

THRESHOLD

MAY 2008

“NO REGGAE, NO JAZZ, BUT EVERYTHING ELSE IS FINE...”

‘Prog Metal: anything goes,’ suggests Threshold’s keyboard maestro Richard West

Picture the scene: we’re at London’s LA2 for the Kamelot/Threshold/Serenity gig in September 2007.

Outside the whole block has suffered a power cut and inside it’s pitch black, save for some low-key emergency lighting. I can’t see Richard West, he can’t see me, and at this point in time there’s a great deal of doubt as to whether the gig will actually go ahead.

As it happens, at 5pm the power is restored and by some miracle Serenity hit the stage at 7pm as planned, but in the two-and-a-half hours between now and then a large number of fingernails are chewed and chewed again. But despite the gloom, there’s a lot to talk about Threshold-wise, including a successful European tour, line-up changes, and what’s going to happen next. But we start with the band’s 2007 offering ‘Dead Reckoning’, an album which has turned more than a few heads and which, I assume, is doing pretty well for them.

“Yes it is,” agrees Richard. “It’s going really well, and we’re really happy with it. It’s been a really fun album to tour with, although it’s obviously a bit weird to tour with a different singer, but looking back at our history I think we’ve done

really nice.”

It’s no secret that the album originally ran under the working title ‘Pilot In The Sky Of Dreams’ which was then switched to the more metal-sounding ‘Dead Reckoning’. I wondered why the title was changed at the eleventh hour: surely it couldn’t just be the fact that the initial letters of the original title spelled out ‘PITSOD’! Richard laughs - thankfully! “No, that was not the major reason! No; if the album had been more progressive then that would have been a great title for it. And the cover which Thomas Ewerhard



that before,” he laughs, “so we’re used to it! And it was kind of a fun challenge, because a lot of the songs weren’t written for Damian but he’s just taken them and made them his own and put his own personality into them. And it’s actually more fun than touring with Mac in that there’s a new twist on the songs; sometimes when we’re touring, you know, having done the whole writing/production/promotion thing and then touring the same songs you can get a bit bored of them, just because you’re over-familiar with them. So to go out and put a new twist on them is

did for us which has now become our ‘best of’ cover, again is more progressive, but because we went for a harder-sounding album it just wasn’t appropriate. We love the title, the label love the title, but it just didn’t fit. So we looked for something that sounded colder and harder and darker.”

The “colder and harder and darker” sound came originally from Richard and guitarist Karl Groom. “We’ve been kind of keeping everything moving with the band for a long time now. One of the main driving

forces of the band was Jon Jeary but he left back in 2002, I think, after we did ProgPower USA for the first time so since then it's really me and Karl who've been making all those sorts of decisions, doing the writing, doing the producing, keeping it moving... So we decided - partly because we signed to Nuclear Blast which gave us the idea - we decided to try and make the most we can out of their metal market. We have always wanted to do a heavier album anyway and it seemed like a perfect time to do it. But at the same time, songs like 'PITSOD'" - he jokes - "came along and 'Safe To Fly' came along, and the end of 'One Degree Down' which is quite progressive, more

love, and there is so much freedom in this sort of music. You don't think, 'oh dear, I'm constrained to a three-minute format'; you can do whatever you want and I love the rich palette you get with prog metal. It's kind of anything goes: OK, no reggae, no jazz, but everything else is fine!" he laughs.

I ask Richard if he had a particular favourite track on 'Dead Reckoning' because, amongst all the obvious highlights, I'd go so far as to suggest that 'Disappear' is one of the best songs I've ever heard. At first - as far as I can see anyway! - he looks genuinely taken aback, so I repeat my opinion. "Thank you... I was going to say 'Disappear'

you just can't listen to them and derive pleasure from them any more. They're fun to play, but you never sit down and listen to them at home. So the songs that prevail are the ones that we don't do live because they're less familiar. So 'Disappear', 'Fighting For Breath'... I hardly ever hear them so I enjoy listening to them again. I can't even remember how 'Fighting For Breath' goes: I put in so much work on it but it's all a distant memory now! But 'Disappear' is one of those songs that I think I'll always enjoy listening to. It was just a real pleasure to write it."

