

Guitarist

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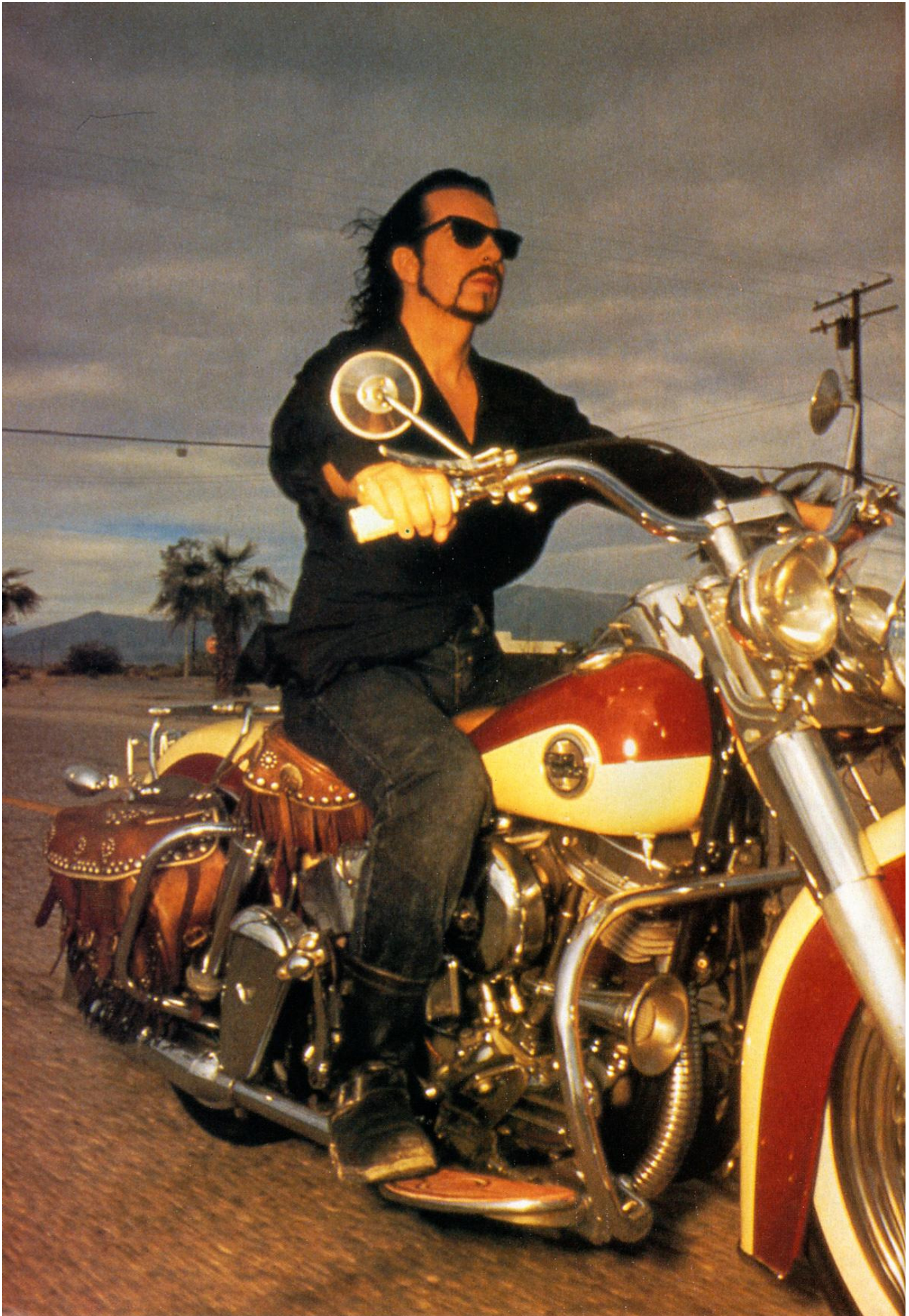
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COWBOY JUNKIE

Dave Stewart

After a career as a man behind others, Dave Stewart has finally decided to front his own band, *The Spiritual Cowboys*. Feature by Michael Leonard.

