

## **TRANSLATION OF INTERVIEW IN 'TRAVERSES' - FRENCH ROCK MAGAZINE - 2005**

*Stéphane Fougère from the French rock magazine 'Traverses' interviewed me after my show at the Cobden Club on the 18th July 2005. At that time, 'Traverses' was a print publication, but his extensive piece is now available on-line on the 'Rythmes Croisés' music website (which is thoroughly recommended for anyone who can speak French.) Stéphane's original interview and review of 'The Full English' can now be seen here:- <https://www.rythmes-croises.org/judge-smith-its-the-breakfast-that-feeds-you/> The interview covered my whole 'soi disant' career (as they would say in France) up to that time, and since I do not have that many long interviews to my credit, I have now attempted to make an English translation.*

*My efforts, with Google Translate and a French dictionary, have been a strange experience. Here were things I said in 2005, which had been translated into French, and which I was now attempting to re-translate back into English eighteen years later. Stéphane is an excellent critic and journalist, and I have done my best not to misrepresent his work, and any errors or awkwardness in expression are mine alone.*

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For some, no doubt, the role played by (Chris) Judge SMITH within VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR can be considered as completely anecdotal, him having only remained a few months within the group at its very beginnings, or, at best, historical, since he was the one who came up with the name of the band. However, his shadow continues to hover over the history of the group (he co-composed 'Killer'), and even beyond, since he wrote songs which were recorded by Peter HAMMILL (and often interpreted live by him, such as 'Time for a Change', 'Been Alone so Long', 'Four Pails'...) and even occasionally recorded with him ('Magog', on 'In Camera'). Other Judge songs have joined the repertoire of singer Lene LOVICH, with whom he co-wrote a musical theatre piece ('Mata Hari'), not to mention the legendary rock-opera 'The Fall of the House of Usher' – created with Peter HAMMILL, and in which Lene LOVICH participated... – for which he wrote the libretto.

In the 1970s-80s, Judge SMITH had a career as a librettist and composer of musicals, but never gave up making music on his own, as evidenced by the release of the 'Democracy' CD, an archival collection spanning from 1967 to 1977. It would however be necessary to wait until 1994 to see appearing, almost under the radar, a real album in his own name, 'Dome Of Discovery', which revealed an unconventional singer-songwriter with singular and fantastic songs (a booklet photo shows Judge dancing with a skeleton).

The release in 2000 of his ambitious "Songstory" 'Curly's Airships', which he took six years to conceive and record, increased Judge SMITH's reputation as a brilliant composer. This ambitious work also mobilized many rock personalities of the 1960s/70s, such as Arthur BROWN (CRAZY WORLD), Pete BROWN (CREAM, THE BATTERED ORNAMENTS, PIBLOKTO), John "Fury" ELLIS (THE STRANGLERS, THE VIBRATORS), Peter HAMMILL, Hugh BANTON, David JACKSON (VDGG...)

Absent from the performing scene for a long time, the former co-founder of VDGG would find an opportunity to find it again thanks to Arthur BROWN, who offered him an opening act for one of his concerts in 2002. After which, Judge SMITH performed in clubs dedicated

to "English Chanson". Finally, and coincidentally, on the day that VDGG gave their first concert after 29 years of absence, on May 6 in London, Judge SMITH also performed on stage, at the cocktail hour, at Cobden Club, and presented songs from his new album, 'The Full English', as well as two older ones that have long haunted Peter HAMMILL's solo repertoire.

While remaining linked to the history of his first group and its members, Judge SMITH has built up a distinct musical universe which, if it does not correspond to the canons of new progressive music to which TRAVERSES / RYTHMES CROISÉS is accustomed to devote its pages, has the merit of being sumptuously original, openly diversified, and carried by an exceptional voice. It was enough for the "traversienne" team to set off to meet him, on a certain May 6, 2005, a date that will remain doubly engraved in our minds.

But to start, shall we have an English breakfast?