Since the album was recorded, of course, there have been some changes in Threshold, with a new face in Pete Morten and a familiar face in Damian Wilson. During the sessions guitarist Nick Midson quit the band, and then vocalist Mac upped and left on the eve of the band's 2007 live dates. "Nick..." Richard pauses again. "Well, it's funny, because you came up and shot those photos at Bray Studios, and he turned up, although we didn't know if he would be there or not! It was around that time that he was deciding if he was going to take some time off or not and he hadn't made up his mind. I think he'd been deciding for about a year - he likes to make his decisions slowly! But yes, unfortunately he decided to take some time off so the photos you took, we actually airbrushed him out of! We needed a second guitarist and Pete Morten's got his own band, Soliloquy, who'd been recording with Karl down at Thin Ice studios. They'd got to know each other quite well so when Nick went Karl instantly thought of Pete. He plays the right style, he's a nice guy, we know him, it sounds easy... And it was. There were no auditions, no looking for a big name to replace Nick. It was really no different to the way we found Steve Anderson when John Jeary left. Steve was an old college friend, I think. He knew Nick, he knew Karl, I think he even vaguely knew Damian from days gone by - so when Damian came back to the band it was 'oh, I remember you!' But we like it that way.



Floyd-y, came along. And then there are songs like 'Disappear' which are more poppy-metal, and so once we finished writing we realised that it's actually not really harder at all; it's just certain elements on the album are darker and harder. We start the album with 'Slipstream' and it feels like it's a heavier album, you've got these darker riffs, we took it down to C for the first time, you've got growling vocals, you know, but really overall the total balance is typical Threshold, I think, perhaps with a cleaner, crisper, production. And I mean, we write what we

myself because it's one of those songs that's overlooked, I think partly because we're not playing it live, partly because it comes later on the album, it's short, you know, but when I wrote it I thought, 'that's the best song I've ever written'. And then I wrote 'Pilot In The Sky Of Dreams' and I couldn't decide any more! But thank you for that, I appreciate it. I love the song and am quite glad we're not doing it live because that way I can keep loving it; by the time you've done a couple of tours with the same songs they become just too familiar - as a band member



“Mac was different though,” he continues. “That was completely out of the blue, and we don’t really know what happened there. The week before he was totally up for it, all year he’d been really excited about the album, he was saying that this was going to be bigger than ever, he really believed in it. And then a week before the first festival, we got this email saying, ‘sorry, not coming’. And it was the day before he was supposed to fly over. So it was a bit of a surprise - no, in fact it was the day he was coming over. So it really was last minute, completely out of the blue, and out of character as well; I mean, he’s been with the band ten years. We decided we didn’t want to close the band down just because Mac had left; partly we didn’t want him dictating it but also we had no real intention of closing the band down just because someone’s left - that’s business as usual for Threshold! And I’d been working with Damian in my studio. He’s been guesting on a few albums, as off the back of the Ayreon project people have thought he’s a good guest singer to have on their albums. Me and Damian work well together so I’d

been producing him. He’s a pro, he wants to get a perfect performance and as a producer I want the thing I send off to the guy who’s doing the album to be perfect too. We’ve been working together on-and-off since ’97 when we did ‘Extinct Instinct’ and I recorded his vocals on that - that was the first time I’d worked with him and it was a challenge because he’s a perfectionist and would sing the same line fifty times and say, ‘oh, I’m not sure’. I’m there, I know it’s perfect, I know he can’t do any better, but he’s all, ‘I’m not sure; was I really thinking the right thing when I sang it?’ It really took a long time, we were doing a lot of long sessions till three, four in the morning, but we’re used to each other, we work really nicely together, and it’s fun. So funnily enough, the week before Mac left, me and Damian had been talking about Threshold and he was saying that one of the reasons that he didn’t want to do it back in the Nineties was he hated the touring, just didn’t like going away, but the irony is that now he loves touring and if the chance was there he’d do it. And then a week later Mac leaves so I think I mentioned it

to Karl and the others and they all said, ‘yes that’s fine’, so I asked Damian and I think it took him all of two seconds to say yes!”

As for whether this is a permanent line-up, “well, we decided back then that all we’d do is see out the twenty dates that we had scheduled,” he replies. “We just wanted to fulfil our obligations; we didn’t want to drop anybody in it. We’d worked very hard to get that far, people had bought tickets, so we thought we’d fulfil all of those obligations and then we’ll decide at the end of the year. We could make a decision now but we might change our minds. So we’ve decided not to decide!” he laughs. “We haven’t got the faintest, I’m afraid - as is always the way with Threshold!”