



From Shard End to Beverly Hills, **Jeff Lynne**, the one-man Brummie Beatles behind **ELO** and the **Traveling Wilburys**, lowers the shades and opens up about cellos, famous friends and producing legends: “I’ve lived out my dream,” he says.

Interview by **BOB MEHR** • Portrait by **PIPER FERGUSON**

IT'S A LONG WAY FROM BIRMINGHAM'S SHARD End to Beverly Hills' Benedict Canyon – 5,344 miles to be exact – but it doesn't seem so distant on this late summer afternoon. Sitting in a very English garden, surrounded by high shrubs and perennial flowers, with a cup of tea in hand, Jeff Lynne basks in the California sun. The mastermind behind Electric Light Orchestra is instantly recognisable, with his signature mop of curly hair, close-knit beard and oversized shades. Yet, as with his hero Roy Orbison, the similarly shy Lynne admits his “look” is also his disguise, a way of hiding from the world.

Often portrayed as a diffident character, the 67-year-old Lynne's success has been hard earned and he's quietly proud of it. His bar/music room, the Bungalow Palace, is decorated with a wall's worth of gold and platinum albums, the biggest plaque hanging over a giant fireplace, commemorating 50 million in career sales – a testament to how massive ELO truly were. They remain so, thanks to the continued use of the band's music in adverts and films. A new generation has learned to embrace the sunny pop, baroque melodies and insistent productions that were so ubiquitous on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1970s.

With his blokey manner and Brummie accent, Lynne proves a welcoming host as he gives a tour of his home – a hilltop manor that once belonged to Elizabeth Taylor's ex-hus-

band Eddie Fisher. “Let's go in the tradesman's entrance,” he says, opening the back door to reveal a room packed with guitars and dominated by a large recording console. As he guides MOJO through the rest of the house, pointing out prized possessions, including the same type of vintage Univox Clavoline that produced the haunting solo on Del Shannon's Runaway, it turns out every room is hard wired for sound, the whole property serving as giant studio.

Lynne has spent much of the last three decades behind the glass, producing an array of iconic artists (George Harrison, Brian Wilson, Tom Petty, the reunited Beatles). More recently, he's returned to making his own music full-time, including, in 2012, a covers album of oldies and standards from his childhood called *Long Wave* and a re-recording of ELO classics, *Mr. Blue Sky: The Very Best Of Electric Light Orchestra*. “Sometimes you have to look back to move forward,” says Lynne, noting the projects cleared the decks

for *Alone In The Universe*, his first album of new material since 2001. Plus, after a rapturously received one-off gig at Hyde Park last summer, he has decided to return to the road with a new line-up, billed as Jeff Lynne's ELO, featuring longtime pianist Richard Tandy, for a tour in 2016.

In the meantime, he's happy to reflect on his early life as well as his many famous associations. Open and upbeat in conversation, he hedges only occasionally when memories become sad or negative. He's ➤

WE'RE NOTWORTHY

“He's a funny guy”: **Tom Petty** salutes Jeff Lynne.



“I met him in Birmingham in '87, the tour with Bob Dylan. He showed up with George Harrison. I was taken with his sense of humour – he's a funny guy. Working, everything comes easy: very professional, amazing ear, a great arranger, great leader of the Traveling Wilburys. Way too talented. He's lost nothing, damn him.”

← sufficiently self-conscious that he'll follow up by e-mail a few days later to make sure he didn't come off as uncharitable in any of his comments. That's because Lynne is genuinely thankful for the life that music has given him. "When I was boy I had a dream, all about the things I'd like to be," he says, reciting the opening lines of the new album. "I've really been lucky, 'cos I've lived out my dream."

For someone who's long maintained a low profile, the past couple years have seen you do some high profile things: playing a Hyde Park gig, getting a star on the Hollywood Walk Of Fame, making an appearance at the Grammys. How have you found it being back in the spotlight?

It's all been amazing, really. It started off in me hometown, with a star on the Birmingham Walk Of Fame. It was nice that they chose me for that. I also got an honorary doctorate from Birmingham City University. Which was great – 'cos I left school at 15, so I wasn't gonna get one any other way (*laughs*).

Your grandparents were music hall performers. Was there a sense of show business in your childhood?

