

DAMAGE CONTROL

Jeff Scott Soto is a favourite of the melodic rock genre, rising to fame with Yngwie Malmsteen and Talisman, among many other ventures, including famously a stint as Journey's lead singer. His solo work has always provided a wealth of solid melodic rock material, with two notable exceptions - his funk flavoured debut solo album 'Love Parade', and his last record, 'Beautiful Mess', which incorporated a more contemporary pop sound with soul and rock mixed in. Fronting the melodic rock act W.E.T. proved that despite his talent for embracing other genres convincingly, Jeff's fanbase mostly wanted melodic rock from him. With a new solo album 'Damage Control' promising to deliver just that, James Gaden got in touch with Jeff to discuss it...

I'm delighted to have the chance to talk to you - I've been a fan of yours for ages, and 'Beautiful Mess', was my favourite thing you had ever done. I loved it from start to finish and -

Thank you - that is so refreshing to hear that! I'm sure we'll tap into that, and the content and direction of 'Damage Control'... I'm sorry to cut you off there, but it's one of the sore subjects. It's actually why I jokingly named this new album 'Damage Control'. Ironically enough, this is damage control to make up for what I left behind with 'Beautiful Mess'. 'Beautiful Mess' was very important to me, it was something I had wanted to do for the longest time but unfortunately, my general fans and some of my hardcore fans didn't really share that vision with me. Even though I felt I had broadened my horizons and opened up a whole new avenue with that record, they were all screaming and crying that I'd lost my edge, so 'Damage Control' is basically to show I've got my edge, and then some!

I did suspect that might be the case - I know I'm not with the majority with my tastes. If people asked me what my two favourite Jeff Scott Soto solo albums are, I'd reply with 'Beautiful Mess' and 'Love Parade'.

Oh wow, really? (laughs)

Yeah! I love the funky stuff, and I loved the Boogie Knights record you did... I like Talisman and really enjoyed Soul SirkUS, it's not like I dislike you doing rock by any stretch, I just like it when you go a bit further. I think you have the same problem that Glenn Hughes has, you can do a lot of different things really well, but because you made your name in the rock genre, a lot of times rock fans aren't that receptive to a switch to funk, or soul or pop or whatever.

I appreciate you saying that, and bless you for noticing! Bless you for seeing past the stereotypical 'hard rocker' that I am usually expected to be.

Well, I liked 'Beautiful Mess' that much, I bought it from iTunes when you released it independently, then it came out via Frontiers as a physical CD with two bonus tracks, and I got that version too. Did bringing it to Frontiers help you reach more people than you had independently, or were people already shunning it because it wasn't going in the 'rock' direction?

I think it was a combination of two of those things. With Frontiers, the kind of label that they are, what they represent, I think that made people more stand offish because I'd stated that wasn't the direction

especially after the success of the W.E.T. album, they said that I really had to follow up as an hard rock/AOR artist, or I would just lose everybody. So I took their advice to heed and listened to my fans, and they wanted that too. There was a lot of outcry that I had lost my edge, and that inspired me to prove I have more edge in my little finger than I have had for the past twenty five years! (laughs)

I've only got five tracks from 'Damage Control' because you're still finishing up the rest of it... but I've had a taste of what you've been doing. It's certainly back in the rock vein. The press releases are all screaming 'Jeff's return to rock!' so I was maybe expecting a guitar heavy, Talisman kind of vibe. There's hints of that, there are a lot of guitars, but you've left plenty of space too for keyboards and melodies. It's not a sonic onslaught of guitars, these are crafted rockers I think. Do you think that is a fair indication of the finished album?

Yeah, I do. The five songs you have are very much a sampler of the album. I'm really pushing the deluxe version of the album which is the fourteen song version, instead of the standard eleven song record. I went to Frontiers with the material and they didn't hear everything. I had done a wealth of material and ended up with twenty one songs, basically enough for two albums. The deal I had made was for an eleven song album and I kinda went way over that with too many songs, too many things I wanted to do. I told them I wanted to release them all, but I was married to fourteen of them! I was basically on my knees asking if they could find a way around it! (laughs) I didn't think I could cut one of them. They honoured me by offering a deluxe edition which adds three bonus tracks to the standard eleven. That's the one I want people to hear - that's like the director's cut. You know how Francis Ford Coppola has his director's cut of 'Apocalypse Now', that's the full version of how he envisioned that movie? This

So I take it Frontiers sort of pushed you back in the rock direction for 'Damage Control'?