"WHAT'S REALLY FUNNY IS I've come full circle," smiles Dave Stewart. "This band is like the old days again. Everybody's manic, all the band members are *totally* into this project like it's their first band – it's really weird, because Martin Chambers, our drummer, has been in *The Pretenders!*"

Backstage at the hallowed halls of the Tez Wogan show, Stewart is revelling in the thrill of the new. With the Eurythmics on hold, as Annie Lennox recovers from a world tour, 'have-a-go Dave' decided to fill in his time by recording 'the solo album'. Whether you like him or not, you've got to admit that Stewart tries hard – bloody hard. As well as being one half of the most successful duo since, oh, Peters and

Lee, he's had time to produce his own TV show (Channel 4's 'Beyond The Groove'), record with artists as diverse as Aretha Franklin and Bob Dylan, and launch his own record label. He's one of those people who really is a workaholic.

"Some people, when they get home, automatically take a bath to make themselves feel better. I have to tape-record something, and it could be with Mick Jagger or the lady who cleans my house. I mean, I've actually recorded a track with the lady who cleans my flat..."

While that particular house track is unlikely to storm the charts, the Eurythmics have regularly provided Stewart with the financial means to indulge himself. Rising from the ashes of the Tourists, the Eurythmics – Stewart and Annie Lennox – proved one of the most consistent acts of the eighties. From the early electro-pop of 'Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)', to the harsher experimentation of 'Savage', they've managed to retain integrity and critical acclaim, while cooking up some exceedingly good tunes. Although a guitarist from an early age, Stewart's music takes a panoramic view – from the sixties guitar pastiche of *Thorn In My Side* to the orchestral pomp of *There Must Be An Angel*. But, as Stewart reveals, it isn't just the diverse content of output that keeps the Eurythmics fresh – it's also the

relationship between himself and his one-time partner.

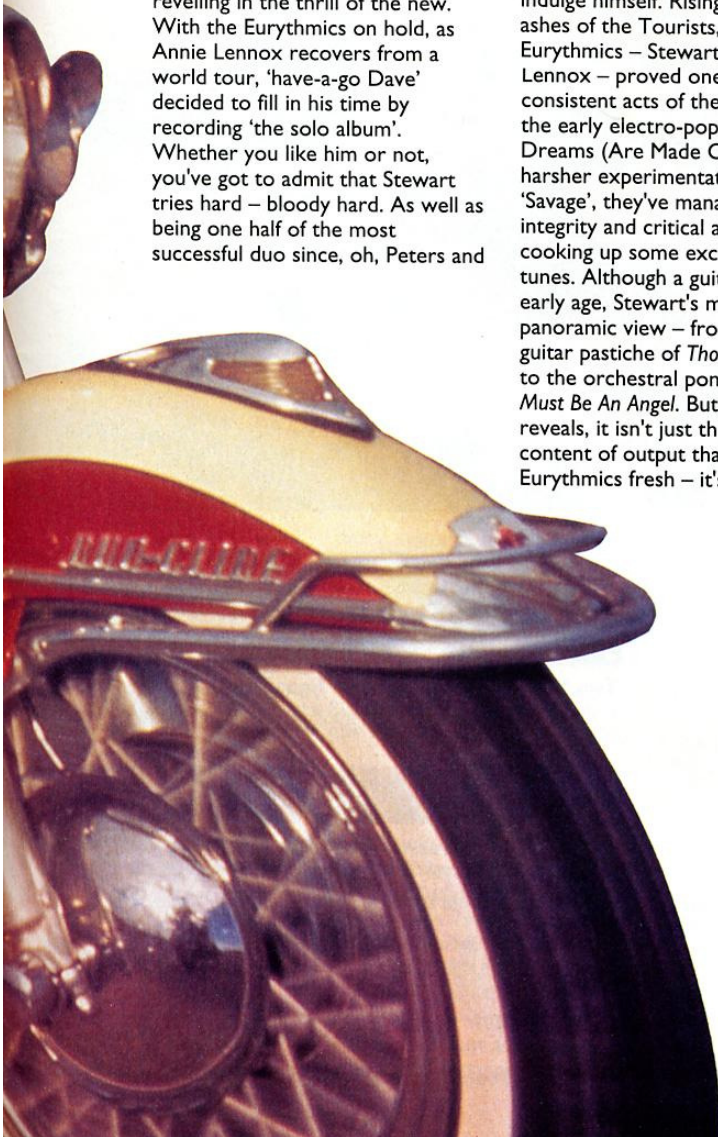
"I never see the Eurythmics as getting stale, because of the friction between us two as a couple. It's something that most people can't draw on – they become successful and just carry on. Me and Annie never went through that sitting back, because we were either getting on great, or rowing; doing a TV show, and suddenly Annie just storms off..."

