

FRIENDS

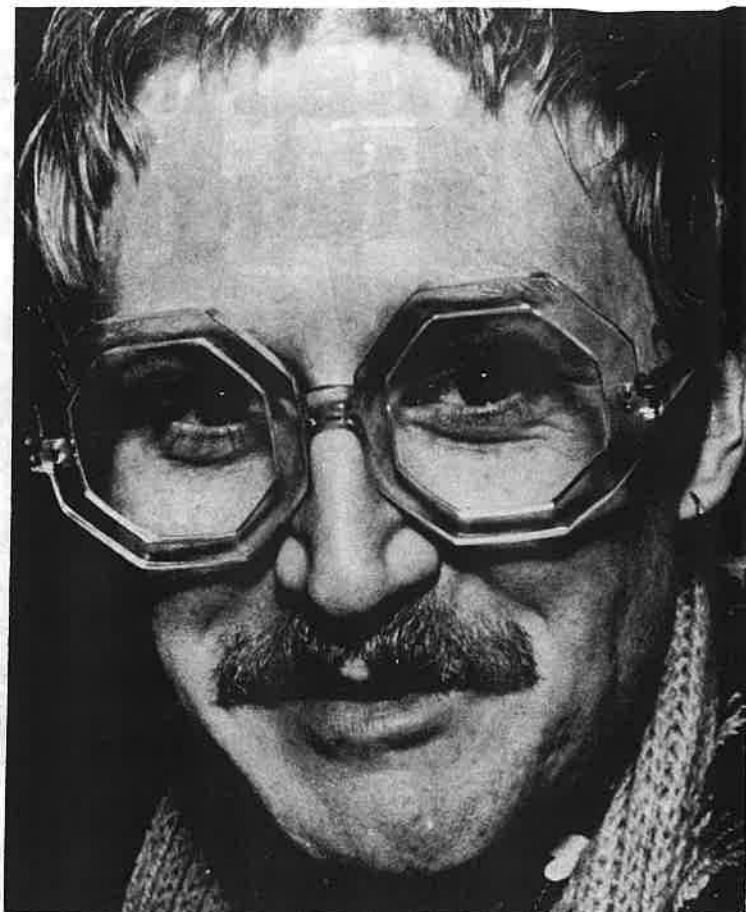
Number 2 January 31 1970 2/6 12½p



The end of the Bonzo Dog

Britain's Zaniest pervert

Jonathon Green



The Bonzos have split up.

Just when it seemed that all the hassles that they had got into—epitomised in the cancellation of most of their recent American tour—were over, their whole scene has blown up.

Half way through their Christmas Party, the premiere of the *Outrage Show*, in the last Sunday Lyceum of the Sixties, a completely bald Vivian Stanshall, looking deceptively like the Mekon in a lamé suit, told the audience that this was it. No more Bonzos. In some ways it wasn't all that surprising, looking back.

The whole concert had something of a deathwish about it. The Bonzos couldn't get anything together. Only Aynsley Dunbar, drumming throughout while Legs Larry Smith cavorted, seemed to have the first idea of what they were trying to get into. Nothing even looked like going right. The machines freaked and so did the humans. A subdued Rodney Slater was almost decapitated by a manic Legs Larry who threw hi-hats and drum stools with careless abandon. It was the only thing he *did* manage to do with any success.

The Bonzos have been a great band at their best, there's little point in charting the sordid details of what was their last concert. They got their encore, but the fast departing audience had to be reminded to ask for it. *'Monster Mash'* had them standing, but it was more duty than pleasure. Even a forty foot transparent imitation swizprick couldn't make up for an emasculated *Keynsham*, nor was clowning Keith Moon any help. They blew it and everyone knew.

For the Bonzo Dog to collapse now seems right out



of time. Earlier in the year it had seemed almost inevitable; soured by their sufferings at the hands of the business and falling apart as a band and within themselves it seemed that they couldn't go on. But over the last two months things have changed. The positive step of rejected the major part of the American tour gave them new energy, intensified by *Keynsham*—the first of their albums with which they had been fully satisfied, and on which they felt they were truly doing 'their own thing'.