None at all. I've never seen a picture of me grandparents on-stage or knew anything about it except what me grandma used to tell me. And she was probably exaggerating. Me dad didn't get on with his parents so it was all very distant. He was a working man, worked for the Birmingham Highway Corporation. He got up at six o'clock and went to work every day 'til he retired at 65. There was no connection of him with showbiz. But he did have the most incredible knowledge of classical music. For a guy who did manual work, it was unbelievable. He could name every symphony or any piece of classical. Even if he heard just one snippet of

something, he'd always know. He couldn't read music, neither can I, but he could pick out the tunes with one finger on the piano, and loved to do that. He was a frustrated musician, really.

Your father was the one who taught you the concepts of melody and harmony?

We were walking past a building site and there was this great big sewer pipe on the concrete, probably six foot across. He said, "Come on I'll show you something." And he grabbed the pipe and [sang] into it: "Ah-ah-ah-ah." Suddenly a big echo of this chord was there. I went, "How'd you do that?" He said, "You can do that, come on." And my little voice hadn't broken yet but I went, "Ah-ah-ah-ah," and it was this chord, it was a major chord. I could tell that's what it was. I thought, "Wow – that's it then, I know how to do music now!" I didn't realise it took a bit longer than that.

Is it true you began playing on a toy guitar?

A plastic Elvis Presley guitar. I nicked it... well, borrowed it, from me mate's cupboard where I'd found it. It had one string on it. I learned every tune of the day on one string – hits by The Shadows and such. I never took music classes. I hated music at school. I really did. It was crap. All that would end up happening is people would throw chalk at the piano strings when the bloke was trying to play. So there'd be a big bum note in it. And we'd all fall about and that'd probably be the end of the lesson (*laughs*).

What was the first show you saw?

Del Shannon at the Birmingham Town Hall. I was 13 and I'd never been to a concert before. It blew me mind. Del was much more popular in England than he was over here. He was top of the bill with Dion and Joe Brown. He had this suit on, and got his guitar off and fell down on one knee singing and all the girls were going mad.

What was the attraction to Shannon – and to Roy Orbison, another of your favourites?

Del had that exquisite falsetto, and the songs were always sad: "Oh he's on his own again." And that's why I love Roy as well. There was a lonely aspect to it that I understood. 'Cos I suppose I was a bit of lonely kid. I had a brother and two sisters, but I was quite a bit younger than them. I didn't hang out with them 'cos they didn't want to have a little kid about. So I related to that kind of music – Del and Roy – from early on.

You got to be quite friendly with Shannon, didn't you?

I met him in 1971, in a club in Birmingham called Barbarella's. We sat and talked for about an hour, and I thought he was the funniest bloke. Little did I know he'd always got a bottle of vodka stuck down his overcoat. I didn't realise he was drunk. But he was the nicest person who was drunk that I've ever known. Just wonderful. He came to my house in Birmingham and we jammed in my front room. When ELO used to come on tour in America he'd invite me to his house in the Valley. We'd get walloped together on beer. But it was such magic to me to be in his inner sanctum, in his den, with all his gold records around. I thought, "Fancy me being here."

Growing up in Birmingham in the '60s – was it as unglamorous as one might imagine?

Well, it was rough place, 'cos everyone was doing a rough job. There wasn't any lying about. It was all slog and cold weather and hard graft. I left school at 15 and I had to work 'til I was 18. I'd get on the bus at like half past seven in the morning to go to work. I'd go upstairs 'cos I used to smoke and you can't even see 'cos it's filled with smoke and all the windows are shut 'cos it's freezing. People used to spit on the floor on the bus. They actually had a notice "No Spitting" – which is charming. Such a shame – we can't spit in here? (*Laughs*) I was working in a motor accessories shop, stocking shelves, for years. Until I went

professional and joined The Nightriders. That was the happiest day of me life. I tell you, I was walking on air. But I didn't let them down at the job. I stayed on through the rest of that week.

The Nightriders transitioned into The Idle Race, a band still beloved by British psych aficionados. How do you view the group's music today?