Judge SMITH – The Full English  
(Labour of Love Records)

Without having a gargantuan discography like his ex-colleague, Vandergraafien Peter HAMMILL, Judge SMITH has the gift of always metamorphosing from one disc to another. After the Dante-esque song-story 'Curly's Airships', which was spread over a copious double CD stuffed with compositions, with drawersful of recurring themes, Judge SMITH returns to a much more stripped down expression, but without being threadbare, and to a very simplified and catchy song format. Is there anyone that these terms bother? That would be a shame, because we would like to hear songs, like those on this album, more often. But even if that reassures aesthetes, that hope is already lost, because Judge's songs do not at all correspond to the current commercial straightjacket.

The sound universe of 'The Full English' follows the "English Chanson" format with old-fashioned atmospheres which obviously recall "French" cabarets and dance halls, backed-up by with tangos ('Like a Rock') and Eastern European flavours (new versions of 'Tell Me You Love Me' and 'Carpet Tiles', two songs that were on 'Dome of Discovery').

The musicians chosen by Judge all contribute to strengthening this specific atmosphere, from the acoustic guitar of John "Fury" ELLIS (who, until now, we were more used to hearing on electric guitar) to accordions, organ and piano by Michael WARD-BERGEMAN, without forgetting the sporadic percussions of René VAN COMMENEE, the same man who played tablas on 'Curly's Airships'. Add a little Bass here and there for form's sake, and sprinkle with a few choirs hallmarked 1960's... Purity and acoustics are the key words of this disc which deliberately plays the "retro" card. Even VAN COMMENEE's few drum tracks are ultra-referenced "old 70's" and are perfectly suited to the context.

As for the songs themselves, under their inoffensive instrumental 'senior citizen' exterior, they display a mischief subtly tinged with irreverence, and shows seemingly ordinary characters entangled in situations which are no doubt no less ordinary, but which Judge SMITH knows how to portray with an oblique and informed gaze which brings out an unexpected originality, even tending towards a Monty-Pythonesque comedy: the couple embarking on a flooring business which generates a lot of tiles (!) ('Carpet Tiles'), a lover

who finds it difficult to bear his adulterous relationship ('We'll Always Have Paris'), or the "musician in spite of himself" who finds his artistic success difficult ('Take It Away').

Under the jovial façade, a refined analysis of human nature exhibiting its mental labyrinths, breaks through and, under the "dated" musical flavour, emerge very current subjects: 'Advance The Spark' deals for example with the relationship between sex and speed (a subject dear to David CRONENBERG). 'Not Drowning But Waving' questions the interference in the lives of others, and appeals to the right to be different. Finally, moral blindness is addressed in 'It's The Silence That Kills You', a new version of the song which appeared in the track 'The Final Taboo', in 'Curly's Airships', evoking these soldiers sacrificed for a lost cause, but proud to have "accomplished their duty".

Other texts show a sharp political eye barely concealed. How can one avoid thinking of the British Prime Minister while listening to 'Seemed Such A Nice Boy'? The global village is also stigmatized in 'I Want Some Of It', while 'But Is It Art?', which apparently recounts the "making-of" of the album, does not fail to expose ambivalent feelings in relation to new technologies, and implicitly extends the echo of the theme of globalization and its risks of human isolation ("Did the Technology Bring us together, or Did this technology keep us apart?").

All these reflections, portraits and modern tales hide their depth under refrains that immediately strike the ear, like something taken to start the day well. It remains to be seen whether, in the morning, you are more the type to swallow a little black coffee in a hurry, or whether you prefer to take, as you are asked in British Bed & Breakfasts, "The Full English..."

## Interview with Judge SMITH

**Judge SMITH:** Tell me, since you attended my concert, do you really believe that my music is suitable for TRAVERSES? As I said, it's still very much in the "songwriter" style...

**That's what I find interesting, precisely, coming from someone who comes more from the rock scene... You have your very personal way of approaching the format and tradition of song.**

**JS:** In England, there is now a whole movement called the "English Chanson", but I do not think I am fully integrated into that, because, after all, I come from rock n'roll. But I like what these singers do, and I've played in clubs that are intended for them. They sing songs of a literary nature, which have real meaning, which is rather a good thing...

