

DEEP PURPLE - HIGHWAY STARS

An interview with DON AIREY as the legends prepare to hit the road again

Deep Purple continue to be a popular force in the rock world, surviving changes in trends and line ups, while still producing high quality material, and boasting some of the world's most talented musicians within their ranks. Some thought the writing may be on the wall with departure of founding member Jon Lord, but Purple decided to carry on and they made a stellar choice of replacement. Few people have a C.V. like keyboard player Don Airey, who has played with a veritable who's who in the rock world, and he attained the vacant position helping the band to continue to forge a path forward. With two studio albums under their belts with Airey as a fully fledged member of the band, and talk of another in the offing, James Gaden spoke to Don about that and the upcoming selection of Deep Purple UK dates in November.

Hi, is that Don? It's James from Fireworks magazine.

Hi James, how are you?

I'm very well, thanks. Are you enjoying Copenhagen?

Yes, very much. It's a wonderful place to be. It's expensive though...

I'm ringing to talk about the upcoming UK tour with Deep Purple in November. Are you really looking forward to getting back out on the road?

Oh yes. I'm surprised we're doing so few dates in the UK, but that's the way it goes sometimes.

Do you have to spend a lot of time rehearsing for new tours, or have you gotten to the point where you all know each other so well that it doesn't take long to get back into the groove?

Well, to quote Graham Bonnet, he said 'grown men rehearsing?!' (Laughs)

(Laughs) That's Graham's style though really...

Yeah. Well we do, if we put a new number in the set or something. Y'know, run through it at soundcheck. It's kind of a band ethic, that everyone's supposed to know what they're doing. Everything's at the drop of a hat sometimes.

I think Deep Purple have always had that spontaneous quality though...

Yeah. I remember when there was the official release of the album 'Bananas', we had a concert in Berlin. So, y'know, we had to run all the numbers through, and it took about three hours! At the end of it, Paicey could barely stand up! He said 'We've just rehearsed more today than we have in the past thirty years!'

(Laughs) That must've been something to see! Although you've been there a while now, you are still seen as the new member. Did you have to revisit any of the albums they'd made to become familiar with the back catalogue, or where you already familiar with most of it?

Not really, I pretty much knew most of it.

Yeah, I think the list of people you've played with is just immense, you've played with anybody who is anybody. I was thinking this current stint in Purple must be one of the longest times you've spent in one particular project isn't it?

Yeah, it's twice as long as I usually stay with anybody. Y'know, usually it's about three years before I get itchy feet and want to move on. However, this has gone so well for all concerned, and it's such a nice thing to be part of. Musically, personally, financially, so I've just stayed the course.

I think from my point of view, as a Deep Purple fan, who's watched the band over the years, when it came time for Jon Lord to step down, I think a lot of fans thought that there wasn't going to be anybody capable of replacing him. On my shortlist

though, you were number one, because of your pedigree. You were one of the few people who could fill Jon's shoes, and people wouldn't frown and go 'Oh, what's this?'. Obviously with you having the Whitesnake and Rainbow connection there, along with all the other great acts that you've worked with like Ozzy, Sabbath and Gary Moore. So, did you feel that was a worry when you joined the band?

Well, there was the question in every press conference 'how does it feel to fill Jon Lord's shoes?', and it used to be asked every time. I was digging through the wardrobe case, and I actually found a pair of Jon Lord's shoes! So I took them along to the press conference, and it was the only one time when they didn't ask me that question! (Laughs) I could have put them on and said they were a little bit too big for me or something! But y'know, I'm doing a very difficult job following that guy! There's more to him than meets the ear, do you know what I mean?

Also he played such a large part offstage as well. That was a hard thing to get to grips with. He's such a witty guy...

Well this is it. I recently reviewed a Deep Purple DVD collection called 'History, Hits & Highlights', and it spans from '68 to '76, and when you see when Deep Purple first started out, long before Ian Gillan and Roger Glover were there, Jon used to do all the interviews and all of the promo stuff, and I don't think a lot of people realised that. So, for you to come in and have your own signature bits now, like the Star Wars theme and your solo bits, I think that works really well. I can't imagine it was any better for Steve Morse when he joined either?

Oh yes, I mean the essence of it is just to be yourself. That's what I try to do, but at the same time it was important to try and recreate the sound Jon used to get in the old days, which was using a guitar amp as well. I had Jon's C3 as well of course, I bought it from him, because he said he didn't want it anymore. So I had it completely rebuilt, and it just sounds immense!

Do you think that Purple is the closest you have found to a musical home then?

Oh absolutely! It's pretty hard to take over from Jon, and when he left I think the band was pretty shattered. Fortunately things have taken a turn for the better, the band's really consolidated and playing as well as it ever did. Especially recently, it's really gotten back to it's heavy, ancestral status. We're going out there and really playing like we mean it! Paicey in particular, just seems to get better every night!

Yeah, he's phenomenal! I think another thing that you bring to the band, that a lot of people don't give you credit for, is your ability as a writer. When you look at some of the great stuff you've contributed on with Rainbow and Ozzy, I think that element that you've brought to the band has helped as well. I mean right from joining the band, from 'Banana's' you've been involved with the writing as well.

Yes, well as a keyboard player you kind

of lead from the back, and edge everybody forward. I think that's what Jon used to do as well. The main contribution you make really is toward the structure of the song, finding out how you get from A to B. Y'know, there's a bridge here, an intro there, a change key here etc. That kind of thing, just turning ideas into songs, and I'm pretty good at that, as even someone like Gary Moore would admit! (Laughs).

