A Conversation with Glenn Tilbrook by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 12/2002)

In modern pop songwriting, one of the most illustrious and popular teams was that of Chris Difford and Glenn Tilbrook of the London band Squeeze. They cut 13 albums and penned scores, probably hundreds, of pop gems, some that will stand for decades to come, like the catalog of the Kinks, the Beatles, and the Beach Boys. "Tempted," "Black Coffee In Bed," "Another Nail For My Heart," "Hourglass," "Bang Bang," just listing the first five that come to mind brings a smile to a fan's face...

Popsters Tilbrook and Difford survived the onslaught of punk (in fact, were stylistically encamped on its perimeter and well-positioned for the "New Wave" movement to follow), the inevitable comparisons to Lennon & McCartney that have been lethal to others, and their own growing pains and differences over a 25 year cowriting relationship.

Glenn Tilbrook has been on his own for some years, and has made the leap to becoming both lyricist and melodist for his burgeoning solo career. He's also sought out other great lyricists like Aimee Mann and Ron Sexsmith. His first solo release, *The Incomplete Glenn Tilbrook*, is loaded with pretty Squeeze-y tunes as well as numbers that bear the imprint of both his newfound collaborators and the freedom that being solo brings. A week ago I caught his act at an R&B club in Nashville called 3rd & Lindsley, and he floored everybody in attendance.

Think about it: when was the last time you saw anybody playing pop music solo, convincingly, especially on acoustic guitar? But Tilbrook played mightily and sung flawlessly, and was truly funny between and during the songs. The cat was working it every nano-second, a real entertainment tutorial for the many songwriters present. Even more impressive was the glimmering body of work that the man has amassed in his career, an infectious and inspiring catalog of tune after great tune that was so clever, so musical, so much fun to listen to. He is RV-touring this and other countries relentlessly, and will be appearing somewhere near you very soon. Don't miss it!

I had to chase his ass around for days to get this interview. (And thanks to Karyn Soroka for all her help!) His cell phone kept cutting out the first day, out of range the next. The day after that he was pulling into Nashville, but was searching for a sports bar that might be willing to televise his beloved Charlton team. (English football in Nashville on Sunday? Surely you jest...) But we met at the show, the following day finished up, and here you have it. He is the quintessential nice guy, inspired and motivated, and one of my new heroes.

GLENN TILBROOK: Glenn here, ready to go, finally.

PUREMUSIC: It's a beautiful thing.

GT: So how are you?

PM: I'm great. Jeez, that was a frickin fantastic show last night!

GT: Oh, thank you. I really enjoyed it too.

PM: I mean two hours of just nonstop entertainment. It was relentless!

GT: [laughs] In a good way, I hope. Not relentless like the dentist, I mean.

PM: No, I was bowled over. I keep telling people, "When he wasn't playing something amazing, he was being totally funny."

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GT: [laughs] Oh, I'm glad.

PM: I was the guy in the front laughing my ass off the whole time.

GT: That's cool. Thank you.

PM: Yeah, really, really fun. And I said to Bill DeMain after the show, "I'd say we've seen over 300 chord changes."

GT: [laughs] Thank goodness I'm not counting.

PM: There had to be twenty songs. There's definitely fifteen a song. [laughs]

GT: Yeah, that's true. Three hundred different chords, hey... I think I might incorporate that into our marketing effort, in terms of value for the money.

PM: "And tonight you will hear a minimum of 300 chords!"

GT: Yeah. [laughs] Excellent.

PM: So how are things with you?

GT: Things are good. Things are really good for me. It's interesting, carrying on from the conversation that we started, I mean, Nashville is a really good case in point. I'm very aware of the fact that going on the radio and being connected with that helps a show. And in terms of the amount of people that see me, I think it's double now over what I had last time. So that's good, it's heading the right way.

PM: Right.

GT: And that's what I want to do, I want to come back, and again and again. [laughs]

PM: Yes. You sowed a lot of good seeds that night, and I could see that the people were just totally satisfied. I mean, I often see good shows, but you rarely feel truly sated by a performance.

GT: As long as it doesn't get to the stage where you think, "Enough!" [laughs] "No more!"

PM: Forgive me if I double back on a question or two, because there was too much interference and we didn't really get a good enough tape. Don't you find—and now I know—that playing solo is very liberating in a lot of ways?

