

WALKING WITH KINGS



Rich Ward (left) has an impressive back catalogue of high quality work through his career. He can lay claim to being the driving force behind rap-metal pioneers Stuck Mojo, as well as the chief creative force with metal band Fozzy, fronted by WWE superstar Chris Jericho. Fozzy have evolved from a spoof act into a serious and highly regarded rock band due in no small part to Rich Ward being 'one of the best song writers in metal', according to Jericho, but he proved he was a talented artist in his own right when he released his magnificent melodic solo album 'My Kung Fu Is Good' under his moniker of The Duke. If that wasn't enough, he is now part of a superb new act called Walking With Kings, a Christian themed band featuring Ward as the guitarist and co-song writer, alongside his Fozzy band mate Frank Fontsero on drums, ex-Furyon bass player Simon Farmery and newcomer Terry Chism, who not only provides keyboards and the other half of the song writing partnership, but tops everything off with a soaring vocal performance. All this, and the album is free! James Gaden wanted to help spread the word...

I absolutely love the new album Rich, and I wanted to basically help to inform people about it, so can you tell me the story of the band?

Sure! Terry sings in a local church close to where I live and my friend Kerry said 'Hey man, come and see this friend of mine, he's been trying for years to get things moving in the music business, but he's just having such a hard time making something happen.' Terry has his own studio at home, but he was having trouble making anything that sounded like an album, the stuff was sounding like demos. He wanted a producer to come in and help him, so I came in... they were in this weird middle ground between sounding a bit old fashioned, and still wanting to be a bit cutting edge. That's a really fine line to walk, it's tough to serve both masters, getting a nostalgia feel while being modern. So I said that they should stop over-thinking things and just play, let me record them just being themselves. As we started getting into that, I started to recognise that for Terry, the drummer he had was not going to be able to do what I needed from him, in order to give Terry the album he wanted. You're only gonna be as good as your drummer, that is the honest to God truth. Any recording, any live performance, if your drummer is amazing, you're off to the races. If your drummer is just okay, you're only going to be okay.

I don't mean you have to be technically amazing, but you have to be able to lay a solid foundation which you can build off. I suggested he used Frank Fontsero, my drummer, who has played on everything I've done over the last twenty years. I figured bringing Frank in for rehearsals would make the project sound much better. Then, as we evolved from there, I got more attached to the songs and I started to really enjoy playing with Terry, his voice is amazing. We just sat down one day and I said 'Hey, how about we just start this thing from scratch and just call this "our" band, because I don't just wanna produce this now, I wanna be IN the band!' (laughs) So I went from just being

the producer to being producer, guitarist and one of the guys in the group.

At the time, we had Sean Delson playing bass for Fozzy and I said that we should do what I always do, when I've done Stuck Mojo. The Duke album, Fozzy, it's always the same guys because I think the band should be a family. Even when Sean left Fozzy, it was the most amazing parting of the ways with a band member I've ever been through, nobody was mad, there were no hurt feelings. Sean was very committed to the direction of his Agent Cooper band, I'd met Paul Di Leo from working with Adrenaline Mob and we had become soul mates immediately, his playing and mine are like two peas in a pod. His playing reminds me a lot of Dan Dryden, the bass player I had from the Stuck Mojo days. Dan, Frank and myself, I thought, were one of the best rhythm sections in rock. Not because we were more talented or anything, but because we clicked well. That's the key to a great band, the pieces all fit. You can put a bunch of amazing musicians together but it's not always going to work, it's all chemistry. So when we were looking for a bass player, I really wanted to find somebody... Paul plays with several big name bands outside of Fozzy, so I wanted to find another player that would fit Walking With Kings perfectly, but have a free enough schedule for it. That's why Adrenaline Mob didn't really take off for Paul and I, we were just so busy! There was no room to prioritise it, whereas Mike Portnoy and the guys wanted it to be their main thing. I didn't want Paul in that position, so we went for Simon Farmery, who I found through my Lainey rep in the UK. Simon is a Manchester boy as you probably know, and he worked out great, it was like it was meant to be!

