

# DISCOVERING ELO

On Location With Deane Zimmerman



Dagmar Photo

**"We don't go on the road to make money, we go along to promote records and as long as we can break even, we'll put on as spectacular a show as possible."**

After ELO's last tour, a dazzling spectacle complete with a five-ton spaceship, sophisticated lasers, and other grand effects, the question most frequently asked was "What can they possibly do next?"

Since they didn't tour in 1979 we'll have to wait at least until early 1980 to find out.

But in the meantime, ELO released their 9th album, *Discovery*, (with the disco hit "Shine A Little Love"), and while it's not as spectacular as the spaceship, it's certainly more controversial.

In New York for press and radio interviews, a cheerful Bev Bevan relaxed in his luxurious Waldorf Towers suite and explained why he calls theirs "high class disco."

"There's so much awful disco, there really is," he said. "It's in tune and it's in time and you can dance to it but really it's nothing — so little thought got into it. The difference with ours is that we feel it's well performed and a lot of thought

did go into the arrangement of it. And the songs themselves hold up well."

**HP:** When you recorded "Shine A Little Love," did you think of it as entering the disco derby?

**Bev:** No, because we don't go in the studio and make a single, we go in the studio and make an album which is what we did. There are probably two tracks you could call disco, there's one that's really down to earth rock & roll, and there are several ballads. We always do a variety of material — we never want to get stuck in one sort of groove. Variety is one of the things that's kept us alive and popular for so long, cause people never know quite what to expect and neither do we. We just go into the studio with an open mind.

**HP:** When are you going to tour?

**Bev:** I don't know. I wish I did cause obviously everyone's going to ask me. I suppose we'll start thinking about it at the end of this year which means that it'll probably be the beginning of next year

before we actually get around to it. Whenever we do tour we'll have to think of something new and put a lot of preparation into it to follow the spaceship routine cause everyone's really going to expect us to do something pretty sensational again.

**HP:** Do you think anything can top the last tour?

**Bev:** It would be so easy to say I think we've done the theatrical bit, let's go back to a more basic music show. That would be the easiest thing in the world for us to say but I think that for the most part people would like us to do something spectacular and since we refuse to do the same thing again, I'm hoping that someone's going to come up with another idea that's as good.

I think we're going to experiment with some sort of holograms — light refractions and things like that.

**HP:** With the state of the music business being what it is, are you concerned about the financial drawbacks of putting on such an extravagant production?

**Bev:** We don't go on the road to make

money, we go along to promote records and as long as we can break even, we'll put on as spectacular show as possible. I suppose if the time comes where it would cost us an *awful* lot of money to put one on then we'd have to re-think things but it hasn't happened to us yet. The last tour was very spectacular and involved an awful lot of people — a 50-man road crew — but we managed to break even so as long as we can do that, we'll plow as much as we possibly can back into the show.

**HP:** How do you get that perfect, 'studio' sound onstage?

**Bev:** Well, one secret I suppose is that on our last world tour we actually talked Mac, our engineer from Musicland in Germany who engineered our last four albums, into coming on the road with us and he knows our music literally better than we do. He and Jeff produce the sound that we want in the studio so Mac knows exactly what we're looking for onstage too. I think he plays a big part, an unrecognized part, of course, cause no one really gives any credit to people like that, but Mac is a very important part of our sound.

**HP:** Whether it's a spaceship and lasers, or a 42-piece orchestra and the choir of 30 male voices you used on *Discovery*, ELO relies heavily on the grandiose. Has that become an integral part of your identity?

**Bev:** It is but only cause we're in the position to do it. We didn't start off like that, with the first three albums we just went into the studio, just the band, and we didn't have anything special going for us. We were on the road with very little equipment and two or three roadies, the same as most bands, but because of the success we've had we've managed to build it up.

