

I'm With The Band(camp)

Some came with trumpets. Some came with tambourines. Some came with serious shredding skills. But all 50 fans left the **Yes Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp** in Las Vegas with priceless memories to treasure and no, er, drama...

Words: Stephen Humphries **Images:** Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp

For perhaps the first time in his life, Chris Squire is getting a bass lesson. Squire peers intently at his teacher, 52-year-old John Haddad, as he patiently teaches the self-taught Yes bassist a chord progression on a white Rickenbacker.

It's a scene made all the more surreal by the fact that Haddad is a diagnostic radiologist from Houston. The tune he's teaching Squire is The Who's *Pinball Wizard*. And the two bassists are sharing a stage inside a Yes-themed Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp in the middle of Las Vegas.

"I was able to play a bit of *Pinball Wizard*, which I've known my whole life but have never played," Squire says later. "I was a big fan of John Entwistle."

If Chris Squire feels like a fish out of water, he isn't the only one. For Haddad and about 50 other amateur musicians, the July camp is a rare opportunity to get away from their day jobs and act like rock stars. Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp hosts numerous sessions per year, including one at Abbey Road in London, where

amateur musicians spend a few days jamming with star performers such as Jeff Beck, Roger Daltrey, Def Leppard, Slash, Sammy Hagar and, now, Yes. Over the course of three days, the mostly middle-aged men (and one or two women) play alongside members of Yes, record songs in a studio, and headline a stage inside the MGM Grand hotel. Think *City Slickers*, but with nicer amenities, an abundance of spandex, and men slinging guitars rather than lassos.

"These folks had a decision to make in their 20s to go for a career in music or get a real occupation," says David Fishof, the concert producer who founded the Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp. "The ones that chose a real job have been walking around every day of their

"Heat Of The Moment played on a trumpet is pretty hard work, but he did get it right!"

Steve Howe assesses the new talent on show

lives, thinking, 'What if?' Today, they can realise their dreams at Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp."

Case in point: 58-year-old Mark Howell, a construction industry contracts manager from Anderson, South Carolina, signed up for the camp because it's in keeping with his new life credo of 'no more regrets'.

When Howell first arrives at the campsite — a fairly anonymous concrete building just several blocks from the Las Vegas Strip — he frets that he'll be the worst musician among the attendees. He needn't have worried — one camper from Philadelphia arrives with little more than an untrained larynx and a tambourine. (Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp isn't kidding when it says that all talent levels are welcome.)

In the three months prior to camp, Howell has been working diligently

on guitar exercises to polish his "rusty set of knuckles". The last time he practised this hard was when he was a youth. "My mom got me into lessons at eight, and sat across from me every day with a wooden spoon, 'inspiring' me to practise," recalls Howell, who has an easy smile and curly, short, chestnut hair. "I was on the radio by age 10, playing in talent shows broadcast AM from music shops in the Twin Cities in Minnesota. I got tired of lessons and wanted to rock, so in '67, when I hit 12, she let me quit and I immediately formed a three-piece power trio."

During his teenage years, Howell logged many hours playing in schools, bars and hotels. But none of those gigs were as high-pressure as Howell's first-day audition at the Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp. Outside, the 43-degree heat is enough to make one's sweat evaporate. Inside, the cool air-conditioning doesn't stop grown men from perspiring as they wait to audition in front of the camp counsellors, who include guitar hero Gary Hoey, drummer Joe Vitale (the Eagles), and bassist Rudy Sarzo (Ozzy Osbourne, Whitesnake).

Once the 10 counsellors have assessed the playing abilities of all 50 campers, the participants are divided into eight musical groups, each mentored by a camp counsellor. Howell gets paired with Haddad — who is as lean as the neck of his white Rickenbacker — in a band led by

a professional drummer named Johnny Lust.

