

WHO IS THE DADDY?

JAMES GADEN CHATS EXCLUSIVELY TO FRANCIS ROSSI

Back in Fireworks #40, I interviewed the legendary frontman from Status Quo, Francis Rossi, about his new solo album 'One Step At A Time'. I very much enjoyed the upbeat feel to it and the chance it gave Francis to explore some of his pop sensibilities outside of the confines of Status Quo. Six UK shows were booked in support of the album, a thought that filled Francis with a sense of trepidation, but upon completion, a gig at St. Lukes in London was booked, for the purpose of recording a live DVD and CD of the solo show. I was fortunate enough to be in attendance that night and thoroughly enjoyed myself. The DVD proved to recreate the experience superbly, so after a bit of nagging, I was granted an exclusive interview with Francis to talk about it. As this would be my third time talking to the charismatic guitarist, I expected him to be talkative, witty and entertaining as always. What I didn't expect was the phone to be answered on the very first ring by a timid, effeminate voice...

Hello, is daddy there please?

Er... pardon?

That got you didn't it? You didn't expect that.

(Laughs) No, I didn't!

I wasn't going to do that, I was gonna do 'Freddie's Sandwich Bar, how may I help you?' but I just thought of 'Hello, is daddy there please?' Makes it sound like I called you. I think the phone is a wonderful thing for doing shit like that.

(Laughs) It is, and I must say, that is the best start to an interview I've ever had!

Not a bad life really then, is it? Things on the up - and you work for Fireworks, that's not bad is it?

No, it could be worse... right, you've completely thrown me off kilter now, I don't know where I am.

Well I'm ready now!

Good - okay, I don't know if you remember or not but I interviewed you back when 'One Step At A Time' was released. You told me that you had to play some shows to support it, and part of you was really looking forward to it, but another part was terrified of having to go out there without Status Quo. Obviously, you played the dates and now you've done a live DVD of a show at St. Lukes, which is also out as a live album. Was it you who

decided to do that because the other shows went well?

No, it was one of those things - I didn't really want to do the filming either really, but it's one of those things you sign up for when you say something like 'ooh, I wanna be a pop star!' Stuff like that, which I said way back when - loads of things I've done with Quo I'd rather not have done, getting photographed so often for one, being on the cover, all that kind of thing... but it comes with it. If I want this, I have to do that stuff to go with it. When the record company gave me a solo deal, obviously they want to maximise their return from it, that's life. The first solo show I played, in Edinburgh, I literally had to be pushed in the small of the back by the production manager to get me on the stage. Once I got on, I was okay. But the one we recorded, from the second set of dates... probably the worst show we frigging played! I told the band 'Look, I don't want any of you guys getting silly about the cameras. I don't want anyone worried about their mums or dads watching...' Everything I told them not to do, I fucking did! I was useless! I've seen the DVD once, my children put it on the other night... that was embarrassing. Him on the screen, me, ooh, he looks uncomfortable. But... I do think it's a great collection of tunes.

Oh, absolutely. I was there for that show, at the recording...
Oh dear.

No, honestly, I really enjoyed it! I thought the performance was great. The thing I liked best

about the DVD though, was you have left it exactly as it was on the night. I got home and told people about it, specifically different funny things you said in-between the songs, especially when you were moaning about fitting the capo because it kept making your guitar go out of tune, and it held the show up. They way you did it, with your typical humour, it really endeared me to the gig and I was glad you left all that in there, you didn't feel the need to polish it all out and fix it, make it all slickly edited. I think that side of the show makes it more entertaining.

Well it's nice of you to say that. He was cacking himself up there with that capo, that's why he was filling in with all that rubbish! We've had trouble with that guitar, the bridge has been moved, the body has gotten soft with age and the screws into it were moving... the guitar is from 1958 I think and the first time the machine heads were changed was probably ten years ago. Parts for guitars used to last for centuries but now they want you to buy more. We've got it fixed up now and I'm looking forward to playing it again. Hopefully, when the capo goes on now it'll sit straight! All those things were making me nervy. However, I must say, when I watched it again, part of me couldn't help thinking 'Cor, I'd love to do that again.' I'm terrible like that! I really enjoyed working with those people - it's not that I have a problem with the people I normally work with, it's just... it was great, I really enjoyed myself. It was strange with the press too - I didn't have to go down a storm, I didn't have to have people going nuts, I didn't have to have a massive gate, I didn't need those things that come along as part of being in Status Quo. I was just that bloke from that band, with no huge expectation of what I'd do. I really enjoyed it.