**When did you discover this world of English chansonniers?**

**JS:** It's through the people who organized my concert, namely Sean KELLY, Peter OSTROWSKI, David SCOFFIELD and Alan HUTCHINSON. They love the English Chanson. I had never heard of it. They took me to concerts, in clubs that specialise in this mode of expression, and persuaded me that singing in these places could suit me. I said okay. I

recorded a cassette, with just one instrument as an accompaniment. I didn't play that, since I don't play any instrument. I write and I sing, that's all.

**Didn't you start your career playing the drums anyway?**

**JS:** Yes, but badly. On the other hand, I am a good drum programmer! Anyone who has been a drummer, even a bad one, can become a good drum programmer, because you can do what you always wanted to do if you had the talent!

**Is that what you tried to do with the last piece you played in concert, But Is it Art?, which is also the last of your new CD?**

**JS:** No, no, here I used a simple commercial backbeat from a CD sampler. It suited what I was trying to 'stigmatize' in this song, but that's all.

**On the other hand, the drum programs on the Dome of Discovery album are yours?**

**JS:** Yes, as well as on Curly's Airships. I'm pretty happy with it, but it's always better to have a real drummer. On The Full English, there is a real drummer and percussionist, René VAN COMMENEE.

**Have you ever sung and played drums at the same time?**

**JS:** Yes, in the days of VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR, but I wasn't good enough. I always wanted there to be a really good drummer, and I made sure that Guy EVANS was recruited, because I did not want to continue in that role.

**So you mainly started out as a singer and songwriter?**

**JS:** I really wanted to go on stage to get girls! (laughs) It was only after that that I got interested in songwriting. It took me a while...

**Were your first songs song lyrics?**

**JS:** No, not really. Well, some of them were rather like those of Peter HAMMILL. Since Peter was the first person I worked with, I tried to write songs that were about as good as his. I didn't really succeed... (laughs)

**Otherwise, were they more "pop songs"?**

**JS:** No, I never wrote real pop songs. I started out in the psychedelic underground world, so I didn't write things like, "I Love You, Baby." That said, there are some classic pop songs that I love! But I never tried to work in the pop industry.

**So your original musical background was psychedelic?**

**JS:** In school, I played jazz, folk, Bob DYLAN, but I didn't take music seriously until I went to America in 1967. And from that point, I wanted to set up a group; and that was VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR.

**This trip to the United States in 1967 seems to have had an important impact on your relationship with music. How exactly?**

**JS:** It was there that I discovered that there was an ever-growing community of young people who wanted to approach rock music on an intellectual and spiritual level and whose music was not necessarily simplistic, and not necessarily short songs. Pop and rock were becoming very different things, and rock could be a valid avenue for embarking on serious, unconventional, and thought-provoking artistic creations. Since that time, I have never doubted for a moment that that was true.

**Where did you meet Peter HAMMILL, exactly?**

**JS:** At the University of Manchester. We were studying there at the same time. We started VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR as a duo. At the very beginning, we looked a bit like T.REX, Marc BOLAN's group, with bongos, percussion, Peter played the guitar and sang. We even opened for T.REX in a Manchester club. And after that, we looked for an organist. At that time we saw Arthur BROWN... He was at my concert, you must have seen him... Surely you said hello to him at least? He's a god! You shouldn't be talking to me, but to Arthur! You should meet him, he is right behind you....

**(Editor's note: Taken aback, yours truly could only face the facts: Arthur BROWN, the real one, the only one, was there, all smiles!)**

...We had seen him with Peter at the University of Manchester, and it changed my life! I wanted to be Arthur BROWN! He had a band without guitar, so we wanted a band without guitar!

**I heard that the first concerts of VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR also had a theatrical aspect. Is it because you had studied theatre?**

**JS:** No. It's the influence of Arthur BROWN, again! He was very theatrical, so I wanted to do the same. I had costumes, weird accessories... But when the band really started, when its music really matured, this theatrical aspect was no longer necessary. The group was not going in that direction. That's why I left the band, after recording the first single.

