

# The way BARNEY KESSEL



## sees it

(interviewed by  
LES TOMKINS)

IT was great to come back to one of my very favourite cities, London, after almost three years. It doesn't seem that long to me, but towards the end of '69 was the last time I was here. I had stayed a while, with the idea of planning to remain here permanently. Having made the effort, it proved, all in all, that it was to my best advantage to live in the United States and come here perhaps two or three times a year, if possible, to work here and on the Continent.

First of all, I happened to arrive in London in 1968 at a time when the

weather was very nice. I had about twelve perfect days for walking through the city, and I just fell in love with it. I went home and I told my family that I would really consider living and working here. It seemed it would be a change, a growth experience, really giving another dimension to my life. My parents were born in Europe; so it has never seemed strange to me, since the first six years of my life were rather European-orientated.

So I just thought it would be a very good thing for us all. I love the English countryside, and the friendliness; I also love Rome very much. It seemed as if I could go back to the States and visit there. But with children in school, and with many considerations in terms of the potential income . . . it's not Europe's fault, but America has so many people, and there's such a big market there that it's advisable for me to be in that market. Other than that, I love the living here.

It's not a prime activity at this point, but I do studio work, in which I've been established for thirty years in Los Angeles. It's just mainly that financially, psychologically, the kind of education my children need to receive is that which would prepare them for life in the States. And I wouldn't get that in Europe, even though they would get a good education. As a matter of fact, two of my sons have had one year of education in Switzerland; but basically they need the orientation for the environment they're going to be in. Even though Oxford and Cambridge, as examples, would provide excellent educational growth, it would still not equip them effectively to live in the United States.

Yes, there's tension in the States; I think that country is just going through a lot of growing pains. Don't forget that, quite unlike anywhere else in the world, probably, the people are a mixture of many different races and cultures, and there's a real brewing pot there. There is no plan, doctrine or rule that at any one time satisfies all the people, because of these background differences. So we as a country are never always right or always wrong.

We are enjoying a very high standard of living, but we're paying for it in psychological deterioration. As a matter of fact, we're taking stock of all the technological advantages that we've had, and are weighing up if it's really worth it, or if maybe we've gone too far. No, I can feel a great deal of back-tracking and returning more to a simple life, with simple values. Yet I see that in many places in Europe they're racing ahead, trying to be like America is already; in the meantime, America is trying to get back to the way Europe *was*, and the way *it* was. And I think you almost have to go far enough into this technological acceleration, until you get to a point to see that it really *isn't* the way to go.

It's not up to me to say what other people should be doing musically, but, for the most part, I feel that jazz music and popular music *per se* have digressed and deteriorated to a great degree. I feel that the motivation is not as honest and sincere to make music as it was in the 'thirties and 'forties. There is a great, great deal of profit incentive, all the way down the line from record companies, to dealers, to jobbers, to musicians themselves. Some of the musicians want to make money, and are very ambitious; so they move into commercially-slanted areas. Others simply cannot find a way to exist playing the way they want, and so in desperation they do it. Again, it's not for me

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to judge which is which and why, and they're all entitled to do as they choose, as I am.

But I do believe that for the younger generation who are born and grow up with those values, and honestly feel that way, it is their music. And they can be creative within a very limited structure. It's still limited, because although rhythmically they do explore much more than jazz, melodically and harmonically it's very barren, from my point of view. So, of the three dimensions that exist in music, two are almost totally lacking.

Also, most of the people do not respect their craft enough to study music. In other words, they don't know music. And I don't even mean reading music—I mean they simply *don't know music*. Really, they're using it as a kind of a sex substitute, as a sort of a glandular experience in lieu of physical contact. If that's what they want. . .

In the last fifteen or twenty years, there have been some good rock artists, some good country-and-Western artists evolving who have talent. I think people like Simon and Garfunkel, Elvis Presley, etc., have a certain amount of talent. Certain songs that have come up, like "For Once In My Life", "Yesterday" and "Michelle", are musically good. However, I marvel more at these people's success than I do their artistry. To me, they still do not possess the real, intrinsic depth and magnitude of many other talented performers that I know. I mean, there's none of those who have the stature of Sarah Vaughan, for instance. They're pop artists of the moment, they make a lot of money, and hooray for them, but I feel that, relative to standards that have already been set, they are diminutive talents.

Concerning the guitar, I would be reluctant to evaluate most of its money-making players of recent years. I would say that within the context that I have heard Eric Clapton play, I have enjoyed his playing very much. As I have mentioned on occasions, I think he's very talented; I've also liked this young fellow that I've heard, Peter Green. I don't find any substance in Jimi Hendrix, although the world does, but to each his own. I'm sorry that he died, and that he had that bad experience and again, I applaud the success he had. But there's nothing in what he does that awakens anything in me. I'm sorry if this offends anybody who enjoys him; by all means, continue to listen to him, with my blessing—but there's *nothing* in there for me. It's really the epitome of what Shakespeare wrote, when he said: "Full of sound and

fury, signifying nothing."

It's a general statement, but I think that—excluding some of the talented people that I have heard—most of the rock guitarists are highly untrained. They're untrained people playing for untrained audiences; so they deserve each other, in that they're thoroughly compatible. Yes, I've always played for non-musicians, but the crowd that listens to these people really don't care too much for the kind of thing I do. They find it very boring; they don't even understand why you even want to play this way. I mean, I've talked with them, and they've expressed the thought: why don't I get a certain kind of a guitar and different amplification? There's nothing really right or wrong from my point of view or theirs; it's just a value system.

Speaking generally again, I would say that most of the younger people that I've heard play electric guitar have used too much amplification; they've used it in lieu of other musical principles. I could even understand them wanting to stress more of the electronic values in it, instead of musical values, if that's what they want to do; and some of 'em do. But I do think that there's far too much stress laid on the amplifiers.

It really reminds me of a story about one of our American architects, Frank Lloyd Wright. He was asked once: "Mr. Wright, you are the father of modern American architecture. You have gained this reputation because one of the things that you've done is: you have begun to use a lot of glass in your work. What do you think of these young architects that have come since you, and used much more, almost even total glass?" He

says: "I don't think it's valid." They said: "Why?" He says: "They have taken effect and made it principle." And so, in this case, many things in music do exist as effect, and do not deserve to be principle.

It's not even a matter of: "Who am I to say so?" It is a matter of good taste. And from what I have read and observed, the best music, no matter what kind it is, emulates Nature. Nature's constantly changing; it has variety, consonance and dissonance. Everything is not always loud, not always soft, not always bland, dissonant or simple. It continues to have life, and generate in an unpredictable manner. So when you play nothing but blues after blues after blues, with amplification turned up, and it's the same little old patterns over and over, it reaches a point of saturation. After which the enchantment is over.

To be sure, it's a factor that always existed, and had to exist in order to survive, but this whole focus on financial profit today is much greater than in the 'thirties and 'forties. There are not so many people writing songs because they think it's a sweet idea; they're not doing it because they think the world needs this particular song. They're writing music for the money that's in it, and they're grinding it out just like people grind out automobiles or sausages. If they no longer want the sausage in bulk, but in links, they're going to get it in links. And the butcher couldn't care less—it's just another package to him. That's how it is: they're manufacturing music to order, and putting it out by the pound.

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