Steve's Hillage's roots run deep through rock music's progressive history. Speak his name in England and it's greeted with the same appreciation as Gilmour, Manzanara, Clapton, and Page. Back in the early 70's, he was instrumental in three of the very best Gong albums ever. Known as ***The Radio Gnome Invisible Trilogy***, the albums: *The Flying Teapot* and ***Angel's Egg*** (1973), and ***You*** (1974) presented a formative style of music which embodied the wild spirit of experimentalism and the sublimest laws of organic growth. During that time Hillage met his spiritual mate and future musical partner, keyboardist Miquette Giraudy. Soon they were off on their own, waxing psychedelic with machinery on a variety of hard-to-classify solo projects such as 1979's seminal ***Rainbow Dome Musick***, a revolution that wasn't really broadcasted in the traditional sense, but a revolution nonetheless.

Due to boredom with the rock format, the pair took a recording hiatus in the 80's and Hillage focused on record production and fully immersed himself in computers. Then in the late 80's, the UK house music explosion offered the duo the excitement they needed to do their own music once more. Hillage started hanging out at underground clubs, meeting DJ's and imagining guitar parts over house tracks. In 1989 he met up with Alex Patterson (The Orb), who was fond of mixing ***Rainbow Dome Musik*** with dance beats and thus 777, an unshakable vehicle to meander on in many wondrous ways about life through music was born. Now after two successful releases which established the group as a dynamic cross-pollination of technology and rock, they return with their most ambitious project yet, ***System 7.3: Fire + Water*** (released as System 7 in Europe). This double CD features ***Fire*** holding over 73 minutes of entrancing-dancefloor intensity and ***Water*** flowing with over 75 minutes of the pure ambient bliss. As on the two previous releases, Steve and Miquette have collaborated with some of the most well known names in current electronic dance - Derrick May, Laurent Garnier, DJ Lewis Keough, Mickey Mann, Youth, The Drum Club and other noted luminaries share writing and producing credits on both CDs. Thus, both the structure and facade of this new work is built up of thousands of details and experiences, and the whole forms an integrity, a synthesis, which puts everything in its place after exhausting all the possibilities of chance. Only a handful of recent albums in the field of genre-fusion have an effect comparable to ***Fire + Water.*** In it, 777 exhibit that the knowledge of technology melded with their warped rock experiences of the past increases not only its relevance but also its beauty, and for the determination of this knowledge 777 introduce novel methods to both ambient, techno and rock and subject them to subjective control. ***Fire + Water,*** however, is not just a landmark in the discipline of modern sound making and in music as a whole. Zestful, illuminated by a rare intelligence and even rarer consciousness, it is a great delight to hear.

Steve, tell us about the names 777 and System 7.

Well we really like the number 7. Originally we wanted to call the group 7, but there was another group called 7. Then we were toying with a French phrase called System D, and then we put the two together and got System 7 in early 1990. Then when we read that Apple computers had come up with a new operating system in 1991 with the same name we thought 'whoopee, this is it!' We researched whether there was a copyright with that and in fact it's not. People think in America that the reason we can't use the System 7 name there is because of Apple, it's not actually the case. It's because there's another band called System 7 already in America. I don't mind people thinking that Apple computer is making the problem because we think their corporate bastards, they should have given us a load of free Mac's for publicizing their system.

Maybe we can make a strong case for that. It may not be too late for them to redeem themselves.

Yeah, Power Mac 8100, 110 megahertz processor would do very nicely.

You've gone from progressive to space to ambient to house and now *Fire + Water*. Did you ever think one day you'd have people chilling and dancing to your music, and you playing with DJ's?

I think that all of our musical outpouring's have had a certain consistency about it, I mean some of our stuff in the 70's was defined as progressive rock, we never even saw it like that. I'm quite uncomfortable with the term progressive rock. I rejected it finally in 1979, the idea of the audience-performer relationship of progressive rock, where the audience is like disciples worshiping the God-like figures on the stage, I don't like that. One of the things I like about the dance movement is that the audience and the dancers and the crowd are much more equal in significance to the DJ or performer. That interactive, equal balance is much more modern, whereas the classic stage-audience relationship I find very conservative. So how did we end up doing what we're doing? Miquette and I, we're like, you know, hungry. We want to keep discovering and learning things and we've gone on our own journey of discovery and this is where we've ended up and that's about all I can say, but, there's certain elements of what we're doing now that are quite similar to what we were doing in the 70's, obviously the whole context has changed, the rhythm tracks have changed, some of the aims are the same. In some respects I'd like to think that to a certain extent some of the aspects of what I do on the guitar is a bit like Miles Davis. Miles trumpet style remained pretty consistent, but his musical context changed quite radically, if you think from going from the 50's right through to just before he died. As far as seeing the dance thing develop, I was really into funk music and quite into some disco music in the 70's, much to the shock-horror of progressive music fans... you see I don't have this sort of division in my mind you know... in the 70's I was into some of the more sophisticated uses of the guitar and keyboards, I was also very involved with European synthesizer music which was developing to a certain extent, some of the roots of techno and I liked funk, I was a big fan of George Clinton and Funkadelic, early Commodores, Earth, Wind and Fire. These have all sort of mixed together to provide the roots of what we're doing now. I remember a specific event in '78. We were doing a club tour of the U.K. and they were playing Kraftwerk's *Man-Machine* lp in the discotech, *Space Lab* was the track, and the people were all dancing and this was like a dumbfoundedly significant moment, like, I'd seen the future. It was like an electric shock, because before, people tended to

