

HEAVEN & HELL

James Gaden talks to Geezer Butler



Nobody can dispute Black Sabbath's place in rock history - through the days of being fronted by wildman Ozzy Osbourne, to boasting Tony Martin and even Ian Gillan among their ranks. They've had their ups and downs, but I don't think it's too difficult to argue that hiring Ronnie James Dio as vocalist (joining the trio of Tony Iommi, Terry 'Geezer' Butler and Bill Ward) and making the awesome 'Heaven And Hell' album was a certifiable highpoint.

Bill Ward departed, and Vinny Appice replaced him on the drum stool. With him Sabbath made 'The Mob Rules', 'Live Evil' and, years later, 'Dehumanizer'. That was it from this line up for a long time, before a compilation called the 'Dio Years' was put it - it featured three brand new songs and led to a tour - under a new moniker of 'Heaven & Hell' which allowed them to play Dio era material free from any obligation to air some Ozzy classics. The group clicked into their groove again and have just made a thumping new album called 'The Devil You Know'. Geezer Butler was on hand to talk about it...

After getting through to Geezer first time, I asked him how he was doing. A voice with that trademark Birmingham accent replied that he was ok, and sat watching the Manchester United match. I knew all about it, I was recording it on Sky+ to watch later because some damn fool scheduled my interview for when it was on - oh, the things we do for this magazine! Nevertheless, I apologised for interrupting it, and hoped I'd smooth things over by telling him I was very pleased with the new album. I wasn't even lying either. It really is very good.

I mentioned that after they did the new songs for the 'Dio Years' compilation, a lot of people were really happy with the quality of the three new songs, but I think everything on this new album surpasses them in terms of quality.

"Oh good!" Geezer replies. "Well, we had more time for the album. Those ones on the 'Dio Years' were done in a hurry, to add to that collection. The album was something to take a lot more seriously."

I decided to ask about the writing for the new album - getting mp3s to download is great for promos, but you do lack some bits of information I find interesting. I refer to the fact that the three on the 'Dio Years' were credited to Ronnie and Tony,

so was it a much more band orientated affair this time?

"Yeah - those original three songs were something Ronnie and Tony got together to do to see if it would still work," Geezer explains. "This time, it was a band effort because we knew we were going to be going into an album situation. So we brought all our ideas in and y'know, worked like we did on 'Dehumanizer' and 'Mob Rules'."

I remembered on the early Sabbath records Geezer were responsible for a lot of the lyrical work. I question him about if he still gets involved in that side of things, or is that all left to Ronnie?

"No, it's all down to Ronnie, the lyrics. The only reason why I ever wrote any for Sabbath was because nobody else could!" he laughs. "I don't know whether you've heard the new 'Paranoid' release, but that has Ozzy's original lyrics in there, and you'll see why I had to write them!"

I offer my opinion that it's great that this lineup are back together. The 'Heaven and Hell' album was my introduction to Black Sabbath and I've always been a big fan of the Dio era. For them to get back together all these years later and still make a great record is fantastic - and the

loads of overdubs, tons of keyboards or anything. We wanted it to be just the four of us as much as possible. Having rehearsed it, once we got in the studio, we didn't really need to change anything, so it was virtually live in the studio."

I think that gives it an added vibrancy, because some bands tend to polish things too much and they lose the edge...

"Exactly!" Geezer enthuses. "That's just what we didn't want to do. I think the three on the 'Dio Years' were so raw, we wanted to keep that feel."

He mentioned keyboards just then - I have noticed there is a little keyboard work on 'Atom and Evil' and a touch in 'Rock and Roll Angel', but other than that, mostly its just the four of them I can hear. Who put in the keyboard flourishes - was it Ronnie?

"No, Mike Exeter, the engineer, put those in," Geezer replies. "We didn't want too much, and it leaves me a lot more room to put in more bass parts, without keyboards there. We didn't want to inundate the whole thing with keyboards. I think they can polish stuff up too much anyway. Mike really got what we mean, just having the odd part in the background for subtle effect, rather than having them really prominent. We tried to limit it to just intros and solos."

