

THE FIREWORKS STORY

In the editorial of last issue I commented that 12 years ago, when we launched our first issue in June 2000, I never expected to still be here publishing the magazine in 2012. When you look at the longevity of dedicated melodic rock fanzines and magazines over the years, there really hasn't been a magazine with anything like the staying power of *Fireworks*. Think of *AOR Basement*, the long lamented *Hard Raxx*, the excellent *Frontiers*, as well as *The Rock*, which only lasted 2 or 3 issues. Even my own beloved *Boulevard* only lasted five years and 20 odd issues between 1987 and 1992.

In the end, it always comes down to commitment and time, with even the most ardent contributors finally getting jaded and questioning their reasoning, as well as their sanity. No-one ever published or wrote with the intention of making money – it was always done for the love of the music, an attempt to keep the scene we love alive and kicking, when faced with a blanket wall of apathy from the trend-following media. Looking around today, I like to think all those people's work wasn't in vain, and while we will never experience the glory days of the 80s again, we certainly have a very viable and vibrant underground scene, with new bands appearing every year, hopefully to carry the baton of melodic rock to the next generation. Will bands like H.E.A.T., Houston, Serpentine and Reckless Love still be here in 20 years? One can only hope.

So how did *Fireworks Magazine* come into being? Well, the genesis of the idea goes way back to 1988, the year I first moved down from Scotland to work in Stockport, England. Back when *KERRANG!* was still worth buying, I saw an advert in the Classifieds for a fanzine called *Boulevard*, the loving publication of Mark Ashton, probably the biggest AOR fan I've ever met. The content of the fanzine was very good, but the presentation was certainly lacking. I contacted Mark, arranged a meeting and drove over to see him. We got on great, and by the end of that day I had joined the team at *Boulevard* and taken on the responsibility of design, as well as contributor.

Boulevard went from strength to strength, but the idea of creating our own little record company to release demo albums took on a life of its own, and as Now & Then Records expanded and became more time consuming, *Boulevard* ended up taking a back seat and was finally put to bed in 1993.

The fully story of the rise and fall of Now & Then Records is worthy of a magazine all to itself, but for now let's skip forward 7 years to 2000. Sebastian Kozak was a graphic designer who became a good friend, designing numerous covers and booklets for Now & Then, including the first 3 Ten albums, several Crown of Thorns releases, Hugo and many more. Around this time, Sebastian was also putting together a melodic rock fanzine called *Raging Heart*, run by editor Lee Brimlow. But Seb wasn't very happy.

"I grew increasingly disappointed with the poor quality of the finished product," he explained for this article. "It was basically photocopied which didn't do justice to the design and execution - something I'd put a lot of time into." Not only that, but there was no drive for advertising, or greater vision. During one of our get togethers to right all the world's wrongs, we discussed the idea of doing a magazine properly. Getting it printed professionally, get it in the shops, get advertising... putting my experience with *Boulevard* together with Seb's design talents just seemed a naturally winning combination. But what to call this flight of fantasy? My choice was 'IMAGINATOR', after the Nelson album of the same name. That seemed to encapsulate everything I wanted to say, but in the end it was Seb that came up with the title 'FIREWORKS'.

"Yeah, I was fond of Bonfire," recalls Seb. "I remember listening to the 'Fireworks' album pretty heavily at the time. I also remember certain disgruntled personnel referring to the magazine as 'Sparklers' which I found very funny at the time."

Not that I complained about this choice, as it was my favourite album at the time!

So gathering together a group of friends and colleagues



If *Fireworks Magazine* is good enough for Michael Anthony and Sammy Hagar from *Chickenfoot*, then it should be good enough for you. Oh yeah!

Photo: Sue Ashcroft

from within the scene, the bed-rock of the magazine being myself, the husband and wife writing team of Phil and Sue Ashcroft and Kieran Dargon, (as his name is misspelt throughout!), we launched the Crown of Thorns covered first issue in June of 2000. A look at the cover for the other bands featured told one exactly where our loyalties lay: Firehouse, Fair Warning, Hugo, Bonfire, Stan Bush, Danger Danger, Danny Vaughn, Two Fires, Kane Roberts and an exclusive interview with Marcie Free, amongst many others. 56 pages, with only cover and centre spread in colour, and a free 17 track CD, all for the price of £3! Bargain!

