

PHOENIX

An I.M. report on BOB HENRIT'S new band

Every thinking musician reaches a point in his career when he's got to stand up and be counted. It's a watershed in a career, the point at which the individual offers his best in an unadulterated form regardless of commercial necessity, and asks for approval for himself. For Clapton, Baker and Bruce, forming Cream represented that point — for McCartney it was Wings and for Wakeman it was going solo. Now Bob Henrit, Jim Rodford and John Verity have arrived at that point. The result is Phoenix — a three-piece band playing hard, gutsy rock — the type of music that Britain is famous for producing via bands like Zeppelin and Queen.

When Argent crumbled at the beginning of 1976, Bob Henrit knew where he was going. He and bass player Jim had long wanted to form a tight three-piece playing more simplistic music than Argent had evolved into, and, almost immediately on collapse of Argent, Bob, Jim and John started to get some ideas that had been lying dormant for quite a time out of their system.

Instantly the combination worked. John's material suited the band's rugged format perfectly, and within days of starting preliminary rehearsals, all knew they were on the edge of something really important.

"We all got so much pleasure from rehearsing together," recalls Bob. "It was so odd to start playing and know almost immediately that something really important was happening between us. We decided almost straight away that the potential was so enormous, we ought to form a permanent band."

Phoenix ("rising from the ashes" — get it?) quietly went into serious routining. The rest of Argent were recovering from a year's gruelling USA touring, but Bob, Jim and John got their gear together every day and got stuck into Phoenix.

"It was so refreshing to get up and go

and play every day knowing that something new was likely to be happening musically." Bob told me. "Although I've played with Jim and John for quite a long time in Argent, it was so different to play with them in a style of music that was fundamental to all three of us. The charge we got every day was tremendous."

Out of the spontaneous combustion came the band's first album "Phoenix." It's released in the UK in October and in the US early in 1977 and other worldwide release dates are to follow.

The band have signed to Trident for management and production. Trident's track record is superb. They were the company responsible for discovering and launching Queen, and they've now put their entire resources behind Phoenix and believe that they could become international superstars on the scale of Zeppelin or Tull. As part of the mighty promotional machine, the Trident organisation have made a twenty-minute video film for worldwide screening. The band hired Shepperton Studios and worked ridiculously hard to produce a film that illustrated exactly where the band is at both visually and musically.

In the new band Jim Rodford incorporates keyboards and six-string guitar into his repertoire (as well as bass), and John Verity is the front man — singing superbly. Bob controls the powerhouse percussion section sitting behind his mighty black Pearl outfit, surrounded by gongs and cymbals.

Jim Rodford's guitar is of special interest. He used it during his time with Argent and it was built for him by a friend. It's basically a Fender Stratocaster and Precision bass, with part of both bodies cut away so that they slot together (like tongue and groove panelling) to form a double-necked guitar. That way Jim gets a double-necked Fender and an instrument that slots apart for easy

carrying.

The band are aware that their line-up is the most demanding in the business. "It's a real challenge playing in a three-piece" said Jim. "In my opinion all the finest bands are three-instrument bands — The Who, Zeppelin, Cream etc. — and I think that's the ultimate line-up, if you can do it. There's no more versatile outfit and the freedom of expression offered is amazing."

Unlike some attempts by inexperienced musicians in three-piece bands, Bob, Jim and John are not fighting all the time to "fill out the sound" — they don't need to. Each musician is such a master of his instrument(s) that the overlapping and interweaving of lines is so subtle and complex, the gaps that might occur for less able players just don't exist. Phoenix have the art of simplicity. It's an art practised to the nth degree by the Stones and, as every experienced musician knows, there's nothing harder to achieve. It's a simplicity achieved by dexterity, knowing what not to put in and knowing where all the accents should fall.

It's a pointer to the stature of the band that they're not planning to release a single from the album. Five years ago, bands regularly scoffed at the singles market — today, record companies aren't prepared to let them get away with it. Except in very special cases.

CBS Records won the rights to Phoenix's material. It was a battle fought against incredibly stiff opposition as the combination of the "name musicians" band plus Trident Productions is a formula guaranteed to start accountants writing out advance cheques. It's also a clear indication of the faith that CBS have in the band as they were the original record label for Argent. CBS know what the potential is and they're backing Phoenix.