Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson
Guest: Ian Anderson
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Ian Anderson, currently embarked on solo projects, is the lead vocalist and flautist of the legendary band Jethro Tull, which has sold over 60 million albums worldwide.

WOODS: Tell us a little bit about Thick as a Brick, which hit number one on the album charts in 1972, and what's the premise behind the sequel?

ANDERSON: The original album in 1972 was an album generally thought by commentators of the time and now to be, I suppose, as a classic prog rock album, a progressive rock album, a concept album, and it came hot on the heels of an album called Aqualung, which became a very successful album for Jethro Tull. When I wrote Aqualung I was definitely not thinking about writing a concept album. It was a selection of songs, but in the way that you dress that up for public consumption and a vinyl record, in a gatefold sleeve album cover. You try and draw things together to give it a sense of unity, and maybe I overdid that, because a lot of folks thought that Aqualung was a concept album, in spite of the fact that I continued to say, "No, it's just a bunch of songs." Three or four of them have something to do with each other, but most of them are unrelated to the others.

When it came to the following year and a follow-up album, I thought, "Right, let's give them the concept album they think I just made in 1971." Let's really go to town on it. It was written as a bit of a parody of the prog rock genre and the concept-album era, to the extent of my pretending that it was written or lyrically that it was based on the poetry of an eight-year-old schoolboy, and to present it very much as a continuous-flow piece of music, which essentially was 20 minutes one side of a vinyl record and 20 minutes the other. It caught the imagination of a lot of people at the time. It was part parody, part serious, essentially the meanderings of a precocious mind on the verge of puberty. I don't know if you remember that, but I certainly do, and things were a little confusing and became even more confusing for the next four years or so. But that's an important part of any child growing into physical adulthood.

You have a distorted view of the world around you based on what parents tell you, what schoolteachers tell you, what you observe, and the way that you observe it from your own little world. It was in some ways a little autobiographical, as most things I write are to the tune of maybe 20 percent. Otherwise based on a lot of other stuff around me, so I tried to see the world through the eyes of a prepubescent child grappling with the notion of making sense of the adult world. Forty years later, after a long hiatus and several attempts by record companies and peer-group musicians and fans and media to write a follow-up, a sequel, finally I came up with an idea at the end of 2010. In early 2011, I sat down to write that sequel based on the very simple idea of what might have happened to Gerald Bostock, the fictitious child poet. What might he be doing today? So I wrote down a list of 15 possibilities, whittled it down to five, and started to write. About three weeks later I had an album.

WOODS: For what it's worth, it's my favorite album of yours since Stormwatch in the late 1970s. It really demands the listener's attention. It's not just something to have on in the background. You've got to sit there and listen to it, listen to the lyrics, follow the story. The tour has been a great success—commercially, no doubt, but also critically. I've been very pleased to see what a lot of reviewers have said: I went to the concert knowing Thick as a Brick would be very good, but I had no idea how good the new material would be and how well it would translate to the stage. That's got to be gratifying.

ANDERSON: Yeah, I think the moment when I started to write the album, I was very much trying to put something together with a lot of visual references and things that I could do in terms of staging that would make it a performance piece. So I was constantly relating back to the original Thick as a Brick and how that

might be staged, too. What sort of visual imagery we could be using in terms of our video screen and additional performers and so on. The way that we present the show, it had to tie together. I very much wrote the album all the time almost writing a performance, writing a concert live performance which I didn't do in detail really until after I'd finished the recording. Certainly in quite a lot of places, I had a fairly good idea how I was going to do the performance side of it, the actual stage production side of it, while I was writing, rehearsing, and recording the album. The detail came later when I sat down to write the show in the couple of weeks after I finished recording the album.

WOODS: You're currently on another leg of the tour. I attended a show on the first tour. I flew down to Chicago, because I didn't know there was going to be a second leg. I couldn't imagine missing the performance of Thick as a Brick all the way through, which hadn't been done in 40 years. Where does the current leg of the tour take you?

ANDERSON: Well, we revisit some areas that we've performed in the last year with Thick as a Brick in 2012, and so we have another couple of shows at the Beacon Theatre in New York City and start out on Long Island. Then we head off to Boston again, and then wind our way up to Canada and play Montreal to Toronto, Hamilton, Windsor, back into the U.S. for one show south of Chicago in Merrillville. Then we head up to Winnipeg, where my wife particularly enjoys having a birthday, so we spend a night off in Winnipeg and then do a show there and across Canada. We finish up back in the USA in Tacoma.

WOODS: This is sort of an inside-baseball question but some of us are interested in it. How did you meet Steven Wilson, who I think is one of the more underrated musicians out there? Of course, he's a great producer and great technical guy as well. How did you meet him?

ANDERSON: He was someone I got to hear about, really, because of his work in remixing one of the classic albums of King Crimson, so as a remix engineer and producer in his own right of his own material, under his own name and prior to that, in the band that he founded some many years before, he was someone known to me really for his remix work. When EMI asked me about doing some 5.1 surround remixes of Aqualung and other albums I suggested Steven Wilson. He was approached and did a couple of test bits, which he sent to me.

I thought he had a good approach, which was to keep very much the same layout in the stereo picture, to extend that into the surround sound world and to keep the balance pretty much the same. To technically clean things up, have a much more sparkly mix, because these days in the digital world you can dump all the background hiss and clatter. Take noise and the rumbly sort of things that are extraneous to the music that you couldn't help but record at the time, so you can clean it up a lot in the digital world just by taking away the stuff that is not musical. We have a much clearer, more transparent mix.

