

# The Art Of Playing

As recognisable key figures in the music industry go, there's not many bigger than Ronnie Wood. Joining the Jeff Beck Group in 1968, he befriended vocalist Rod Stewart and they contributed to two albums with Beck before moving on to form their own band, joining up with ex-members of the Small Faces Ronnie Lane, Ian McLagan, and Kenney Jones. Simply calling themselves The Faces, the band had great success and laid down some classic rock tracks such as 'Stay With Me' and 'Ooh La La' which Wood himself sang.

When The Faces broke up, Ronnie tried his hand at a solo career, before eventually being approached to replace Mick Taylor in The Rolling Stones. Wood has been with the Stones since 1975 as a full time member, and contributed to their success co-writing over a dozen songs including collaborating with Mick Jagger on the popular 'It's Only Rock 'n Roll (But I Like It)'.

Ronnie also kept his solo career going releasing a series of albums through the years and frequently touring with them with his own band. The bug bit him again recently, as he prepares to release his seventh solo album 'I Feel Like Playing' on Eagle Records, his first solo album since 2001's 'Not For Beginners'. It's a star studded affair featuring contributions from Slash, Billy Gibbons, Flea, Kris Kristofferson, Bobby Womack and Faces colleague Ian McLagan, while still retaining the identity of a solo record. With this and a Faces reunion announced (featuring Wood, McLagan, Glen Matlock in for the late Ronnie Lane and surprisingly Simply Red's Mick Hucknall filling in on vocals in place of Rod Stewart) there was much to talk about. James and Buz Gaden traveled down to London to meet up with Ronnie and get all the details...

James: We're overjoyed to talk to you, and I'm really impressed with the album. I loved it, I was really surprised with how many different styles were on it.

Yeah, there is a diverse natural feel about it, because I didn't really plan on making the album. I knew one was in the air, but until Steve Bing rang me up, and I was in LA, and he went "Hey Ronnie, I've got the House of

Blues booked, I've got Jim Keltner and Ivan Neville". Flea happened to be in town also, so me and Bernard (Fowler) went up there and we just cut 'Spoonful' to get things going. Then we did 'Why You Wanna Go And Do A Thing Like That For', and then the second night we tried 'I Gotta See', and just laid the groundwork for a few others. I had a few more in the bag like '100%' and 'Tell Me Something', I had a demo from London of that one... So yeah, it was all quite natural.

Buz: It's great, because we've both got completely different tastes, but we both like the album. There's something for everybody on it.

Yeah, there's even... like the reggae of 'Sweetness My Weakness'.

Buz: 'Lucky Man' is my favourite...

'Lucky Man' yeah! Bobby Womack was in town to do some background vocals. I always feel comfortable on a solo album with him, and have used him a lot. He's great! He came out of the woodwork, because he was hard to find before that. I was thinking "I wonder how I'm gonna get hold of Womack?", and he suddenly materialised. He was like "I'm here for you Woody!" And with this Faces project that I'm working on now... he rang me up the other night and he said "Hey, you want somebody to carry your suitcases?" (Laughs). So he said he'd be there anytime I want, and anytime I want help for promoting my solo album he'd be there for that.

James: Fantastic! With all the guests on the album I was wondering if it was going to be one of these all star projects, but they all fitted in, and it still sounded like a cohesive album by yourself. There were certain things I could pick out from individuals, but it complemented rather than detracted. Like Bernard's vocal contributions - or with Billy Gibbons, when he played on 'Thing About You', his guitar sound was just perfect, and you knew it was him. Do you write with a guest in mind, or write the song, and then think "so and so would be perfect on that"?

Most of the songs were just spontaneous. Billy walked in and he just saw the atmosphere that was going on and said "Have I got a song for you!". He hummed me a line, and I was like "C'mon, let's write it!". He had the words "I've got a thing about you", because he saw me with my girlfriend, and so we just designed the track there and then, recorded it, and it turned out great.

James: It worked brilliantly, and that was my favourite. We were both commenting that it's one of those albums that the more you listen to it, the more you appreciate it, and you sort of change your favourite. It's a real mood album.

Yeah, and the songs I had stemmed from various phrases I had going like "sweetness my weakness" and "why you wanna do a thing like that" and "well I don't think so!"...