Friends talked to Vivian Stanshall late last year, when this new period of optimism was at its height. With newly cropped hair, to symbolise his movement from fun and laughter to hard work and all the problems entailed in managing the band alone, Stanshall talked with obvious bitterness about what had happened and how very bad things had become. Tempered with the bitterness was sadness. One could not help but sympathise. But then it seemed as his overpowering optimism could help the Bonzos win through. Now the opposite has been seen. Despite everything that has been said and done, the band has fallen apart. What its unique and very individual talents will do now is still unknown.

There's been no attempt to update the interview, that Stanshall claimed to have been his first serious statement, and what must now stand as his last, certainly as a Bonzo. It is sufficiently interesting in its own right not to require the sensational immediacy of the latest 'frankest ever' out pourings. If you see it as a dream come distinctly untrue or as a sad irony it makes no difference.

'We had an astonishing interview with a bloke in Cincinatti who came on a recording scene and he came along to say hello and he caught Neil and I in a particularly vicious and nasty mood.

We were standing up on our hind legs and bleating. And we treated him to a two and a half hour harangue about the role of the artist and the sickness of the system and the persecution and all of the stuff and at the end of this incredible discourse he said 'We won't understand these people—they're artists'. We were dumbfounded by that. It came as an incredible revelation to him that we had artistic ideals rather than financial ones. People who are creative, people who are the sacks of potatoes for these people to sell, are by nature lost before they have begun. There's not generally speaking in the nature of creators of any kind to have business minds. You don't need to be a businessman. You have to be business-like about the way in which you're going to utilise what talents you have to get the best out of you and preserve you as a creator for later years. We just carried on through fiascos and ridiculous bookings and signing absurd bits of paper—I'd just sign them to get them out of my life and never see them again. I'd sign anything and tear it up. And at the same time I was still trying to make things and masks and do this, that and the other. *Keynsham* may not be interpreted as an attack on the system—on the surface it's just another happy little piece. In fact it's a particularly vitriolic condemnation of this maelstrom of hatred and greed. There is some fifties music in it. When I feel particularly aggressive as I have done for the past six months I use the most aggressive part of my life which I suppose was the fifties when I was a Teddy boy. I suppose there is quite a lot. Ho . . . We discover things about ourselves everyday folks . . . In real terms the really sordid level of northern club that comes on the LP is a better place to play and sort yourself out than the ones we did play which were slightly smarter. Padded loony bins. Lots of red, cheap furnishings and muted lights. First year after we left school and decided to go professional we just went out to pasture on the club circuit and univeristies. As

soon as it became apparent that we could earn money in these sort of places then we stayed there. It took supreme strivings to get out of that . . . well it took 'Urban Spaceman' which was an incidental. Then we were put out to sniffle around in the area of ballrooms and things. We were sent in directions that were completely unsuitable for us. They were decisions made on the basic premise that the idea of a band is to make money and as steadily as possible.

I'd never cut a gig even if it were totally unsuitable because I'd feel guilty about the people who come to see you. I really do. In the dressing room at Filmore East about four of five blokes came in who'd come from Ohio to see us. If you start turning places down you think about the people like that that you'll be disappointing. Leaves me speechless how anyone could come that far to see anything—it would have to be Lourdes for me or a levitating poodle or something. In the whole of our career in England and in the States we've gone through anything, sleet and snow, whatever condition we were in, brainstorm and anything, 'cos we genuinely cared about our audiences. You must care about them and about what you're doing. Now we are trying to by-pass the eventuality of going to do something pointless by simply not booking ourselves for such places. Organise our lives the way we want. From this period to this I want to record, or read or make things. So that shouldn't arise any more. We are changing our format now. We have to work around the country between now and Xmas and we'll make the best of it. Taking about four and a half tons of gear on the road. We can't afford to take more than that on the road. Doing that till the end of the year. Half way through January, after our first two weeks off for years, we'll be presenting a two hour complete stage show which we are asking more money for, under the understanding that the extra money will be used to cause a stage to be built, and to be able to have some control on the price the audience is charged—you must do that, I don't want to sit in front of resentful people; people who say 'I've been charged £1 for my seat and I'm sitting on my arse amid all this beer and slop and I can't hear what you're doing and I can't see you' and so on and I don't blame them for saying that its all a bloody con. You can get around that happening. If we can give people what we can give and we give them our best then we stand a fair chance of surviving, people won't resent us and we'll be value for money. We'll be taking the two hours show about six or seven times on the road. Plays sketches and so on. In order to do that you can set it all up the day before so it goes perfectly. People have a right to demand this. At the prices that people are charging at clubs all over people should get concert conditions, or if its a dance the very best conditions to dance. The system gives little or no encouragement to people with talent and sincere ideals . . . its just a terrible set up.