**How long did you stay with VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR?**

**JS:** About a year, I think...

**And during this short period, you had already written a lot of songs...**

**JS:** A few, yes... I wrote some before leaving the band, and even more after! (laughs) But songs like Imperial Zeppelin, which Peter recorded for his solo album Fool's Mate, were

written in the days of VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR. In fact, this is the period during which I began to learn to write. I matured slowly... I mean by this that Peter (HAMMILL) was already a brilliant composer at 18 years old. Me, I only became a reasonable composer when I was 20 or so... He was brilliant early on; I had to wait a bit... So he didn't need me much to write songs.

**Your “Vandergraafian” period was therefore a period of initiation...**

**JS:** Absolutely. After VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR, I started another group, HEEBALOB, which was a bit like Frank ZAPPA, rock songs with jazz solos. David JACKSON was part of this group before joining VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR. HEEBALOB split following the bankruptcy of the record company that was going to sign us. So I wanted to say that I am quite proud to have gone through VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR, but I am no longer there. I do other things that are much more significant (to me), at least things that seem more significant, ha! ha! I became significant thanks to the “Songstory”, the sung story. In fact, it is a very French genre. French popular songs have always told stories. It's traditional. I want to tell stories in my songs. I developed a way of telling long stories with texts and rock music. I don't think anyone else has done what I do, so far.

**Except for ‘Democracy’, your first real solo album was ‘Dome of Discovery’, which was released in the 1990s. Did you ever think of recording records before that?**

**JS:** Yes, of course, I always wanted to make records; but I don't play any instrument well enough to perform on stage or on record. And until a few years ago, people like me had to find the money to put together a band, of whatever style, to play their music, before they had a chance to be able to record anything. Recording itself was a very expensive process. So financial constraints always prevented me from making records.

**How did you end up making Dome of Discovery?**

**JS:** During the 1980s, I started buying recording equipment and learned how to use it. I then recorded several demos (some of which ended-up in Democracy). In 1990, I felt confident enough to start working on real recordings. So I gave up my job and moved to rural Norfolk. I'm lucky to know some great musicians, but rather than calling on them on this debut album project, I wanted to do something entirely on my own that could be taken seriously by my friends. That's why ‘Dome of Discovery’ is the way it is. Everything on this album was played or programmed by me, and I even made my own audio samples. Fred TOMSETT, who had set up the Oedipus Recs label, had already published a collection of my old demos in ‘Democracy’, and he offered me, in the same way, to release ‘Dome of Discovery.’

**Curly's Airships was therefore your first recording of a song story. But it's not the first one you've written. There is, in your archival album, ‘Democracy’, an extract from a “rock requiem”, a ‘Dies Irae’.**

**JS:** Yes! It is indeed part of a long composition, ‘Requiem Mass’. I'm quite proud of it, but unfortunately no one has ever heard it, except this ‘Dies Irae’, in a demo version whose

sound is unfortunately not very good. I would love to record it all, but to do that I would need a real rock band that I could work with and record with.

**So there is a full version of this requiem?**

**JS:** Absolutely! Everything is already completely written, with a musical score for choirs, brass... It's a big project, which contains some of my best pieces.

**In any case, the demo version of Dies Irae gives a very promising taste!**

**JS:** Thank you! I can imagine it with lots of choirs, four trumpets, four trombones, something dantesque...

**Moreover, it is this kind of arrangements that you used for your first real CD, Dome of Discovery, with brass instruments, a choir...**

**JS:** I love choirs. So I made one for this record. I hired the vocal talents of a soprano, a tenor, a bass and a baritone. I had them sing scales for me, and I made my choir from that. Today, it is easy to buy sampled choirs that can be played on keyboards. But they are too... "refined". I don't want that. I want "big ladies", singers with opulent breasts and throats! That can't be bought in samples. So I had to make my own samples at the time, from recordings of real voices that I made myself; but I did not sample my own voice.