GT: Oh, yeah. Well, you saw. Yeah, definitely. I think that, for me, what made Squeeze work is the fact that we were a bunch of very different personalities, even down to the chemistry between myself and Chris. We were quite different in a lot of ways. And it was that push and pull that made our writing partnership work, I think. There was a constant sort of battle between us, but I think we always respected what we got from that, and it was very fruitful and productive. But one of the areas that would suffer is that our sense of humor isn't necessarily the same. It would be impossible and, I think, not right for me to do a show like the one you saw, or to address an audience, which I do in a very personal way, at a Squeeze gig. All that stuff means that before I started performing alone, I would never get to do any of that.

PM: So in terms of being half of a great duo, you felt you couldn't be the single person that you

truly are?

GT: Well, I think so, yeah. I think that's true. In the dynamics of my relationship with Chris—this isn't being horrible about him—he's not a relaxed person on stage, and I am. And that's not because I'm great, it's because I'm lucky I feel that way.

PM: Yeah, I think it's just the way some of us are.

GT: Exactly. But our partnership works great when we play songs or have a band, and I was always happy doing that, really happy doing that.

PM: Yeah, and such a fantastic band it was.

GT: Yeah, yeah.

PM: For people who are in a duo, musical or otherwise, do you have anything to offer as words of advice?

GT: I'm the last person to offer advice. I never know how to give advice. I guess the best advice I can give is, when things happen, either things that you make happen or that happen to you, try to understand why. That's the best advice I can give.

PM: I hear you. Without belaboring the past, what do we know about Chris Difford now, how is he doing and what's he up to?

GT: Oh, he's doing fine. He just released a solo album in the UK [*I Didn't Get Where I Am*], which has some great tracks on it. He's singing really well. I think on his solo record he's just got the best singing he's ever done, so I'm very pleased that he's done that. And I think it's one of those things, that not working with me has also liberated Chris in some ways, and I think that's great. I'm really happy for him.

PM: So, when you first realized that now you had to be your own lyricist, were those lyrics that you started to write indeed your first lyrics, or had you written plenty of lyrics before you teamed up with Difford or along the way?

GT: I wrote songs by myself until I was about fourteen, I think.

PM: [laughs]

GT: That's when I met Chris. Actually, when I met him, his lyrics were so much better than mine. And generally, my tunes were better than his. So that's how we came to write that way. And from that moment on, Chris just kept on giving me lyrics. And that, for me, was great. I'm more than happy to just put tunes to those lyrics. So it wasn't as if Chris was writing about things that I couldn't understand or identify with. It was rather that I completely understood and felt what he was doing, and it felt natural to be doing that. And at the end of all that, when it came to me writing lyrics, the biggest influence on me was Chris.

PM: Sure.

GT: There's more than a touch of him in some of my songs, I think.

PM: Absolutely.

GT: That, again, feels natural to me. What else have I been doing for the last 25 years? I've been working with him, so it's not surprising that he's an influence.

PM: Are you comfortable now with being your own lyricist?

GT: Yeah, I am, completely.

PM: Because a lot of the new songs are great lyrically.

GT: But it took me a while to get there. I wrote some stuff I really wasn't pleased with at first. It was hard for me. But once I got one song done I was pleased with, that I could look at and think, "Well, yeah, okay, I think that's good," that took a lot of pressure off of me. Also, working with other people helped. Aimee Mann did the lyrics for "Observatory," and Ron Sexsmith for "You See Me," so I knew I had *some* good lyrics there anyway, which again made it easier for me to relax and think about what I wanted to do.

PM: Have you done any co-writing with people here in town, with Nashville people at all?

GT: No. But that's something I really want to do. I want to come back to Nashville and do some more writing, and I also want to do some recording. I really want to do some recording here, because there's a—well, you don't need me to tell you—I love the stuff that comes out of Nashville and I think the people here have a work ethic that I admire.

PM: Yeah, and there are so many good writers, so many good players, so many good studios.

GT: Yeah, exactly. So I'd like to come here and do that, definitely. And it's the sort of thing I feel free to do now, being by myself. There's much more opportunity for me to do that.

PM: Most people, and even many of your fans, don't realize like I do now what a great, great guitar player you are. I know, because I saw. Let's cover what your axes du jour are, and any accoutrements. Both of the guitars you used are Taylors, right? [a six string and a twelve string]

GT: Yes, I've had them both for around ten years now.

PM: Yeah, mine is old. I think the old ones are a lot better.

GT: Oh, yeah. [laughs]

PM: I mean, that's when they were still using Brazilian rosewood and really taking their time.

GT: Yeah.

PM: But I thought that your twelve-string must play awfully well, because you were doing really, really difficult stuff on it, both right hand and left hand, and so that's probably got a great action, doesn't it?

