

JULIAN BREAM

There have been times when Julian Bream has declined an interview, feeling that he has said quite enough about the guitar. He is keenly aware of a truth not always appreciated, that music is not talking about it (or writing about it) but playing it. Fortunately for his multitudinous admirers, he relaxes that opinion from time to time, when he feels that verbal communication can usefully complement his unparalleled musical communication.

Come to think of it, his verbal communication is pretty unparalleled, too. Who else can talk about music and the guitar with so beguiling a blend of humor, passion and down-to-earth common sense?

Classical Guitar magazine has interviewed Julian Bream many times. This particular interview, by Chris Kilvington, found the 60-year-old maestro in a communicative mood, discussing many different topics with the warmth and commitment that characterize his very best guitar playing. CC

In a 1985 interview, you said ‘guitar music is largely not intellectual music.’ What did you mean by that? After all, you are regarded as a champion of new music and one of its greatest interpreters.

About 40 years ago I met the famous Italian composer Gian Francesco Malipiero, had an introduction to him, and played for him on both the lute and the guitar. He said: ‘You know, they’re two very different instruments, the lute and the guitar; the lute is music from the spheres and the guitar is the music of the streets.’ In a sense that conveys exactly what I meant when I said that a lot of guitar music is not intellectual; the guitar is an earthy, sensuous, and ravishingly beautiful sound in the right hands. The music, or the quality of the music, is nearly always on the slight side; it doesn’t have any grave intellectual import. I feel the guitar is an instrument of the senses; it has a great charm, and it has half a dozen pieces which could be said to be great, probably not half a dozen even. And the rest of its repertoire is, on the whole, rather lightweight. But that doesn’t mean that a fine player cannot invest that music with great meaning. In a sense it’s more of a challenge to play the guitar repertoire than that of the piano.

I think it was well summed up by Edgar Allan Poe in his short story, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The anti-hero is a guitarist, and the gist of the idea as it affected Poe was that although the range of the instrument was not great, *because* of those very limitations there was a certain tension created in the performances which made them magical. He said it much more beautifully than that, of course.

The constraints and discipline can be creative as well as sometimes being harmful to the creative process. To play a dozen notes beautifully on the guitar — any notes — can evoke such expressiveness. But it’s how you play those notes that is important. And how you link those notes, and how you use the diminuendos of the plucked string that in itself creates

a myriad of silences. But it’s those silences, and the tensions between the impact of the next note they create. That is important — that is the poetry.

Why does one get it right, so close to being perfect sometimes, and not at others? That’s true, isn’t it? Yes, it’s true, but that’s the charm of public performance, that it’s never the same. Even the instrument itself, because the density of wood is so fine compared to that of a violin for example. It’s very finely calibrated, always subject to the prevailing conditions of the air, the humidity, the dryness and so on. Sometimes in a concert hall where it’s too humid, the instrument simply won’t sing as you want it to. And when it’s very dry the guitar can be rather shrill and unyielding. And your nails of course, their condition and length, and the state of your strings, whether they’re brand new or three months old — should they have been changed? Then the hall itself and its acoustic, which obviously very much affects the way you play. I always play a little faster in a dry acoustic, and I think that most people do, because you’ve got no assistance from the hall to help the notes sustain and thereby achieve the phrasing as you want to present it.

Another consideration, and a most important one, is the public. When you go to a concert there’s such a wonderful — or can be, shall we say — such a wonderful feeling amongst most of the people, and that feeds back to the performer. And if people are attentive and concentrating and willing to let themselves go into the music, then I think certain things can happen in a recital which make it a memorable, or at least a pleasurable, event.

This business about the audience — why should it not always be excellent? Every audience has surely come to be entertained or involved?

I wonder about that. When I was a student I used to go to concerts in London, and they weren’t hugely