I did too - as I said last time I spoke to you, with your material, I like the...

The poppier, softer stuff, like 'Thirsty Work'.

That's me!

Yeah, I was looking at the setlist the other night and I said 'They're great tunes' to the wife. She went 'Yeah, they are!' and I thought fucking hell, I'm saying they're great, I wrote them, you're saying they're great, they're by your husband. What a pair of dickheads! (laughs) It's very difficult because you're looking at yourself. When you come to judge it, it's like 'Well, can I say it's good?' Or you can be too critical - I look at my guitar playing on that DVD and I think it's wooden and I can tell by my face I'm edgy at the start.

I think you probably are being a bit self critical there because I've seen Quo a bunch of times and when I came to see you I didn't think you looked edgy or anything like that - I just enjoyed the show for what it was, which was a chance for you to play some good songs that some Quo fans wouldn't

get on with, and the chance to slip in some of the lesser heard Quo stuff.

You're a stout fellow - can you multiply yourself by ten thousand and come to as many of my gigs as possible please? (laughs)

If I could, I would! But like I say, I really liked the fact you picked some obscure or less well known Quo stuff to play - you had two from the 'Under The Influence' record, three from 'In Search Of The Fourth Chord'... great songs but stuff that probably would never find space in a Quo setlist. Did you have songs like that in mind early on when creating your setlist, or where you thinking more about your solo stuff first and foremost?

I'd like to say I was thinking about those Quo tracks, but if I take you back to when I talked to you before, my manager mentioned about me re-working a Quo song. I didn't really want to until I remembered I wrote 'Caroline' as a shuffle originally, and I could go back to how it was before it became the Quo song. I told you I was laughing at the idea of opening with it, because Quo have opened shows with 'Caroline' for so long, it's painful. So I decided I'd open with it, the one song people thought 'Well surely he won't start with that...' And he did! But once I had that idea, I figured out how the set should go. 'Caroline' would go into 'Claudie'... I've always loved that, we did that years ago and they lace together beautifully. That's a big part of putting a setlist together, you can have loads of great songs but they won't all mesh. The way 'Caroline' finishes is perfect to go into 'Claudie'. From there, you go up a tone into 'All We Really Wanna Do' which I think is a fab tune. I'm getting excited about it again now, can you hear me? (laughs) On about himself again, what a dick! Oh dear!

(Laughs) That explains the answer to where I was going next - I wondered if you had a collection of songs in your head that you were dying to play live, or if you'd gone back through the records and thought 'Oh yes, that would be perfect'! But if it all started flowing, that makes sense, run with it.

Yeah, the difficulty too is there is an expectation with Quo - a Quo gig is very pacey. To try and place any of those Quo songs I did in there, at the tempos they're at, in a Quo show, would be very hard. 'Twenty Wild Horses' could work because we've done that before with Quo, 'You'll Come Round' might work, but it might not. If you tried to put in 'My Little Heartbreaker' - that would be awkward to get into a Quo show, in the middle of all that staccato 'da-da-da-da-da-da-da!' that we do.

Yeah, it would have to be in next to 'The Oriental' or something like that.

Exactly, so when I was doing my solo setlist, one sort of led to another. They all sort of linked up. I think in the rehearsals and stuff I only made one change to the set, just took something out. So once you have the songs in place, you need to make it a show... can he go out there and do these songs while comfortably chatting to the audience. Can he chat? Yes he fucking can! He can talk! Otherwise it would just have been song after song after song... that's all well and good but with them lacing, if you had one song after another with nothing inbetween, you'd almost be punch drunk - 'God, is he finished yet?' But I enjoyed crafting how the show should run.

I think one of the other big factors in the appeal of this DVD is the setting - St Lukes is very cool and unlike any show I've been to. When I first arrived at the venue I wondered if it was the right place! It looks great on the DVD, with that big window just above the stage. Did you think the same?

