



TICK MY BOX

Despite being a full time member of Status Quo since 1976, veteran musician Andy Bown has had a varied career. He has played alongside Peter Frampton in The Herd, was a member of Judas Jump who opened the Isle Of Wight Festival in 1970, worked as a session musician, written TV themes and released a collection of solo singles and albums. His time in Quo sees him fulfilling keyboard duties as well as additional guitar and harmonica - plus he has co-written some of the bands biggest hits, such as 'Whatever You Want' and 'Burning Bridges'. On top of that, after nearly three decades, Andy has recorded a brand new solo album entitled 'Unfinished Business'. After receiving a promo copy, an extremely impressed James Gaden got in touch...

Before we start, do you prefer Andrew of Andy?

Well, my professional name as a solo artist, I suppose, is Andy. I've used Andrew with Quo for a long time, but I think Andy is probably best.

Okay, I only asked because whenever I talk to Francis, he always calls you Andrew.

It gets confusing doesn't it? The solo album is under Andy - yet I don't really know anybody who calls me Andy. If I pick the phone up and somebody asks for Andy, I know it's somebody I don't know! (laughs) Anyway, it's a pleasure to meet you.

We've met fleetingly once backstage at a Quo meet and greet in Hull. But it was that brief, you'd never remember me.

Ah, at the City Hall? I like that place. It's really, really crammed.

It is - and there's always an idiot thrown out early on! But anyway, I've been listening a lot to your solo record and I absolutely love it, I think it's excellent!

Oh, that's great, I'm thrilled!

Yes, it's my most played album of the month. I wasn't sure what to expect - I've not heard one of your solo records before. I've heard you with Quo, I know what songs you've written with Quo, but I didn't know what direction a solo record would take. I was quite surprised how guitar driven it was. I thought being a keyboard player in a guitar band like Quo you'd maybe go a different way - did you have a specific direction in mind?

Well, for the last twenty five years, I've only ever written on guitar. I do play some guitar with Quo as you know, not a lot but I do play, so that's probably why the songs are guitar based. It's how I write and I play all the rhythm guitar. That's where I get the core part. But I just did exactly what I wanted to with this record - it's the first time I've ever done an album or single that I did for myself. It didn't have something else behind it, nobody telling me that 'oh, this has to be for a commercial' or 'this might work for Quo'... I just did exactly what I wanted. A lot of it is tongue firmly in cheek and underlined by, I hope, a feel for the blues, which I love and always have done.

The tongue in cheek side definitely came across, some of your lyrics did amuse me...

Yep, and we were in Judas Jump together - that terrific seventies failure! (laughs) But he plays a blinder on there I think you'll agree. Did you think the album had a live feel?

Yes, I did, it's not an overly produced record by any means.

That's because a lot of it IS actually live - there's even some live vocals on there.

Even better! Well the other big thing about it that ticked my box, if you'll pardon the pun, is your employment of female backing singers, which is something I really gravitate to.

Aren't they gorgeous, these girls? They gave it absolutely everything. We had such fun and I hope it sounds like that.

It does - I remember discussing this point with Francis a while back, because he used female singers on his solo album and it was tried on some Quo songs way back, but some of the more die hard rockers didn't much care for it.

Yes, but also we didn't get the full benefit with Quo because there aren't a lot of frequencies available. Quo has that certain sound, a certain chemistry and there aren't many frequencies left for the human voice. If you can slip in one lead vocal and maybe a harmony, that's just about the limit, really, because the rest is pounding snare drum and howling guitars.

With this being your first solo album in thirty odd years, is this something you've been working on for a long time, or did the opportunity just present itself because there was some Quo downtime while Francis worked on his solo stuff?