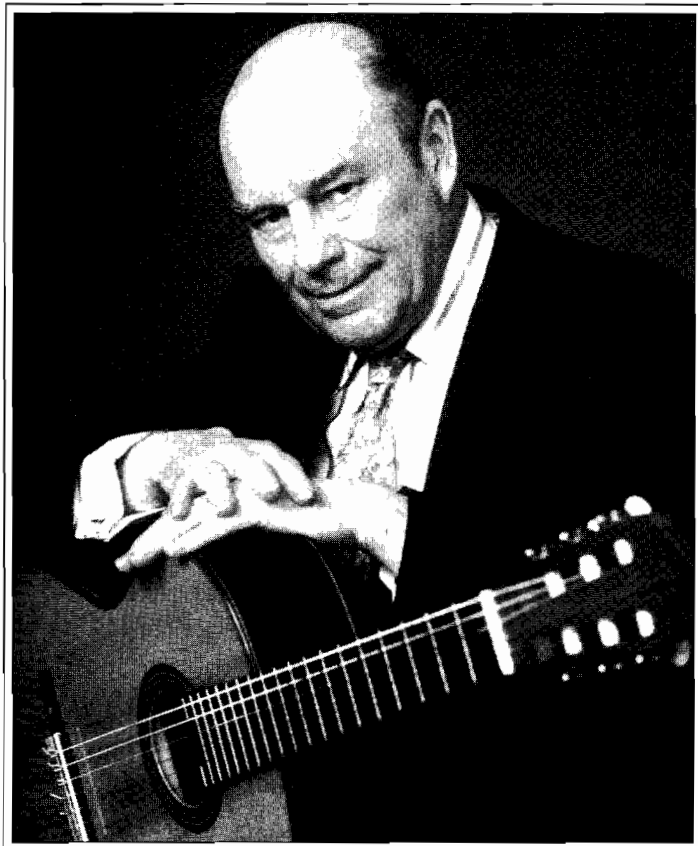


Photo by Nick White, EMI

advertised as concerts are today. There was perhaps a little notice on a Wednesday in *The Times* or *The Telegraph*, but you had to know where to look. But the fact that you had to search and hunt, to make an effort, meant that you weren't just some ordinary old concertgoer. And that is already a wonderful beginning from the point of view of the public. Nowadays promoters want to get as many egalitarian bums on seats as possible, because it is largely an economic exercise for them. And so the great thing is to find new audiences, and that comes about through advertising, the media, and so forth. They bring in people who wouldn't normally have gone to concerts 40 years ago. They think, 'Hello, I saw him on the box, perhaps it might be a nice idea to go to his concert'. So they go. You get people coming out of curiosity more than anything else.

And sponsorship. I'll give you a typical example of a bit of dead wood in the audience. Nowadays, nearly all my concerts are sponsored, like the one the other night in Bath, sponsored by the gas company. They gave their top employees tickets, with a special bar laid on for themselves and their friends — then they hear the concert and have a slap-up dinner somewhere afterwards. So it's really just an outing for the company, and people are not going to say no to a trip to Bath, with a free concert and a free meal thrown in. It's very hard to get through to dead wood. If you succeed, you've actually achieved something. That's the problem with this modern sponsorship: admirable

when it's working; but, finally, it doesn't always help.

What do you think would be the perfect audience, if such a thing could exist?

I don't think anything is perfect. London can produce a very good audience — in the Wigmore Hall, for example, with just over 500 seats. The one year I couldn't use the Wigmore I went to the Queen Elizabeth, a cold and rather austere hall but not a bad acoustic. And I had one of the best audiences I ever had. Yet the Wigmore is the ideal hall for the guitar. When I was a kid just after the war all the great artists played there, I mean the very greatest. Pierre Fournier, Victoria de los Angeles, Rubinstein — that calibre of artist. And the Segovia evenings there were just as magical. Whereas when he moved across the river to the South Bank into that very dry, large hall, I felt it was only half a musical experience. So I think that halls are very important as far as the quality of audience goes.

How do you go about choosing a new piece — and what are the processes for you between that and performing it?

These days you're asked for your program maybe a year ahead, whereas before it was a couple of months. People want to get everything organized early, and I find that rather sad. I've just been giving my programs for next May, yet now I have the summer pretty much off to learn things and make records. I'll probably learn something that I'd like to play in my next season's concerts, but really I'm stuck.

My programs have a typical and rather conventional shape. I play what I really like to play, and if nobody likes it, well, they can go home. To be able to take that attitude — well, at the age of 60 I feel you've earned that prerogative. I play only music that stimulates me, and I never, ever, get bored with the pieces. But I do rest them, perhaps for a number of years, and then pick them up again, and I see totally new things. I'm doing that now with Lennox Berkeley's *Sonatina*. I found that the old concept I had of the piece wasn't bad but that I just didn't bring out all the beauties which I now feel in the composition. I can tell by the fingerings I used. It's a very well-made piece, and charming music. I remember Britten once saying — and he seldom had a good word for any other composer and was very critical of English composers in particular — 'That is very nearly a great piece'. Coming from him, you can be sure it's a damn good piece anyway.

