

it is yet to come. [laughs] I wrote a song about a person from my hometown of 3,000 people in Louisiana. He was the shoe shine guy in the only barber shop in town and was shining shoes to a New Orleans “2nd line beat.” I learned a lot from this guy rhythmically and we became very good friends. He was in his mid-fifties and I was about six. I ended up bringing him to my house and played him a couple of songs. I told him, as I played the songs, that I stole this from you and he says, “You did, you did steal that from me!” [laughs] Despite that, we became really good friends and when I was 12 years old, I watched him die...a train hit him. So, I wrote a song about him and now I've been asked to write a movie. I have started the screenplay and will be turning it over to a professional script writer and let them finish it up. They are going to use the song that I wrote it about.

Wow, that is an incredible anecdote.

BK: Yes, it is. However, until this very moment, the highlight of my career was with Toto when went to The Grammys in 1983 and we were nominated for more Grammys than any one person or band had ever been before and we walked away with more awards than anyone had ever won.

That was for the Toto IV record, was it not?

BK: That is correct. It was all based on the strength of ‘Rosanna.’

You simply cannot say enough about that song.

BK: I was thinking the same thing... Oh, my God! [laughs]

Congratulations on a fantastic album and I am confident that it will resonate deeply among the fans of AOR and melodic rock.

BK: Well, thank you so much. We had tremendous amount of fun recording this CD and am very, very happy with the outcome.

Your collective performances, the songwriting and production with ‘Kimball-Jamison’ is what fans have come to expect from Frontiers Records, the premier label in supporting this style of music. Additionally, both of your careers in the music industry spans more than three decades. Please continue to record and perform, as a dedicated fanbase exists that will always support you and other like-minded artists. Any last words for the readers of Fireworks magazine?

BK: I'm pretty sure that the next duet CD Jimi and I do will be written by myself and Jimi. After listening to all of these songs and hearing some of Jimi's ideas and I have a lot of material written as well, we're already talking about another duet CD...and I have my own [record] label now...

Really? What is it titled?

BK: The name of the label is ‘Future Memories Music.’

I guess that this collaboration then stands to be an ongoing project?

BK: It will, it will.

I think all the readers will be thrilled to learn that fact. Am I assuming correctly that the next installment will be released through your record label?

BK: Yes. Jimi owes another CD to Frontiers...they will have the first option on his next solo CD. However, I really want to get my label up and running. I will be the first artist on the label but with ‘Future Memories Music,’ I will have a complete “open book” policy for all of the artists. They can come in without a lawyer or accountant and see the “books” anytime they want.

What about your upcoming recordings with Robert Sall (Work Of Art, W.E.T.)...will that be released on Frontiers or will that be on your label?

BK: That will be on Frontiers. When I signed the agreement to do the ‘Kimball-Jamison’ CD, there was a clause in the contract saying that Frontiers would have the first option on my next CD. The collaboration with Robert Sall will be that project.



Photos: Pierre Baroni

New Zealand born vocalist Jon Stevens has achieved great success during his 30 year career. Beginning as a pop singer, he topped the Australian charts with ‘Jezebel’ and his cover of ‘Montego Bay’. Further chart success continued, before Stevens formed a band in 1986, which would eventually become the popular Noiseworks. Their self titled debut album was released in 1987 and Noiseworks promptly hit number 2 on the Australian album charts and released five singles.

Follow up album ‘Touch’ hit number four and included ‘Keep Me Running’ which would end up being heard around the world when it was used in an episode of the TV smash Baywatch. In 1991 Noiseworks released ‘Love Versus Money’, their third album, which produced the classic rocker ‘Hot Chillit Woman’ - this gave Noiseworks their biggest hit single, hitting number seven in the Australian top ten.

Noiseworks came to a halt in 1992 when Stevens joined the all star Australian cast recording of ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’, giving an arguably show stealing performance as Judas, opposite Kate Ceberano, Angry Anderson and the legendary John Farnham in the leading role of Jesus. The show toured, playing for 84 nights for a total audience of over a million people. The cast album also hit number one in the Australian album charts.

Keen to capitalise on the hit, Stevens recorded a new rock orientated solo album ‘Are U Satisfied’ in 1993. The more pop orientated ‘Circle’ followed in 1997, which featured ‘Carry The Flame’, a song Stevens had written which was used as the official song for the Sydney 2000 Olympics Torch Relay.