Pretty much, they were against me doing 'Beautiful Mess' but they didn't stop me from doing it which I appreciated. I paid for that album myself and released it myself at first, and then later on they came in with it because it was a sort of minimal responsibility and outlay for them. And afterward, it was sort of an 'I told you so' situation. They said this time around,

deluxe version of 'Damage Control', those fourteen songs, from beginning to end, is what I consider to be the complete album. So I hope the fans are willing to focus on the fourteen song version over the eleven song edition.

You did the DVD 'One Night In Madrid' which was very 'Beautiful Mess' heavy in it's set, and you put together a fantastic band for that. I know you have some guests on this album like Dave Meniketti, Gary Schutt... are the guys from the Madrid gig on this record, or did you have to assemble a new band for this 'return to rock' direction?

It's absolutely the same band and everybody from the band has contributed, they all write on it, they all play on it, that band is so talented, I wanted not just their playing skills, I wanted to utilise their writing talents. I've got some major contributions from them and I couldn't have done the album without them.

I was really impressed with them on the DVD, I loved Jorge Salan's guitar playing, I thought BJ's vocals meshed so well with yours...

Oh yeah - what's amazing about those guys is they can all sing lead. In some capacity or another, they can all take the microphone and be lead singers. That was so imperative when putting a line up of my band together. Previously, I only really had Howie Simon and Gary Schutt who were strong enough vocalists. Now I have four guys who can take the mic - whatever harmony or blend I need, if somebody is doing something too complex to play and sing at the same time, there's always back up. When we do it all together, there's such a harmonious blend of talent, it's quite overwhelming for me. I'm on stage with them sometimes and I look and think 'Really?' It's too good to be true! (laughs)

One of the five tracks I've got is 'Never Ending War' which has a cool intro, so I'm guessing it's the opening song?

Actually no, though I've done a video for it. 'Look Inside Your Heart', another song I've done with Joel Hoekstra from Night Ranger, we co-wrote those two and 'Look Inside Your Heart' will be the single.

Okay - I thought 'Never Ending War' was very good, and lyrically a bit more political than your usual fare?

Yeah, it's pretty much self explanatory with the title - basically commenting on the state of the world as it is today, everything from the economical side of things, to the wars that have involved everybody from Afghanistan to Iraq... terrorism, foreclosure and people losing their homes, people out of work, the state of some of the countries going bankrupt. Everything is in there, but lyrically it's not as political as the video! The video, Gary Schutt went a little crazy on the political end! (laughs) When people see it, they'll go 'Oh Jesus Christ, another politically charged video clip!' But it actually works really well with the song. I just wanted to write something about my view regarding what is going on in the world today. We have people we look up to, who are symbols of hope, and those are the ones letting us down the most. It's kind of sad we have to leave this mess with the next generation, but that's what we do, as history proves. Hopefully we'll see the light and get through it.

One thing I thought you have carried over from 'Beautiful Mess' is you are keeping your vocals more in the lower end of your register, I think you sound richer and more impressive there. I remember you saying you did a lot of high stuff with Talisman and the lower stuff was easier on you live and you could manage most of it even if you had a cold. Did you tailor the songs deliberately for your voice at it's lower end, or was that how the material turned out naturally?

A combination of the two - I feel like... I don't want to say anything that might get misconstrued as disrespectful - for me to sing those high notes and be up in that register all the time is a bit silly. It's become a thing of comedy for me, I listen to stuff I've done in the past and it's impressive and everything, but it's almost like 'Hey, look at what I can do and how high I can do it'. It sometimes takes away from the song because you're showing off. I'd rather the vocals come across as more mature and more... not sensible, there's nothing sensible about rock and roll, it's about rebellion and doing whatever the fuck you want! But I wanted it to be more believable, more timeless. Some of the high vocal styles, it's now a niche thing - it sounds great, but it's dated, you know? I wanted something that will stand the test of time and not have me sounding too high or whiny. I want it to sound as good in twenty years as it does now.