However, two things quickly became very clear. Firstly, getting the magazine into shops was not an easy business. Mail order outlets were very supportive, but actually into High Street shops? Not so easy. There was no proper distribution for issue #1, but it certainly acted as a very expensive calling card!

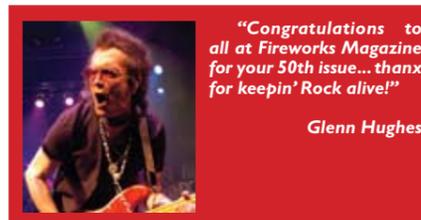
Secondly, I quickly realised that a cover price of £3 was not going to be viable. Due to the small print run, the actual cost of printing the magazine was over £2 a copy. Selling direct for £3 was okay, but shops wanting copies required a decent discount for their own profit margins, and when adding cost of postage to those outlets, £3 a copy was just never going to be enough. So from issue #2, the price jumped up to £4, which at that time was more than £1 more expensive than *Classic Rock*.

A distribution deal with World Wide Magazine Distribution quickly followed, and this enabled the magazine to get into the likes of HMV and Virgin, as well as all stores of the Borders book chain.

It took till issue #6 before I had an epiphany. Something that today seems totally obvious, but back then I wasn't really thinking about. Up until issue #6 I had been happily putting my favourite artists on the cover: Ten, Danny Vaughn, Bob Catley... and on #6 I chose Harem Scarem, promoting the monster that was 'Weight Of The World'. However, the returns statement for that issue showed more than 50% of the magazine went unsold – the lowest selling issue to date. It then struck me that as much as I loved Harem Scarem, the average rock fan walking into an HMV store would likely never have heard of them! So from that point on, I decided that *Fireworks* should have well-known, easily recognised artists on the covers to help boost sales, no matter what my personal thoughts on such artists were. For me, this just made sense, although for others, it was a little harder to take, with one close colleague threatening to walk out after I decided on Nickelback for the cover feature of #15. Luckily, sanity prevailed.

Issue #15 also saw the introduction of our then newest member of the team, with James Gaden taking up the responsibility of design after Sebastian decided to call it a day after his Darkness fronted #14 had provoked some negativity within the ranks. I asked James how he came to be press-ganged... oops, sorry, I mean recruited to the rapidly growing *Fireworks* family!

"I was running a studio in a printers, overseeing artwork for print," he explains. "Being the boss, I used to abuse the internet to avoid working whenever possible. I was on the Glenn Hughes forum and on one thread or another I made some ridiculous overblown semi-serious comment (which I'm well known for) along the lines of 'I'm the best graphic designer in the country, if not the world'. As luck would have it, one of the fellow forum members turned out to be the awesome Sue Ashcroft from this very magazine. She sent me a message asking if I was that good, would I fancy doing a rock magazine, because *Fireworks* had just parted company with Sebastian and needed a designer. I told her that of course I was good enough... but I asked her to send me a sample issue to check out, just to be sure! She sent me about five, and I got quite carried away reading it - I'd never seen *Fireworks* before because there wasn't a Borders near where I live. I had been reading *Classic Rock* but I'd gone off it due to their penchant for writing mainly about stuff that happened years and years ago. I missed my music magazine fix and *Fireworks* covered a lot of stuff I liked, some stuff I'd never heard of, and actually cared about what the artists were doing NOW. That, combined with the fact that I'd been toying with the idea of setting up my own business, made me keen to come aboard. I was introduced to Bruce via email, and while I was prepared to try to keep to the style Sebastian had created, Bruce was happy for me to put my own stamp on *Fireworks*. I saw no



"Congratulations to all at *Fireworks Magazine* for your 50th issue... thank for keepin' Rock alive!"

Glenn Hughes

downside and was delighted to join up. When I packed in my job to work for myself, *Fireworks* became my first official customer. Because of that, and my love for the magazine and all it stands for, I'm always prepared to really go the extra mile on it."

Besides doing a great job on the design and layout, James and his brother Buz are also heavily involved in the writing side of the magazine too. I wondered how this aspect of the job had opened up his love of the music.