I don't look upon this as a load of artistic wank. I really think that there is a business way of doing it too. You can make a handsome profit and share it and utilise it to help the people who are doing it to do better things. There's a jolly handsome profit to be made that way, and an honourable one. That's what I believe and am going to do. I will. No reason why not. I shall beat the business at their own game simply because I don't want what most of them are offering and secondly because you can't beat the cut price store. There's no answer to the supermarket in the arts or anywhere else. You either reduce your price and increase your integrity or you're out of the market. In all of this renaissance which people tell us we are undergoing at the moment, people are being militant with the wrong weapons. You should be militant with the tricks, gimmicks, loopholes, knots and porcupines of the establishment. Find out those and start using them against it and destroy it that way. Then introduce new and better laws and ways of doing the thing. Senseless badges, demonstrations and exterior manifestations of frustrations and hatreds seem silly. I don't blame people for being out of control. I'm filled with hatred too. I am full of paranoia, fears of being persecuted. My whole life now has

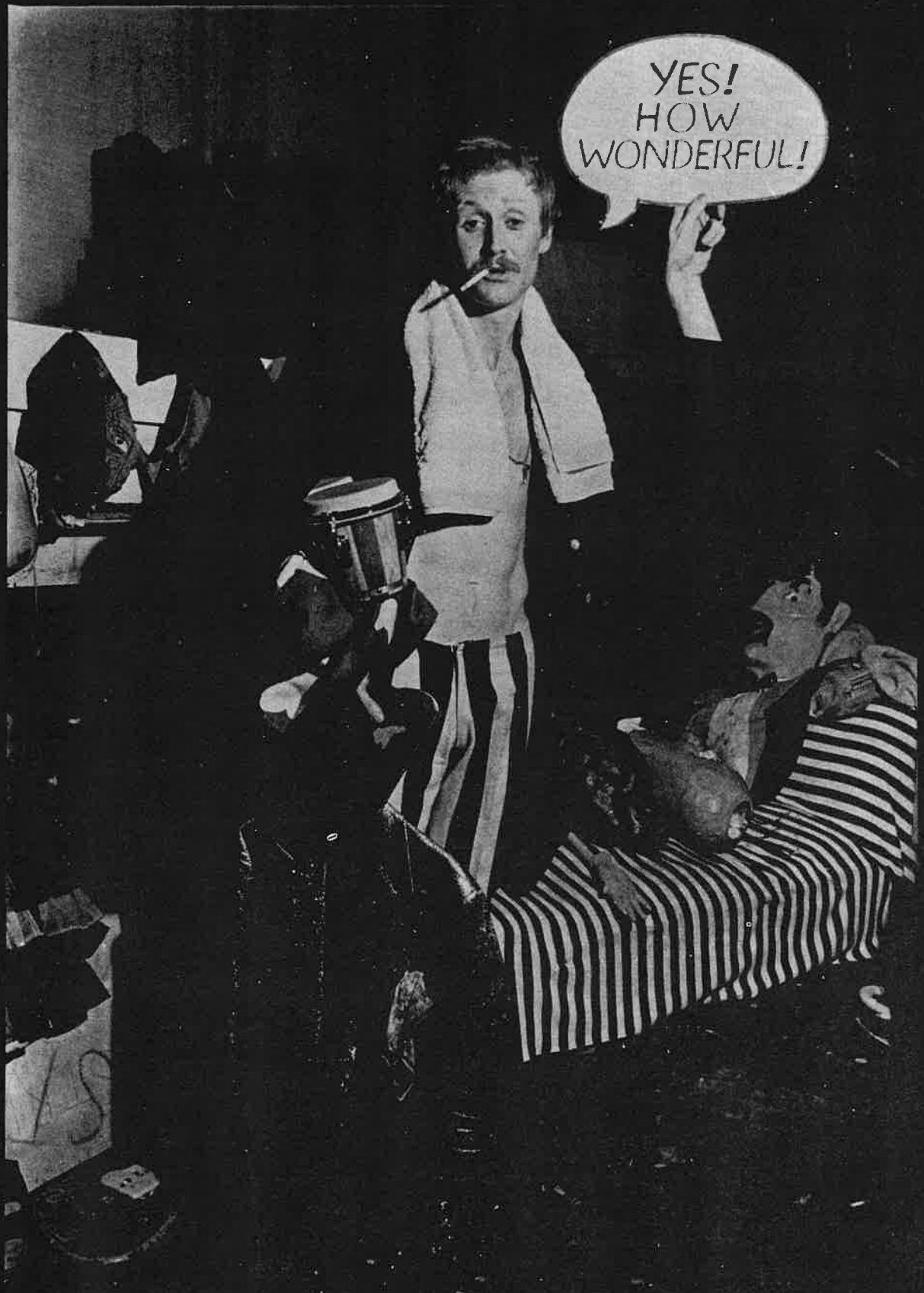
somewhere or other this idea. If I can do these arty farty things then I can use them as weapons too. That's revolution you're preaching there buddy . . . stop at anything but that . . . Paranoia is one of the themes of the album. There is a track on that about hatred of the system which did its best to put me off Shakespeare and any poetry, painting . . . stuffed down my throat things that were obviously unsuitable and made things that were exciting to me unpalatable by making reverent, dead things out of them. I mourn the loss to so many people of so much because of the way they were taught. The odd boy also inhabits Keynsham because he doesn't like algebra and woodwork and games. He's a freak because he doesn't like things that are normal.