I'd heard about the place, that was the reason it was decided we would film there. I think we had something stage right, where there was a gap in the equipment that shouldn't have been there, the band should have been more boxed in... however, I like the overall look, like you say. And I've always wanted to sing with girls. I feel great with the women up there - and it's nothing to do with my knob! I just love singing with girls. Alright, it could be something to do with my knob, let's not be too hasty. But that vibe... I don't know, it's a different tension. With Quo, it has to be done a certain way, I can't change it, I always think of Little Richard - it needs that intense drive. It's real and you think 'Yes!' when it gets you, but fuck, it's hard work! Whereas the Francis Rossi thing - he was uneasy

that night, his voice wasn't quite right I don't think. I've been getting quite good with the vocals, how to use what I've got. That night I don't think I was quite on it... however, I'm very pleased with the songs and the look.

When I talked to you last time and you told me you were going to put together an eight piece group to back you, you said you were having two guitarists... your son Nicholas, and Rhino's son Freddie, as well as your guitar. I was worried three guitarists might be a bit much but I thought it sounded fantastic. Did you have trouble figuring out who would play what?

No... when I looked at it the other night, I noticed a couple of fills Freddie missed in 'Blessed Are The Meek', but with most of the stuff off my album, when I wrote them I'd usually try and work out a second guitar part and a third guitar part. But I always wanted that with Quo. We talked about it where we'd have another two guitarists who'd sit back and come in during the second verse and make a double track up with what Rick and I were doing. But I think we're too loud, there'd be too much of a mass of harmonic distortion going on. With this, there's three distinct guitar noises, nobody is trying to outplay anybody else and they're plugged into little amps.

I thought the way you balanced out the whole sound was great - considering you had drums, bass, three girls, two guitars, your guitar, your voice, plus keyboards and even a bit of harmonica...

He's good, Mr Hirsh isn't he! He's an odd looking man but I fucking love him. He's such a great musician - he humbles people like me. I realised when I was watching it, he played a fill in one of the Quo songs that was perfect and I never even mentioned it to him. I've known him a while and when we were talking about the shows, I sent him the CD to learn, and another CD of the various Quo bits. We were rehearsing in the second week and I said 'oh, when we do 'Tongue Tied' I went for a Lennon sort

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Francis Rossi

of style on piano, using an upright sample instead of a grand piano...' and he went 'Yeah' and just played it perfect. Oh, alright, he's got it. He can listen to something once and he's got it, the whole frigging thing. I wish I was that good!

Sickening, people like that, aren't they?

Very sickening, but I love working with him. He's so good! I'd have liked to have got him a proper Hammond as oppose to some Moody thing, but I liked watching what he did on the show. I was getting quite excited about things I saw, my right leg was going 'dum dum dum' on the floor, you know because you're mind is going off on tangents? I was thinking 'Ooh, he played that fill nice, oh that worked beautifully, ah, that ending was a bit short...' and I started think 'You know what, I could take this somewhere!' That doesn't mean I can't take Quo anywhere, but... anyway, I'm sounding a bit too over-enthused here. I can hear you - 'he's a bit too keen on his fucking self, that Rossi!' (laughs)

(Laughs) That actually leads me nicely to what I was going to ask next - I was going to say now you've done the shows, and there's a live document, is that it, closed chapter...

No! I want to do more. How, I don't know. I'll be honest, if the DVD doesn't do well, I don't think there will be enough people who want to come and see me. That's not him crying, that's him thinking about how it's a risk for promoters and venues to take you on. I have a deep desire for it to go on.

I would have thought you'd have shown enough success from the ticket sales of your prior shows to get some more dates booked in similar sized venues, regardless of the DVD's performance?

Hmmm... I don't think that it's looking quite that good... I don't know, it might be promising. At the moment

I'm doing a Quo album, literally today before we spoke, so my focus for the solo stuff has gone a little bit. For me to still be interested in it - it would be understandable if I'd done the solo thing and said 'Yeah, I was jerking off, I've had enough of that now' and gone back to my real job, but there's a part of me that just really enjoyed it. And it allows me to do a certain amount of strumming, instead of the intense 'Raaarrhhh!' of Quo.

There are more boundries in Quo, less room to move because of expectations.

Yes, something we've steadily built over the centuries. (laughs) It's understandable - the stuff we're doing now, on one hand I think 'Yes, this is really fantastic!' but on the other hand I think 'It's just Status Quo though, innit?' I know where the songs are going next - of course I do. But I guess I could say the same with AC/DC, I can hear a brand new song and think I know where that's going to go, here comes the bridge, now a solo...' But I can do that with other bands, maybe it's because I've been doing it for so long.

Yeah, but as I said when we've talked before, I firmly believe, in terms of song writing quality, the last three Quo albums have been as good as any you've done, so if the new one is as good as them, it'll be fine.