Another standout for me was 'Bible Black' - its got that nice acoustic intro, textbook Ronnie vocals and lyrics, and then it comes in with all the band - it sounds like classic Sabbath. I saw this was picked as the lead off track on iTunes to give people a taste of the album. People have left feedback and I think there's probably an 80% - 20% split, with 80% saying it sounds amazing, and 20% blasting it because it's not with Ozzy. As someone who has been in the business a long time, does Geezer think the internet is a good thing?

"I think it's a definite help, especially since we changed the name of the band. Our kind of following, who like Sabbath, Dio, Tony's stuff... we've always had this hardcore following, and they can see exactly what we're doing. It really helped when we changed the band name to 'Heaven And Hell'... to get that information out there. Without the internet, it would have been a struggle to keep everyone informed. I think it's great, you can do so much with it."

I think it's great for that - people obviously used to release singles as a precursor to an album, but they've pretty much died a death now. To be able to go on a website and hear a sample of a track...

"Exactly!" Geezer agrees. "You'd never hear us played on the radio anyway. So, the internet allows people to go and listen to whatever they like."

And the other thing about changing the name - I think Ozzy has moved into that mainstream bracket with the reality show thing, whereas the other guys have kept their integrity by sticking to making good quality heavy rock... and as Sabbath are so often cited as an influence by so many new rock and metal bands, it must help to cross them over to a younger audience?

"Yeah, I think a lot of it helped when we did Europe and played a lot of festivals. You often get a younger crowd at some of those, but a lot of them already knew the

songs anyway, so that was great. When we played in the states, it was such a diverse crowd - you'd get like ten year old kids, up to like seventy year old blokes... in the audience as well as on stage!" Geezer quips.

It's great when a band can have crossover appeal like that, and it's a testament to their music standing the test of time.

"I think a lot of it is, metal isn't shoved down your throat every day. It becomes like an exclusive club, and there's always a fantastic atmosphere when we play."

And by changing your name to Heaven And Hell, there's no pressure to play the Ozzy era Sabbath material. It must have been refreshing to have chance to play a lot of classic songs from the Dio period that they've never really had chance to play live?

"Precisely," Geezer says, "and I think we did something like ninety five shows, and I can only remember one person shouting out for an old Sabbath track."

"It's amazing that a lot of the bands we toured with on the Ozzfest and things like that, they came up to us," Geezer replies. "Bands like the Foo Fighters, they told us they got into us from Ronnie's era. That was their introduction to Black Sabbath, was with 'Heaven and Hell'."

I wanted to ask about the title of the album 'The Devil You Know' - it sounds like a good Sabbath style title, but with a deliberate hidden meaning there about the quartet all having worked together before?

"Yeah, that's sort of it - I came up with about twenty different titles for the album and Tony particularly liked 'The Devil You Know'... because of the meaning behind it of it being called Heaven and Hell but really being... er... Sabbath!" he laughs.

I thought the cover was cool as well - it depicted the sort of thing I hoped to hear and was a good match for the material on the record.

"It grew on me," Geezer says. "At first I didn't really... I thought it was a bit too corny, a bit 'typical metal' sort of cover. But we made a few little changes to it and it worked in the end."

The band recorded it at Rockfield Studios in Wales, which is where they did 'Dehumanizer' - did they pick there specifically in the hope of familiar surroundings helping the process, or was it coincidence?

"No, there's actually very few living studios left anymore. There used to be loads in England but now there's literally like... two!" he laughs. "We knew Rockfield, we've been going there since 1970. It has great people running it, great food which is always important, and we enjoyed it there with 'Dehumanizer'. It's good to go there knowing what you'll get."

Did it take long to make? I know there was a weeks rehearsal, but how long to put the actual album together?

"What we did, was about a year ago this month we started it, writing for six weeks, then toured with Judas Priest for a while, then did another six weeks when that was finished, and that was it. So about three months to write, then we booked three weeks at Rockfield and it took about three weeks to get it all mixed."

I ask if Geezer is the sort of person

who listens to past work to get in the right frame of mind?

"No, I don't listen to anything. I usually listen to Radio 4 or 5," he laughs.

To be honest, some of the stuff I've heard on the radio, I can't really blame him.

Geezer laughs again. "No, really, I don't listen to music at all."

