

Back in Issue 24 of Fireworks, we had a pair of interviews with Foreigner members Kelly Hansen and Jeff Pilson, talking about the resurrection of a classic band. Since then, the new look Foreigner has toured the world, winning over the bulk of the doubters by breathing new life into timeless material and playing it with a fierce energy and enthusiasm.

Now the rejuvenated band have a new DVD out, named 'Alive And Rockin'', filmed at the 'Bang Your Head' festival, which features a strong live performance of a shortened set - shortened by dropping the signature ballads 'Waiting For A Girl Like You' and 'I Want To Know What Love Is'. What with that, and talk of a new studio album among other things, it was time to speak to the man in the know - Foreigner founder, leader, guitarist, songwriter, occasional producer and all round legend, Mick Jones. James Gaden placed the call.

After navigating a labyrinth of switchboards and receptionists at his hotel Stateside, I finally get through to Mick's room. After greetings are exchanged, I tell the very laid back Mr. Jones that the first thing I want to talk about is the new DVD from the 'Bang Your Head' Festival. I mention that it's not typical Foreigner, which results in a chuckle of agreement from him. So I ask him why choose a festival like that, and playing a shortened, rocky set to film - as oppose to the other shows the band played on the tour?

"Well, we thought it would be an interesting show to have on film anyway with it being, like you say, not something we would normally do," Mick replies. "Plus they film a lot of the show there anyway, so a lot of the equipment was already present. It was a really challenging day - we didn't really realise just how much until we got there and found that is was primarily seen as a metal day! So what happened was we found ourselves there in the middle of a lot of black leather and chains and figured that it was time to get serious, and remind these people that Foreigner is a rock band."

Mick beats me to it as that was exactly the point I was going to make. I chat with him about the two big ballads being huge successes and a lot of people remember those songs the best, but I don't think that paints a very accurate picture of what Foreigner are all about. I tell him that I remembered when I first started getting into rock music and I only really knew they had done 'Waiting For A Girl Like You' and 'I Want To Know What Love Is', I later discovered Foreigner were behind some serious classic rockers. So I ask if Mick prefers playing the set without the ballads so he can get back to your roots and rock out?

"No, I feel fine about the ballads," Mick says. "There is a certain amount of pressure that's built up over the years that people in our audience do want to hear at least one of those songs, and I think quite rightly so. It would be like going to see The Beatles and if Paul McCartney didn't sing 'Yesterday', there would be some disappointed people!

"At the moment though, we're touring over here in the States with Def Leppard and Styx, which means we have to play a shortened set. So for this tour we've basically been playing the 'Bang Your Head' set every night. It's a very tiring set," he laughs, "because there's no gaps to catch your breath! It keeps you on your toes!

"Primarily, my idea for the band at the very beginning was to be a rock band," Mick continues. "However, I think we showed some virtuosity in being able to do different feelings and songs. Lou had a fantastic voice and it was a vehicle to try all kinds of things and show people what his range was and how good he was."

I agree wholeheartedly about Lou's vocal skills, and that brings me to one of the things that struck me about both the DVD, and when I've seen the band live - that is not only what a good frontman Mick has found in Kelly Hansen, because he has an excellent voice and real presence, but the entire band is a supergroup. So I ask him if these guys were his first choices, or did the band sort of fall into place by accident?

"I had known Jason Bonham for many years, from when he was a kid almost. He and I had jammed a few times during some... er... drunken late nights," Mick laughs. "Anyway, we met through a mutual friend and at the time Lou had left the band to pursue a solo thing and Jason said that is was a real shame that things had ground to a halt, and he felt that these songs should be represented properly. He thought they were going to waste a bit. At the time I wasn't even sure if I wanted to start the band up again. What I did want to do though was repair the legacy though. In the waning time of the band just before Lou moved on, the shows were not good. I felt the band had left on a bad note and I thought Foreigner, what the name meant and the heritage of the songs, deserved to be left at a higher level. So that was really the motivation for me to put the band back together.

"So I had to find people who I felt were able to deliver the goods. I had Jason right from the beginning, we got Thom Gimball and Jeff Jacobs back because they'd been part of the band in the nineties. Then we got a huge addition in the form of Jeff Pilson on bass, because he and Jason together form an incredible rhythm section. Which left only one missing piece, and everything sort of revolved around this - whether I could find a singer who could live up to Lou's strength's and reputation as a vocalist."

I reflect on how phenomenal Lou was and what a huge part of Foreigner's sound he provided, so I imagined that can't have been easy to find.

"You know, looking back, and I don't say this to blow my own whistle," Mick begins, "I discovered Lou when he was very raw and young. I kind of schooled him on how to approach singing. I taught him a lot because I had spent time working with singers before. I had a very specific thing in mind about how I felt the songs needed to be sung and I pushed him and worked with him extremely closely. We worked for him to develop his own style so in a funny way, I knew what I was looking for this time around, because I helped create it in a way. I'm not taking anything away from Lou you understand, he's a fantastic talent. But I got to know Lou's voice so well, after hearing him sing every single word of our songs!" he laughs.

"So I knew what I needed to look for vocally, which was a gigantic thing to undertake, and I did want somebody who could front the band and liven things up. As luck would have it, there was Kelly Hansen living right around the corner from Thom Gimball and Jeff Pilson in L.A. When we heard he was interested, we sent him what was effectively

a karaoke tape!" Mick laughs again. "We sent him the tracks to a few of the songs with the vocals removed so he could put his own on.

"He sent it back and I couldn't believe it. I was amazed, he'd gotten completely into the feeling of the songs, and the sound was really very close to what I had in mind. I think, a b o v e
all he
got

the emotional part of the songs down, and he's just gotten better and better at them."