With your contribution to the writing in mind, do you get a say in the setlist?

Well, everybody does, it's pretty democratic. There's a bit of a ritual goes on. Paicey likes to have the last say, and why not? He's the longest serving member of the band, and he has a great instinct for what works and what doesn't.

I think when I first joined the band there was an aire of studied indifference about everything. I think that they were in such shock with the Ritchie problems, and with Jon it hadn't been a barrel of laughs for a while either I don't think. So now it's really a positive thing, and I really think the music is great. Everyone is playing so well, which is the main thing.

Absolutely. I think everytime a new member joins Deep Purple, it sort of invigorates everything. I've noticed that throughout the years, and I interviewed Ian Gillan not long ago, and he was saying that since you've joined, with 'Banana's' and 'Rapture Of The Deep' being really well received, and selling better than anybody expected, that everyone was really happy. It's like a continuous evolution isn't it?

Yeah, I love being on tour. I think any kind of musician worth his salt knows that's where you belong. That's where you have to face reality. So it's just making sure everything is right for the gig, keyboard wise, and I try and throw in different things all the time, and they respond. They're such great players, and they can improvise, and get away with things that maybe lesser musicians wouldn't...

So with that in mind, are you guys working on a new album at the moment, or is that something to come after the tour?

It's in the offing. We've got a lot of commitments until the end of this year, I mean we're working until the 18th December, and I think then, in the new year, we'll have to come up with some new stuff. I think we're about ready for it, so I'm really looking forward to that!

We've had such a great run with 'Rapture Of The Deep', it's been so well received. When you're a Classic Rock band, you feel very cautious about playing any of the new stuff, particularly in a festival situation. The other night, we had to follow Foreigner, which is not an easy thing to do! Y'know, hit after hit, and Mick Jones is just an amazing player! They've got this wonderful singer called Kelly Hansen, so it was very hard to follow that! So we had a little talk in the dressing room about whether we should just play the old stuff, but we decided to just go for broke, and we did. We played 'Wrong Man', 'Things I've Never Said', 'Rapture Of The Deep' and went down an absolute storm! I think kids want to hear the new material as well as the oldies.



Yeah, that's it. I remember ages ago I talked to Roger Glover, and he said the same thing. You're always in that position that if you play all the old stuff, some of the newer fans will be disappointed that the recent material wasn't played, and if you leave some of the old stuff out, there will be people saying 'I can't believe they didn't play this!' - so, you can't possibly please everyone, I think that you did the right thing.

It's just trying to find a balance. If you're in the open air, then it's more older material, but if it's indoors the new stuff gets more of an airing.

One thing I did want to focus on, just before I go, is you released a solo album called 'A Light In The Sky' not so long back, and on the vocals was a guy called Carl Sentence. I'd actually seen him earlier. My friend did a tour called 'Whole Lotta Metal', and that's when I first saw Carl, and I thought he was amazing! So I was thrilled to bits when he actually got a break to sing with somebody like yourself. How did you come across Carl?

Well I knew him from years ago. He was in a band called Persian Risk, and I used to pop down the Marquee to see them. So I knew he was a real talent. I saw him doing 'Whole Lotta Metal' at the Cambridge Corn Exchange, and we hooked up then. I had a few large shows, and we had a bit of a mix up, and he couldn't do one of them. So I said I'd make it up to him, and said I had an album coming up, and asked if he could write some lyrics.

We did some live shows too. I go out sometimes as 'Don Airey & Friends', hook up with some local musicians, one rehearsal, and on we go! He's just great though!

Yeah, I mean you can give him Rainbow, Whitesnake or Ozzy stuff, and he can handle it all!

Oh yeah, and he's quite a guitar player as well! I've got another solo project on the boil at the moment, so he's getting involved with that too. He's marvellous, we have a good laugh, he's such a good lad.

I met him backstage at the 'Whole

Lotta Metal' show, when that was touring near where I live, and my friend is the keyboard player, and it's his show, and he told me that you were at the Cambridge gig, and he was terrified that you were there with him playing keyboards! He said it was like having royalty watching!

(Laughs) It's funny, I was once doing a gig with Bernie Marsden, and we had an Ozzy cover band supporting us. They were pretty good, I mean it's hard to do all that stuff. I was standing in the wings, and the keyboard player was on my side of the stage, and there was a bit of a gap. He said 'I'm not playing 'Mr. Crowley' with him standing there!' (Laughs).

Just to finish off, I read that you were writing a book about your experiences in music?

Yes, I've started one. I've been sorting through all my archive stuff, and I've got a tremendous collection of pictures, tour programmes, everything. I always seem to be halfway through it though, with all the other things I have going on. But I think it'll be good.

Fantastic, I'll look forward to that! Well, thanks for talking to me, Don, and all the best for the tour!

Thanks James, I've enjoyed talking to you.

Catch Purple at one of their five UK shows below. Tickets are on sale now: visit online at www.kililive.com, www.seetickets.com or via www.ticketmaster.co.uk; the Credit Card Hotline is on 0844 844 0444.

DEEP PURPLE NOVEMBER 2009

**Tuesday 10th
Manchester Apollo**

**Wednesday 11th
Glasgow Clyde Auditorium**

**Friday 13th
Birmingham LG Academy**

**Saturday 14th
London Hammersmith Apollo**

**Sunday 15th
London Hammersmith Apollo**