

LOVE, DEATH, GUITARS, ETC.

Richard Thompson is a powerful songwriter and quite possibly the best guitarist in rock. One thing he hasn't mastered yet is selling records.

Article by Peter Carbonara

Richard Thompson is all things to all men; he loves to rock out, but his records are filed under "folk"; he writes superb songs, but they're sometimes eclipsed by his guitar playing; he's a cheerful, friendly sort whose main preoccupations seem to be heartbreak and death. He has recorded with little commercial success for nearly 20 years, while his songs have been covered by big names like Elvis Costello, John Cougar Mellencamp, and the Pointer Sisters. He's a melodicist who likes to get atonal, a writer of nerve-shreddingly personal songs who likes to play Jerry Lee Lewis's "High School Confidential," a Muslim mystic who likes Benny Hill. He's a rock 'n' roll marketing nightmare.

The English singer-songwriter and gentleman guitar hero has just released *Daring Adventures*—his second album for PolyGram, his first with an American band, and his first with producer Mitchell Froom, whose crisp, tough sound has brought Thompson's idiosyncratic music as close as it's ever gotten to the rock mainstream. Froom, who first made his mark producing the Del Fuegos, teamed the guitarist with Hall and Oates drummer Mickey Curry and session bass player Jerry Scheff, a harder rhythm section than Thompson has usually recorded with. Although hardly slick when you compare it to the last Wham! album, *Daring Adventures* sounds like Thompson's best shot to date at getting on American radio, a prospect Thompson welcomes.

"I always figure if I've sold a lot of records, someone's gonna come to me through the door saying, 'Wow, look at this...'"

Look, you're No. 500 with a bullet?

"Yeah. Things haven't got that exciting yet, but you never know. We live in hope and trepidation."

Thompson began his career as one of the original members of Fairport Convention, a group that in its heyday in the late '60s sounded like an English cross between the Jefferson Airplane and the Band. Thompson, then a tall, skinny kid with a long face and an enormous mop of brown hair, brought to Fairport his brooding songs, his reedy voice, and a guitar that buzzed, droned, coughed, sang, and shrieked in a style that owed little to previous rock 'n' roll. From the beginning, he was doomed to be commercially marginal.

Fairport weathered a series of storms, ranging from the general indifference of the market to a 1969 auto crash that killed the group's original drummer and Thompson's girlfriend. Thompson carried on with the band until 1971, when he became the last original member to leave. Since then has found his own way through the underbrush of the big-time rock jungle, going through contracts with a number of record companies while making music that filters English folk through rock 'n' roll and his own spiritual take on the universe.

That music, simultaneously exultant and creepy, was mostly made with Thompson's ex-wife Linda, whose emotional but dry-eyed delivery invested a lot of his songs with a kind of ethereal dignity. The



Charles Simpson

Thompsons cranked it out in relative obscurity—except for a stretch in the early '70s when Richard's involvement with Sufism, a mystical wing of Islam, caused him to give up music altogether—until 1982, when they released *Shoot Out the Lights* on Hannibal Records, a small label run by Thompson's longtime friend and producer Joe Boyd. The record was a smash by independent-label standards, selling about 80,000 copies, generating enthusiastic write-ups, and earning the Thompsons a new audience. It was their finest hour commercially and artistically. It was also the swan song of their marriage and the end of their collaboration.

Shoot Out the Lights was the sound of two heads cracking together, two people going at each other ferociously, backing off, flirting with freedom; first

pleading, then angry, then conciliatory, and finally separate and bitter. Thompson says the songs on that record were written before the events leading up to his divorce, but the conflict between the couple gave the record and the tour that followed it an edge that seemed to erase the line between Thompson's life and his art.

"I saw them on that tour," says R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck, "and there was obviously such tension between them onstage. I don't know if I could do that every night." And Buck is not the only listener who's heard Richard's songs as almost brutal—even masochistic—in their intensity of feeling. "I don't know if I could be that naked emotionally," he says admiringly.

While the fallout from Richard and Linda's separation has lingered (last year the two released albums