To what extent is your interpretation planned in your

dynamic and tonal phrasing, and tempo, and to what extent is it intuitive on the night?

Tempo is very spontaneous because, as I mentioned earlier, it is, among other things, to do with the acoustics and how you feel. You know, it's the old heart that sets the rhythm. Tone color — which, as you know, I use rather a lot — I sort of work out, but not always. Sometimes I enjoy experimenting or reversing the colors; a passage taken near the bridge I might try beyond the soundhole, and so forth. And that keeps one on one's toes.

Is that purely for the possibility of discovery?

Yes. And for fun. Dynamics are largely prearranged; but the intensities of those dynamics are not.

And how does that happen?

According to the hall and the audience. If the audience is really concentrating, you make them concentrate even more — well, you don't *make* them, you just do, it happens. Sometimes you can play so quietly, perhaps a tiny, gentle artificial harmonic, but if you can get it to ring exquisitely with some left-hand vibrato added, it has a certain magic.

Such an important thing about the carrying power of the guitar is the actual sound you make on it. If the sound has a real centre, is really focused, then that sound really carries through the air. It doesn't matter about decibels; it gets there. And if the sound is not well focused, a bit angular or thin, that will often not register so much with people. It won't travel. I experiment a great deal when I'm performing, always trying to get the instrument to ring a bit more or to have a little bit more incision in the articulation. I'm always trying things, and sometimes I fall flat on my face. But it's worth a try.

Tightrope walking?

A little bit. But audiences like that. The ones that know, they know what you're doing and they're saying 'No, no, he's not going to get away with that one.' And you do or you don't.

It keeps it live, doesn't it?

That's it! I was doing a concert recently somewhere in Germany, and finished with Falla's *Miller's Dance*. And that fantastic last A minor chord right at the top of the instrument — I missed it by a semitone! Except, of course, for the open A; the rest was A flat minor — the very last chord of the concert. They're very serious in Germany, but the whole audience collapsed with laughter. I was so annoyed with myself, but I have to say the audience enjoyed it.

I just shrugged my arms and walked off. I can see that it was amusing and I was grateful that they laughed, but for me it wrecked the whole evening. I felt I'd let the composer down. But that happens from time to time, and it does liven things up a bit. I'm always looking for the very best out of every phrase.

Do you think you're changing?

At the moment I sense I'm improving, somehow. It's a wonderful feeling. Something has happened. I'm enjoying the whole business of making music so much now — I mean, I always have, but in some ways even more now. As you get older — and this is not just to do with music — you begin to get rid of things that are a waste of time. You say 'I don't want to do this', or 'I'm getting rid of that'. I want to simplify life. Because since the beginning of time life has got more complicated, and there comes a time when you want to concentrate on what's truly worthwhile. And all the rest of the stuff — chuck it! I've cut out a lot of the waste of energy and time. You're not going to live for ever, you know time's limited and you suddenly realize that it goes at a hell of a lick. It seems only yesterday that I was 50. The great thing is to get rid of all the unnecessary stuff.

Do you do exactly what you want to do?

I've always been idealistic about music. I suppose. One of the things I remember as a student at the College after the war was that we were an idealistic generation. It was a rough time coming through the war, but we had ideals. And I miss that now. There weren't so many people doing things; there weren't so many people, period. And there was space, and there wasn't this sort of competition and this sort of elbowing.

You're talking about the musical world?

You bet — but also the world in general. There weren't the pressures, particularly on young people. Today they race into these competitions, and if they win they maybe get a prize of half a dozen concerts and a recording contract if they're lucky. That's a lot of pressure on a young person. My generation, we sort of matured into our profession slowly, and I think we were very lucky to be able to do that. Now it's very different. It's the commercialization of life and the competition of it all which has caused a lot of unhappiness for people in general.

Do you think there's any value in music competitions?

I think they can sort out the good players. Let's face it, in the old Communist ethic there was no such thing as

competition, everybody had the same. But the Russians also had their music competitions; they had to have something to sort out the great from the not so great. Even the Bolshevik Russians had that. They treat music very seriously; it's a genuine part of their system of education. Look what wonderful artists come out of Russia — and they're trained at a very early age. It's terrific, it's wonderful. They become so deeply involved with the music itself.