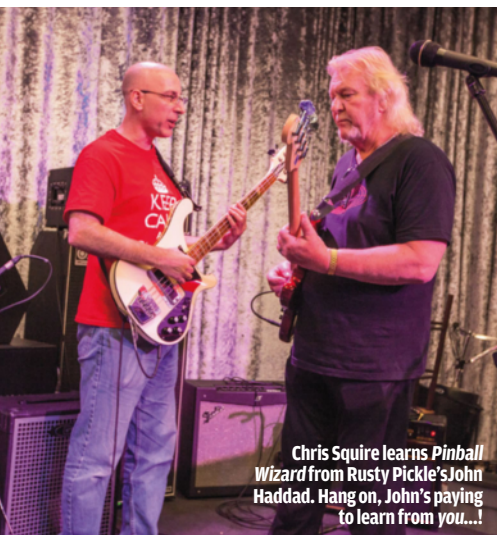
"Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp placed me into a three-piece power trio band," marvels Howell. "Talk about déjà vu and back to my youth!"

It turns out that Howell and Haddad have much in common. They're each

huge Yes fans who could probably tell you what, exactly, a *Siberian Khatru* is.

"I have a '77 or '78 Rickenbacker bass that I bought new at Alex Musical Store in New York on 48th street when I was about 16 or 17 years old," says Haddad, sitting inside one of the camp's rehearsal rooms. "I bought that bass because I wanted to play like Chris Squire."

Similarly, when Howell first heard *Close To The Edge*, it was as if his ears had suddenly discovered their life's purpose. He wore out several Yes records by repeatedly dropping the needle onto the vinyl grooves so that he could learn Steve Howe's guitar licks. But few of Howell's musical peers shared his new-found infatuation with progressive rock. "It was a lonely addiction," he laments. "There were no keyboard guys I knew with the



Chris Squire learns *Pinball Wizard* from Rusty Pickle's John Haddad. Hang on, John's paying to learn from you...



ROCK 'N' ROLL FANTASY CAMP



Rearrange Your Liver beef up the numbers with some blokes who just strolled in.



Alan White and Geoff Downes get in a Pickle too...


‘jing’ to afford synths and it took a ton of talent to play.”

Howell’s promising musical career came to an end in the late 1970s when bars started replacing live music with disco records. Three decades later, he’s giddy to be playing in a live band once again. And, very soon, the three men will be performing with Yes.

In Las Vegas, there is no such thing as ordinary. New skyscrapers have been built to lean like the Tower of Pisa. Nearby, gargantuan digital billboards advertise shows featuring topless circus gymnasts. At street level, a man in a furry Muppet suit poses for photographs with tourists even as the molten temperature threatens to turn the concrete sidewalks into

marzipan. Inside the revivifying cool of the MGM hotel, an even stranger scene is unfolding: Steve Howe is watching a trumpeter play Asia’s *Heat Of The Moment*. The amateur trumpeter and his band have been shuttled from the Rock’n’Roll Fantasy Camp site to a studio inside the hotel to record the cover versions they’ve been rehearsing.

“*Heat Of The Moment* played on a trumpet is pretty hard work, but he did get it right,” says Howe.

Soon, the other members of Yes join the guitarist to observe the recording session and then head over to the camp. The summit of Yes and its fans is a stark contrast to decades past, when the closest fans got to their idols was a front-row concert seat. 



“The more we interact, it seems to increase the interest in the band from a larger global community,” says Squire. “I’ve accepted this as a part of the current way of doing business.”

Even so, Howe expresses some trepidation: “I’m not here to flatter people and pose around too much.”

By contrast, Geoff Downes is innately relaxed, even when he arrives late to camp because his limousine was rear-ended by a car. Inside the venue, the campers watch intently as Downes conducts a masterclass. During a keyboard demonstration of *Close To The Edge*, Downes cheekily reveals that Rick Wakeman played a wrong chord on the original recording. He also offers several candid confessions.

“This was always my nightmare, playing the intro to *Awaken*, because it’s a pretty unnatural figure for a keyboard player,” says Downes, eyes twinkling behind owlish glasses.

Each of the camp bands then gets an opportunity to play a classic rock song with the Yes keyboardist. (Most of the bands steer clear of covering Yes songs because, frankly, they’re technically difficult to play.) By the time Howell, Haddad and Lust take to the stage, they’ve decided to call their band Rusty Pickle (a reference to the tinfoil-wrapped cucumber inside Derek Smalls’ underpants in *Spinal Tap*, perhaps?). Haddad and Lust settle into the groove of the blues shuffle *Sittin’ By The Curb*, while Howell leans back with his Vox guitar and confidently plays nimble, bluesy solos. Downes gamely improvises with barrelhouse piano.