"Aside from discovering acts I'd not heard before, I've been recommended stuff by the other writers, and learned a lot about smaller bands via the walking encyclopedia that is Phil Ashcroft. Being naturally inquisitive means I've built up a decent amount of knowledge myself... being naturally opinionated means it was great to have the chance to put my opinions in print in review form! You were kind enough to let me write some reviews as I did like the subject matter, I wasn't just a designer with no interest in the genre. You must have thought my writing was okay, because you let me start interviewing. My first one was Joe Lynn Turner, one of my heroes - and he was fantastic and gave me so much confidence that I could do a decent job. Since then, I've contributed interviews pretty much ever since - I much prefer it to reviewing. And out of all the people I've talked to, not one of them has been a dick!

"I was told right from the off this wasn't a way of making big money, this was a very much 'for the love of it' endeavour which rewarded you with some real perks - but I loved the idea that I might get the chance to talk to some of my heroes and hear stuff in advance. I've talked to, and met, some of my idols because of *Fireworks* I'm also pretty good friends with Joe Lynn Turner who I've interviewed a bunch of times now, which is as surreal as it is amazing. Plus, the first band I loved were Queen - I had chance to meet Brian May in London, and thanks to Buz interviewing Paul Rodgers in issue 28, we got to go backstage at one of their gigs where I met my all time hero, Roger Taylor! Money can't buy experiences like that!

"Because of all the great things *Fireworks* has given me, and because I love the music, I want to make it the best magazine it can be. They are always receptive to ideas and we've really made a huge leap forward from where we were at Issue #15 when I first joined. I'm proud to see how we've evolved. We are getting better and better as a magazine. *Fireworks* and the formation of Firefest also made me realise there's a lot of good stuff out there that isn't promoted much and writing about these bands or bringing them to Firefest really does make a big difference to them. It's nice to know that what you're doing is helping."

It was issue #17 when we went to 16 page colour centre spread, whilst maintaining the £4 cover price. For issue #21 we went to 92 pages. This was meant to be a one-off bumper issue, but with so many writers now, and so much to write about - as our name was well and truly out there by this time, everyone was sending us promos - 92 pages suddenly became 96 pages which suddenly became the norm. From issue #27 onwards we had a free CD almost every issue, and issue #34 saw the first full-



"Fireworks Magazine is very important to what I'm doing and what I have done. It's one of those few magazines that I actually look forward to getting and reading from cover to cover, that's rare these days with the way music has changed. Melodic Rock and AOR seems to be coming back a bit, and *Fireworks* is one of those really important outlets for keeping up with the scene. And it's getting stronger, and since the addition of Firefest, it's an unstoppable force, and I'm so happy to be a part of it!"

Jeff Scott Soto

colour issue. Cover dated Nov/Dec 2008, this showed that in 8 years we had almost doubled the page count, gone full colour and presented a free CD with virtually every issue (and many times two CDs!) and still the cover price had only increased 50p since 2000. Quite a remarkable achievement, I believe, and truly value for money.

However, just as the magazine was going from strength to strength, on the retail side things were happening over which we had no control. First, HMV cut back on magazine titles they stocked, basically removing *Fireworks* from their listings. Then Virgin went bust, quickly followed by Zavvi. This left Borders as our singular UK High Street outlet. Then, horror... Borders went bust too, leaving us with no principal outlet on the UK High Street. This left us in a very serious situation, and it was a point where the cessation of publication was seriously being discussed. No-one wanted to stop doing the magazine... after nine years of blood, sweat and tears we had built up a wonderful team of writers and created a fabulous network around the world. No-one wanted all that effort to go to waste. But what to do?

The answer arrived in the form of our printers, Warners plc, to whom we had switched several issues before due to our previous printer's operational method of getting the printing done in Eastern Europe to get a good price. Turnaround times had become untenable, so after a long internet search, we ended up at Warners - who, as it transpired, also did distribution, supplying the likes of WH Smiths, as well as lots of independents. After exchanging a few emails, myself and James Gaden took a trip down to their business site for a quite detailed meeting. To be honest, the guys from Warners actually did their best to talk us out of continuing with the magazine, convinced there was no market for this kind of music (they were rather taken aback two years later when I informed them of *Classic Rock*: AOR's sales figures!). They told us they didn't



"Fireworks? Oh, I love *Fireworks* - can't get enough. Catherine Wheels are my favourite."