I say that I think the other thing is because he's got the energy and presence on stage, and he is himself, he avoids some of the comparisons that could have been made like 'He's a Lou Gramm clone' or 'He's the replacement guy' or some of that stuff that a lot of people say when a band replaces someone as good as Lou with someone else. Kelly has his own identity.

"Yes, I know exactly what you mean," agrees Mick. "But in all honesty, we really haven't run into any of that criticism. At the beginning there was some scepticism, but since then we've been fine."

I reply that by and large, I think people are just glad to see Foreigner back. "I think so, and that says a lot about the songs and I think they're reached a lot of people and have great memories for people. And honestly, I think they still sound ok!" Mick chuckles. "When they're played with a lot of energy like they are now with this band, it almost recreates the energy we had right in the beginning. It sounds more like when we started out."

Resisting the urge to make some cheap pun about how it feels like the first time, I bring up a gig where I saw the new Foreigner live in Manchester last year - a gig I enjoyed so much I booked to go again as soon as I knew they were coming back. In the set they took 'Say You Will' and changed it around. It was stripped it down to a more acoustic style and I thought it worked brilliantly. I was wondering if the band were looking at doing a similar thing to some of the other songs, maybe some of the lesser known ones?

"It did work well," Mick replies. "We're looking at that. We're going into the studio in around January or February and we're looking at taking a look at some other songs, and writing some new songs. We already have a couple of new ones actually. We're not playing anything new on stage yet, but yes, that idea opened up another area where we can showcase the talent of the band. It's a powerful collection of musicians and it's a great feeling again to find such energy."

I mention the Foreigner website, because on the front page there is a 'jukebox' with studio recordings of Kelly singing some of the classic songs. I ask if they were intended for release on an album or were they cut just to get the band used to the new sound?

"We were just trying to document how this band plays the songs," Mick responds. "It's sort of a historical note really and to let people know who haven't heard it how we sound now. Sometimes different versions of the songs are needed as well with copyright, if a movie wants to use a song, or something like that. But by and large it's on the website



just to show how genuine the band is and that we are trying to keep close to Foreigner's legacy."

I ask about the new album, if the group have decided if it will be totally original, a mix of old and new or are they still undecided?

"I think it'll be a combination," Mick says. "We'll take a look at some old songs and take a look at re-recording them in a different way, like you mentioned with 'Say You Will' - they would have to be that different to make it work. That would be interesting because there would be a familiarity for fans coming back to us, but they still wouldn't have heard the songs like that before. If it works, it works, but it won't with any song, we'll have to choose carefully."

I do agree that sounds like wise thinking, because the band's last studio album, 'Mr. Moonlight', came out all the way back in 1994. Since then Lou suffered with his health, ended up leaving the band, and Foreigner has been rebuilt with a new rhythm section and brand new singer, so perhaps a little familiarity is no bad thing! I agreed with Mick that changing the arrangements to songs was a good idea too because there's already a live CD out with Kelly singing the classics as they should sound.

While some new versions of old songs sound nice, I'm intrigued to see what new material the band come up with. I comment to Mick that having the likes of Jeff Pilson in the band will add to the writing stockpile, but I'm curious to see what direction the group take. I thought 'Mr. Moonlight', was excellent, but it was quite laid back. Nevertheless, it's probably play that one the most.

"Oh thank you!" Mick says, clearly pleased. "We've already started like I say, with two new songs, and in fact Jason is bringing some great ideas. He's singing songs and coming up with things every day, asking me what I think of it. So he's been putting things down on tape and he's got some really good ideas so I'm looking forward to sitting down quietly with him and going through what he's come up with. I think that's what we've been building up to. The first stage was getting the live band out there - we've toured near enough the whole world. We finish on New Year's Eve, and then it'll be three to four months of writing and recording.

"I'd have liked to have gotten to the studio a bit earlier," he adds, "but it's been fun re-establishing the fact Foreigner is alive, rocking and the feeling is back!"

I comment that some bands, especially established acts who's been around a long time, tend to play an album in it's entirety as part of their set. Would that be something Mick consider doing with Foreigner?

"Well there has been talk of us doing the 'Four' album," he replies. "There's has been an idea of us doing it from start to finish live, filming it and the like."

I think aloud that something like that could be great, especially with the energy the new version of the band put into the songs. I know Deep Purple have done it with some success with 'Machine Head' a lot on tour in the States, and Dio did it for his 'Holy Diver' album as a DVD to commemorate the release of the original.

"Really? Great - we have been talking about it," Mick says. "We've been approached by VH1 and they would set us up with a suitable setting and we'd play the album to an audience.

"I'll have to get practicing again though!" he laughs. "I'd have to work hard on some of those songs... it's not an overly complicated album, but sound wise it was very direct so I'd have to work hard to get that feel back before we decided to do it."

I decide to make my final question a selfish one - I was asked about the 'Mr. Moonlight' album, in the song 'White Lie', what is the white lie in question?

"Oh, you'll have to ask Lou I'm afraid!" Mick says, laughing. "I may have told a few in my time, but Lou wrote the lyrics for that one so he'd have to tell you."

I shrug, saying it will just be one of life's little mysteries. It was just when I was asked, it was cool to be able to say 'I don't know, but I'm talking to Mick Jones shortly, so I'll ask him!'. Mick laughs again, so I ask if he still speaks to Lou, or is he busy doing his own thing?

"He's busy doing his own thing. I hear of him occasionally, but we haven't actually talked for a while. I'm sure we will, it'll come around, things like that do."

With my time almost up, I thank Mick for being such a gracious interviewee, to which he simply replies "Cool man. Looks like we're going to see you in Manchester." I confirm that, telling him I'll be there, singing slightly worse than Kelly, but singing nonetheless. At this comment Mick rather insultingly bursts out laughing and bids me farewell. Charming.