“Playing with any member of Yes is light years beyond anything anyone from my side of the tracks could ever imagine doing,” says Howell later.

Downes appears to be having a ball, contributing a widdly solo to ZZ Top’s *Tush* and adding rollicking piano to *Little Red Rooster*. Alan White drops by to watch, even though he’s not scheduled to perform with the campers until the following day. “I’m just a punter,” smiles the Yes drummer.

If White feels at home, it’s because he’s been a counsellor at previous



Rock’n’Roll Fantasy Camps. He regales *Prog* with stories of past experiences, such as the time when Allman Brothers Band guitarist Warren Haynes gate-crashed a rehearsal with a camp band he was mentoring.

“He came into the room and he said, ‘Alan, I’ve been dying to get to your room so we could jam together. Let’s play *Gates Of Delirium*.’ I said, ‘You’ve got to be joking!’ That’s one of the hardest songs Yes ever did.”

Top: “Without wanting to sound clichéd, I’m living the dream. I’m on permanent fantasy camp!” says Jon Davison as he performs with Rearrange Your Liver on show night at the MGM. Above: Steve Howe meets a happy Rock’n’Roll Camper.

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Rock’n’Roll Fantasy Camper Mark Howell

A while later, Squire and Jon Davison get up on stage with each band. A four-piece with the less-than-promising name Rearrange Your Liver enlists the two Yes men to play an impressive version of *Roundabout* that segues into the climax of *Starship Trooper*.

“They were the only band who wanted to play a Yes song,” says Squire, nodding in admiration. “They wanted to play the whole extended long version. They were getting their money’s worth, those guys.”

Davison decides to linger behind with the campers for an informal jam session that stretches late into the evening. He wows the participants with a dexterous bass solo during a cover of Jimi Hendrix’s *Hey Joe*.

Not surprisingly, the former Yes tribute band singer feels a kinship with these musicians. “Without wanting to sound clichéd, I’m living the dream,” says Davison. “I’m on permanent fantasy camp.”

He is indeed. Ahead of Yes’s UK tour in 2014, Davison hopes to begin recording a new Yes album, which may include song ideas he’s submitted to the others.

The following day, Howe plays an intimate acoustic show at the camp, performing solo songs as well as Yes pieces such as *Masquerade*, *Solitaire*, *Mood For A Day*, and *The Clap*. He even sings during *Ritual*. The guitarist becomes increasingly relaxed and convivial throughout the session and, later, happily poses for photos and signs autographs. (No handshakes, though. The campers have been forewarned that the guitarist fears getting his fingers crushed.)

Later that evening, the campers head back to the MGM Grand for the grand finale of their sojourn. Just a dice roll away from the casino floor, an open-air bar has been transformed into a stage. A curious crowd gathers to watch. Several members of Yes turn up even though their official camp duties are over. Davison even hops up on stage with a couple of the bands and Downes does an impromptu keyboard part on a cover of Stevie Wonder’s *Superstition*.

After Rusty Pickle perform Led Zeppelin’s *Rock’n’Roll*, Bad Company’s *Feel Like Makin’ Love* and The Who’s *Pinball Wizard*, Davison compliments the band on their song selection.

“Knowing that four guys from Yes were in the audience kept my adrenaline up,” says Haddad, who plays in a Tool tribute band on weekends.

For Howell, the performance was a greater triumph than he’d expected. “My daily grind, corporate world was further away than Mars, and I had more emotion and adrenaline running through my body than a 14-year-old on his first date,” he enthuses. “There’s nothing like standing on a stage and hearing a cheering crowd. There just isn’t!”

Howell’s rock star moment may be finished – for now at least. But he’s thrilled to be playing at a technical level he never thought he’d attain again. “I can always say I once jammed with members of Yes,” he says, “and I’m not sure which of us was further out of our comfort zone!” ☺

Find out more about the Rock’n’Roll Fantasy Camp at www.rockcamp.com.