Francis Rossi

see *Fireworks* as a viable business concern. However, we have never looked upon *Fireworks* as a business - we are all in it for the love of the music. So we were determined to press on. To get into WH Smiths, even on a limited store basis, was going to cost us the best part of £5,000, which was non-recoupable. The magazine didn't have that kind of money. We went away to think things over, and discuss the situation with our colleagues.

A few months later, we went down for another meeting, this time taking our esteemed colleague Paul Jerome Smith with us. We went through all the numbers, all the figures, all the possibilities... and against the advice of Warners themselves, we decided to push on ahead. Paul, James and myself put in the majority of the £5,000 out of our own pockets, with additional help from Steven Reid and Graham Hatton. We just couldn't let our dream die.

As Paul explains, "I was absolutely horrified that to get the magazine into the country's main High Street print vendor, WH Smith, the magazine would have to pay what amounted to a 'sweetener' to get it into just a few of their stores: not even all of them - and none of them at prime sites for the chance purchase of magazines, such as railway stations. At the meeting I attended with Bruce and James it was fundamentally clear that if we didn't 'cough up' there would be no future for the magazine whatsoever, as the loyal subscriber base would be insufficient to make it financially viable, or worth the time expended on creating it each time. Even getting the magazine into some of the Smiths' outlets would be better than letting the whole shebang founder so meekly, and we might even be able to expand into other previously untapped outlets. I just happened to have some funds available at the time of the meeting with Bruce and James, and I was very happy to offer about a third of the amount required to pay the 'sweetener'. Having been a subscriber from the very first issue, and a contributor from the following one, I certainly did not want 'our' magazine to go the way of so many



"Congratulations to *Fireworks* for hitting the big five-0. One of the many things I love about this magazine is that it is run by people who are so passionate about the music that they started their own magazine and promote their own festival. They never get swayed by

passing trends and they stay true to the music they believe in regardless of what anyone else says! This is the true spirit of Rock & Roll, I salute you and I am proud that both Skin and Red White & Blues have been included within your pages."

Myke Gray

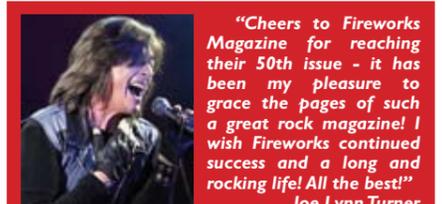
others previously. Not only did I 'believe' in our aim to publicise and celebrate what was still largely 'underground' music, but it had carved out a niche in my whole being, that I did not wish to lose."

We had to make sure the first newsstand issue was a cracker, and getting an interview with Slash was just the ticket. Issue #41 hits the shops in August 2010, also picturing Joe Elliot, Thin Lizzy and Glenn Hughes on the cover and coming with a free 18 track CD. For 'classic rock' fans everywhere, what wasn't there to love?

Of course, now we were on a fixed schedule, which meant the magazine had to come out every two months, rather than the every three months we had sometimes fallen into. That meant *much more* work for everyone, and is one side of the preparation involved in putting a magazine together that I don't think is truly appreciated. Phil Ashcroft has been a main contributor, as well as reviews editor for the vast majority of *Fireworks'* run, and here he reveals some of the time-consuming details: "During my busiest periods on the magazine it's hard to estimate how many hours I spent on each issue. Doing interviews you may have to do some research, come up with some questions, do the interview, transcribe it and then convert it into readable text, so in all probability, anywhere between five and ten hours each. Album reviews would be, on average, an hour for each listen and then another hour to write the review, whilst live reviews of single shows and DVDs are the easiest as you only see the show once and probably don't watch a DVD more than twice. Festivals have been the hardest, with some of my Sweden Rock, High Voltage and Hard Rock Hell epics taking about ten hours just to write up (maybe making notes would be a good idea, rather than keeping it all in my head?), whilst book reviews are quick and easy to write, but obviously it's time consuming to read a book.