Ooh no, I started before he started his! It takes such a long time to do. The first recording session for this was back in... I think September 2009, so I probably started work on it in February '09. Some of the songs had been in the back of my mind, hanging about. That's why it's called 'Unfinished Business' - although it's mostly brand new, it was more about the feel of 'I have to do something', I was getting itchy feet. Initially I had an idea to record a basic track, maybe even at home, just for fun. I was going to put it on the internet in some way, I hadn't really decided. I had a chat with Mike Paxman who produced this record and he does Quo's website and a thousand other sites, he's really technical and clever. He said he'd come over and run through some ideas about what I wanted to do. He came and I gave him some of my ideas to listen to. After a couple of hours he said 'If you don't make an entire album out of this stuff, you are a complete cunt.' (laughs) Obviously, I don't know if you can print that word - 'complete'! That was the bottom line, write that up how you want. I thought 'Oh, that's nice'. (laughs) So I discussed the idea of a record with my wife and she kicked me up the arse and told me to do it. I said 'You've got no idea how much work this is', because I've been there and done it, it's not just a case of recording it, but she told me to get on with it. That was about three years ago.

Well I'm glad they did get you going - it was worth it! Did you find once you'd started you really wanted to finish it or was it a labour of love?

No, it wasn't a labour at all, it just flowed. There was an element of luck, or as I call it... I was told this a long time ago in the art business, a painting technique a friend of mine used was 'controlled accident'. You just make things go a little bit better if you're not quite in control of everything. I'd never played with Mick before, we'd done loads of gigs and shows with Manfred Mann's Earth Band so I knew him and admired his playing, so I earmarked him to play. Henry is my drummer. Well, mine and Eric Clapton's. Although I think that should be Eric's and mine! He's our drummer of choice. I've done hundreds of recordings with him and I've never once given him any indication or direction of what he should play, I just give him the speed and he plays it. Magic! No stress, it was very easy. The tracks were basically done in two sessions. Trevor Boulder played bass in the first session, you know Trevor? From Uriah Heep and of course The Spiders From Mars. He was great, once he gets the part, it stays with him, solid as a rock. For the second session it was Brad Lang. I had never met Brad before, he was recommended by Chris West, the engineer. His father was Don Lang, as in Don Lang And The Frantic Five, so that was good enough for

me. Plus he played string bass as well, which I used on one or two tracks, because that gives a very different sound. Stop me if I'm boring you!

No, not at all, I love hearing about all the studio side of things, like I say, I have no information and I'm a geek for details.

Okay, we recorded it at State Of The Ark Studios in Surrey - it's like a museum. It's got some really old national guitars in, it's got fifties Fenders, really old amps and wacky equipment. The desk was used for 'Sgt Peppers', part of it was used for The Rolling Stones Live In Paris album, this stuff is really old but it all works perfectly, it's beautifully taken care of. That's how we got such an organic sound. There's no digital information going in there.

Sometimes doing everything digitally can result in things sounding a bit sterile, a bit clinical. Yeah, and a bit hard on the ears after a while.

So are all these tracks self penned, or did you collaborate with anybody?

No collaborations, I wrote the lot. Every single word! (laughs)

Some of the lyrics did make me laugh - especially in 'Ruby And Roy', when you said that they 'go together like peaches and stuff' so it rhymed with 'enough'! (laughs)

Well I could have actually used the word 'cream' and rhymed it with the second line by just swapping them around, but that verse is shorter and I did it simply for the fact I thought people would expect to hear 'cream'. (laughs) I could've just swapped the couplet round but I liked it better this way!

That's what I thought, that's why it made me laugh!

Good, that's exactly the point! It made you laugh, that's great!

There are lots of little nuances lyrically that I smiled at. Are Ruby and Roy real people then, or is it a work of fiction?

'Ruby And Roy' is about a big night out in Aberdeen, when I went for a curry with Roy Wood. 'Ruby And Roy'...

Oh, I get it now, Ruby Murray...

Yes! 'Oh what a magical night, Ruby and Roy by candlelight'...

Quo are touring with him soon aren't they?