'Does Keynsham exist? I'd hate to see it, it would be just as disappointing as actually seeing the Taj Mahal. That and the Tate Gallery were some of my earliest disappointments, I'd prefer to think and dream about it for myself. I can imagine Horace, ensconced in his palace with jewels and slaves and nubians waving fronds and having his body perfumed everyday and with these infra-draw systems that constantly send in cornucopias and increase the wealth and the whole thing swells and explodes . . . in some small way Keynsham has taken over today from Mecca, Valhalla and even Heaven. What else is there to break the barrier of red tape except for winning the pools and getting a lot of money. I like the idea of that immensely, I think pools and that

sort of thing is super, the more stockings we can get at Xmas in this dreary pavement the better. The whole thing is boredom, my god the whole world worships boredom. All working towards it. Anyway it seemed a good idea to make it the capital of madness. Normality is what each person considers to be normal things to do . . . whatever I do is what I think to be normal. Its normal to make some compromise to a general rightness. Its incredible that people like me are viewed as freakish. Illogical. Keynsham in general terms is the ID. Inhabited by all the things that I've told and led you to believe are not normal. Humm, that exhausts that boring thing . . . next one please . . . what's your favourite colour . . . ?

In general our concerts are put together by apes who are limited to getting what they, in their own particular swamp, think your most commercial attributes. I just hope that half of the past publicity things about us have been obvious to the people who read them—just must have made them sick. How many people are supposed to be the No. 1 in England. In the States we had this thing that said 'Bonzo Dog No. 1 in England'. Then it had two pictures of our album, very badly designed and at the bottom in dayglow letters it said 'dig?' . . . question mark really big. Can you imagine the thinking behind that? The perverts who sat around a table thinking, what's the name of this band? Heavy today, a . . . fine . . . or I think we'll use prog today . . . They think people are all sitting around flicking their fingers and going Crazy, man, groovy. They really think people are like that. Or do they feel that its all past any measure of sincerity or principles and the whole hype process is a load of shit? People don't want to buy, they look at this and say shit . . . I hope they do, I pray they do. All these things, labels, letterheads and so on can be used to give little insights of information to people. I'm not particularly interested in the people who think we are freaks. I must make that clear . . . The way in which we shall work will sell us to a very large audience. I want to entertain. I want to make shows. I'm not trying to sell a message, only as a framework. The way in which I say it will be entertaining as a complete thing and make it palatable. If there is any purpose or message it is to underline the fact that everyone is freakish. On different levels. I can't see that any of my ideas are particularly contrary to those of supposedly normal people. I try to talk in the currency of ideals not financial demagoguery. Currently I'm trying to have some hand in the campaign for Keynsham because it is so important that what one says what one means, if at all possible. We think its the best thing we have ever done. I can't believe that we've done it. There must be some