In the same way as an actor can become his role, should a musician attempt to become the music, or maybe the composer?

Sometimes one should think about the music deeply without the instrument, with only the score. We must certainly find out a bit about the composer and the environment in which he worked. It all helps. The important thing for a performing musician is that he must be the servant of the composer. And that would be very difficult if you've got a big ego, if you think you're just the greatest. Those people tend not to be the best interpreters, although they can be flamboyantly brilliant and good value. But as I see it, one's role is in the service of the music. And then to be able to convey that music in such a way that it's wholly, utterly and totally convincing. That is a very great responsibility for a performer.

What do you actually think about when you're away from the guitar and working with the score?

The shape of the piece, and sometimes the fingering. It's getting to know the first note so that paradoxically you can almost hear the last note, you can feel the whole sweep of it. It's hard to achieve. Two works of Bach ideally employ that idea, both in variation form: the *Goldberg Variations* and the *Chaconne*. And then you go through an experience which transcends time. I use the word paradoxical because the transcendental quality of the music means that it is always stretching out, and yet the relationship between the variations always brings it back. So you've got this inhale/exhale situation, and it's that tension which can be so moving and so wonderful in a variation piece of that quality. Much better to look at that sort of thing away from the instrument.

Can music sometimes express what words can't?

That's an interesting proposition. There is an abstract purity about instrumental music, whereas words can give a fixed emotional framework to the work. Instrumental music conveys a dimension that is abstract and mystical and also engages the intellect. And those three things are, above all, intercepted by the heart.

But that doesn't mean to say I don't like songs. I love songs, the French songs of Fauré, Debussy and Ravel, and the German Lieder. It's a different concept of music.

I wasn't thinking of songs so much. Everyone in this life must, at one time or another, have been, as we say, 'lost for words', incapable of expressing linguistically something that was within themselves. Maybe music can sometimes offer that expression.

The music is obviously saying it for you, not any words. That's it! And that's why writing about music is in some way a complete waste of time. And yet, even so, a person's thoughts on music can be very revealing. I think you've got to read musical criticism with the foreknowledge that it is a waste of time basically. Yet it can be a highly entertaining business. I read a wonderful book recently about the critics in Beethoven's time and what they said about his music. It's amazing what you can learn about the society of 170 years ago. We tend to class music into categories, and contemporary or avant-garde music is said to be something difficult to understand for many people, and often stretches the medium which is being used to its utmost breaking point. But this is a natural corollary to how things evolve.

One must remember that in the 18th century nearly every new work was an avant-garde piece. Audiences were hearing nothing other than avant-garde music. Take Mozart's clarinet concerto: when that was written it was way out, and the G minor symphony too. People weren't listening to Palestrina; they listened to the music of the day. Maybe one or two people sang a few Bach chorales, but it was generally a totally different situation. I think musical life was much livelier because of that, and the fact that the musical language was in a wonderful state of evolution at that point in history.

Do you think, then, that it's a backwards step to play works of the past?

No, I don't think so. But it's rather hard luck on contemporary composers that they have to hear a masterpiece by Bach before they hear the first performance of their new work. It's unfair for them to be compared with the beauties of an age which had a totally different aesthetic. I do admire someone like Pierre Boulez or Harrison Birtwistle; their music is continuously evolving. And most music of the last 15 years has become so-called 'melodic', or you could say harmonic in the quasi-traditional way. And I think most of it is pretty mediocre stuff.

I hardly know of a person I want to commission a piece from now. I think the two composers alive with the greatest musical ears are Takemitsu and Lutosławski. (*Both composers died a few years after this interview took place — Ed*).

You know, there was always a time when I felt I must commission so-and-so, I must get a new work. Maybe it's because I'm getting older, but I'm not so very enthusiastic about what I hear now. I don't go to many concerts but I regularly listen to the radio specifically to hear certain works and get the feel of a new composer — there may be a Beethoven in our midst that we don't know about. It's very easy to make great sweeping statements about things, but that's my general feeling at the moment.

You wouldn't say no to another Nocturnal or Bagatelles, quality-wise, would you?

Well, there's nobody who can write that music any more. They're period pieces, they're of their time.

I notice that guitar programs, when I see them, are rather more conservative than they used to be. And architecture, and painting....

Is that wrapped up with the political scene, the extremely functional politics we've seen in the last ten years or so?