Some of it holds up, I suppose. There was some really daft ones, though. I used to like daft stuff. It was kind of influenced by George Formby, 'cos that was one of me dad's favourites as well. He also turned out to be one of George Harrison's favourites. But I used to write them like that 'cos I was too embarrassed to write love songs – in case me mum and dad saw them – so I'd do silly ones instead.

A few years later you joined The Move with Roy Wood, and then eventually launched ELO together. How'd your relationship with him come about?

When I was in Idle Race I started hanging out in the nightclubs, like Cedar Club or the Rum Runner, and I used to meet up with all the other groups, 'cos now I was in one of the top bands in Birmingham. Roy Wood and meself, we'd have a few drinks and we'd always end up talking about having this group with strings. It was a few years until the thing actually came together with ELO.

What was working with Wood like?

Funny enough, we never collaborated on anything, ever. All the songs were either mine or his. They're not me and him together. Which I always felt strange about, that we didn't collaborate. It just never came up. I'd say, "I got a song," and Roy would say, "Well, I've got a song." (*Laughs*) That's how it went.

He bailed on ELO after the first album.

I think when it happened, when the band finally materialised, it wasn't as much fun as we thought it was going to be. I ended up doing a couple more songs on the album than Roy did, and he was already getting fed up, I think. Too many cooks. Too many people in charge.

The early gigs were a bit of a shambles as well. 'Cos there was no pickups on the cellos or the violins, so we had to have mikes on them and, of course, that's just a disaster. Everything was constantly feeding back, like "waaaaah!".

So Roy just left. He'd already gotten another group together, Wizzard. I don't hold

"Del Shannon was the funniest bloke. Little did I know there was a bottle of vodka in his overcoat."

anything against him at all. He probably felt I was overbearing in some ways. [Drummer] Bev Bevan came round and said, "Roy's left the band – what do you think we should do?" I said, "We'll just get on with it then." Secretly, I was quite pleased 'cos it meant now I could write hundred per cent of the material and produce it.

I've seen Roy recently, I saw him getting my star in the Walk Of Fame in Birmingham. I invited him to that. He's a nice guy, Roy. I really like him. It's just that musically we both had to go our separate ways.

With ELO you began this merger of rock with strings – were there any growing pains?

Yeah, well, getting cello players is really hard

'cos they don't know anything about rock'n'roll. And I had to get used to having these strangers, these classical musicians, in the band. Some of them were really nice, the guys. Of course for them it was like Disneyland every day on the road. They were all at it eventually (*mimes smoking and drinking*) so they turned into proper rock'n'rollers (*laughs*).

You were managed for many years by Don Arden's organisation. How did you view him – was he as notorious a figure as legend would have it?

It makes me laugh, all that. The reason I liked him was he could get me studio time, as much as I needed, to make the records. And I don't know how he did it... or what methods he used (*laughs*). But as long as I could get in the studio I was perfectly happy. And I didn't have to worry about the money side of it, how much it was costing. 'Cos soon as the money side comes into it all the creativity's gone.

Your tendency these days is to hunker down and take years making albums. But you made a lot

of records – 10 in 10 years – in the '70s, on top of all the touring. Was that output the result of management or the record company pressuring you?

It was me pressuring me, believe it or not. But it did seem like they'd come straight off the bloody tape recorder and they were released the next day or something. You'd have a month to write the album, six weeks to record and then it's gone out your hands and you don't have a chance to say, "I need to get that bit better." I couldn't change anything and that's how they are forever. There was so many things, little bits, I didn't like. That why I went in and redid some of them [on 2012's *Mr. Blue Sky*]. I had a chance to finally get them right. ➤

A LIFE IN PICTURES

Jeff Lynne: Electric Light orchestrator.

1 Shard End rocker: Jeff Lynne (centre) in Brum school band The Andicaps, formed in 1963.

2 They liked their toys: The Idle Race, 1967 (from left) Lynne, Greg Masters, Roger Spencer, Dave Pritchard.

3 Switched on: Electric Light Orchestra, 1972 (from left) Lynne, Bev Bevan Roy Wood.

4 Cello, Mr Blue Sky: Lynne, Bevan and the expanded band. Richard Tandy (back, far left) is still with Jeff's ELO.

5 "Little did I know he had a bottle of vodka under his

overcoat": with "funniest man" Del Shannon, recording in '73.