**HP:** Which was more fun?

**Bev:** For out and out fun, yeah — it was more fun in the early days. The further back you get the more fun it actually was — probably the most fun I ever had was when I was in a group at school just purely



Richard E. Aaron/RETNA

**Bev and Jeff party after the show.**

for the fun of it. And then after that, the first group I was in was with Denny Laine and for a couple of years we toured around England in a beat up old van playing wherever anybody would have us, making absolutely no money but having a whale of a time. The more successful you get it builds up to the position we're in now where everything has to be so perfect. Obviously there's a lot more pressure now than there was before. All we had to worry about once upon a time was getting to a gig and playing. Nowadays everything is planned down to the minutest detail and

you have to worry if the lasers are right, the lighting is right, the sound effects are on cue ... It has become much more of a business.

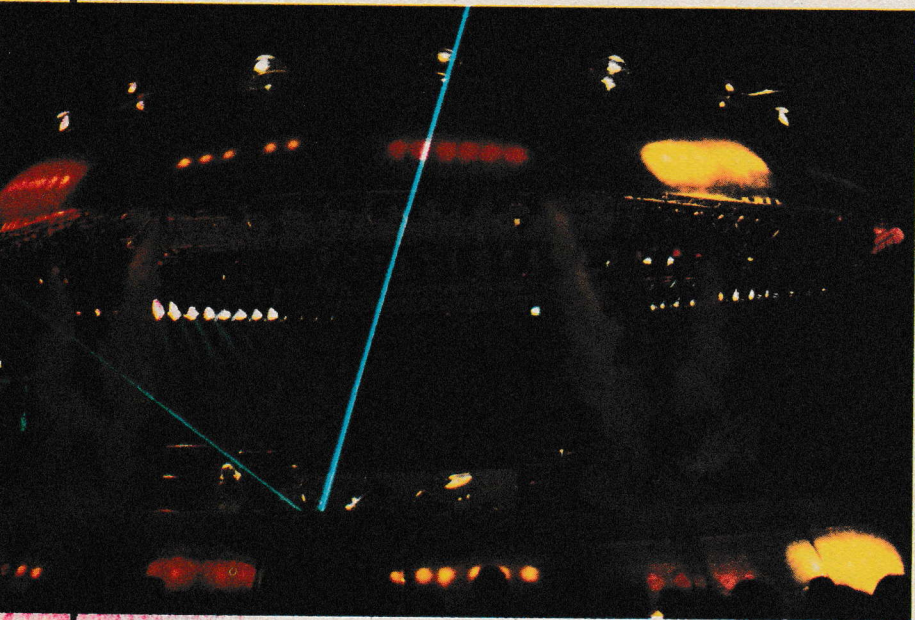
**HP:** Does that take away from the music? When you're onstage were you more concerned about the spaceship (which didn't open manually) getting stuck than with the songs?

**Bev:** Oh if that had ever happened it would have been riots. Every night we were a bit worried if the spaceship would go up but that was before we actually started playing. And then once it did go up — it did every night, it never did let us down — and the crowd's reaction was always so tremendous, it really lifted the band. We could hear the crowd just roar, the crowd would go berserk and we hadn't even struck a note so that was really marvelous, it put us in a great frame of mind to play.

You do tend to look around and think well, the laser's off cue or I must have a word with the lighting director because he didn't get that cue in the right place and you're making mental notes as you're playing to talk to people afterwards. But I don't think it actually detracts from the playing because we stick to the same arrangements as on the record and we know the numbers we're doing onstage so well that we become a little bit mechanized and we don't have to think too deeply about what we're doing next.