I think it's the way the world is. I believe there's always a spirit moving through the world, always has been. And today I feel it's so unhappy. The violence of it all! It's a terrible time. I feel that it's hard to compose beautiful things in a world which is killing itself, killing itself in more ways than one. I don't think it's a pretty picture. Do you?

On composition again: the critic Edward Greenfield once wrote 'with the "wrong" notes written, the player is prevented from bringing out the instrument's proper resonance.' Any thoughts on this?

I would say that certain keys have specific moods, and one of the unfortunate things about the guitar is that it's limited in the ways it can transpose. This is very indicative in the 19th-century sonatas. I can hardly think of a guitar sonata that has a development section. And key relationships do play such an important part of classical sonata form; they create part of the tension of the music. A thematic idea in one key sounds so different in another, and the guitar finds it difficult to cope with that in terms of musical development. Yet sometimes a remote key can give a covered feeling to

the music. Takemitsu's *All in Twilight* has lots of G Flat, A Flat, D Flat, yet it sounds very well. The reason is that he's worked it all out very carefully on the fingerboard. It gives the piece a rather muted feeling, which I believe he wants.

A change of tack: what sort of practice are you doing nowadays?

About three or four hours a day. I start off quite early in the morning and work through until midday. I don't practice in the afternoon. In the morning I'll start about 8, do an hour, have a breather, another 45 minutes, a breather, and so do about three hours playing in a four-hour session. I'll do a bit more between 5 and 6.30, and then I put the old box to bed and have a glass of gin. Down here my days are very simple. I might go out and do a bit of gardening in the afternoon or walk the dog; it's such a negative time, whereas the mornings and evenings are great. That's the thing about being a performer, you tend to move towards the evening.

You're a late-night person?

No. I used to go to bed very late, but not now.

Are you still having to do lots of practice on technique since the accident to your arm, or have you got all that back again?

It's pretty much sorted out. But I had to do a fantastic lot of practice initially. And then I carried that on because I really enjoyed it. I had to change my hand position slightly because of the accident, and then the left hand, I changed that too. I did a double change.

What sort of things?

I tended to play with rather flat fingers on my left hand, and I didn't notice it until I saw the scenes from the films on the Guitar in Spain. I looked at my left hand and asked myself, do I really play like that? It was terrible. It sort of sounded all right, but I thought I'd never develop my left hand if I continued to play like that. So I had to change, and that was very hard to achieve at my age. But I'm glad I did it; I really had to slave, but I'm so pleased that I did it. I hadn't actually seen myself playing for a long time, which you don't in the normal course of events. The palm of my hand was too far away from the fingerboard. And what a hell of a job it was to rectify it, too.

Being virtually self-taught, I have always had to approach these things a bit like that; trial and error — and a lot of trial specifically.

I had to start from the very beginning. About a month

after the accident, I did 15 minutes just moving the fingers, then half an hour, then 40, 50 minutes, then an hour. Diatonic and chromatic scales, arpeggios. I worked in front of a mirror and I would watch what was going on and I gradually built my technique up again. It was interesting. I wouldn't recommend it to anybody, but you do learn more that way.

With your right hand, did you just reconstitute what you had before or did you change things?

I changed things a little bit. The position of my thumb. And I'm quite happy to have changed my wrist position also. Whereas previously I kept it more or less the same throughout a performance — although I moved it up and down the strings — now I'm quite ready to change the angle, to move it as I feel. It's not a very pure outlook to technique, but it's one that suits me now.

I also notice that guitar players in general don't fuss with their right hands anything like they used to in terms of the old Tárrega bent wrist. And I'm not at all sure that's a good thing either; the thing with the Tárrega bend is that you didn't have to support the wrist, it just fell that way. But with this flatter method, you have to consciously support the wrist.

When you had the accident, did you feel like packing it in? Did it ever seem that bad?

It was certainly a pretty traumatic experience. It does have an effect on your life and your outlook upon things. It was terribly bad luck being involved in such a catastrophic accident, but I also feel I somehow had great fortune; really, I'm lucky to be alive. It gave me another dimension of feeling to have gone through an experience of that kind. It did change my life.

I stopped for a month, and maybe that was good too. The initial thought was 'Maybe I'll never play again.' I don't know what effect that would have had on me. I would have missed the playing terribly, I must say, because I love playing. Maybe I'd have done a bit of teaching — yes, I'd have done that. But as soon as I felt I could move my fingers I knew I'd play again. That was why I had the operation done on a local anaesthetic, so I could talk with the surgeon. I really wanted to know what he was doing.