**What you did for Dome of Discovery, would you like to do it for Requiem Mass as well?**

**JS:** No, no, it's too good for that! It has to be a real choir, real brass, a real band. I don't even have to sing there. I need a young, good rock singer. I'm not a rock singer, as you must have realized. I'm just good at singing "Judge Music". (laughs) the Requiem Mass needs a real rock singer, like Arthur (BROWN)...

**But Curly's Airships still has rock elements, and you sing in it...**

**JS:** Yes, of course, but I'm not singing like David COVERDALE... That's not what I do. Anyway, my next record will be another Songstory. This is exclusive information for TRAVERSES: it will be called 'Orpheus'. It will therefore be based on the myth of Orpheus, already superbly treated by Jean COCTEAU. That movie is fantastic! My version of the story will be different from COCTEAU's, since Orpheus will appear as a rock guitarist! In the legend, Orpheus is supposed to have invented the guitar. It's very interesting. The ancient Greeks had an instrument very close to the guitar and which Orpheus is supposed to have invented. So this will be the next record I plan to work on.

**Regarding Curly's Airships, I understand that you would like to give a full stage version?**

**JS:** Indeed, it was never played live. I've always wanted it to be sung live with musical bands. I might have the chance to do it, but at this moment I can't say much more, since it's not fixed yet. However, I might be able to give a live version of it for an hour and a half. So it

wouldn't be all of it, but it would still be that. There would be projections, narration, costumes, something theatrical... It could be done...

**You worked with Peter HAMMILL on a kind of rock opera called *The Fall of The House of Usher*, the first edition of which came out on record in 1990. I understand that you worked on it for several years. Why did you take so long?**

**JS:** We decided to write this opera on November 9, 1972, and Peter sent me the first of a dozen cassettes of his musical sketches in January 1973. However, I had already written a libretto for a classical opera on this theme at the age of eighteen. And there must actually be a few lines of text from that original version that remained in the final version.

Peter and I have always been absorbed by other projects, but except for a period of four years during which he was fully involved in VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR, we continued to work on this project every year until it was finished. Fully successful collaboration on an opera takes a very long time, because both the music and the libretto go through several versions and adaptations in order to fit well together.

**Did you intend to make a stage version of it?**

**JS:** We always intended to perform this opera live, but just how this music could be recreated for the stage was always a serious problem. Nevertheless, by 1989 plans were well advanced to stage a production in Barcelona, as part of an artistic program surrounding the Olympics. Unfortunately, everything fell through at the last minute! It was a big disappointment, but it made Peter decide to record and produce *Usher* on record.

**Lene LOVITCH plays one of *Usher's* characters. It seems that you have worked with her on other projects, in particular a musical theatre piece. What was that ?**

**JS:** I've known Lene and her partner Les CHAPPELL since 1970. They were both art students then, and we all lived in cheap rooms above a Greek fish-and-chips shop in Tottenham Court Road, in the West End of London. They are both wonderful and unique people. They wrote beautiful songs and had one of the best live bands I've ever seen. She is a fascinating artist! With Lene and Les, I co-wrote *Mata Hari*, a musical theatre piece starring Lene. The true story of Mata Hari, executed in France in 1917 for espionage, is extraordinary and fascinating; and working on it was a big step for me in developing my narrative music writing techniques. The play was performed at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, London in 1982, and sold out the entire time it ran. However, I was very disappointed with the production. Because Lene was a rock singer, not an actress. I had written the piece for her and for three singers/actors/dancers who were to support and highlight her. Unfortunately, the three guys who were selected for the casting could neither sing nor dance, and were only very average actors. Lene had to carry the whole show on her shoulders alone. She performed very well, and the show was far from a disaster, but I hope I never have to be involved in any "conventional" musical theatre again! There are too many things that can go wrong... I really hope to work with Lene again in the future, maybe on the next project after the one I'm currently working on.