Come the mid-eighties, and the two's volatile relationship led Stewart to ease off on his input to the band, eager to quash Lennox's worries about becoming a pawn in the Stewart game plan. With their most recent album, 'We Two Are One', the slick knob-twiddling skills of Jimmy Iovine were enlisted, perhaps to mediate the sparring between the Stewart and Lennox corners. While it was typically successful (catch the CD-piped proof in your local wine bar now!) it lacked the edge and verve of 'Savage'. Was the solo album a direct result of the contrast between 'Savage' and 'We Two Are One' – a bid to regain control?

"I never really thought about making a solo album at all," says Stewart. "I don't know why, but it must have gone so far into my subconscious that it never came up. But just before the 'We Two Are One' tour, I was knocking around with Chris Thomas – my co-producer – and he heard me writing some songs and said, 'I really like these – I wouldn't mind going into the studio and doing some tracks'. And that was what triggered me off."

With the gamut of extra-curricular activities that Stewart indulges in, he already had a pool of songs to dip into for solo material. But rather than taint *The Spiritual Cowboys* with the charge of Eurythmic cast-offs, Stewart set about the solo project from scratch.

"The tracks that Chris Thomas heard were just me messing about, but I wrote all these songs specifically for the album. I do write a lot of stuff for different people though, some of it at really obscure tangents – Hall and Oates are just



▶ doing one of my songs; the new Roger McGuinn single; to the really diverse, like Etta James. There isn't really any particular direction of songwriting – it just goes splat against the wall!" he laughs.

His co-operation with Roger McGuinn had its bonuses. Apart from overseeing the return of a formidable, if wayward talent, it also offered a nice line in fringe benefits...

"He was great. We're his favourite band – he says!" Stewart laughs. "He really loves The Spiritual Cowboys... He came to rehearsals and came to the first gig in a little club. And he's persuaded Rickenbacker to make 1001 of the new Roger McGuinn 12-strings, with the built-in compression, so I can have one. That's nice..."

The Spiritual Cowboys project sees Stewart returning to the guitar. It's a swirling, psychedelic affair – if still with a contemporary feel – and has the sort of widdle excursions typical of a man let out of his pop cage. It's therefore surprising to hear that he still pens most of his songs on a keyboard.

"Tracks like *Missionary Man* or *I Need A Man* – that Keith Richardsy thing – are written on guitar, although I tend to write on keyboards. But I've got into the guitar again recently, over the last year or so. With the Eurythmics song structures it's like, 'there are 16 bars of guitar here, and then it goes into something else.' It's all parts and there's not much loose meandering.

"But on my album – on *Soul Years* for example – there's the feedback guitar all the way through the verses. And on *Jack Talking*, the single, there are two guitar solos; one on acoustic and one on electric. I like it for the song structure. On first listen it might whizz past, but it's completely opposite to a normal song structure – you're wondering which is the chorus and which is the verse, and then it comes to the guitar solo. Then you get to another guitar solo, and then goes into a bridge. You just think, 'what's going on?' I like to have that."

