

Wizzard and Move pop legend Roy Wood reveals his secret shyness

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HE has one of the most recognisable faces in popular music, his heavily made-up face and wild hair as iconic as the poster boy image of Che Guevara that adorned every 60s schoolkid's bedroom wall.

Madcap appearances on Top Of The Pops helped build his reputation as the wild man of rock, while memorable songs earned him a mantelpiece crammed with awards that glittered more than glam.

But the colourful, carefree image hid a secret. The real Roy Wood is, to this day, an intensely private person not given to small talk, and surprisingly self-conscious at social soirees.

Currently rebuilding his life after a traumatic relationship breakdown, the 61 year-old chooses his words carefully, admitting that this is one of just a handful of interviews he has given in recent years.

"I am reserved," he says as we meet at Birmingham's equally iconic Fort Dunlop, home of the Sunday Mercury. "I'm not good at meeting new people unless it's part of my job. Interviews and such.

"In a public place people will come up and talk to me and I'm not very good at that, although I'll do my best. You have a responsibility to talk to the fans because they've given you the career you love.

"I'm not great at conversation. Small talk doesn't come easy. If you look at the old photos of me in the early days, I'm always the one hanging back with my head down, more the musician than the frontman.

"It's a weird thing when you get up on the stage – a bit Jekyll & Hyde. You have to put on a persona, which is what I did when I was leaping about in Wizzard. I was this different person to who I really am."

I mention Alice Cooper, who I've interviewed several times over the years as plain Vincent Furnier, and who always refers to his outrageous alter-ego in the third person. Roy nods in recognition.

Creature

“Yes, I can relate to that,” he says. “I met Alice a few years back at the Kerrang Awards, and he came over to shake my hand. He was a nice bloke, utterly unlike the creature he creates onstage.

“I find it difficult to meet new people. Recently I was told that maybe I should bring some aspects of my stage persona into my personal life, and then I might find social situations easier.”

Roy’s preference for privacy is one of the reasons why he now lives in the wilds of the Peak District. Twelve years ago he bought a disused village pub from Marston’s Brewery almost in the middle of nowhere.

“It seemed like the ideal place,” he explains. “It was off the beaten track but big enough to invite the band to stay while we rehearsed and recorded.

“A lot of work was needed on the place, and I’m still doing it up. I reckon the brewery must have known they were going to get rid of it five years beforehand because it was in a terrible state.

“Whatever wasn’t nailed down Marston’s took with them – even the doorknobs and the lightbulbs. They left nothing. The bars were full of wood rot so I had to drag them outside and burn them.

“I’ve put another bar in now just for me and my mates. I’ve made it look like a pub again – I’ve even got old-style pumps, although I haven’t got any beer on at the moment. You need to drink lots of ale to justify putting a big barrel in.”

In fact, despite his riotous reputation with The Move back in the 1960s, Woody isn’t a big beer drinker. He’d rather have a good glass of claret, knows his wines, and has a refined palate.

He famously quit the fledgling Electric Light Orchestra before it fully took flight, taking Jeff Lynne on a path to worldwide pop domination. It was a decision that bemused many at the time.

But the headlines that accompanied the split were far of the mark, Roy says. He left because he was fed up with the managerial machinations of Don Arden, a band boss from the old school of pop svenaglis.

“He was the man who ruined my career,” he says matter-of-factly. “His business dealings all came out in the end, but at the time it was reported that I’d had a huge row with Jeff Lynne. That simply wasn’t true.

“We’ve never had a real row and we’re still mates now. It was Jeff and I who started ELO. We were always willing to experiment and we’d stay behind in the studio after our Move bandmates Rick Price and Bev Bevan went home.

“When we were in The Move we never really made a lot of money, but as things improved I started collecting instruments from second-hand shops. I’d go in and buy an oboe or a French Horn.

“I didn’t just want them hanging on the wall, and it was a shame not to play them. Through brute force and ignorance rather than musical finesse, I learned to play them. I could probably play an electric kettle, you know.

“I was getting bored with The Move because we’d done as much as we could, and I thought there must be a lot of young musicians out there playing classical instruments who liked rock and roll music.

“The rest of The Move thought I was nuts but I’d become mates with Jeff Lynne after he replaced me in the Nightriders and they became The Idle Race. I told him about my idea and suggested we join forces.

“It was difficult because of the management, but Jeff did eventually join The Move, solely so we could start getting ELO together. So, yes, we shared the same vision of what could be accomplished.