sit cross-legged and smoke huge conical joints and get really stoned to this music, and this idea of dancing, I thought was really brilliant. Obviously things took a while to develop. I worked most of the eighties as a record producer, and still do, but I used to go to clubs a lot and followed that through electro, hip hop, various other styles, just purely for enjoyment. Then the house boom started and the whole new sort of psychedelic aspect arrived and I just had this desire to start making music again as an artist. I couldn't control it, I'd be going to clubs hearing acid house DJ's and imagining guitar parts over the top of these tracks and thinking, I've got to do this!

Is it because in one sense, house music is a track waiting for other instruments to play on top of it?

Yeah, we just got this new mix in from Richie Hawtin on our track Alpha Wave, and it's very minimal, with some brilliant 303 on it and it sounds great just as it is, but also it's brilliant for playing guitar over the top of it, which I'm going to do tomorrow night at the Limelight in New York, it's a really intense groove.

Mmmm, yes the good groove is the vehicle and then you have your guitar which conveys meaning, intent and feeling. What a wonderful way to go about it, you're plugging in and creating a new improved groove.

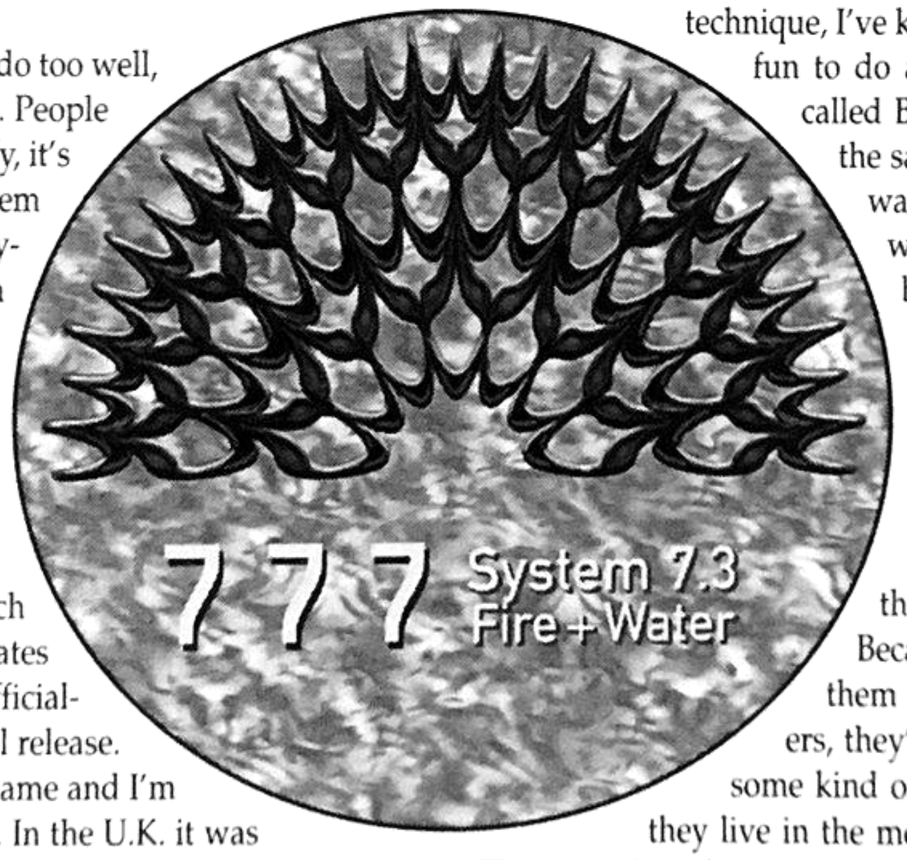
That's a nice way of looking at it, I like it. One thing I ought to mention as well is in doing our work in the 80's we developed pretty formidable programming techniques, so we do quite a lot of the grooves ourselves. I'm well into the conventions of good house music.