6 Roy and the boys: Jeff (back left) with Traveling Wilburys Tom Petty (back right) and (front, from left) Roy Orbison, Bob Dylan, George Harrison,

7 In the frame: Lynne holds on tight at his Hollywood Walk Of Fame induction with Petty, April 23, 2015.

8 "As long as I could get in the studio I was perfectly happy": Jeff in his comfort zone, July 11, 1972, recording *ELO 2*.





"We'll just get on with it then": Jeff Lynne invites you into his Bungalow Palace, Beverly Hills, California, September 3, 2015.

"I like the **roar** of the crowd, but there's **nothing** I like **better** than being in the studio, **finishing** a record and thinking, I'm **so chuffed** with that."

◀ **Is it true that your father challenging you about your music was the pivotal point for ELO?**

I was kinda doing what everybody else was in the early '70s, playing these 15-minute guitar solos and all that shit. I never liked that, really; it wasn't me at all. But I was just trying to fit in at that stage. One day me dad said, "That's your trouble, you haven't got any bloody tunes." I thought, "Right, I'll show you some tunes." So I made [1974's] *Eldorado*, which had a very melodic intro and loads of orchestra, just to shut him up, really (*laughs*).

Did it work? Did he finally admit that you had some "bloody tunes"?

Well, he was never one for going on about anything. I mean, my mum never even mentioned any of me music. But I remember clearly the one comment me dad made [about *Eldorado*]. He said, "That's a smasher, that is." Smasher, meaning a good 'un in Birmingham. That was one of the biggest compliments I ever got in me life.

You've been notoriously stage shy over the last 30 years. Did you ever enjoy performing, even at the peak of ELO?

I didn't relish the live tours, no. I did them for the sake of the records. 'Cos I'd put all me

energy into those records and I didn't want to just let them slip away.

So you were never one to get off on the roar of the crowd?

I like the roar of the crowd, I've had some fabulous nights on-stage. But there's nothing better than the studio, than finishing a record and thinking, "Fuck, it's great! I'm so chuffed with that." It's much more satisfying than people clapping or cheering or screaming. I love that as well. But you can't live on that 'cos you've got to make the music for them to applaud in the first place. That's the most important thing.

Doing all that work during that era, do you have any regrets – say, getting involved with the soundtrack for [notorious 1980 cinematic bomb] *Xanadu*?

(*Laughs*) I've never seen the film, to be honest. Funny, I was talking to Olivia Newton-John just the other day. We spoke on the phone, 'cos she happened to be with a friend of mine. We hadn't talked with each other since the film. She's a lovely girl, and the film was good fun, though I know it's been slagged off more than anything. The record is actually quite good. I think the tune *Xanadu* is one of me better numbers, even though it's very light.

Later '80s albums like *Secret Messages* and *Balance Of Power* – was there a sense that the band had run its course? Did you feel obligated to carry on?

I was under contract for a few more albums. I did those and I got paid a lot of money for them. I wasn't gonna lose that, 'cos that's what I'd worked for all them years, to get the good fees like the big time guys.

Then you started your production career – which hit an amazing stride in the late '80s. Do you recall your sessions working with Brian Wilson on his self-titled 'come-back' album?

I hadn't known him at all, but Brian asked me if I wanted to write a song and produce it with him. "Yes, please – I'd love to." I went to his house in Malibu and wrote it with him right by the seashore; his place was only a couple steps from the sea. Him playing piano and me strumming guitar and we came up with the song, *Let It Shine*.

The song is co-credited to Dr Eugene Landy – Brian was still in his grips at the time.

Yeah, that was pretty grim, actually. [Landy] got struck off didn't he? There were all the minders around and stuff. But Brian's great now and he's got that lovely wife. Anyway, we

got to the session and I played lots of the instruments: bass and rhythm guitar and keyboard, and he did some keyboard, and we co-produced. Despite our production backgrounds, there wasn't a lot on it actually. It's a nice tight-sounding record.

A less obvious collaborator was Randy Newman, who enlisted you to produce a track on 1988's *Land Of Dreams*.