“One night we were working on a Move backing track and I started playing along on a cheap Chinese cello I’d bought. Jeff thought it sounded great and suggested I add it to the track. In the end I did 15 overdubs until it sounded like a heavy metal orchestra.

“That was 10538 Overture, the birth of ELO.”

In hindsight, does Roy have any regrets about walking away from what would become one of the most successful bands in mainstream pop?

“Not really,” he muses. “There was a lot going on behind the scenes with the management and I couldn’t face it.

“Maybe at the time I might have been a bit hot-headed. Shortly afterwards ELO had a big tour in America and perhaps I should have stayed a bit longer to be part of that.

“But you do what you do, and at least I didn’t leave to become a failure. At least I went on to have big hits with Wizzard.”

Debut single Ball Park Incident, chart-toppers See My Baby Jive and Angel Fingers, and I Wish It Could Be Christmas Everyday followed in quick succession, although the latter reached only No 4 in the UK.

But even then the influence of Arden – father of Sharon Osbourne – hung over him. “I was contracted to Don Arden for longer than I should have been,” he sighs. “When I broke away he stopped me from recording in any London studio. I ended up booking in under false names but I was soon recognised.

“He ruined the momentum. After Wizzard it was difficult. People haven’t got very long memories and suddenly you fall out of favour. When that happens it’s really hard to get back if you’re not high-profile.

“I was working flat-out but to little effect. After that, I was just mucking about with musicians and going into local studios. We had an album called On The Road Again that was originally going to be on EMI but wasn’t promoted at all.”

Roy Wood’s Wizzo Band, Roy Wood’s Helicopters and The Roy Wood Big Band all followed but met with little commercial chart recognition. It was an impasse, however, that failed to curtail his creativity.

After all, his solo album Boulders back in 1973 really had been a solo effort.

“I played all the instruments, did all the vocals, produced it, designed the cover, drove the van, made the tea and sandwiches,” he beams. “Now that’s a real solo album – I’m never short of ideas.”

Which brings us to the present. Helped through his personal problems by daughter Holly (“She’s stood by me through hell and high water, and the daughter gives the dad good advice these days”), Roy is brimming with invention.

There’s a compilation album, a project with an orchestra – possibly the CBSO – an arena tour with fellow survivors Status Quo, and a surprising new academic role.

“I’m putting together a compilation album from a songwriter’s point of view,” he says.

“That means not all the tracks will be by me. There’ll be other people doing covers of my songs, too.

“Kaiser Chiefs do a great version of Flowers In The Rain, Status Quo do a good I Can Hear The Grass Grow, Cheap Trick rock and roll California Man, and there are others I like as well.

“A lot of companies over the years have got permission to use my songs, but they never ring me to ask me what I think should be on the album. They just put it out, usually in chronological order, and that doesn’t necessarily make a good set.

Christmas tour

“I’ll include a few of my hits because people expect them, but I’ll also use tracks I think are among my best. One I really like is Beautiful Daughter, which was on The Move’s Shazam album. I’ve since recorded it with a string quartet – and that works really well.

“I’m doing an arrangement for a 70-piece orchestra of The Move’s Blackberry Way, together with a new central section that’s never been heard before. That will be nice for the train-spotters out there. I’d love to do it with the CBSO.

“I’ve also got some ideas for a different version of the Christmas song but I’d probably not include the original. Same song, same lyrics but with different instrumentation. After all these years I can be my own boss.

“I’ve spent most of my successful career with EMI and I’m hoping they might take it. Otherwise I might release it through a Sunday newspaper like Paul McCartney, Joni Mitchell and Noel Gallagher.”

A Christmas tour with Status Quo will see Roy Wood’s Rock & Roll Band back playing the big arenas, calling off at the NEC on December 5.

“I want my band to be heard on the big stage,” says Roy. “They deserve to be seen. They are the best musicians I have ever worked with.”

Finally, there’s a new challenge for Roy Wood, rock legend, Ivor Novello award-winner, member of the Society of Distinguished Songwriters and Academy of Composers.

After receiving an honorary Doctorate from the University of Derby, where his songs are part of the songwriting and studio syllabus, he has been asked to turn lecturer, and pass on his skills.

“I’d love to do that,” says Roy. “I was absolutely delighted to get my Doctorate. At last I can use that time-honoured line: “Lie down, I’m a doctor!”

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