Your music also crosses a lot of boundaries. There's your guitar work, ambiant atmospheres, electronic euro-dance beats and maybe even a little ambiage.

Hmm, that's very French...

But it sounds like your pretty psy-fi to me. You know, science-fiction is huge right now in movies and TV. It won't be long until this music's going to catch on too. It's the soundtrack to the star travel that we all imagine ourselves doing as we watch Star Trek. It's a Sound Trek Star Track, or should I call it Star Tech for short?

Well... we don't really define what we do too well, it's like we just do it, it's up to you to define it. People have always found us rather difficult to classify, it's a problem we had back in the 70's and a problem we have now. My main thing is rather than trying to define what I did on the last album, I'm more concerned with working out ideas for the next one, which we're going to start in May and hopefully get out in October.



Any insights on how you'd like to develop that one compared to the album you've just finished?

Well, we tend to have a theme for each record, one of the problems in the United States was that our second album was not released officially, there was a lot of imports, but not an official release. That's where we made a brilliant play on the name and I'm really pissed off it didn't get released out here. In the U.K. it was called 777 by System 7 and for the American it was called System 7 by 777. We used the exact same artwork and flipped the names, which I thought was really cool. The very first 777 record had some great vocals on it by Olu Rowe, I really love working with vocals, and as a producer I work mostly with singers, but that album was a little complex, so on the second album we adopted the motto of leaner and meaner. So having done the leaner and meaner album, the new one, the third one, .3, is deeper and wider and we're, you know, still ruminating on the next one.

So your dealing with dimensions, spatial...

Yeah, well you get a kind of motto on what the overall way you want a record to work and then take all the various ideas we come up with by ourselves or with collaborators and filter them through this sort of overall approach, it's a good way of keeping this stuff fairly consistent.

A lot of the new instrumental music is hinging to concepts of either sonic geography, which gives a sense of place or location, or actually being inspired by architecture.

There's an old saying, you know, architecture is frozen music. That music is liquid architecture.

Fully validated today by modern science I might add. As a matter of fact, Youth, in our recent innerview with him said...

Oh you know my dear friend Mr. Youth?

Yes, he's recently made a wonderful quote about his Butterfly Studios as a ritualized spaceship enabling one to build the sonic temple, if you will.

We do a lot of our records in that spaceship, in the U.K. were signed to his label, called Butterfly as well.

Yes, I was very excited to hear that. So how does it feel when you're playing your guitar, when you're doing your thing, when your in the mix?

When I'm on stream it's a good feeling. I really feel I'm transmitting something... I try to use myself as a bit of a channel, to be quite honest that's the way I see it. I'm less interested in the technical notes and what my finger muscles are actually doing, more in trying to transmit energy. Particularly when I play with techno music, I'm very, very concentrated on rhythm, and a lot of what I do is using echo loops and I try to get the echoes to be absolutely bang-accurate with the rhythm track and get my playing actually rock solid and get it really, really in... there's a point where it creates a window and I can really project energy. This is particularly what I like to do live.

You, your guitar and the various rhythms are sort of one in a web-matrix of modulating polyphony.

I use the guitar as a sound source and it's like a human interface with techno rhythms and it's an interacting thing. This aspect of the guitar is far more important to me than playing lots of clever solos and musician technique, I've kind of left all that a bit behind, although it was fun to do a big guitar solo on this album on the track called Batakau, which is actually named after one of the sacred mountains in Bali. Laurent Garnier, who was working with us on it said 'Steve, I've always wanted to do a fairly slow ambient track with a big guitar solo, you're the guy I want to do it with.' I said 'Laurent, let's do it,' and we did it, all done in one day, whole thing, recorded and mixed.

So how do you feel about your prospects here in America?

I'm really very excited about playing here, I think it will interest and enthrall a lot of people. Because American's in general I found, a lot of them have problems with music made on computers, they're attached to this idea of rock and roll being some kind of human musician thing, besides the fact that they live in the most technologically-advanced society on earth. They're technophobic in the most deplorable and bizarre way. But let me be clear about this, I'm not one of these people who says rock and roll is dead, I do not see techno music as replacing rock and roll carte blanche, I see them as two parallel developments. As a producer I work a lot in the studio with bands and I enjoy it, I've got a skill there and I'm quite happy to work in rock music, but as an artist, obviously I see things differently when I put my artist hat on.

So then, how does it feel to be Steve Hillage, the artist?

Well I feel slightly different from my previous lives, you know, maybe another aspect of the same thing. If I'll remember this incarnation in my future life, I don't know. You know, it's been a nice journey.

System 7.3: Fire + Water is available on Astralwerks Records.