Yeah, that wasn't really much of a natural fit (*laughs*). He is certainly different from me. But I loved Randy, I loved his tunes. They're all of a certain style, but I love his drawl, the way he drawls out the language. That song with Randy was recorded in a bedroom and bathroom belonging to the Heartbreakers' Mike Campbell. That's where it was done, as was all of Tom Petty's *Full Moon Fever*. Which, to me, that's one of me favourite albums I've ever done.

Why do you think the collaboration with Petty – that album ended up selling five million copies in the US – was so successful?

'Cos it was so easy. It was me and Tom sitting knee to knee with guitars writing and playing. Every night we'd come out of there going, "Fucking right!" Tom gave me totally free rein. Other than Mike, we didn't use all his band members at that point. He wanted to do one on his own to break free of that. So I'd play on a lot of it – bits of lead guitar, bass, keyboards, all the stuff I normally do. It was a different way of working, where the track comes together gradually, in layers. He hadn't worked like that I don't think. It had always been the group thing with him.

But you did produce Petty's next band record, [1991's *Into The Great Wide Open*] with the Heartbreakers. Was it tough inserting yourself into such a long-running relationship – did you ever feel like the other woman, so to speak?

(*Laughs*) It was more difficult there, definitely. But they all did what I asked them to do and were very nice about it. I thought they were splendid. I like all the guys in Tom's band.

You began your association with George Harrison producing his album *Cloud Nine* in 1987. You'd first met him briefly back in 1968 during The Beatles' sessions for *The White Album* though, right?

Yeah, very briefly, during the *Idle Race* days. I went into the studio there at Abbey Road. Walked into the room where John [Lennon] and George were. They were watching through the window as George Martin conducted the strings on *Glass Onion*. That was such a privilege to see that. Like seeing history itself.

How did Harrison approach you about producing him?

Actually, through Dave Edmunds, who I'd worked with. Dave and I had dinner one night. We'd finished eating, and had these big brandies, so we're both bollocksed. We walk two different ways leaving the restaurant. He gets to the end of the street and turns around and says, "Hey, Jeff!" I go, "What?" And Dave says, "I forgot to tell you: George Harrison asked me to ask you if you'd like to work with him on his next album." I said, "What do you mean, you forgot?" (*Laughs*) I'd love to have known that before we ate.

So I went to meet George at [his estate] Friar Park. And that thing is intimidating. It's like the Palace Of Versailles. I thought, "Oh I can't go in here; I'm sure someone's gonna chuck me out." I met Olivia, his wife, who said, "George is down by the lake." We went down, and he was by the lake in his boat. George

Piper Ferguson

said, "Ello Jeff, come and get it here, then." So I sat in the boat. And he said, "Now, don't put your hands outside the edge of the boat. You gotta grip with your bum" (*laughs*). I thought, "That's my guy." It was a great introduction.

How long did it take for the two of you to come up with the idea for putting together the *Traveling Wilburys*?

I'd been working with George on *Cloud Nine* for maybe two months. We would always end the night having a couple beers and [smoking] a thing, and he said, "You know what? Me and you should have a group." And I said, "Really, a group? That'd be great. Who would you have in it?" And I thought he was going to say, "Oh, Fred Trilby from up the road," or whatever, but he didn't. He said, "Bob Dylan." And I said, "Oh, Bob Dylan, of course." So I said, "Well, can we have Roy Orbison as well?" (*Laughs*) Once he'd said Bob Dylan, I thought, "Fuck, the world is my oyster." He said, "Yeah, of course we can – I love Roy." And Roy had toured with The Beatles as support years earlier. They could never get on 'cos Roy would close the first half of the show and the audience were clapping

STRINGS ATTACHED

Three stages of ELO, by Danny Eccleston.

THE ECCENTRIC DEBUT

Electric Light Orchestra
The Electric Light Orchestra

★★★
(HARVEST, 1971)



The Beatles are dead; long live The Beatles! ELO's debut announced Jeff Lynne's mad scientist plan to re-fab the Fabs for a new decade with the stunning Dear-Prudence-into-A-Day-In-The-Life overload of 10538 Overture, while Roy Wood's Look At Me Now nods to Eleanor Rigby. But at its best it ranges beyond pastiche – with a startlingly original and integrated vision of orchestral rock – especially in the gnarly, raw edge of the strings.