Actually, the first time we were all together in a room was when we filmed the video for 'Leap Of Faith!' It was crazy, I was touring with Adrenaline Mob, calling Simon, then speaking to Terry, trying to scheme how to put this band together, to lock together what Terry, Frank, myself and Sean had recorded - Sean played most of the

bass parts before he left. Sorry this is a long-winded answer, but the point I'm making is some things in life are better left unplanned. You work hard, you let things unfold. It's like a good relationship - if you see a girl and you are trying really hard to get her to like you, you're trying desperately to make her yours - most of the time it won't work out! The best times are usually when things start off friendly and just unfold. We all have our own stuff going on, but we're all working hard behind the scenes for Walking With Kings. We've hired some radio promoters to work the Christian market, a PR guy to get us some more press... things are moving, but we're looking at Walking With Kings to be something to cultivate - we're not desperate to force it to work immediately. We'll start small, we've put out what I think is a great album, and when I'm done making the new Fozzy record we'll see about some shows. We're building a solid foundation - good songs, friendship, a good live show, just see where it goes.

I downloaded the album simply because you were involved, I love your stuff, I'm a big Fozzy fan and I loved The Duke record. I really didn't read anything about the band, it was only when I was halfway through that I realised there was a Christian theme to the songs. I must admit, if I'd known it was a "Christian" album, I'd have been less receptive - Christian music often gets negative connotations, but you guys have done it without being too overbearing - many of the songs are lyrically ambiguous. Did you deliberately try and tone it down?

The songs are a bit of a mixed bag, some of the songs were mine before we started working together, some were Terry's. The songs basically just were what they were, not a lot of thought went into it at that point. Some songs were Christian by nature, but others were maybe more spiritual or uplifting by nature. When Terry and I started writing

together, we had a positive theme. The reason why Christian music gets a negative reaction is because people tend to focus on negative things. It's like policemen, if one is in the news because of corruption or police brutality, then they're all judged like that. So you get a Catholic priest that has molested a child and that's what society focuses on. I spent twenty years on the road and my faith played a very small part in my life. I was concentrating on music, that was my religion and God for many years, even though I was a believer. I prayed and if I had a friend or family member in need, I'd always pray, but I just didn't feel like God listened all the time. Part of it was probably selfishness about what I wanted, what I was going to do, what records I was going to make - that led me to buy into the negative side a bit. But in reality, probably 97% of Christian people I've encountered in my life are the best people I've met. The same thing happens with soldiers, we had that soldier in Afghanistan who killed seventeen civilians, that's a terrible, awful thing. But there are so many British and American troops out there who are so brave, fighting with honour and dignity, sacrificing everything, but we ignore what the good guys do and look at what the one bad guy did. That's a problem with society rather than Christians, soldiers, police or anything like that.

I have no intention of using Walking With Kings as my sword of righteousness to go out and tell people they are wrong if they don't believe what I believe, because of course, there is no right and wrong! I just know what's right and what works for me. If somebody has a need or a longing to find out more about spirituality and what positive things God has done for me, I'm more than happy to share that with them. If they don't want to hear it, I'll keep my damn mouth shut! (laughs) You're right, some people of faith can be a bit heavy handed and none of that can be seen more prominently than in extreme faiths like militant Islam or the TV evangelists who are judgmental and condescending. I think we all need to get away from that, not just Muslims or Christians, but people in general.

I can't argue with that. Regarding the album itself, like I say, it's not heavy handed lyrically, it is a really strong rock record... and you decided to give it away absolutely free via the website. Was that to raise the profile and hope you'll get maybe support along the way

from a label or distributor, or are you keen to stay independent?

Like I said earlier, it's all baby steps. We could easily get a record deal and distribution for this, but the problem is we are a brand new band, so we'd have to sign a contract that really wouldn't be that favourable to us. We need to prove we can be profitable on our own, that's what labels are looking for. They want to know what kind of people we're drawing, how many CD's we are selling at shows, are we getting airplay... we decided not to go with our hands out, looking for money. We wanted to work it on our own, try to build it into something special. We have had record companies reach out to us, but we need more for the industry to take note of the impact and following the band has. We'll let it grow organically.