Of the craft of songwriting, he says, "it depends how you approach songwriting and guitar playing really. You see, I've learnt by my mistakes – I've made a fortune by making mistakes – but I've had an open enough mind to think, 'oh, that mistake's really good!'"

At this point he picks up the Takamine acoustic resting by his chair to demonstrate one of his

'mistakes' – the muted riff on The Spiritual Cowboy's *King Of The Hypocrites*...

"You see, I came up with this riff, and I just put this whining guitar over the top, with me hitting the whammy bar to give an Indian sort

the acoustic voice-and-guitar version of *You Have Placed A Chill In My Heart*.

"Yeah, well you can get an incredible dynamic with such a simple arrangement – you can build it up and take it down at the drop



of thing. And the mixture of these things gave a great texture. Then Tower of Power came in to add a brass riff, and in the end I just kept the first two notes of the riff so it never resolved. And all together, it made the strange texture."

How many people could afford to pay Tower of Power for two notes? Not many. Like the Eurythmics' records, the album does hint that Stewart threw money at it until it was 'just right'. Does he always like such lush productions?

"Well, sometimes I like it to be completely empty – like on *This Little Town* or *Mr Reid* – but I use layers that aren't a wall of sound; it's more like if you look over here there's something else, then there's stuff right on the edges. I love all kinds of music so I tend to gorge myself. I love the Sex Pistols' wall of guitar, and there's two tracks, one called *Love Shines* and the other's *Party Town*, where there's this wall of noise. Then in the middle there's a Rickenbacker playing over the top of all that."

But with the Eurythmics, some of the most acclaimed songs were the ones stripped bare – particularly

of a hat. To do that with machines is *incredibly* hard. But if you get a great band together, you can do that. I'm taking the Al Green approach with this band – we've got two drummers and when it's flat out, it's bloody noisy! But then, you can take it down to almost nothing. Annie and I can do that easily with just acoustic guitar and voice. That's what's so chilling about it dynamically – you feel as though you're falling over the edge of a cliff all the time. Unless you have a band who are incredibly used to playing with each other, then it is very hard to do all that."

Throughout the Spiritual Cowboys album, Stewart's R&B influence is very evident.

"It comes from when I was first getting into music," he reveals. "I have a cousin in Memphis, and he'd send us all these records you just couldn't get in Sunderland. We were the only people who knew anything about these records – Stax/Volt, and Sam and Dave. And me and my brother were grooving to all these records when we were about 13. Then I got into Mississippi John Hurt, Robert Johnson, and ▶

- Stefan Grossman's 'How to Play The Blues Guitar'..."

What of the story that Grossman taught the 16 year-old Stewart how to play bottleneck outside a pub?

"I already knew who he was, but nobody else did in the North East. My cousin sent over the record, 'How To Play The Blues Guitar', and you got a free bottleneck or something! Anyway, when I found he was coming to play, I couldn't believe my luck. He only played to about 30 people, and afterwards I went to talk to him and he was just amazed I knew all his songs! I was going, 'oh, teach me that one, St Louis Tickle', and he just sat down and taught me a few things. I can't remember how to play them now,

Stones and just flipped, but the very first thing was this. There are riffs off really obscure Sam and Dave records that I still play. It was amazing for me, because when the Eurythmics first played LA on the 'Sweet Dreams' tour, Dave, from Sam and Dave, jumped up and sang *Wrap It Up* – which we covered on that album – with Annie. Annie didn't know who he was, either, but I was just passing out!"

WHILE STEWART GIVES Robert Johnson's 'King Of The Delta Blues Singers', George Thorogood and the Destroyers' eponymous debut, and Jimi Hendrix's 'Electric Ladyland' as favourite albums, the



but you know..." as he picks out a rag on the Takamine, "this sort of thing. Everyone else in Sunderland was singing 'Oh, I went down the mine, and I...' and I'd be there playing these rags.