James: With that one, I thought it had a real Stones feel about it. Do you ever feel a little bit restricted within the Stones, because obviously you've written so many great songs with so many people, but most people think of the Stones as "Oh, it's Mick and Keith who write it all"?

Well it is harder, even though I've got songs through many times that I've co-written with them. Yeah, it is harder though. We all find a lot more freedom when we do a solo project to get rid of the ones that are on the verge or on the backburner. You know the feeling, "ooh, I don't think they're gonna quite get this one". Or it would be too much work to get a certain song across and accepted by the board. If you do it yourself it's a lot easier.

James: Saying about Bobby Womack hanging around a lot, was Slash the same, because he's on almost half the album?

Yeah, Slash and I just bump into each other all the time. We have this kinda unwritten thing with the guitar, and the conversation. Like I have with Keith, I have with Slash. With Billy Gibbons, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, you know we all kind of talk through the guitars. So yeah, it was so much fun with Billy and so much fun with Slash. While I was making my album, Slash was making his, and when I had my book out, he had his out! We didn't know, we'd meet in Waterstone's or something, and it'd be like "What are you doing here?" and "Oh I'm promoting my book"! (Laughs) So it'd be the same with the album, he'd come in and I'd say "listen to this", so he would, then I'd say "now play on it!". (Laughs) He'd always know exactly what I wanted.

Buz: I love the version of 'Spoonful' on the album. I like the way you changed it - everyone else's versions seem to be so true to the original, yet you've really put your own stamp on it.

Thanks! That was Bernard Fowler. He said "how about like we give it more funk?", and we cut that live.

Buz: You even sound a bit like Howlin' Wolf on the chorus bit!

Yeah, it's alright innit! (Laughs) It's always been one of my favourite songs, that and 'Smokestack Lightning' and all that kind of thing. It was a song that all the groups of the time played, in the sixties, and I thought it was about time for a rebirth of that song for the kids now.

James: Did you produce the album yourself?

Yeah, well it was me and Bernard. I didn't lose track that it was my album, even though there was so many guests. So I had to draw the line, and make so sure my voice and my guitar came through as me.

James: Yes, because you've had guest singers in the past, and despite having Bernard there and

having him contributing backing vocals, it's very much a Ronnie Wood project. It sounds like your album, not a compilation of sessions with others.

Yeah, Bernard wanted that too. We spent a lot of time getting the songs in my vocal range, because when I've made solo albums in the past they're all too high, you know screaming away into it. Playing them live just ripped your throat up! (Laughs).

James: Is this new album something you would think of touring with?

Yeah, I'm thinking of doing a gig when the album comes out on Eagle, which is a fabulous label. I want to do a little theatre gig to announce the album in London, I might do the Ambassador Theatre... A really intimate, smaller audience, so you're more or less on stage if you're in the audience! So I might do a few gigs there, and then take it on, see how it goes, and maybe do a few more.

James: I think a lot of the songs would work really well in a more intimate atmosphere. Like you say there are so many styles on there, some of them would be really good with a quite close proximity crowd. They'd translate quite well I think.

Yeah, and I've got my great live band that I can call on. I've got Andy Newmark on drums, and whoever's in town, Willie Weeks maybe, who played bass on a lot of my stuff. They're always great to call on. Andrea Corr if she's in town, or Beverley Knight, or my daughter Leah, who normally sings. Friends like Frankie Gavin, a fiddle player, and Bernard of course. He can help me with the vocals.

James: He was a terrific find! The amount of things he's done with the Stones and with all the various Stones offshoot projects.

Yeah, he's worked with Charlie, Mick and Keith separately. I first met him when he was on tour with Mick's solo thing. We've remained very close through the years.

James: He's a very good singer. I remember you did a painting for the cover of the 'Nickelbag' album he did with Stevie Salas as well, where he sang all the lead vocals.

Yeah, that's right! One of my abstracts was used by Tim Reece, one of our sax player's too.

Buz: Yeah, it's a proper solo album this one, with you doing the cover art, producing it... did you write all the songs too, apart from 'Spoonful'?

Yeah. Actually, I co-wrote 'Why You Wanna Go And Do A Thing Like That For' with Kris Kristofferson, Bernard helped me with 'Sweetness My Weakness'. Bob Rock and his fellow writer Eddie Vedder were involved with 'Lucky Man' and 'Catch You'.