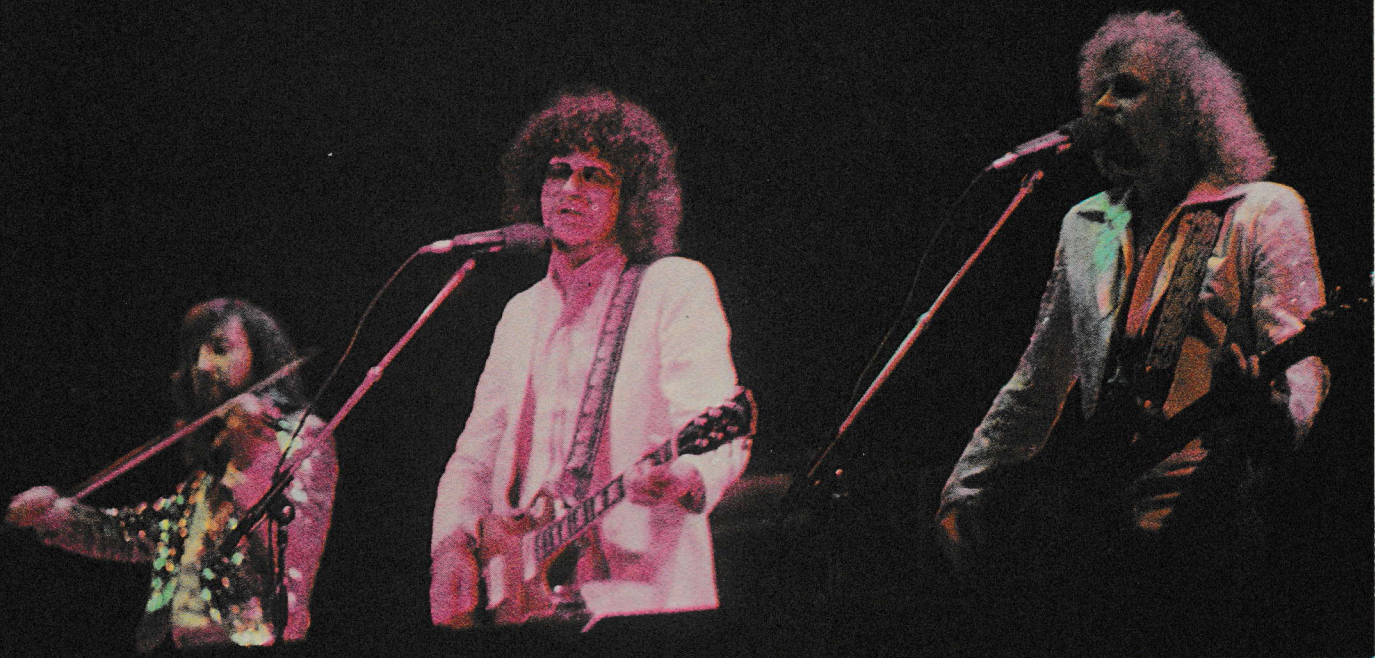
**HP:** Do you think the criticism you've received about using tapes onstage is justified?

**Bev:** I think some people think it's like cheating in some way but it all depends on how you look at it. For example, there's no way we can get a choir sound, a good one, onstage. We use a meletron and it's reasonable, but meletron is only tapes



Bob Gruen

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Bob Gruen

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anyway. We're just trying to get the best sound we can onstage and if that occasionally means having the help of tapes, then we'll use them. If the audience didn't like it then we'd stop doing it but people like us to sound as close to the record as possible and that's what we'll continue doing unless there's any objection from the people who really matter, the ones who pay to see us.

**HP:** Why did you call the album *Discovery*?

**Bev:** To be honest there's not really a good answer to that. We always have trouble with the album titles, we really do. It's always the last thing we ever think of. We got a short list of four or five titles and *Discovery* was one of them. It didn't seem to mean anything, it just looked nice written down and then we saw the artwork and of all the titles, *Discovery* fitted so perfectly that it was the obvious one to use.

**HP:** No hidden meanings, like disco-

very...

**Bev:** Very-disco? Richard Tandy, our keyboard player, thought of that. Actually there are so many different words you can get out of discovery.

**HP:** But nothing intentional?

**Bev:** No, there never is actually. People actually try and read a lot more into our stuff than there's really there. We just go to the studio and have fun.

**HP:** Does it take a long time to record?

**Bev:** Yes, but we don't mess around in the studio, we really get down to work and we get it done as quickly as possible. It still takes a long time because there's always so much to do.

