

# Richie Kotzen

*Richie Kotzen is as prolific as he is talented. A gifted guitarist, skilled multi-instrumentalist, songwriter and superb singer, Kotzen divides his time between The Winery Dogs with Billy Sheehan and Mike Portnoy, and his expansive and varied solo career. Hot on the heels of 'The Essential' collection comes 'Cannibals', a brand new studio record with funky guitar, heartfelt ballads, guest stars and Kotzen's signature soulful vocals. James Gaden was on hand to hear more...*

**I absolutely love 'Cannibals', I've been obsessed with it, playing it constantly! I couldn't believe when I read the press release that this is your 20<sup>th</sup> solo album. Did you think of it as a milestone, or was it just a new record to you?**

I'm glad you're feeling it! It's weird, if I was asked how many solo records I have done, there's actually *more* than twenty. It's hard to decide what counts as a solo record and what doesn't because there are some project things in there... I did a CD in 2008 called Wilson Hawk which was primarily me, but because it was all R&B and Soul, it was such a different style, I put it out under another name. There's things like that, then compilations and stuff, but yeah, it's kind of number twenty, which is crazy to think I've been at this so long. I remember getting my first record deal when I was seventeen and here we are, years later. It's been a long journey and it continues to evolve.

**Some of these songs are new and some are songs that have been hanging around a while. Have you collected old material and written new material to fit with it?**

Actually it started with the song 'Cannibals'. That came first and then I wrote 'The Enemy'. Usually, when I write a new song that I really connect with, I tend to look in my archives and see what other ideas I have in there that I've yet to develop. I found a couple of songs that fitted into that category. 'Cannibals' was brand new, but when I wrote 'The Enemy', I wasn't happy with what I did for the verse. I went back and found an old recording which had a really cool musical part which I liked. So I used that for the verse, sort of mixed and matched. I did the same thing with 'In An Instant' as well, the chorus and verse was brand new but the pre-chorus and intro had been lying around for a while. I super-imposed the old recordings into the new stuff so there was some trickery involved, that's not something I do very often but it was interesting to do.

**You've done the bulk of the instrumentation yourself as usual, but you have brought in some guests. You have dUg Pinnik from Kings X duetting with you. Slightly more left field is the appearance of Billy Sheehan, but on backing vocals rather than bass!**

Right! The dUg thing was interesting, we were hanging out at a barbecue at my buddy Jerry Cantrell's house and dUg was there. He was telling me how much he enjoyed the Winery Dogs and that he'd love to work with me. I went home that night and I was messing

around with some ideas and I discovered the song 'All In'. I thought that would be a good song to duet with dUg and he did a fantastic job. With Billy, obviously he's a band mate of mine from the Winery Dogs. I was playing him the finished record in the studio, I was there with my girlfriend and Billy was there with his wife. He started singing along in that low voice that only he has and I said "Wow, that's too cool, I've got to have that on the record!" So I handed him a lyric sheet and a live microphone and let him have at it. In the background you can hear my girlfriend and Billy's wife screaming and doing Blues runs, it all made for a real party atmosphere.

**You said 'Cannibals' was the first song you wrote and that is the title track. When you write for an album, do you know beforehand what kind of album you want to make? Does a specific song shape it or do you just see what comes out and discard things along the way?**

Well, things just kind of come together. Every song comes from a different place. I heard the melody for 'Cannibals' in my head in a restaurant, while I was eating ironically enough! (laughs) I went outside and sang it into my phone and as I was singing it, the whole concept of cannibals came to me. I wrote the chorus and the rest fell into place. The exact same process happened with 'The Enemy' but some songs come from odd places. The song 'You' was something my daughter August played on the piano when she was fourteen. She was playing it over and over and I asked "What is that?" She said "I don't know, I just made it up." I thought it was too good and I recorded her playing it for about seven minutes. I put it on my hard drive and forgot about it until this past summer, when I heard it again and thought "Man, I've got to turn this into a song." I wrote the lyrics and the melody just follows what August played, so the words were mine but the music was really her doing. Then I came up with the concept for the video, found that old house out in California to film at and it was pretty cool.

**Does August play a lot of guitar like you, or did she naturally gravitate to the piano?**

She does play the guitar, but the piano is her primary instrument. She sings too and she was in a band, the last incarnation of the band had her playing bass so that was interesting.

**I think your vocals on this record are incredible. You've got a great tone and your high range sounds fantastic. Did**

**you take lessons or are you a self-taught vocalist?**

Thank you man. I did have training, I had some problems at one point in my career about my voice. I had to see someone who sorted me out. I was overdoing it, I ended up with nodes and had to have surgery. I went to see a guy by the name of Ron Anderson, who is a popular vocal instructor in the Los Angeles area. He taught me a lot of things I was doing wrong. It was funny, I first went to him when I moved to L.A. – the first thing the label did in those days when they signed a young artist was to get them a vocal coach. They got me involved with Ron and he really helped me. Somewhere along the line I abandoned his techniques and I ended up in trouble. I actually had two surgeries. I realised I was doing something wrong and I went back to him. Since then, knock on wood, I've not had any problems other than general fatigue, which happens to any singer. There's a lot to be said for singing correctly!