GT: It has a lovely action. I mean, honestly, the twelve-string is a better guitar than the six.

PM: Really?

GT: Technically, it is. And I'm used to it.

PM: You know, it's so rare to see someone get on stage and play pop music solo.

GT: Yeah.

PM: Because it's damn hard to do. And to sound pop, it generally requires more, or requires one person working very hard.

GT: Yes. Well, it worked out quite luckily for me, then. It doesn't feel hard to me.

PM: I didn't see any [effects] boxes whatsoever. I didn't even see a tuner on stage.

GT: No, no.

PM: Even for a twelve-string.

GT: No. I don't like to use those. I mean, I use them if I'm in a studio or something, but I prefer to use my ears otherwise.

PM: And no kind of reverbs, tremolos, no boxes at all?

GT: No. I've been very tempted to go down that route. And I think what would happen with me is, if I ever do that, I'll get a bunch of samplers, of both vocally and the guitar, and work with those. I did have a sampler with my guitar for a while, one of those foot control ones from somewhere in Texas. I can't remember what it's called. And I had it with me for about three months. Then I just thought, well, actually, I don't really need that. I like the discipline of it being very simple.

PM: Right.

GT: And I have a feeling that if I do get one box, I'll get twelve. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, one gets you a dozen. I know that's true.

How important is the Internet in your current scheme of things?

GT: Very important. I have to say, my first point of view on the Internet is as a user, and it's wonderful, absolutely brilliant in terms of reaching people. And in terms of people knowing what I'm up to, and the exchange of information between people who are interested in me—well, I find it very hard to imagine doing what I'm doing now ten years ago and it being anything like the same.

PM: It couldn't have been, no, absolutely. You can touch a lot of people and be touched without having to Be there.

GT: Exactly, exactly that.

And then there's the whole MP-3 downloading stuff. At one point I thought it would hurt only the big people. I now think it probably hurts everyone, but just incrementally. Not that I'm losing sleep over it, but I know that sales—from what I was hoping to do to what I'm actually doing, there's a big difference. I was reading in Billboard last week that the sale of singles dropped 60 percent last year.

PM: Holy jeez.

GT: They've got to be worried. I'm worried to a certain extent. People come up and give me compilations they've made, and it's great, and I love it. And I can't deny the technology is brilliant,

and who wouldn't use it? I use it. I can't criticize other people for using it.

PM: Yeah. Artists have to find ways to use the technology so that we don't get screwed by it, and so that it works for us, because it's not going away.

GT: The thing I find, technology has just run away. When Apple ran those Billboard ads last year, "Rip, Mix, Burn," to me that was Apple saying, "Please do that, because that's what you can do with this." That's just terrible. It would be as if cassette manufacturers 20 years ago held up copies of albums and said, "You can make copies of this for your friends." And you remember the big fuss they put up about cassettes.

PM: Oh, I remember, yeah.

GT: If anything, the record industry has learned nothing in terms of ways to combat that. At that time, LPs were still packaged, and the packaging was a much more attractive option than cassettes could offer. But now you can Xerox the cover and rip your own copy of it off. The way I try to look at it, if people are going to do that, they're going to do that. There's nothing I can do to stop them. And if it means someone says, "Hey, I went to see this guy last night, check this out," and people say, "Yeah, I like that," then maybe they'll come and support me next time.

PM: There are some very, very interesting articles by Janis Ian. I don't know if you know her as an artist.

GT: Sure, yeah.

PM: But at janisian.com, she wrote a very provocative series of letters to the industry on this topic. I don't know if you've seen them, but you ought to check it out. It's interesting, and it will get you thinking in a variety of ways about what we're discussing here.

GT: What was the gist of what she was saying, or is too complicated to summarize?

PM: Well, I would cheapen the depth of her argument—

GT: Okay.

PM: But she was saying, "Hey, it's not all bad. Here are the ways that it's good." And she really researched and thought it out very carefully. She's a smart person. And I think she'd put your mind at a greater level of ease about it.

GT: Right, right.

PM: Tell me, what are you listening to and what are you reading?

GT: I'm listening to the new Badly Drawn Boy record today.

PM: Is that the name of the band, Badly Drawn Boy?

GT: Badly Drawn Boy is from Manchester, yeah. I'm just absolutely mad for BR-549. I want to get hold of all their records. I've got my Junior Brown records out at the moment, because every so often I like to get his records out and listen to those.

PM: Totally amazing.

GT: I mentioned the Coral to you—did I, or did I not?

PM: Who?