"Acting as reviews editor I'd probably spend almost half an hour a day answering e-mails and keeping my lists up to date, talking on the phone and sometimes sending out CD's, whilst the editing and proof reading alone could take ten to fifteen hours. It's hard to judge because obviously I'd have a lot more to do in the weeks either side of the deadline, but a conservative estimate would be a hundred hours per issue, possibly going up towards two hundred for the issues I'd done a lot of interviews and reviews for. Also, sometimes if you're not in the right frame of mind it can take a lot longer than it should, but those are usually the times when it's urgent and you have to keep going. I've lost count of the nights I've stayed up doing magazine stuff and I sometimes wonder how my sanity and my marriage survived, but when people tell you how much they've enjoyed reading it you tend to forget how hard it was... at least until it happens again two months later, ha ha!"

And now, having added to our roster of superlative writers, we feel we have managed to not only maintain, but actually improve the quality of the magazine. Over the last year we have widened our distribution into many McColls



"Cheers to *Fireworks Magazine* for reaching their 50th issue - it has been my pleasure to grace the pages of such a great rock magazine! I wish *Fireworks* continued success and a long and rocking life! All the best!"

Joe Lynn Turner



You can bet after jamming with his heroes in the heavens, Gotthard's Steve Lee is telling Bon Scott and John Bonham how much he loved Fireworks!

Photo: Mick Bailey

and Martins stores, and Warners are currently looking at potential new export ventures.

And of course, there have been other spin-offs, most notably being the Firefest Festival, started up by fellow *Fireworks* writer Kieran Dargan and myself, which launched in 2005 and showcases the greatest range of melodic rock and AOR acts ever assembled in the UK. Not only do we bring over the latest darlings of the genre, but we make it our mission to reform wonderful bands from the past that nobody ever thought we'd see again: FM, Romeo's Daughter, Valentine, White Sister, Blue Tears, Strangeways... to name just a few.

And also during the last two years, we have launched our website, www.rocktopia.net, created by those wonderful people at Transistor Ltd who created our fantastic Firefest DVDs (go check them out at www.thefirefest.com). James Gaden also spends a lot of time making sure the site is up to date and relevant.

"It's another part of wanting to make *Fireworks* the best it can be," James explains. "Berny and the guys from Transistor Pictures suggested building a proper online home for *Fireworks* and the music it covers. *Fireworks* didn't have a particularly lavish website before, but Berny and his guys did an amazing job. It now gives *Fireworks* a serious online presence and gives us some more options. For example, being bi-monthly means we can't really do 'news items' in the magazine, because we'd be out of date so fast. But we can on Rocktopia, and that's one of the things I do - I put up press releases, concert announcements and the like. Also, we put reviews from the magazine up online into what is becoming a huge library - we've only been online two years and we've already got 1,000 CD reviews on there!"

"When a new issue of *Fireworks* is due out, I select some material from it to use as promotion - I usually edit three of the main articles down into sample extracts, and then select a couple of the smaller articles and put them online in their entirety. I tie it up with a press release telling people what is in each issue and then they can try before they buy. If an article is too long for inclusion in the printed magazine, we put the 'uncut' version online. We also put some exclusive Rocktopia interviews online that people can read, as well as exclusive Firefest live video clips. All of this is then shared via Facebook and Twitter, because that's how people connect nowadays. Berny and his team are constantly adding stuff and as well as regular news and reviews and the interviews from *Fireworks*, we're looking at building an album database too, so it'll become a great place to discover music!"

So, that brings you up to date, and we hope you can help spread the word. We have an absolutely wonderful group of people writing for this magazine, every one of whom gives their time for free. This is not a business, this is a labour of love. We do this for the music. We do this for the fans. We do this for you. Enjoy!



We can't say that a chance to grace the cover of issue 43 of Fireworks WAS the reason Mr. Big got back together, but we can say it MIGHT have been!

Photo: Sue Ashcroft

I must say, when I was asked by my editor if I wanted to interview the legendary UFO, it took me a nanosecond to decide in the affirmative. It's not every day one gets the opportunity to interview Rock Royalty is it? They're about as iconic as English Heavy Rock and Metal bands go. Forget the fact that they currently possess two Americans in their ranks and a certain German superstar was once the primary guitarist; Phil Mogg, Andy Parker, Pete Way and Paul Raymond are about as English as you can get. Pete may be currently sidelined from the band but the door is always open, and I discussed this issue and various other points along with their cracking new album 'Seven Deadly' with the very affable and likeable Mr Raymond. The interview lasted a good three quarters of an hour so below is an abridged version of what was discussed. His warm Brummie accent was a pleasant surprise and after the customary pleasantries were exchanged it was straight down to business...