THE MATURE WORK

Electric Light Orchestra
Eldorado

★★★★
(JET, 1974)



Lynne's dad's jibe that Jeff should try writing some actual tunes bears fruit in ELO's first fully coherent LP, with the operatic ecstasy of *Eldorado* Overture melded with the show-stopping melancholy of *Can't Get It Out Of My Head* and the supercharged Lennon yearning of *Mister Kingdom*. Full, soft, rich, and shot through with Lynne hang-ups – wandering innocents, the wild west – it reinforces the impression of man who's never quite at home.

THE TECHNICOLOR EPIC

Electric Light Orchestra
Out Of The Blue

★★★★
(JET, 1977)



ELO's late '70s were golden and their best album a moot point. Some favour the more modest pop parameters of *A New World Record*. Others indulge the ambition of this 2-discer, rambling wildly between the Oxygène-disco of *Turn To Stone* and the side-long *Concerto For A Rainy Day* – Lynne's adieu to symphonic rock – where the Rundgrenesque fantasia of *Mr Blue Sky* and *Big Wheels*' burnout lament cohabited. Punk? That was a galaxy away.

and screaming so much. Lennon would go behind him and say, "Get off, Yank!"

So yeah, we had me and George and Tom Petty, and Roy Orbison and Bob Dylan in this group. And I think everybody was kind of looking up to Bob. He didn't take any leadership role, he just wanted to be one of the lads. He actually wanted to call the band Roy And The Boys.

Do you actually remember the first time you ever heard Orbison?

Oh yeah, the very moment. I was a kid, sitting on a stool and my mum and me auntie were talking and the radio was on in between them and *Only The Lonely* came on. I couldn't believe it. That voice! It was like magic or something. Manna from heaven. How can anybody possibly sing like that? The song finished and me auntie turned to me mum and said, "Oooh, that's too sexy – I don't like that." I thought, "You gotta be mad." It was the best thing I'd heard, ever. But it was much too sexy for me auntie and me mum (*laughs*).

You revived Orbison's career, helping write and produce [the triple platinum] *Mystery Girl*, and giving him a last great moment before his death. What do you recall most working with him – aside from that voice?

It was just a great period. He was really up for it and enjoying himself then. I remember him laughing that fantastic laugh he used to have: a giggle, a really high giggle. *Beautiful*. Making the Wilburys record, Roy would actually do sketches from the Monty Python shows. He could do the entire sketch himself, all the parts. He'd do the whole sketch and then giggle himself in fits laughing. And we'd all be in fits of laughter too, 'cos he was so infectious. He was a happy bloke, contrary to what people imagined.

Then, of course you got the call to work with George, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr on The Beatles' 'reunion' tracks on the *Anthology* series, *Free As A Bird*, on 1, and *Real Love* in 2. That must've been thrilling and daunting all at once.

When we got to studio it was great, just the three of them and me in the same room. And it was never interrupted from that really. But every night I'd be going, "How am I gonna get this?" 'Cos John's vocal [for *Free As A Bird*] was on cassette, stuck with the piano – you couldn't get rid of the piano and it was all out of time. Ahhh, it was bloody murder to get that to work. The whole thing was very strict, 'cos I had fly John in, which I could only do with my finger. He was on a harmonizer. And so I put him in all the places he needed to go and then I'd trim it a little bit here and there. It was a hard thing, 'cos there was no computer used. Not one. That's why it was so difficult. If we'd had a computer it would've been a doddle. In the end, we got it. Paul gave me a big hug. He said, "You did it!" I thought, "Yeah, I just made a Beatles record!" It was another of them moments in me life – like, "Fancy that!"

You're planning a return to the road next year. Was it the Hyde Park show that convinced you to get back on stage?

Yeah, 'cos I really was scared of it at first. I hadn't done any live stuff of that size for 25 or 30 years. I was filled with trepidation. But once I got on there, the audience loved it. Seeing them going mad... I hadn't ever felt that before. Even in the old days. There were a lot of young people there, too – that's what I was really chuffed about. A lot of ordinary 20-year-olds and 30-year-olds, along with the older fans. So we're gonna do some tours, or at least a tour, then another next year. It feels like it's finally time.

M