genie of the grooves or evil troll that will muck things up. After all these years; of being screwed up and told how useless I am. Everyone has this myth that there is something special about the record business, a certain initiation ceremony or certain tatoos on your buttocks to enable you to be an agent. And it comes astonishingly relevant, a mindblower to find that you could do anything. It is a wonderful exciting time that people can make films and records and do them in their own way and make actual brass for someone. If its not bugged up by the same diseases that make established industry what it is there could be marvellous things happening. I loathe the limitations that the price range and the whole system puts on things, everything. The price of the albums should be determined by the artistic merit of the thing and the artistic merit should go hand in glove with the time it took to make it. Its a shame that I'm not allowed by my own morality to make records of other things. We had some very interesting conversations on 'Shirt'. Some of them went on and I thought they were valid. One can only put out a certain amount of talk on a two pound record but it would be nice if you could put out a tea bob talk record. Or something that you thought was interesting. What represents a bloke is what he creates, the only thing by which he can be judged. It really is perverted, some of it. I don't think it'll be discovered. The sleeve notes are here but most people will just take them as arbitrary dada spewings laced with a bit of fun.



YES!
HOW
WONDERFUL!

I don't care. We are fighting battles against irremovable forces.

I like working in the States, I like the audiences, they latch onto things that I never thought they would. People told us they won't understand English humour. But we just did it. Great. But they didn't twig why Englebert or why Victor Sylvester. But they got the general terms. Made us concentrate more on visual things than verbals. Got less idiosyncratic and less native, emancipating. We came back feeling that things we'd been saying and had been on the verge of giving up were in fact right, thought that's a dangerous way of thinking. They respond in a different way, a different race. People react intellectually to emotional stimulants and vice versa here. (Hey... a platitude, put apostrophes around that, you rotter.) The central thought can be gleaned from our past, if you want our philosophy. The best thing is to be creators for others we fear becoming machines. Worried about various systems. We smell nastier rats in different areas to those that other people do. I see some of these TV programmes and they are more than just bad and vulgar, they're suppressants, opiates. The series we did was pretty good in principle. It was the first series to treat kids as intelligent kids, note that I hesitate to say treated kids as adults because they are obviously wrong too. My boy is 17 months now and he is equally knowing as I am, but his vocabulary is in terms of sights, sounds, smells and touches. He's as knowledgeable as I am. I felt part of a good idea. It worked. The kids came in and laughed. Its immaterial even if they don't get what we are really saying. I doubt if we'd do another one. I fear that we rather estranged ourselves the last time because we were all so upset and miserable, it was a very bad period. It got worse and worse right up to nearing the breakup after the last US tour which really was the end. The finest thing anyone can do is to laugh, sit back and enjoy each other's company.