**HP:** What special techniques do you use?

**Bev:** We just use a layering method where we literally start with bass and drums and maybe a rough keyboard which gets wiped off later anyway so we virtually start with drums and bass and just build up layer after layer until it's a finished product. We can really hear it grow bit by bit. One thing we do I don't think anyone else does is that we double-track all the drum parts. That means I have to go into the studio again and play exactly what I've played before sort of note for note, stroke for stroke which is very restrictive. I can't put anything down too fancy the first time because it would be impossible to get it exactly the same the second time so we keep it pretty simple. But it does give a great drum sound, it gives a very, very big drum sound in which to build everything else upon.

**HP:** Some reviewers have called you the best drummer in rock & roll. Do you agree?



Fin Costello/RETNA

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(continued on page 61)

# ELO

(continued from page 39)

**Bev:** Ha ha ha. No, no — certainly not. The one I've enjoyed the most I suppose is Buddy Rich but he's a jazz drummer and I wouldn't even try to compare myself to his talents. I suppose my favorite rock drummer is probably still John Bonham and I used to really like Ian Pace of Deep Purple but he's not really playing anymore. It's just that I've been playing a long time I suppose, that people are beginning to become familiar with me.

**HP:** How long have you been playing?

**Bev:** Well, I started playing at school, about '62 I suppose, 17 years now. I've been playing professionally for about 14 years.

**HP:** Why did you start playing drums?

**Bev:** I couldn't really play anything else, I still can't play anything else. I haven't got a clue about playing a guitar or piano. I would have liked to be a singer but I can't sing so all that was left was drums and it came very naturally to me.

I think I'm alright but no, there certainly are flashier drummers than me, there are a lot of drummers that can do things I can't. I think a lot of drummers do too much. I prefer to keep things reasonably basic and solid and I think as that sort of drummer — as a solid rock & roll drummer who holds a band together — then I'm good at doing that. But I'm awful at drum solos, I really am. I don't even like them, I don't even like when other people do them. I certainly don't do them well.

**HP:** Why do most drummers love those endless solos?

**Bev:** It's a real ego trip — not just drum solos, any sort of solo. I hate those long guitar solos when the rest of the band walks off and the lead guitarist is spotlighted and you just know that for the next ten minutes all you're going to hear is like a thousand notes a minute and feedback and the whole bit. It doesn't appeal to me at all, I much prefer the band to play together. I think there's far more excitement in that than hearing people soloing.

**HP:** Do you spend a lot of time here?

**Bev:** I don't come to America unless I've got something specific to do here, which is either touring or doing some promotional stuff.

**HP:** Do you think ELO is an 'Americanized' band?

**Bev:** Well, it certainly was true — things have changed a lot since then but there was a time, three or four years ago, where we were very, very big, or beginning to be big, in America anyway and nowhere else in the world really. Except for giving us one or two hit singles our own country didn't seem very interested in what we were doing and we virtually disowned them and concentrated almost 100% touring America. Each time we made a record our first thought was "will this appeal to the American market?" But with *New World Record*, then *Out Of The Blue*, and now the new album, our acceptance seems to have grown. We're very, very popular in England and also throughout Europe, Australia and a lot of other countries. Now we probably think of ourselves on a world wide basis but I think America would be considered our #1 market because we've always appreciated the fact that the American people were the ones who put us on the map.

**HP:** Do you enjoy being sent out to talk to

RETNA



"Very disco? Richard Tandy, our keyboard player, thought of that. Actually there are so many different words you can get out of discovery."



Jeff Lynne onstage...

the press since Jeff Lynne doesn't do many interviews?

**Bev:** I don't mind at all, I do quite enjoy talking to people. Generally people are nice but there are exceptions. There are certain writers who think a lot more of their own reputation than of the people

they're writing about and they ask baited questions and things with hidden meanings. They're really trying to trap you all the time and make you say something you wish you hadn't, or make you say something nasty about someone else. I don't enjoy talking to people like that. □