You'll know better than most, but I think after Robert Plant, it was Steve Perry that sparked everyone singing in the stratosphere. I have no problem with Steve Perry, but for everyone who adores him, I always liked the lower register vocals like Paul Rodgers, Jimi Jamison, early Coverdale, that kind of thing. I think you have a great sounding lower range and I like you using it. You all have high notes but you don't need to use them all the time.

Exactly, I think it also gives you somewhere to go! That was one of my problems when I was younger - if you start high, you're like 'Jesus, this is quite high, where do I go now?' and the answer is 'well, higher!' (laughs) So to avoid taking it to the stratosphere to get a dramatic climax to a song, if you start in your lower range, you can build it up much better. Even on this album, there are certainly more upper register notes than on 'Beautiful Mess' but I'm not going for the really high stuff I did on the W.E.T. album. I'll keep that stuff for W.E.T. and for my solo stuff, I feel more at ease lower down.

You mentioned W.E.T. there, you're involved with them, you tour with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, you have your solo stuff - is it hard to keep your focus with you constantly moving from one thing to another, or do you prefer it because it keeps things fresh?

Absolutely the latter - I need the different sides and channels to not only keep me fresh, but keep me interested. The key word there is interested. If you put me in one category where I'm just doing one thing, I'll lose interest. I'll be bored and phoning it in. But to have chance to change styles, work with different things, add different things to my repertoire, that's what keeps me excited, even after nearly thirty years in the business.

So how long have you spent

working on 'Damage Control'? I have no idea when you will have had the time!

(Laughs) I started writing and gathering songs around summer of last year. At some points it was a bit of a rush. I just finished the T.S.O. tour not even a week and a half ago, and I had to do all my vocals then. Some tracks weren't even finished, so I was doing lead vocals to the demos and then working on the music while I was back out touring. It wasn't ideal, but I got optimum performances! A lot of musicians dream about being able to build up the track after the vocals are done, when traditionally you sing to the finished song. The musicians have to imagine the vocals at the end, it's like when you make a Star Wars movie, everything is done to a green screen and you have to work imagining that there will be space battles and light sabres and things added after you've done your bit. So these guys actually appreciated having my final vocals so they could lay their work down to that. And I actually think I got a better product as a result.

So a lot of it was done with file swapping and using the internet?

Absolutely - this album was recorded on three continents! It was done in North America, South America and Europe! Everywhere from Spain, to Sweden, to Brazil, to Florida and New York in the States. I'm in L.A. right now, finishing up. I'm aiming to have it delivered to Frontiers in, say, the next six hours. (laughs) It's amazing, I think I've got about twenty five people on this album, from all over the world. I'm so thrilled, because it all sounds like one. It's amazing, with technology today, you can do things together without physically being together - just as I'm talking to you now through Skype, to the many avenues of being able to make a record together without having to do it like the old days where you spent fifteen hours on a flight to be able to sit there in a room! (laughs)

So, you told me you are finishing the album off today, but being such a busy guy, what will you be doing next?

We're working on piecing together some tour dates and figuring out exactly when and where. I leave on Friday for Athens where I'm going to actually produce a band. Talk about last minute, I'm literally sending stuff out today to Frontiers and then in two days I'll be in Greece producing a band! That has to be done by the end of the month, then I'll have to dive into the next W.E.T. album before I start rehearsals for my next tour.

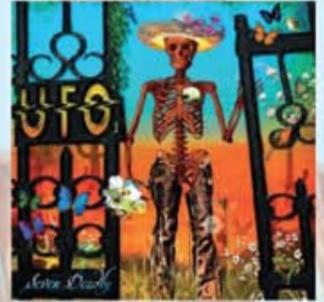
That's interesting, you saying you will be producing someone... I know you've been behind the desk with stuff you've done, but have you ever acted solely as a producer before?

I have done in the past, it's been a while. It's an honour to be back in the chair. Like you say, I've produced my own albums and I usually co-produce everything I've been a part of, be it Talisman or W.E.T., I mixed Soul SirkUS... but yeah, it's always been stuff I've been involved with artistically. It's nice to be able to step in and help guide and piece together another band entirely, who I have nothing to do with in regards to being on stage with them or anything. It really is non-stop! (laughs) But I wouldn't have it any other way. I love how that momentum just keeps my me looking at the big picture, which is to make sure I don't burn out or fade away!

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