GT: The Coral, C-o-r-a-l. They're a band from Liverpool, England. They're all between 18 and 21, and they're absolutely fantastic.

PM: Are they a pop band?

GT: They are a pop band—they're a pop band in the sense I understand. Most of my favorite music is created by people who sound like they sat down and absorbed something. And the Coral sounds like they spent three years in their respective bedrooms listening to West Coast psychedelic music plus pop music, then came out with their own take on it. And because they've sort of grown this thing together, it sounds a bit like that, but quite a lot like nothing else I've heard.

PM: Oh, I'm going to get right on that.

GT: Yeah. Also, they're doing things like time signature changes, all that sort of stuff that really not that many people are doing now—

PM: No.

GT: —and make it sound not like Yes, but like pop. And I like it sounding not that labored.

PM: And what about books?

GT: Books, well, let me see. I just finished P. J. O'Rouke's *The CEO of the Sofa*, just because I like him. And I just started reading *The Cold Six Thousand* by James Ellroy. It's very good, very stripped down. I always admire people who can get right to the point, in three words identify what they're talking about. That's an art in itself.

PM: Truly. Are you much of a religious or spiritual sort?

GT: I'm not religious. I wasn't brought up by believers, though I wasn't brought up by non-believers. And I suppose that lack of religion has transferred itself to me. My children, on the other hand, are being brought up to believe in God. People who have that certainty, I envy them without being able to understand it.

PM: Does that mean your wife is more of a believer?

GT: My ex-wife, actually. And yes, it does.

PM: And on the Christian side, or—

GT: Yes, she is.

PM: That's very interesting. So you live now in England?

GT: Yes, I do.

PM: And with whom, if that's not too—

GT: With my partner, Suzanne. We are now expecting a baby too, so that's a great thing.

PM: Ah, beautiful. Do you have any hobbies outside the musical sphere?

GT: Not too many. Cycling I really like doing. I mean, I carry bikes around with my gear, too, so it's always nice to go for a ride.

PM: Yeah, you seemed like you were in good shape.

GT: Luckily enough, yes, I am. The other thing I've got in my bus is I've got two turntables—two CD turntables, not vinyl—and I like playing with those, playing records loud.

PM: [laughs]

GT: Absorbing. If I'm at home, I spend a lot of time in my studio, just doing one thing or another, because everything you do feeds you in some way, doesn't it? So I just like playing music or doing things that are inspiring.

PM: Oh, yeah, you can't be on output all the time. You need to get on input.

GT: Exactly, yeah.

PM: Well, if you would, give us your feelings about the States, the Yanks, and touring here.

GT: Well, I've always had a fascination with America, ever since I can remember. Certainly my generation were inundated with images about America, and we had ideas about America before we got here. I'd always dreamed—quite literally, dreamt—of coming here. When I did first come here, it was actually everything I'd hoped it would be. It was fantastic.

And I've had lots of times back here since, and I've never really revised that opinion. I think that I—now, I speak as someone who lives in London, and I don't think I'm ever going to move away from there—but I really believe that Americans are very open, warm people, in a way that humbles me every time I come here. And I have more experience of that in the last, say, two years, than I have had previously. I love being here. I love traveling around here. I love meeting people here. And [laughs] I love being home as well.

PM: Yeah, of course. And it's beautiful to hear someone call us warm. I really appreciate that, because you were extremely giving in your performance, and you seem to just give every ounce of what you have and who you are, and I admire that greatly.

GT: Well, that's very nice of you. Thank you.

PM: Is there a question that you wish interviewers would ask, but they never do?

GT: [considers, then sighs] I was trying to think of a good answer, but I'm afraid I didn't. People generally seem to cover things, and understand, to a large extent, where I'm coming from as well, which is always nice.

PM: I think that's because you are so giving, and you're so open faced in both your tunes and your way with the audience. You make yourself truly accessible instead of enigmatic.

GT: [laughs] Well, that's good. I'm pleased to hear that.

PM: So thanks so much for all your time today.

GT: Well, I thank you, and I'm sorry for all the delays...

PM: And it was a very memorable show the other night. I'll never forget it, and I look forward to seeing you next time.

GT: Excellent. I really appreciate it.

PM: Thanks, Glenn. Take care.

GT: All right. Cheers.

Most of the photos that illustrate this interview come from the astonishing array to be found at "The Unofficial Glenn Tilbrook Site," many snapped by fans. Handsomely designed and smartly written (check out the mighty thorough bio), packed with rare treats of every variety, this site (www.babylonandon.com/glenn) is definitely the place to go for all things Glenn.