**You mentioned the HEEBALOB group earlier. If I remember correctly, a certain Max HUTCHINSON was a member, and I believe that you subsequently worked together on various projects. Can you tell us about it?**

**JS:** As for Maxwell, we've known each other since we were thirteen. When I left VDGG, I made a guest appearance in his band COUSIN MARY in Aberdeen, Scotland, where he was studying architecture, and at a convention of architecture students in Portsmouth. Max and the drummer, Martin POTTINGER, had decided to put their studies on hold and started a band with me in London. So that was HEEBALOB. A few years after the band broke up, I met up with Max again. He had opened a London branch of his father's architectural practice, and as I needed a job, I started working for him part-time, as a freelance "Architectural Assistant" (in other words, an unqualified architect!), and I continued in this field, with a few breaks from time to time, until 1990. Max had an extraordinary melodic gift, and we collaborated on many musical creations, notably on a cycle of dramatic songs, 'The Kibbo Kift', which dealt with an anti-war, "ecological" movement, focused on camping and Woodcraft, who split from the Boy Scouts in 1920. This was staged at the Traverse Theatre at the 1976 Edinburgh Festival, and was produced again for the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield the following year. We then wrote 'The Ascent of Wilberforce III', a mountaineering musical whose first twenty minutes were in Esperanto and which featured a singing Yeti! It was again produced at the Traverse Theatre in 1981 and at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith the following year. We were subsequently commissioned to do a show for the prestigious Hampstead Theatre, and we wrote 'Geraldo's Navy', about a dance band on a cruise ship. This commission was accepted by the producers, but was never produced... Max and I also started a kind of rock-punk-new wave band called THE MODERN BEATS, with Martin POTTINGER and bassist Ian FORDHAM, (from my 70's band THE IMPERIAL STORM BAND). We didn't play original compositions, but covers of 60's pop songs, and we were playing them, as they said, "too fast, too loud, and fifteen years too late"! We played quite often on the North London pub circuit. We also formed an avant-garde improvisation group called THE FREE ART RESEARCH TRIO, in which I played a set of homemade wooden percussion instruments. Among other performances, we performed at the International Carnival of Experimental Sound in London, in 1972, and at the famous jazz club in Soho, "Ronnie Scott's". Maxwell is now a TV and radio presenter.

**Finally, how about the genesis of your latest album, The Full English?**

**JS:** This album is due to the people who organized my concert at the Cobden Club, as I said before. They are the ones who enabled me to get back on stage. I had a set of songs that I could perform live with one or two musicians. I was asked to make a record of it for an British label. But due to unsatisfactory financial circumstances, the project could not be completed. So I had a half-finished, almost "unplugged", record, which was something new to me! The Italian label 'Labour of Love' then offered to release it in this form. I went to Italy to do the mixing. Marco OLIVOTTO did an excellent job in production. That is the story of this CD. There are new songs, and a few older ones, that have previously appeared on 'Dome of Discovery' and 'Curly's Airships', but in very different forms. I'm happy to cover my old songs. This is a lesson I learned from Frank ZAPPA, who could record seven or eight versions of the same song. If it's good for Frank, it's good for me! I also plan to make other

records in the same genre. My musicians are wonderful... This is the closest album to the "chanson" style that I have been able to do.

**The final song, 'But Is It Art?', tells the making-of the album, doesn't it?**

**JS:** Yes, completely. It's the last song to be written for this record, and it came to me when the rest of the content was almost finished. I got up in the middle of the night to write the lyrics, and I'm pretty happy with this track. I now want to make an album with longer songs, maybe five to ten minutes. They would be short sung stories, but which would actually be long songs, a bit like in...progressive rock! (laughs) When I was younger, I liked to say that I made progressive music, but now that the term "progressive" has a very specific meaning, I don't say it anymore! The term designates groups who claim to be progressive, but that is not what I mean by this word. It does not "progress", it stagnates. It's not that I want to criticize these bands. But when I say that my music is progressive, it should not be understood that it resembles the music of these groups. It is not YES or GENESIS.

**This is why VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR did not want this label.**

**JS:** Yes. Although, originally, we defined ourselves as progressive. But that was before the term took on another meaning...

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