable DAT recorder, and at the mixing stage, these were mixed with the original sounds. The shed was in use at that time as a warehouse, full of plastic dustbins, and we only got in there by the good offices of Den Burchmore of the Airship Heritage Trust. The guys working there kindly turned off their fork-lift trucks for five minutes while we scurried about the alleyways between huge piles of dustbins trying to catch these sounds.

There were a few other minor examples of Conceptual mucking about. For example, there's a passage where John was trying to make the sound of an airship breaking up in flight. He needed a piece of rough metal to scrape over his guitar strings so we used a piece of broken airship I happen to have. I thought it was worth going to all this trouble just for the hell of it, just to say we'd done it, not so much for the acoustic results that I thought we were likely to get, but I was amazed at what a difference they make. The Cardington church organ sounds delightfully English and authentic, while the Beauvais recording is astonishing. We did it on a cassette recorder, because we didn't have a DAT recorder available, but the sound is fantastic, quite unlike anything else on the record. Well worth all the effort. As for the stuff we did in the airship shed, I would have thought that, with modern digital-echo and reverb processors being available, our recordings of the ambience in there would have been redundant, but these passages have a unique quality of sound which we couldn't have achieved otherwise. A lot is down to David Lord's skill during the mix, of course.

Q.

How was the mixing done?

A.

David Lord mixed my last CD, 'Dome of Discovery', and he seems to have a weakness for difficult and not very profitable projects. I know him because his studio and Peter Hammill's studio share the same building. He's an extraordinary man, a serious classical musician and composer, turned rock'n'roll producer. Delightful company, and effortlessly brilliant at what he does. His contribution to 'Curly's Airships' was absolutely crucial; the quality of the finished sound is down, very much, to his work.

For the mixing, I had to take my 16-track, my computer and my sound modules down to Bath and transfer all sixteen tracks of my master-tapes onto David's large array of

ADAT digital recorders. Then, as we mixed each individual 'fragment' or mini-track of music, the time code, now safely on David's system, could control my computer which, in turn, was driving my sound modules and playing the drum and bass parts in real time, as the mix happened. This meant that, if my precious drum and bass stuff wasn't up to scratch, David could oh-so-diplomatically suggest an alternative, and the parts could be changed in my computer's sequencer there and then. The finished mixes were transferred onto David's hard-disk editing system, and stitched together into the tracks as you hear them. I had to schlep all my gear up and down to Bath about eight times between March 1999 and January 2000, thirteen weeks work in all. In between stays in Bath, I was recording my finished vocals, which I find is a wretched job. I love singing, but recording vocals is hell when you have to do all your own button pushing at the same time as well. Of course the vocals on 'Curly' made the mixing a very delicate job.

Q.

Why, particularly?

A.

Well, because a songstory is a narrative form, it's absolutely essential that all the words can be heard and understood first time through. With a normal song, you can afford to set the vocals back a little, make them sound good with echo and reverb, and maybe you miss a few words the first time you hear it. That's ok, because it usually doesn't go on too long and, if you want to catch all the lyrics, you can listen again carefully. It can be interesting and intriguing to have the voice a bit indistinct. But a songstory goes on too long to be forever straining to follow the words. Understanding the narrative has to be effortless; otherwise the listener will eventually lose interest. That's what I believe, anyway. So David had to tread a narrow path between making the voices sound clear and making the voices sound good.



Q.

What's your final verdict on the project?

A.

The verdict should come from a jury not a Judge. What can I say? I don't think there's anything else like it - not that I know of, anyway - but the fact that something's unique doesn't necessarily mean that it's any good. I think I've done something that hasn't been done before, but I don't know if I've done it well, or even whether the something I've done was worth doing in the first place. I hope people will tell me.

For another interview with Judge conducted by Sean Kelly and David Scoffield, in September 1995, see [The Judge Smith Interview](#).

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If you have other questions about **Curly's Airships** for Judge, please post them on the [Ship's Log](#) and he will do his best to answer them there.

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