The year 2000 also saw Jon join INXS, replacing the late Michael Hutchence. The revamped INXS toured repeatedly with Stevens fronting the group, making him an official member in 2002. More touring followed, and eventually Stevens quit, stating it was “boring” as the band had only managed to record one new song with Jon during their four year period together.

Stevens went back to recording with a new, more urban and R&B tinged solo album ‘Ain’t No Life For The Faint Hearted’ and did some TV presenting and guest judging on New Zealand Idol, as well as recording an acoustic album of Noiseworks and solo songs called ‘The Works’.

All was going well until 2008, when Jon recived a call from his doctor urging him not to exert himself. A routine check up had revealed he had blocked coronary artery and his heart was not pumping blood around his body properly. Something as simple as lifting a heavy box could have killed him, but fortunately the problem was caught in time and he had two stents surgically fitted which saved his life.

Keen to make up for lost time, Jon returned to action in 2009 and 2011 sees him release not one, but two tremendous albums in the space of just a few months - a brilliant all original album ‘Changing Times’, followed quickly by the stunning ‘Testify’, a bluesy soulful covers record. Long term fan James Gaden thought there was no better time to interview Jon, as he has never sounded better...

I have to start by telling you that ‘Are U Satisfied’ was my favourite solo album of yours - until I heard your latest two, which are just amazing! We’ll start with ‘Changing Times’ - you had to have heart surgery a couple of years ago - had you started this album before that happened, or has making this been part of your convalescence?

Thank you! Yeah, prior to me going into hospital, we had started recording stuff, the nucleus of it was there. Then I went into surgery and it just took me out completely! (laughs) I was out of the loop and was thinking about just, basically, living, y’know? Family, friends, all that stuff - life. I spent a month in hospital, had a few complications like infection and stuff, I had a pretty rough time for a bit. Then I had a three month recovery from that, and during that three months, I started getting stronger, things started going through my head. I started getting ideas for songs coming to me again, and when I felt good I started working on the album again. Songs like ‘No Surrender’, the song ‘Changing Times’, ‘Closer To God’, those songs were ones that were about taking stock of your life - something a near death experience makes you do.

Definitely. I was really impressed not only with the quality of the songs, but it has a pretty contemporary sound to it, yet it still sounds like you. Was that something you tried to achieve, or did it just happen naturally?

I stuck with my live band of musicians, just a four piece, keeping it simple, there’s no keyboards on the album. It’s just me and Danny playing the guitars. I just wanted to keep it really raw and dynamic - playing these songs live, they just live and breathe even more than on the record. We road tested pretty much all of them live before we recorded them properly for the album. I went back to basics and did what we did with Noiseworks - write songs and go out and play them. If the audience gravitated to them and they lived in that live environment, then they made it to the recording process.

I got the album digitally, so I was wondering who you wrote the songs with?

Just with my band, I wrote the lyrics, and the band would work on ideas the music side with me. We went up to Byron Bay to Rockinghorse studios, we took two separate trips and just spent a few days there, getting drunk and playing music! (laughs) Pretty much the whole album, the embryo of it, came out of those two sessions. It’s fairly secluded up there, our phones didn’t work, we didn’t have the internet, so we had no choice but to play. No distractions - just music and getting drunk. It was great fun actually!

When the album was done, you gave it away for free for a short period of time on your website, which is how I got it. Why did you do that?

Because, being independent, everything has changed with the internet. I just thought that now it was finished,

what was I going to do, ask people to pay for it? Nah, I’ll just give it away, what the hell. I’m so proud of that record, I just wanted people to hear it. I love the songs on it and I wanted people to hear it and perhaps tell their friends. That was the idea, I couldn’t be bothered with the whole trying to sell it thing, because people download it anyway! It worked quite well, because it was free, a lot of people checked it out and thought it was cool.

Then I changed management, did a deal signing with Universal, and they said to me ‘Well, what would you like to do?’ I told them I wanted to do a bluesy, soul record. I wanted to do some of my favourite tracks from that genre and they said ‘Cool!’ I thought we’d be doing it next year, and they asked if I could have it out for Christmas! (laughs) So I said sure, they said ‘off you go, do what you want’. Okay, great! So I did - I spent about eighteen months on ‘Changing Times’ writing, funding, mixing, sorting out the artwork, I did everything on that record. When the soul thing came up, the thought of having to put everything together again - oh, I couldn’t be bothered. Such a head fuck, y’know? So we talked about producers and John Fields’ name came up. He’s great, so I hooked up with John and I just had to be the singer. It was a whole different thing, I could do what I wanted musically, but not have to be involved with all the other stuff. It was a totally different feeling, making ‘Testify’.