"Whatever you first get into leaves a lasting impression. At that time, American music was much more interesting, because in this country it was Cliff Richard!" he smiles. "When I was 15, I saw the

spectre of narrative English quirkiness – specifically that of The Beatles – raises its head on *This Little Town*.

"That's because I'm singing about a time – I even say it, 'about the Beatles and the cracks' – when the radio used to announce weeks before that a Beatles single was coming, and then it'd be on every hour. It was when I was 16 or 17, so I really got the full Beatles

treatment. About the first time they went psychedelic, was the first time I took any drugs. Sgt Pepper is so different from any other pop record in structure, and then you hear that for the first time when you're on acid! So *This Little Town* is about then, and about my home town, and all the things that made me want to go away on this musical mission. And then I keep saying that I want to go back there to remember what it was like – I keep saying, 'to be born again'.

"As soon as you become successful, you get all the things that come with it – fame, the whole music business – but I loved it at the beginning. You'd write a song in a flat, and rehearse it at the youth club. There's a lyric in there – 'I was talking to some friends of mine, trying to make sense, after drinking a case of wine from Yugoslavia'. Sunderland was treated as such a poor relation of the South, that you got second best vegetables and meat, and the only wine you could get for ages was Yugoslavian riesling, really cheap. So they're all little references to that. There's a line – 'trying to make love to a shopping arcade' – which is about

You can get an incredible dynamic with a simple arrangement – you can build it up and take it down at the drop of hat. To do that with machines is incredibly hard

me and a friend staring in this shop window at about three in the morning. We didn't really understand we were there, because we were hallucinating, and we were staring at this mannequin going, 'oh wow! She's amazing!' And this policeman just walked up to us and said, 'okay, what's going on here then?'"

Yes, okay... I think that's enough of that sort of behaviour. What about other influences?

"I think Morrissey writes some brilliant words. In the past, I used to love a lot of Joe Strummer's songs, Peter Shelley from the Buzzcocks, Ray Davies, the Velvet Underground and Lou Reed. I thought the new World Party album was really good – it sounded like a labour of love, and you could tell he'd caressed every instrument he played. I don't think it's retro, it's just the sound of all the things he's into. It's like me – it's just a

► mixture of the things I love, with the words I want to say."

On the subject of words, the lyrics to *Mr Reid* suggest Stewart doesn't hold 'career' people too fondly...

"It's really about these people who want to be in a powerful position, and want to get everything correct and perfect. But really, they're very fragile and the reason they want to do that is because they're so freaked-out themselves. They can never relax, you know. They never want to get drunk, never want to lose control. That's why it goes, 'men, blocked within their own heads / men, with power but no friends'. It's actually based around one particular person, but it's about business people particularly, who are obsessed with coming out at the top of the ladder, and don't want to let anything interrupt that aim. But when they get there, they're the loneliest people..."

No danger of that himself. Having made America a home from home, with his own LA studio, Stewart makes a habit of rubbing shoulders with legends. You want lifestyles of the rich and famous? Reel 'em out Dave!

"Harry Dean Stanton practically lives at my place in LA. So does my next door neighbour and the whole of my band, usually because they're waiting for 'dead' time in my studio. Absolute chaos – it's fantastic! It never ceases to amaze me, like, when there was Bob Dylan, Roy Orbison and George Harrison... All these people in my kitchen, writing songs. All the time I was thinking, 'hang on a minute! I'm from Sunderland. This shouldn't be happening.'"

But happen it did. The Traveling Wilburys recorded their album in Stewart's house – for free of course – and Bob Dylan made 'Down In The Groove' with Stewart in the production seat. Mick Jagger's woeful 'Primitive Cool' was another of his projects, but as Stewart concedes, "he should have trusted his natural strengths a bit more. We recorded stuff under somewhat compromised circumstances. I've spoken to him since and I think he agrees."