We are, he did some UK shows with us a couple of years ago and he's doing it again this year - Kim Wilde is with us too. He's a great guy. He's a really good writer and it was just great to share the bill, even though we were top, I loved it, I hadn't seen him for years and years. I didn't know him that well so it was great to go out - all the band, the crew, we all went out for a huge curry, or Ruby, and the evening went on and on until the last two people hanging on at the bar, at Slaine Castle, were me and Roy. Hanging on by our fingernails! So almost every single line in that song is true. Except you can't get Bombay Duck anymore now, it's illegal!

I thought Roy was maybe a real guy but now you tell me it's Roy Wood and a curry, it's put a completely different slant on it now. I thought it was a couple, but now you said that I can read it a totally different way!

That's the point, I wanted people to think it was some odd couple, I'm delighted you thought that!

The other one lyrically that I paid a lot of attention to was 'When The Lights Went On'. It starts talking about you kicking off Live Aid, the 'biggest gig we'll ever play'... but there are other bits that sound like they have interesting stories attached, such as doing a session with Jerry Lee Lewis?

Yes, all of that song is true. That was a record he did called 'Jerry Lee Lewis Live In London'. It was a big blue double gatefold vinyl album. The world and his mate was guesting on it. All the credits are on the back cover, down the centre and it's done alphabetically so I think I was first or second. The same thing happened with 'The Wall' with

Pink Floyd! So there were all sorts of people there and I had to play electric piano. I get there and it's set up right next to him at his piano. The instruments were touching each other! When I saw that, I was crapping myself. (laughs) Eventually, he walked in and said 'Hey boy!' and that was about all he said to me. But that was one of the funniest things - during one song, I turned around and I couldn't believe it, right next to me he was playing a solo with his foot. Later on, we went into the control room to hear some playbacks and it sounded... like he was playing with his foot! It was dreadful! Just awful! (laughs) But it made for a great sight - this god, playing this crap!

(Laughs) There's also reference in that track to you meeting Chuck Berry and shaking his hand...

Oh, I did. That wasn't that long ago actually, that's one of the newest songs. It only happened a year or two ago in Sweden. I shook his hand - which happens to be the size of a large shovel. Fantastic! He's my hero, he's the King Of Rock 'N' Roll for me. Then, under him, is the White King Of Rock 'N' Roll, which is Jerry Lee. Chuck is my king - I know he's a bastard...

Yeah, but some of his songs are awesome, so fair enough!

They are awesome. I think he's probably the largest single influence lyrically on me. He's always twisted words... sure, he did some pretty naff double entendres all the time, but there's nothing wrong with that!

For me, going back to the Rock 'N' Roll era, as much as I like Elvis, for me it was Little Richard, he was the man. I think he had such a great voice, he had the best rock singer voice of that era for me.

Yeah, I liked him but he only did one or two singles that really hit me, whereas Berry had dozens and dozens of them. They all sounded the same, but they all had four or five different verses, thousands and thousands of good lyrics. Each one was a story.

At the end of 'When The Lights Went On', you go through a string of famous names, and in between all those legendary names like Robert Plant, Tom Jones, Brian May, Steve Winwood... did I hear Rolf Harris?

Yeah. Oh, I met them all, that's all true. But I'm not showing off, it was just fun. Paul McCartney says never to name drop, it's a mistake.

I disagree, what's the point of meeting all those great artists if you can't tell people about it?

(Laughs) I actually stood six feet from Jimi Hendrix when he set fire to his guitar at the Saville Theatre in London. I was in the wings. Ringo Starr shared his sandwiches with me when we played on an album together, I was playing bass to his drums. People ask me for anecdotes, asking what has happened to me and I say 'Er, nothing really...' - I can never think of anything! But when I was at home, in peace and quiet, when I started writing that song, all these incidents came back to me!

Well when I heard the list, I wondered if it was all people you'd met, or a mix of who you had met and who you admired.