Steven—he has a great respect for the original work, the original production which, of course, was me producing and mixing the album. But to do that again now with his slightly younger ears—I mean only slightly younger. Steven Wilson is himself no spring chicken, but he's got ears that are 15, 20 years younger than mine, so slightly more trustworthy when it comes to mixing. So I asked him in fact when he came to having done A Passion Play, Benefit and Aqualung and Thick as a Brick 1, all of that was a work in progress, if he'd be interested in doing the mixing of the Thick as a Brick 2 album, which indeed he did. So I spent many hours in Steven's studio, with him working on the remixes of those old and new albums, and for the most part, I'm quite content to let him do most of it without me being in the room. He sees it very much the same way as I do. I think he has a natural understanding, really, of a lot of elements of classic rock. Not just my music but other artists, too. So he's a good man.

WOODS: You did an interview not long ago in which you were talking about Thick as a Brick 2, the current album, and you said something along the lines of, "There has to be a place for thinking man's music." I thought that was an interesting remark. Can you elaborate on that?

ANDERSON: It's thinking person's music, because one of the nice things about Jethro Tull and the work that I do on my own name is that it's kind of boy, girl, boy, girl out there in the audience. We've never been a band that appealed to a largely male audience. In most countries we play to it's always been a mixed audience. Mixed also because we naturally look at the demographic. It is pretty broad. People who are from all walks of life. I'm really very happy that that's the case, because there are so many bands who just do have the stereotypical kind of male black t-shirt, air-punching sort of audience or just the rock-and-roll beer-drinking buddies. Luckily it's not been that way for us, so I think it's something I always wanted to perpetuate was that you can make music which reaches a broad swath of people on different levels.

Yes, there are elements of straight-ahead rock music there, which appeals to the beer-drinking buddies, and there's a lot of music that I suppose appeals more to the sensitive and more feminine types. That's just really reflecting my own interest in music and my own interest in trying to reach across the musical genres and to embody all of that in a somewhat eclectic style. It's not meant to be overly challenging in an intellectual context, but I do like to think there's a little more depth and gratification to be got by listening to the music, reading the lyrics, and going into the detail of what goes into making that kind of music and recording that kind of an album. You don't want to make it too difficult. It has to be entertainment.

WOODS: When you look over your whole catalog, what are you the proudest of?

ANDERSON: Not unwaveringly so, but here and there I think I have a pretty good opinion of some of the lyrics that I've written. I've written some of the worst lyrics and some of the best lyrics in rock music. I think when I look back on it, because I don't go where other people go and do it much better than I can do it anyway. They've lived that life and, perhaps, can talk with authority. My lyric writing at its best is kind of out there. No one else uses those words, those constructions, those thoughts. I do feel that I've stamped my own kind of authority and individuality on rock music lyric writing when I've done it well. I've done a whole bunch of stuff, and look back on it and think, "What was in my head writing that?" Usually because I've been too self-consciously trying to write in a certain way.

These days I just let it flow. I don't really analyze what I'm writing, and I don't set out to write it a certain way. I really just let it happen, and then begins the laborious process of editing, organizing, cutting, pasting, putting things into the finished and polished trim. I do start off by just being a lot more confident, more relaxed in the way that I write things. Lyric writing at its best is what defines me, and I suppose the other obvious thing that defines me is the guy who plays the flute in a rock band. After all these years, I'm probably still the only person, internationally speaking, who's really known for doing that to the level that it's given the flute a prominent role in the history of rock music.

WOODS: I want to let you run in a minute, although I appreciate your comments about your lyric writing, which I think is ridiculously underrated. Just what comes to mind is that wonderful little song "Weathercock" from Heavy Horses. It's just a beautiful ode, the sort of subject that wouldn't be taken up by anyone else, and from time to time on my website when I'm trying to promote your stuff, I just quote the lyrics, because they're beautiful and creative. A lot of times people say, "Oh, listen this band's lyrics; they're so deep," and they sound like a seventh-grade poetry contest winner.

But before I let you go, my ten-year-old daughter, Regina, is taking up the flute, and she loves Ian Anderson. I'm sure she would love some parting words of wisdom from you. Have you any for her?

ANDERSON: [Laughter] It's always dangerous trying to impart words of wisdom to people regardless of their age, but it's particularly scary when young people who are at that point of, I guess, wanting to distill the confusing thoughts. I suppose it would be that nothing in life is terribly easy. It's actually summed up best by an ex- American president, by Kennedy, who said—having had his nose rubbed in it by the Russkies when they not only got Sputnik into orbit before the Americans could do the same but then managed to get Yuri Gagarin 51 years ago into space—of course the big comeback was the promise to take America to the moon

within ten years.

Kennedy said something that has meant a lot to me over the years. I'm paraphrasing here. We don't choose to go to the moon because it's easy. We choose to go to the moon because it's hard. In other words, things that do seem daunting, do seem like an impossible challenge, are very often the things that really do drive people to excellence, to achievements. And he wasn't talking about himself. He was talking about thousands of people that had to be doing their best, had to achieve excellence to do what he had promised the American people he would do in ten years. Not that he was the guy there at the time, but that meant a great deal to me. I suppose that in a way carves out a good motto for life, doesn't it? "Choose to do some things not because they're easy but because they are hard," as he said in his Bostonian American accent. You know hard, difficult, and I think that's a good lesson to keep in mind, and it took Buzz and Neil to the moon. So it can't have been a bad thought.