Outside the Eurythmics, Stewart has presided over a number of completely duff productions, but he's not for giving up. Even his own label, Anxious Records, has come near to collapse, but it's all part of his philosophy – if it's fun, why not have a go?

"I've never made a conscious

decision in my life," he insists.

"Well, the only one I made was that if I ever became really wealthy, I was going to have a studio. But all the other things are completely random: who I've worked with is completely random; the way I go about recording or writing songs is totally random. It's just based on intuition.

"I'll pick up a guitar and play a riff, and the next thing I'll do is put

THE SPIRITUAL COWBOYS album doesn't revel in such diversity, but does feature guitars up front like you've never heard Stewart before. Some of the sounds are huge, particularly on *Hey Johnny (It's You)*.

"That's actually two Rickenbacker 12-strings, slightly distorted, in stereo – one on either side – with a six-string in the middle doing the *Day Tripper* type of riff. With having Chris Thomas, who actually



down a drum pattern that's completely the opposite to what you'd imagine, so that it throws it. I like it when you think everything's normal and there's this big twist and it's all 'off'. Like on *There Must*

produced 'Never Mind The Bollocks', it does sound big..."

What of the other guitars he used?

"Well, there was a Gretsch, a browntop one which I just bought off this guy who came round to my house; and the Rickenbacker 12-string; and Takamine acoustics," he smiles, twanging it *again*, "which are just brilliant. Playing onstage is amazing, given the problems you usually have with acoustics. These have the EQ and everything and you just get the perfect acoustic guitar sound, without sounding electric. Live, when we do the six numbers acoustically – songs like *You Have Placed A Chill In My Heart* – the guitar sound out of the PA is just crystal clear."

On Channel 4's *Star Test*, he confessed that the only things he collects are guitars...

"I never thought I was a collector, until I got my guitars out. ►

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Be *An Angel* by the Eurythmics; the last thing you expect is a French opera singer to come in followed by Stevie Wonder playing the harmonica. It's such a mad mixture of things, I love that."



- I've got about 30 I suppose, but they've all got special little purposes. There's a couple of really good Gretsches, and some funny little octave guitars."

Gretsches are an obvious favourite ("they're so cool") but, like many people, he does have problems with them.

"They are hard to get right, but when you do, you get this really mellow but raunchy sound and it's really 'woody'. You've got to play differently. It's like an old car; once you get it right, they're bloody amazing. I remember, when I was doing this big jam thing in America with Eric Clapton and Bo Diddley (Tsk, tsk! Namedropping again!) with this mad, square guitar. He's done all this weird, electric stuff to his guitar, and he had this switch

which brought in an octaver, and when he came to his solo, he just winked at me and pressed this switch and the sound was just *amazing*."

The guitar playing on the solo album favours twangy and rhythmic solos rather than those of the screaming variety, again doffing a cap to his influences.

"There's a bit of the wailing in *The Devil's Just Been Using You* and a bit on *Jack Talking*," he shrugs, "but I've never been one for just a bombardment of notes."

Will this project finally take Stewart out of the shadows and into the limelight – a path he's helped so many others take? I suspect not, but he probably doesn't at all care. Perish the thought, but if he wasn't hugely

popular, would he still pursue music as a career?

"Well that's the thing!" he exclaims. "I don't see it as 'a career'. Me and Siobhan (Fahey, ex-Bananarama, now of Shakespear's Sister, and Stewart's wife) are similar people – and we've talked about this. We could both survive in a little cottage in Dorset with very little in the way of material possessions. I'd want to have a guitar and a little tape recorder, and she'd have to have her record collection I think, but we could do it. I don't like the things that happen when you become famous. They take you out to a restaurant, and you wait hours before they bring you a little carrot or something, beautifully arranged on the plate. I like beans on toast..!●