I think people, by and large, are still in the mind-set of 'You have a record deal? Oh wow, you've made it' which is far from the truth. To hear you say getting a record deal is less beneficial than running it yourself via a website is quite an eye opener.

Oh yeah - like you said, the idea of a record deal now really means nothing. In the eighties and the nineties, there were only a few real record companies. Now, everybody with a studio has a "label". In the eighties, you couldn't just make a record, it cost a lot of money to make a record. Now, you can make one in your living room! Because it doesn't really cost anything now, the quality of the albums out there are not as high, simply because there are so many more! Remember the eighties, you slugged it out in the clubs, spending months sweating it out hoping somebody discovered you. Then if you were spotted, you had the long process of working with the label to choose the songs, getting a producer... it was a really involved process. Now there are less filters involved. There is still genius out there, but there's a lot more stuff out there which is less refined. It's a good thing, I think - I don't look back, things are always better going forward, but they will be different. Look at every day as an opportunity to grow, learn and do new things. It's like bands complaining about illegal downloads who are promoting their record via a website! There's a dark side to any technology. The CD came out, people were upset that they couldn't have their albums with that great big vinyl sleeve. But it was easier to transport, you could play it in your car... like anything, there's good and bad. You have to look at the positives - okay, 1,000 people may have taken your album and you've made no money, but how many other thousands of people have you managed to promote your album to, basically for free?

On the subject of record deals, Fozzy has recently signed up with Century Media, who will handle the next Fozzy album. I know you're working on that at the moment, which surprised me, because Chris Jericho is back in the WWE at the moment, on TV every week. Is there a release date in mind, or are you just working on it when Chris has time?

No, there is a release date planned, but I can't say when, the record company will announce that... I can ball-park it for around early Fall. The reason we can work on it okay at the moment is, as the singer of the band, all Chris has to do is a couple of hours a day. No singer comes in the studio and sings for eight hours, because the human voice can't do that! After two hours, you can't keep going indefinitely, there are physical limits to what the voice can do. Vocal cords are just muscles, and when they tire, the quality will diminish rapidly. The vocals are all done in Tampa - I go down on Chris' off days. He wrestles on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday, and he has Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday off. On those three days, he does

two hour sessions for vocals. We do a couple of songs a day, or we may write a bit together if things need tweaking. Then Chris can go home and spend time with his family and I'll spend the rest of the day working on production, backing vocals, all that stuff. My favourite part of being in a band is making albums. It can become a bit dizzying, especially for someone as chaotic as me with my organisation. The biggest part of being a producer and engineer is remembering what you forgot to do! (laughs)

On your Facebook updates, you seem rather excited about the paybacks...

Oh, it's without a doubt the best thing Fozzy has done, and I'm even going to say it may be the best thing I've ever worked on. But you never know until the finished article - Chris and I were laughing about this the other day. Our favourite song from 'All That Remains' was 'Lazarus' and it ended up being the penultimate track on the record! We had such high hopes for it early on. But that happens - with 'Chasing The Grail', from the start I thought 'Under Blackened Skies' was going to be THE song, but it turns out that 'Martyr No More' was the one - mostly because the mix was so good there, so powerful, and Chris' vocals were so good on that one. That's often what it comes down to, can the singer sell the song? That's the most powerful thing - look at the greatest songs of all time, be it 'Dream On' by Aerosmith, 'Paranoid' by Black Sabbath or 'Burn' by Deep Purple... it always comes down to how good the vocal is, if it captures something special. That's not diminishing the bass or the guitars or the drums, but to work, the vocal has to be at it's best. That will determine the success of this Fozzy record - it's not all on Chris, it's what I capture from him as his producer. Chris gets his headphones on and sings hard, but I have to communicate to him what was amazing, and what I still need from him. He can't really hear what I hear, because he's singing at full volume and hearing so much of himself, he can't hear what I can. He needs guidance and coaching, and that's what a producer does. All the greats, Rick Rubin, Bob Rock, Mutt Lange, they are all great at communicating with their singers. That's what I have to do with Chris, tell him when he's hot and tell him when he's close, but not quite. I have to be careful, I can't inject negativity into the session, I can't make Chris feel like he sucks! (laughs) Even if he has a rough day, and it doesn't matter who you are, you'll have great days and rough days. It's up to me to make Chris feel like on his okay days, he's still great. Half of being a singer is confidence. I'm not a false cheer leader, but I do guide him.