I remember when they got back together to tour, there was no immediate thought of an album, but now obviously we have one, so are Heaven and Hell planning more, or is it too early to say?

"We've learned to take one thing at a time," he tells me. "When we went on tour originally we were just going to do a month, to promote the 'Dio Years'. That month turned into nine months, and at the end of the nine months, we sort of went 'Ok, well that's it...' We'd exceeded what we had set out to do and we felt sad at the end of it. So Ronnie said 'Let's just do an album,'" he chuckles. "So that's what we did - we were all up for it. So now we'll tour again to support it, and that's as far as we've planned."

I bet it can be like a vicious circle when you've only just done a tour and now you're gearing up again.

"If you enjoy it though, that's all that matters," Geezer replies. "If we didn't enjoy it, it would be pointless doing it. We're all getting on a bit now, so we think we should 'do it while we can' kind of thing."

Certainly when I watched the live DVD, I thought the band gelled tighter as a unit because obviously there's a wealth of collective experience in the group now.

"Right, but I wish... like I said, it was only planned as a month long thing, finishing with that show. I wish we'd filmed it further on in the tour, maybe three months in because I thought we were much tighter and playing better then."

Wow - well it didn't show! I thought everything about the performance, Ronnie vocally, was awesome. He was hitting everything he ever did on record, and even stuff I've never heard him hit. When 'The Mob Rules' started up, and he did the 'Oh come on' as that real high pitched scream, I just thought 'My God!'

Geezer laughs at this. "Ronnie just amazes me. A lot of older singers just can't do it anymore, and Ronnie... literally, when he sings in the studio, you have to go out of the room, he's so bloody loud! He's got the loudest, strongest voice I've ever heard."

And he's not a big guy, is he?

"No!" he chortles. "And when we do gigs, he doesn't warm up or anything. He just goes on cold and comes out with this incredible voice."

Outside of the band, Geezer has also released three solo records. Has he anymore in mind, or is he just concentrating on Heaven And Hell right now?

"No, I'm just concentrating on Heaven And Hell at the moment," he answers. "I'm



always writing stuff anyway, it's like a hobby as well as a living to me. As soon as a new gadget comes out, because I'm a gadget freak, I'm always trying new stuff. At the moment I've been trying to write some acoustic stuff. It'll never end up on anything Sabbath related or to do with Heaven And Hell, but it might, you know, end up on something of mine."

I was going to ask if he had ever considered branching out - obviously Sabbath had a certain parameter to work in and Heaven And Hell is a continuation of that, and his solo stuff is still in the metal genre, albeit more modern sounding. It would be interesting to hear what a departure for him would be like.

"I just go through different periods. When I was writing for Heaven And Hell I did a lot of experimenting there, but I knew it wouldn't end up on that record, but maybe on something next year."

I had a vague recollection that he started out as a guitarist originally?

"I was a rhythm guitarist," Geezer replies, "because I used to love John Lennon. I used to play all the Beatles stuff and eventually, I got into Cream and Hendrix and rhythm guitar went out of fashion. I was in a band with Ozzy and we met up with Tony and Bill Ward, and ended

up switching to bass."

Did it take long to learn? "No - the first time I ever played a bass was actually at a gig. Before that, I used to just tune my guitar down! I couldn't afford a bass, but I ended up borrowing one from this bloke that only had three strings on it on the way to our first gig, so that was the first time."

And there's a very distinctive style to Geezer's playing as well.

"Yeah," he says, "but with Tony and Bill, I couldn't have asked for better tutors really. I had to get to their kind of level very fast, or I'd have been thrown out of the band. If it wasn't for how good they were, I'd probably never have done anything."

Geezer also started using a wah-wah peddle with his bass... I remember when I first heard 'N.I.B.' and I didn't know much about music, and I didn't even realise that intro was played on the bass!

Geezer laughs. "That was a leftover from my guitar days I think - I just thought I'd try it on the bass!"

Well it worked out! I'm all out of questions, so I thank him and wish him good luck with the album. He thanks me back, and I tell him to enjoy the rest of the match.

"Cheers - it's one-one at the moment."

Great - thanks for that Geezer.