I think so, it's sounding... I don't know, I just think it's a bit more interesting at the moment. Again though, it's a fail safe - I have to be into what I'm writing, or it just won't go down. I can't pretend to be enthused. But I can be enthused and into it, and then say to you later in the year 'Tell you what, that was a sack of shit, I lost it there!' But sometimes it might be 'My God, how did we do that?' I'd love to be saying that to you, but we'll see.

Well, one other thing I wanted to ask about your solo show, we originally talked about 'King Of The Doghouse' and you commented how it had gotten away from you a bit and you didn't keep control of it. Were you tempted to take any of the songs from that and do them live as you felt they should have been done?

With the song '...Doghouse' itself, I was, but I think I really fashioned 'Tallulah's Waiting' from that in a way. I did have a DAT of a bitchin' mix of that song - I gave it to the producer at the time, who thanks to all the ecstasy he was taking was up and down and subsequently lost it. It was a good stereo mix, would have been a nice single. I thought that was a pretty good song, if I'm really honest I think there were maybe four really good songs on that album. Overall, I didn't really write anything for it, money was thrown at it... I got a set of speakers from someone who worked on it with me as a thank you present. I'm thinking 'Thanks, what the fuck's that about?' (laughs) They come to work for you, buy you speakers as a present? They must have been paid some good fucking money! But yeah, I let that album go. I do believe though, that I'm sitting here now, talking to you, looking out my window, as a direct result of all that's gone before, so I can't moan about it. Are you like that?

I am, I completely believe it all works out.

Nice - and I'm really pleased with 'One Step' as a record. I'm going away soon for a couple of weeks. When I get back, I'm going to sit in a room and have another listen, see what I think. Will it be as good as I thought it was, or was I too wrapped up in it at the time to really see? It's like the first time you meet a girl, for the first few weeks you're blinded by it all, you can't keep your dick out of her, you just want to stay glued... then you'll settle down. I think albums can be a bit like that. Unlike Mr Hirsh - when we play 'One Step At A Time' he heard every little thing first time. With Freddie and Nicholas I'm pointing out little subtle fills and flurries that are there, but Paul, he hears it all in one go! Bastard. He knows exactly what you want. But then he's an old fart like me.

(Laughs) With you doing this solo thing between Quo albums, do you think it'll tempt Rick to try his hand at one? His solo album 'Recorded Delivery' has been sat unreleased on a shelf since the eighties - although a lot of it finally came out as bonus tracks on Quo reissues.

He was thinking about doing a ukulele album this January which has just gone. I actually thought, if he did, and sang in his true voice, which few people hear



anymore, with the right songs, he could be... for him to be a guy from a rock band to do a solo album, he'll do some sort of rock album I suppose. What for? If he did the ukulele thing - people would be surprised and I think they'd really take to his true voice. He could do really well with it I think, but whether he would I don't know, he might prefer to be Rockin' Rick. He has that about him. He has this fab voice which is always hidden behind this gruff roar which is supposed to be rock and roll, but it's not, it's just singing from the throat with a gruff voice.

You described Rick's voice as a classic cabaret voice last time we spoke - his proper singing voice.

It's true, he was told it was cabaret because that's where he started. People hear that and oh, mocking, mocking, mocking. To me, his real voice is great. When he sings all that rocky shit people know him for, I think it's dreadful. He knows that! I've told him! We were doing some shows somewhere last year and his voice was iffy and he was getting more and more uptight thinking about it. I told him that if he went in the dressing room, got his ukulele out, he would sing 'I'll See You In My Dreams' or 'You Are My Sunshine' to me in his voice, and it would be fine. But he goes out and goes 'Urrrrgh!' Where he got told that was rock and roll singing I don't know, but he can't do it, it's not his voice. There's only him that won't believe it! (laughs)

Yeah, he's done some great ballads and he did Sam Cooke's 'Bring It On Home' on 'Rock Til You Drop' and I thought he did a good job there.

If you listen to early stuff, listen to Rick sing 'A Reason For Living', that's his proper voice. He sings it beautifully. But someone convinced him that wasn't rock. With my partner, if something sits in his mind, then that's that. Whoever told him that, they've taken something away as far as I'm concerned. One of my sons is a really good singer and he got involved with a woman and she mocked him when he sang - you know when someone is embarrassed, so they mock you to cover it? And since then, he's never sung - and he has a really good voice. Someone, somewhere, did that to Rick I think. Who, I don't know. But if we make too much of this, he'll really cop for us!