The list of names, it's not supposed to be that clear, that would have been really showing off. But everybody named, I have met. And I'm sure there are more that aren't on the list.

That's why I asked about Rolf Harris - no disrespect to him, but he seemed a bit at odds with some of the other names!

(Laughs) He actually drew a T-shirt for me. Rick did a single with him at Christmas and it nearly got off the ground. We see him from time to time. Like Cliff Richard - when you are on the road for forty odd years like I've been, you can't help but meet some of them.

It was good, it made me play the song a few times to see who else I could pick out.

Have you got them all yet? There not listed in the booklet but they are all true.

I think so - the ones that jumped out first were the ones I'm fans of like Brian May, Steve Winwood... on the third listen, I'd heard some names that were buried in my subconscious, like

Judy Tzuke, was she in there?

Yes she was.

I got her then! But yes, it really held my interest - I liked the songs anyway but the lyrics impressed me a great deal. When I spoke to Francis last, he said how you helped him out with 'Frozen Hero' on the new 'Quid Pro Quo' album and the result was brilliant.

Oh, that's kind of him. I did work hard on 'Frozen Hero', I'm quite proud of that.

As I told Francis, I really liked the new Quo record. But I've liked all the Quo albums from 'Heavy Traffic' onwards. I think, song for song, they are better records than the 'classic' seventies ones.

The new one is good isn't it? Yeah, there are some better songs, but the trouble is people see it as more of the same. However, that's what people want from us, it's very difficult. If every artist tried a new direction on each album, it would be a bad move!

Yes, you'd end up with only a small hardcore group who buy everything with that act's name on. Others would pick and choose - 'oh, if it's not a rock album forget it', so some albums would flop on direction alone, regardless of the quality.

Quite right - it's interesting you like our later stuff. I must say, 'Heavy Traffic' was the start of a good run... actually, no 'Under The Influence' was the start I think. That came before 'Heavy Traffic' and I thought that was a good record.

That's right - when I spoke to Francis about 'Quid Pro Quo', that came up because it had just been reissued. It has the original sleeve which you guys wanted, the bent fork. Francis obviously rates the album, he played two songs from it in his solo set. I liked it anyway, but when I played the reissue I forgot how good it was. Francis was of the opinion it was the pub promo campaign that killed it.

Yes, David Walker, God rest his soul, thought the pub sign was better than the fork. It was narrow, wrong thinking, the pub tour gave the album the wrong angle. It was nothing to do with the songs. Try to treat the album as a whole, don't make it a fucking concept to fit a promotion.

My favourite song from that record was one of yours that Rick sang, 'Little Me And You'.

Oh really? Bless you! That's really uplifting!

Good - I mean it! The style of song, with it being a bit rock and roll-ish, Rick sang it really well, I played that the most of the album. In fact, it wouldn't be out of place on this solo album.

It's a happy song isn't it? Yes, I think I could've done that but it wouldn't sound like Quo. Nobody else does, and that song was a bit of a departure for Quo. The feel for the track originally is not what you would call typical Quo but I think it worked. If I'd done it on my own I'd have done it a slightly different way. I think I could've done that, but it was already done by Quo.

Were any of these new songs ones you thought about giving to Quo?

I did harbour a desire to try 'Keeping The Wolf Away' with Quo, I thought that would have worked in a 'Spirit In The Sky' vein, but that was about fifteen years ago. That's the oldest song on the record and to be honest, I've not thought about it since then. So the answer, really, is no, none of them were written with Quo in mind. It was actually originally a B-side to a flop single I did called 'No Fool Like An Old Fool'. Many moons ago - I'm no good at years, but it was before I went grey!

Well, I love the album and I hope it does really well for you.

Thank you very much - I'm thrilled you like it, and I'll try and make sure you get a finished version.

That would be great, but if not, I have no qualms about buying it.

Yes, you did say that... and I must say, I'm tempted to let you! (laughs)