**I particularly enjoyed 'Time For The Payment', I thought that was a great track and a great way to round the album off.**

Now that song – I had that lying around for a while, I originally was going to put it on the 'Peace Sign' record... or maybe it was '24 Hours'. Anyway, I couldn't work it in. I found it when I went back and unusually, I didn't change a thing. I left it exactly as it was and just put it on there. I think it's quite a different sound for me. One of my buddies checked it out and said "Hey, that's a great song, but you should kill the nylon guitar, that doesn't work." I was like "Right, okay, I'll listen to you because you've had so many successful records..." (laughs) This is the thing, you can get so much advice from people, sometimes musicians don't always understand the artistic vision. Just because someone is a musician doesn't necessarily mean that they are artistic or creative. I talk about this when I do seminars, like the Dog Camp one we do where people can come and hang out with the Winery Dogs. One of the things I talk about a lot is concept in music. It's about why you are learning the instrument, what is your ultimate end game? I think it's to be creative and a lot of people miss that.

**Is that why you tend to handle all the instruments yourself on your record, because it's easier for you to lay down what you hear it your head?**

Y'know, I like working with people, I don't want to present the image I don't. Obviously it depends on who! (laughs) It depends on chemistry. For me, it's a very natural instinct, I hear an idea for a song, I sit down with pen and paper, I start writing lyrics, I take out the guitar, I sit by the piano, I test it out and try it, see if it makes sense. Once I feel it's at a certain point, I take it into the studio and record it so I can hear it back. As I'm doing that, I suddenly realise I can hear a bass line, the drums should be doing this or there should be a second guitar part there... before I know it, a day or two later, sometimes longer, I have

what sounds like a finished song, what sounded like what I heard in my head. That's the ultimate goal. People ask me how I know when to let go of a song? If it's exciting to me, if it sounds like what I envisioned in my head, then I know I've got a finished song.

**What happens when it comes to playing that song live? If you have a song you envisioned and created by yourself, do the band you tour with have freedom to interpret the parts or do you have them stick to the vision?**

The songs are generally played as they were written, but my trio have played together so long and we have such a good connection, when we get into the solo sections, those become spontaneous and develop. For example, the song 'Fear' from 'Into The Black', for years we played it straight, as it was on the record. One night, I completely changed the arrangement regarding how long the sections would last. I did a longer intro, I did a long solo at the end which broke down and got louder, there were trade offs and suddenly the song took on new life. I'm comfortable improvising with those guys, I barely have to even give them a cue and they know what I'm doing and they know how to play a supporting role.

**Do you know how many songs from 'Cannibals' you will put in your live set?**

Not yet, because my solo touring just ended. I just finished up in Japan where I filmed a DVD. As far as new songs go, I did 'War Paint' and 'Walk With Me' from 'The Essential Collection' and 'Cannibals', we did that before the record was released which was fun. I toured for three months, doing United States, Europe, South America, Mexico and Japan so I was pretty exhausted by the time I got home. I'm on a break, going back out with the Winery Dogs in October.

**With you having (roughly) twenty solo albums out, is there one you look back on with particular fondness or are you always focused on the current one?**

Every time I release a record, I release it with the same enthusiasm as the previous one, so just by nature, a lot of artists tend to say their most recent release is their favourite. With my audience, I find individual songs resonate more than albums. People will comment about certain songs or tell me they are getting lyrics from a song tattooed on themselves, not so much albums. If there is an album mentioned, it's often 'Into The Black' or 'Mother Head's Family Reunion'.

**'Mother Head's Family Reunion' was my all time favourite, up until 'Cannibals', which I'd put on a par due to the sheer amount I've played them both.**

Cool! 'Mother Head's...' was really my first proper solo record, in a lot of ways. That was the first record I did where I had really found my identity as a player.

**Have you started on the next Winery Dogs album?**

Actually yeah, we got together last month and threw around a bunch of ideas with the intent of those becoming Winery Dogs songs. That is a different process to when I do a solo record because I don't go into the studio until I have a song. With the Winery Dogs, I have all these little pieces which I have to turn into songs via lyrics and melodies. It's a different process but in the end I think we're going to get something really special out of it.

**I'm looking forward to it, I loved the debut. How long did you spend making it? I was under the impression it was quite spontaneous.**

A lot of people have said that and I know there is that perception in the press, but the fact is that record was really a year in the making... in some ways longer. You take into account the first time we met up and jammed ideas. Then we got together again, months later. Then we got together after that to demo the stuff, which ultimately led to making the record. We also took some of my songs which were pretty much written and brought them into the equation. So from when we first got together to delivering the record, it was about a year. Then we went out, we toured and didn't

really do any writing. I'm confident we'll have a really cool record but it's a different way of working for me.

**It must be tough for you all to find time to get together as you all have different things going on.**

It's tricky. I don't have much going on except my solo stuff. First and foremost I consider myself a solo artist. That's what I've always done, that's how I've lived since I was 18 years old, that's what put food on the table. Having said that, having the option to work with these guys is very rewarding. Your point that it's tricky to get together is valid. I'm not really doing anything other than the Winery Dogs and my solo work so it's easier for me – it's tougher for Mike Portnoy because he has a couple of Progressive Rock bands he goes out with. He wants to be out there, on stage, touring. For me, probably because of the amount I write, I like a balance. It's a threefold thing for me, the writing, the touring and the staying home, enjoying my house and my family. I have to have an even balance.

**'Cannibals' is out now on iTunes, Amazon and CDBaby.com**