Until I became wrinkled and destroyed by this system that I shall now make it my purpose to destroy, I used to laugh a lot. We all did. Our reactions at first was turning everything into a joke and tried to topsyturvy everything. And we went through some changes and destroyed the free-wheeling dada thing we had we're trying to recapture that and we became enmeshed in the system and almost became part of what we were attacking. On the last series we were becoming much more aware of what we all should do and what our artistic shape should be and were discovering ourselves and we were really locked in by contracts and so on. At first the worse it became the more we laughed. And we were in these surreal situations. We were doing absurd things that we didn't like and it was ridiculous. And then we realised what was happening and we stopped laughing. Six months ago I began to force myself to work as a machine... the worst thing is anyone could do is to stop me thinking and working. I never felt so poignantly and desperately that I was being strangled. I now feel that it is vital if I could stop other people from being trapped and destroyed in the way I have been. We really did get very much near to breaking up. This album is an expression of our hatred for the system and its also the most together thing we have done. All of it is separate projects. We only liased on two pieces. Everyone was working separately. We stopped talking to each other. We were looking out of the window. I'm empty, we felt, why haven't I done anything. How dare I get on a stage and talk about things I don't know about any more. All I can do is talk about this rotten load of shit. Irrelevant in any case. We were really falling apart. We started managing ourselves and began marshalling ourselves like an army. We worked incredibly hard. We did it cheaply and efficiently. The next one, *Brain Opera*, has been written for a year already. I'm really very excited about our next album. I'm already looking forward to it. We know we must hold onto one thing and record and perform things that we're proud of. Unity in desperation as behind the album. I can hardly believe that we have done what we wanted. It's perfectly acceptable to be a star, I'd love to be a star. I like to go on stage with fantastic snakes

exploding from my head and wigs and mice playing inside them and drawn by swans and so on. As long as we are both aware of what's happening and they realise I know how ridiculous it is then we can both enjoy ourselves. The description of the club we visit was a factual trip. People were saying they had to cut their hair to get in. If we went to the worst tailor's shop in town, and get the filthiest DJ we can find people will love you, they'll say come and meet Joe Hardcastle, he keeps pigs and is as rich as shit and so on. They love being seen in the foyer, first name terms with the stars. Just a suit that doesn't fit, a badge. It's crazy. This track shows us doing that and being as sick as anyone else. We never actually kowtowed, but it was negative support. It is incredible that there are people who don't write their own stuff and just do everything they're given and people still value their opinions. People should realise that we were never really like that. I don't think the business will taint me. My ideas are in the right place. I'm interested in making a reasonable profit in order to further my prime interest which is work, keep fed, have books and art materials. I don't need a fortune to do that, I don't need to screw people, to con them and deceive them to do that. It has affected me already as a person—six months ago I would never have spoken seriously to anybody. I thought that speaking seriously wasn't really creative for me. I would say the same things but in riddles or jokes, or fables; just to entertain the head and play with it.

The whole Chicago harangue was so totally negative. We arrived there in the middle of the riots which no one had told us about before. We looked out for our windows and saw Black Panthers and White Slugs, and Porcupines marching up and down the streets shouting and blowing up statues and so on. We were forced to stay in the hotel. Stranded without money. The record company sent round a guy to tape radio interviews. We were lounging on the bed naked and playing around and there was a knock on the door and a little toad-like photographer comes in and say's I'm from Psychedelic Frog magazine or something and he sits down and manages to piss us both off with the waste of time when we could have been working. And then this guy from the company who is supposed to represent us comes in and starts asking questions like how many in the band and so on. So I just exploded. I told him it was a fucking outrage. Went through the same old thing I've been telling you, I haven't had much other topics of conversation recently. The photographer said 'Hey, they're really getting into something here'. And suddenly he started groping for the taperecorder and getting busy and it has suddenly dawned on him that we weren't just going through the usual chat. We always felt about these guys that it was pointless saying what we felt because they wouldn't understand anyway. Then the other guy gets up and says 'Nobody understands these boys... incredible, bloody incredible'.

'What I'm saying should make sense, but six months ago I wouldn't have sat down and read someone else saying all that. I couldn't have been bothered to read it. What is more pathetic about most of this business is that it does take itself so seriously. One level you get how much so and so spends on shirts at Mr Codpiece and, at another level, hearing someone's pronouncements on anything they think. Its OK I suppose. But the premise that revolution and pop is pretty heavy now man and that no-one could possibly be wrong if they're a pop star or could possibly be ridiculous. Its become even more silly than anything else. Nothin' worse than such blindness and puritanism. People are getting incredibly bloody right, being terribly right and feeling 'I'm too sophisticated and too turned on to accept any other views'. Maybe all these problems will cause me to write better. I've got angry but I've also got crafty and as a writer selective, tasteful, harder. Things do flourish under tyrannies...'

'I do what I do, I am what I am,
We are what we are, we do what we can'
Keynsham.