When I heard that album, I was floored by how good that record is. In all honesty, when you said you were doing a soul covers album, I groaned. Jimmy Barnes and many others have done this, and while I thought you’d have done a great job, did we really need you adding your versions of the standards? But you went the other way, you picked lesser known songs - it’s was so much better for it!

Thanks mate! Yeah, I never wanted to do a record with all the usual hits - and misses, on them! It has been done to death and I just thought I could do something different. There’s a generation of people who maybe aren’t familiar with some of these soul things, they hear it and think it’s a Jon Stevens record. If I put ‘River Deep Mountain High’ on there, it’s part of mankind’s DNA so they immediately think ‘covers album’. It was a case of finding songs that felt good to me and that were a bit of a challenge. I’ve been playing Sam Cooke’s ‘A Change Is Gonna Come’ for the last couple of years in my live set. I’ve actually opened with it quite a lot, because my version of it, the live one, is different to the one on record. I’d start with just the vocal and the chord, and it used to floor people. It got people’s attention fast, because I didn’t come blazing out, hitting them over the head with some rocking song. That was the catalyst of what direction to take, so then I had to find other songs that hit that sweet spot in my voice.

So you just narrowed the selection down with the simple criteria of making sure it’s not too well known and was right for your vocal range?

Yeah, pretty much. ‘Testify (I Wanna)’ has a great groove, that was the second one I picked for the album. Once I got into it, I got a real buzz. Working with John, he said ‘Oh, we’ll get some brass in...’ and I said no, I didn’t want any of that shit, I wanted it basic, just a rhythm section, a little bit of organ and piano - if I can’t play the shit live, I ain’t doing it. So that was the other criteria - I’m performing all the time here in Australia, and I’m a great believer that when you go to see somebody, I want to hear what I know with a real band, no backing tracks, no miming, just the real deal. It’s so much better and more energetic that way. You get a full frontal attack, a performance. And that’s pretty much how I record, it’s all performance based.

I loved the fact that you cut the record quickly, and it’s got a really warm sound, it sounds like a soul record.

Yeah, twelve days actual recording time! It was pretty amazing, but I think that was down to the spirit of the thing. Once we got started, the spirit took over. It pretty much made itself! I’ve done enough records and spent enough time in a studio to know if something feels good, you run with it. You can’t second guess yourself, you can’t worry about perfection of sound, you just get everyone going and capture the moment. And I’m really proud that we managed to achieve that.

There’s three new songs on there, but like you

said, with the covers being lesser known, I was only familiar with a few - the new ones were so well done, I couldn’t pick out which ones were covers and which were originals. Who did you write those with?

The first one, ‘All Or Nothing’, I actually wrote that twenty years ago. I wrote that with with one of your fellow Englishmen, Kevin Savigar. He featured on ‘Are U Satisfied’ way back when. We were working together in his studio and he gets sent ‘The List’. I’d never seen ‘The List’, it’s this thing that people talk about, it’s a list with all these amazing famous artists on it, and what kind of songs they were looking for. His publisher sends him ‘The List’ - I’d never heard of it before! I said ‘Wow, this is amazing Kev, is this what you do all day? You get this list and write songs for people?’ and he said ‘Yeah, pretty much’. I thought it was amazing - anyway, I saw Ray Charles’ name on there, so I said ‘Stop everything Kev, Ray Charles wants a song, we’re gonna write him a song!’ We ended up writing two songs for Ray, ‘All Or Nothing’ and ‘Up And Around’. ‘Up And Around’ is a sort of autobiographical lyric about Ray. Anyway, we sent them over to Richard Perry who was producing Ray at the time, and he cut the song. Sadly, it didn’t make the final record, but suffice to say, when it came to doing ‘Testify’, one of the first things to come to my mind was ‘All Or Nothing’ - it belongs on this record!

The other two songs... ‘You Can’t Do Anything To Hurt Me’, I wrote that with John Fields and Vanessa Amorosi. That was a line Vanessa had - ‘you can’t do anything to hurt me, more than I’ve done to myself...’ I thought that just summed me up, with regards to what I’ve been through. It’s a real soulful song and autobiographical for me - when it all came together, it just felt right being on this record.