I did a quick check on the Internet and worked out how many years you've been in UFO, on and off, and I think 2012 marks your 25th anniversary. I don't know if you want to correct me on that...

No, no, much longer than that. 1976.

Yeah, 1976 when you first joined, but you left for MSG, then Waysted with Pete Way and the band was inactive for a few years as well...

Yeah, but 36 years over the course, in and out. But this is the longest continual span I've been in the band now - nine years.

I know. I was looking back through the history, and correct me if I'm wrong, there's been about 34 ex-members...

According to Andy Parker, all of them are still living, because he keeps track of all these things.

He's into all of that sort of thing then? Keeping tabs on what's going on?

Yeah, Andy's got total recall. Anything you want to know about from the past... the night I got arrested playing piano at the hotel, 1977, Knoxville, Tennessee, he actually remembered what song I was playing when I was carted away (Laughs).

That's incredible!

It's out there anyway. Angus Young, he enjoyed it. Hanging out the balcony shouting 'Hey! You little fucker!' (Laughs).

I take it you were supporting AC/DC at the time?

They were supporting us, believe it or not, Carl. It was 1977, they were still with Bon. It was tough times for them back then.

Well, going by your biography it says you're 66 which makes you the oldest member of the band...

That's correct, yes.

So, one of the questions I have to ask you is basically what motivates you to keep going?

Money. [Laughs] No, no Carl, I'm just jesting. It's all about the music. It might sound conceited but I think I'm getting better as I get older. I certainly play the piano now better than I ever did. The ideas for songs I get are much more sophisticated now, but I was much better looking back then. [Laughs]

I think we all were back then! The fact that you're still passionate, you're still touring, you're still making records, that is quite something..

Yeah, well, what else would I do? This is what I know. You know what Carl, a lot of people do jobs, and I feel really sorry for them that they don't enjoy them, and they can't wait to retire, but, with us, we get

paid for doing something we really enjoy, and that's why you don't want to stop doing it. I don't want it to end. Nobody's actually said to me 'Well you're too old to do this now.' In fact they start saying about Rock Legend and you go 'Oh, piss off!' You know, I'm not Pete Townshend. 'Oh yeah, but you've been doing it for so long.' It's really gratifying. So, that's enough to keep you going...

The conversation turned towards the new album, and Paul asked me whether or not I'd had the chance to listen to it.

I've listened to it two and a half times, if that makes sense.

One and a half times more than me. [laughs]

I must say the opening riff on 'Wonderland' sounds really good to me, and it's got a nice chorus.

Yeah, it's a storming track that one, it's one of the only two 'Metal' tracks on there. I think because of the nature of Phil's voice, he's kind of slipped into a Blues vibe. It's not a bad thing, but at the expense of the Heavy Metal stuff. For me, I like 'Angel Station'.

Who does the female backing vocals on that song, because they're also on 'Mojo Town'.

Do you know what? I don't know. I haven't read the artwork properly. I checked they spelt my name right, and I was credited with playing guitars and keyboards. (Laughs)

So you play all rhythm guitars and keyboards then?

No, no, I just play on my own songs, and Vinnie does the rest - it's a working relationship where we get the work done as quickly as possible.

So which songs did you write, Paul?

Er...good question...we had working titles for them all. 'The Fear' is mine, and the first song on the album, 'Fight Night', that's mine and 'Year Of The Gun'... yep, and the piano thing. Phil phoned me up and said, 'I want to do something that's a bit like Tom Waits' and he gave me a song to download on iTunes to listen to and it kind of reminded me of that guy from the Pogues...

Oh dear...don't! I can't stand him! What's the story with the album cover art then?

His name is Tristan Greatrex.

Did he get a brief on what to design or...

It was Phil's idea and I can diplomatically say it wasn't one of my favourites. There were some better ones for that title. But Phil liked it, and the Merch lady, Kate, liked it. Kate came and did the casting vote