I love the production on your records, are you self taught or were you schooled by somebody in particular?

A bit of both. I will give every bit of credit to Andy Sneap, one of my best friends for almost twenty years. He has just been the best mentor for me. I've done a bunch of records with him, from Stuck Mojo to Fozzy, because I love working with him, love being in England and going for a curry afterwards. It's difficult now, the band is spread all over the U.S. My wife and I don't have kids intentionally because we both knew I wasn't going to be around all the time. But not everybody is in that position, so it makes sense to record here in the States. Over the years, basically I learned not just from Andy, but an engineer here called Shawn Grove - but if it wasn't for Andy I wouldn't be where I am. I've learned from others, such as Rick Beato who did 'All That Remains' - the more albums you make, the more guys shoulders you can look over, asking 'What are you doing there?' (laughs)

Finally, we'll be seeing Fozzy in the UK at Download this year too!

How awesome is that? To be on the same

day as Metallica is really cool - but you couldn't go wrong either way, if we'd have been on Sunday, we'd have been on with Black Sabbath, so either would have been great. We have a great slot on the second stage and we're honoured to do it.

I think you'll do great - I saw you guys last year in Camden. I couldn't believe how much Chris had improved vocally - it was the best Fozzy gig I've seen. Every time I see you, you're better!

Thank you man. That's part of the curse of being part time. When we started, my priority was Stuck Mojo and The Duke, Chris' was the WWE. We were never able to be a full time band then. That's why, recently, Chris has taken big chunks out from his wrestling. He realised we had to be full time to take Fozzy to the next level. Chris spent his whole life on the road wrestling, I spent my whole life playing guitar. I was very aware of who I was as a performer and guitarist, and Chris knew exactly who he was as a performer, but he had to find his voice. You can sing in the studio, but live, it takes years to get that right. You can sing from your chest, your head, your throat, if somebody's voice gets tired you can move it around to protect it. You can hear that in James Hetfield. He sounds nothing like he did years ago, because he's protecting his voice. He's learned how to sing differently because he knows if he screams like he did on 'Master Of Puppets' or 'Ride The Lightning', his voice won't last. Some fans may go 'Oh, it doesn't sound the same'. Well, it's either that, or the tour is over! Chris really worked it - I said to Frank, "do you realise, Chris is the only guy in our band who has improved?" (laughs) I don't sit a practice scales for hours like I used to, I work on songs and play for an hour or so every night, but it's actual playing, not metronome work. Just to stay in shape. Chris though, he's really worked with a mind-set of 'I'm going to get better', and he has, he's great.

Well Rich, I hope Walking With Kings does well for you guys, it's a great record - if you'd sold it, I'd have no qualms parting with money, it's a great album.

Thanks man! Thank you for showing an interest and for your support of Fozzy. Like you said, the record is only available from www.walkingwithkings.com, it's not in stores or on iTunes, you have to seek us out intentionally. We feel very blessed we have such good feedback and we had a lot of fun. I hope it grows too - it's been an honour talking to you James, and we look forward to seeing you at a Fozzy show in the future. We haven't announced anything yet, but I'll tease it here - expect some shows in and around the UK around the Download time...

Fantastic - when you're touring with Fozzy, if Chris has been playing Hulk Hogan's album, I'm afraid that's my fault. (Laughs) Did you give him a copy?

Yeah, when my brother and I interviewed him in Camden, (Fireworks #47) we asked him a joke question about who was the best wrestler, who plays bass, that had made a record, thinking he would say 'Me!' But he didn't, he said Hogan. He hadn't heard the record though, so we'd taken him one on the off chance to present to him!

(Laughs) That is awesome! I've heard that album, back in the nineties when it came out. Didn't he do like a rap song on it?

Oh yeah, rock, rap ballads - it's twenty nine minutes of tortured genius. Everyone should have a copy.

(Laughs) Oh, it sounds so awesome. I'm gonna have to borrow it from Chris and put it on my iTunes, just to get fired up!

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