Is it set in a particular way?

Yes. When they do these operations they're limited by the amount of bone that's there, and I wanted to know just what was destroyed and what was fixable before he set it up. He might have said 'I can do it this way,

but your little finger won't work.' And I'd have said 'OK, I'll have no little finger working.' And I'll tell you what else — it crossed my mind that I'd take up the old plectrum guitar again, because, as you know, I used to be a jazz player.

Les Paul had a similar accident, and his arm was fixed, but fixed just for playing; that was it.

Which jazz guitar players do you like?

I'm not really up on the moderns. Wes Montgomery was a phenomenal player. I admired him tremendously.

Joe Pass?

Joe Pass I think is a lovely player. It's very unusual playing. The way he conceives his harmonies cries out for fingerstyle. Wouldn't you say that? And of course Tal Farlow, Charlie Christian and, the best of the lot, Django. Without a shadow of a doubt.

You said, in A Life on the Road, 'One day I will teach.' What would you get involved with?

I don't know. I reckon that will be when I'm not doing so much concert playing. Playing and teaching is not a good combination. I think to teach institutionally could be rather boring for my temperament.

More masterclasses — that type of thing?

Well, I enjoy doing classes. I do one at the Royal Academy of Music every term, and I learn a lot myself. I sometimes trade someone else's ideas with my own. I have been known to misread notes, and I can find that it's in a class that I get those notes right. I enjoy a class because I can talk about other things than music. Music is a way of life, music has fashioned the way you think about things.

Some students are a little bit intense. I'm all for seriousness, I absolutely approve of that. But I think there's an intensity where they're not looking at themselves from any vantage point and preparing what they're doing. I can talk about other things, which can yet relate to the music and help them to relax a bit more. Because it is a hard thing for students to get up there and go through their pieces in front of each other.

I get a little bit melancholy about the prospects for some of these players. The standard has improved tremendously in the last ten or 15 years, and I don't know where we're all going to earn our bread — to put it in a nutshell. There are some very fine players

about and it's sad that at some point they'll realize they can't realize their ambitions professionally. At least they'll have had a go, and there's fulfillment in that. It's a hard life, a hard profession. You've got to be tough, particularly now when there's so much competition in a rather small fishpond.

Are you giving any masterclasses now as you travel around the world?

Not many, just the odd one. I want to wait some years yet before I start teaching in any serious way. Yet I know it's a good thing to impart what experience you've had, particularly towards the end of a life.

Because I've had a marvellous life and I do want to convey things, and I will. But I'm still learning, still experiencing, and I want to keep that, to keep playing.

What changes do you observe in the guitar scene as you've known it? How was it when you were a boy, then a young man, then at 40, and how is it now?

When I was a boy there was no possibility, professionally speaking, to make a career with the classical guitar. When I was 20 there was a distinct possibility; when I was 30 the possibility had become an actuality, and when I was 40 my career had taken off and I was making a lot of records. I would say that at 50 my career had reached its zenith, professionally speaking. Nowadays there's not so much interest in the guitar among the general musical public. But at 60 I would say that my career is flourishing as well as ever.

What do you think are the reasons for the present decline of the guitar in terms of audience numbers?

I think a lot of younger players' programs are, not exactly boring, just not very well planned as musical entities. I also think there's a higher priority given to

technical brilliance than to musical evocation. And I think that what moves people is the interiorization of music that is distilled and then projected. This age is not exactly a poetic one in any case, so you can't blame these artists; they are of their generation and made by the environment in which they live. They work very hard and their technical achievements are important and can sometimes be exciting. But finally technical achievement must be the servant to the musical achievement, and that is a very hard thing to manage in this climate. People still require that certain spirituality of music from their performers. And I just think it's in short supply.

Countries that have been deprived of the technological society and the mass hysterical materialism that we've indulged in — I refer to those countries that were formerly communist — actually produce better musicians by and large because they're not cluttered up with the coldness of materials and the calculated business of owning things. Our whole thing is geared to 'achievers', but when you're a musician you're not an achiever. You have to have a sense of humanity, and humility. Because you know you're never going to achieve 'it'.

We've got to 60. What about the rest of your time? What are you looking for? Where are you headed?
Oh, I should think for the grave! *(laughter)*.

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