Well I interviewed Rick when 'The Party Ain't Over Yet' came out and I've always liked his vocals, from ballads to rockers, and I complimented him on his singing on that album so hopefully that will help diffuse any potential bombs we've just set! We'll just tell Rick how good he is and we'll all be alright!

There you are, we should be safe now! (laughs)

Right, finally, and this is most important... last time I spoke with you, you broke off the interview at one point to argue with your wife about having Iceberg lettuce with your tea, because you wouldn't accept anything else. So, the burning question - did you get your Iceberg lettuce?

Oh yes.

Thank God.

Yes - she's lovely. She's wonderful, I'm bleedin' lucky. She's in her own world... that sounds terrible, but I mean she's very happy. You'll see people happy in themselves and you think 'oh, wake up to reality!' but really - fuck off, what for! How stupid! She thinks life is lovely, she's whistling and singing. She can wake up in a morning, about half five, six o'clock and by the time she's walked around the bed she's singing to herself... I don't know what the fuck she's singing, but the rest of us ain't, you know? She's just one of those people. Bloody Yank, I'm gonna get rid of her as soon as possible! (laughs)

Well Francis, once again, marvellously entertaining, thank you very much for that. And thanks for completely throwing me off at the beginning of the interview!

That was a good 'un wasn't it? I'm going to have to remember that one!

It was a classic, and I'm glad I've got a recording of it so I can be embarrassed by it repeatedly...

(Laughs) Try it yourself! If someone rings, straight away answer it with something like that. They don't know if they've got the wrong number or what's happened! I had a friend who would answer the phone with 'Hello, who are you talking to?' before they've said a word. It completely

throws someone!

Yeah, I know! (laughs) I have my basic introduction in my head where I say who I am, where I'm calling from and I'll usually start with some pleasantries, I don't expect you anticipating my call and answering with something completely left field! (laughs)

Yeah, but I don't really care what you're doing or where you're from, you want to chat then fine, let's have a chat. I did an interview with a lady from the Evening Standard and we went off onto all kinds of things... we'd talk about religion and then 'Anyway, back to the music...' before we got onto politics, then 'Anyway, back to the music...' All the time we were digressing. So I don't care if you ring me and say 'Oh, I'm from a guitar magazine...' or whatever. That's not my fault! (laughs)

In all fairness, I love that approach, I always try and keep my interviews as a chat, not an informal Q&A thing. And what we've just done there has been one of the easiest and most entertaining that I've ever done! I did one interview, and hopefully the readers won't have noticed once I'd edited it all together, but every question I asked was...

Two syllable answers!

Exactly! I'd say 'So, I really liked the sound of the new record...' and leave a space for him to respond, and he just said 'Thank you!' and silence. No good! So then I'd say 'And you have so and so playing guitar, how did he get involved?' and he'd reply 'Oh, I've known him years' and then more silence.

I bet you thought 'You don't wanna fucking be here do you, piss off!' Anybody in my side of the business has to understand that you need to sell it. If anybody, musician, actor, whatever, says they don't like talking about themselves, they're lying to you! We love talking about ourselves, it's our job, talking up our gigs, our band, our records. So when you get those who don't have anything to say to you, you should say 'Oh, you're big time are you, then talk to somebody else, I'm off.' Mind you, you might get the push from the magazine then, and we can't have that going on!

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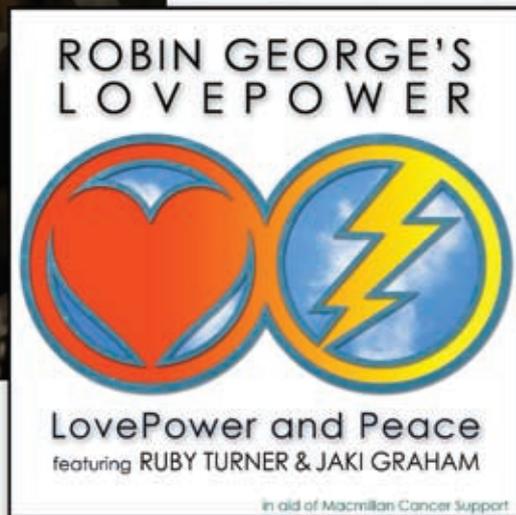


Ruby Turner

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