James: Wow! When you said that you didn't realise that you were going to be making a solo album, it just sort of came about, once you'd started, was it a long process? Did you have to do it all over the place putting it together?

Well I thought I was going to do it all in a week! (Laughs) I did like four songs in two nights, and then Steve Bing had to go off, so he said "Just make an EP with those four songs", but I thought "No, I've started so I'll finish". So I went to three other studios after that, in LA, and Steve Ferrone came in. Jim Keltner, who was working with Jerry Lee Lewis at the time kept flying in to help. Then Darryl Jones came into town. It was just great having all these musicians come in, and go "let me play on it!".

James: Then you've got your Faces reunion too haven't you?

Yeah, we did a show last night, that went great! Our first gig, got it over with! We got some great reviews.

Buz: A lot of people were surprised with Mick Hucknall replacing Rod Stewart...

Yeah, but when you hear him, he sings like Rod used to sing in the seventies, right up there, you know...

Buz: This is it, I mean, we knew he was a great singer, from hearing Simply Red, but I must admit I couldn't really imagine him with The Faces.

No, he can rock. He loves being a member of a rock and roll band instead of being the star crooner, and he can do it! It surprised me how quickly he adjusted actually, and how the press seem to have accepted him. It was quite risky last night, everyone was nervous "Oh, how are we gonna go down?" and all that. We only had three days rehearsal, but we like to keep it nice and loose - that's what The Faces were about.

Buz: That's the thing with Mick Hucknall, he's such a star in his own right, he's not going to get compared to Rod...

He was worried that he would. Most people would say "OK, how you gonna do it compared to Rod?", and he did very well.

James: Was Rod not interested, too busy, or a combination of both?

He was too busy with his 'Songbook' stuff, and his management are very hard to work with. All complications and stipulations, and all I wanna do is play! I didn't want to get involved with all this legal stuff. Rod would've had to have had a lot of key changes if he was to have done it, we'd have to bring the songs down a little bit, and they would lose a lot of their initial magic. So, Mac, Kenny, me and Glen Matlock, we're all happy we can do it in the original key. Glen loves to pay tribute to Ronnie Lane, it all worked really well!

James: Do you think there'll maybe be an album possible with the new line up?

Well that's another thing, if there were enough hours in the day. What we might have to do is record a live gig or something. Mick's gotta go off and put Simply Red to bed for the rest of the year, so maybe something in January...

Buz: A live DVD would be awesome!

James: I'd like to see that too. I've seen a clip of 'Stay With Me' on Youtube when Bill Wyman was playing bass, and was really impressed!

Yeah, Bill's really pissed off that we're not using him now! (Laughs) Mac has always been good friends with Glen Matlock and he said "Glen's all ready to go, and he loves Ronnie Lane", so I thought "let's go for it!". So we kinda left Bill by the wayside, as I thought he was busy with his own band anyway.

James: Finally, can I just ask you, for somebody who's been a key figure in so many legendary bands, is there anything musically that you still aspire to, or is it just for the love of it?

I think it's still hacking my solo career. I'm really pleased that I've made this album, and I can go out and promote it, and see it a lot more clearly and serene now. I'm a lot more focussed. I like to promote it, and have some fun cracking my solo career. and gigging. It'll be great fun, between Stones shows!

Buz: I'm going to give you a huge compliment now, and say I preferred this solo album to The Rolling Stones' 'A Bigger Bang'!

Oh thanks! I like that! (Laughs).

Buz: I thought that was a good album, I just enjoyed this one more!

Well, it grows on me too. I don't play it often, but when I do, I feel really proud of it.

James: I put it on, and it was like first listen, because I didn't know what to expect, "Yeah, it's alright, that". Then the second time I really started to get into it, and the third time they'd all sunk in, and I really like it.

Well that's another thing. I didn't plan, but they all kinda sit nicely next to each other. The tracks flow. 'Forever', the last song, I've had that since 1974, when I first did the Kilburn show with Keith Richards and Andy and Willie and all that! I did that, and I never put it on an album, so Bernard said "You've gotta do 'Forever'". Womack loved that track too. He's not on it, but he always loved the way I sang it.

Buz: Well thanks a lot Ronnie, it's been great talking to you!

James: We've really enjoyed it!

Yeah, me too. Thanks a lot!