The last original one is ‘Be Like Me’ - that’s done as a sort of James Brown thing, with that groove. Then it has that piss-take lyric! (laughs) It’s all about ‘You wanna be a rock star, you wanna be like me!’ That came about because, over here, I’m pretty sure it’s the same for you in the UK, we have these shows that discover talent and the winners become instant stars. Whilst some great talent has come out of this scenario, I’m old school, I’m about paying your dues, spending time learning your craft. I think becoming successful that way is a lot more satisfying than ‘Just add water - instant rock star’. I had a situation here in Australia where a certain young whippersnapper “rock star” was actually a bit fucking rude and obnoxious in my presence. I just laughed, he knows nothing, y’know? Who was he kidding? So that song is basically just about that, taking the piss out of him.

You mentioned Vanessa there - one of the standout tracks for me is the duet with her on ‘Private Number’. Did you have her in mind when you chose to cover that song?

Actually, no, I was thinking about another girl, Kelly Wolfgramm! She’s from Melbourne and she was in New York and going to be passing through L.A. I told her about the song and asked her if she’d come in and do it with me as a duet. Anyway, she got off at LAX, she was only in town for one or two days and she ended up catching up with a mate, and got pissed! (laughs) She ended up calling

me saying ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I got too pissed to come down to where you were recording!’ So I said ‘Oh, okay, too bad, never mind, whatever... bitch.’ (laughs) Vanessa had been in Australia and she arrived back the next day, she came down to the studio so I asked her if she wanted to come in and sing on the track, she said yeah, and it really worked out. She was fantastic.

I’ve noticed on your Facebook page, and all over the internet in general, people are really enjoying ‘Testify’. It seems clear to me you enjoyed doing it, so do you think you might do another album in this style, or do you think one is enough?

I think maybe I could do another, depending on the songs. When we talked about doing this one, there’s so many songs that are untapped. Avoiding the clichéd stuff that everyone has done, there’s so many other songs. So yeah, I’ll look at delving into it again because I got so much pleasure out of making this record. I really enjoyed where it took me vocally - I’m actually in the process of doing a new Noiseworks record as we speak too, so it’s been flat out this last year. That’s a specific thing, it’s Noiseworks the band, it’s rock, and I’m singing like I always did with Noiseworks. With the soul stuff, I sing differently because it evokes a different feeling. I can be a little bit more... vocally gymnastic? I don’t know - I don’t like that term really, but... that more soulful singing - there’s more feel in it.

You can tell, I’ve got all your solo stuff, all the Noiseworks stuff and I think this is the best thing you’ve done. I’m also delighted to hear Noiseworks are back - do you have a release date in mind for that, or have you only just started?

Wow, thank you! For Noiseworks, we’ve got all the tracks down, we’ve just started on the vocals, I’ve got four tracks finished. Because of my schedule and the other boys’ schedule, getting together in the studio when I’m ready to sing, that’s the key. But we have four songs down and we’ve set a deadline for ourselves to look at having it finished by the end of January. However, there’s no pressure on us. That’s the big upside of not being signed to anyone, we’re realistic about what we’re doing, we’re just working on making a great record for ourselves. We’re all very excited about what we have so far.

With you saying that Noiseworks are not signed at the moment, are you going to stay that way as you have experience of being independent?

I’m not sure - I think with Noiseworks, we’ll probably go to Sony and see if a deal is right, if they want us. They have our back catalogue and we have a long history with them. With Noiseworks, I think we’re the kind of band that needs to be everywhere, especially if we have a great record. I think a major label is still good for that side of things, but the whole independent thing, there’s pros and cons. Signing up with Universal, I don’t have to worry about anything, I know things are happening. As for if it takes a hold on the public’s consciousness - I don’t really care! (laughs) I just want people to have the chance to hear it, so put the machine behind it and give people the opportunity to check it out. There are so many choices out there, if people don’t know you’re in the game, how the hell are you going to get anywhere?

But anyway, we’ll see - I’d love to come back to London. Shi! I’d love to play over there again.

I’d love to see you in London - when you replied to me on Facebook and told me I should get myself over for a gig, as big a fan of yours as I am, it’s quite a treat!

(Laughs) Yeah, it is quite a treat! Speaking of London, there’s a song on the ‘Testify’ album called ‘Open To Ideas’, it’s an obscure Faces song written Ian McLagan, Rod Stewart and Ronnie Wood. I just sent it over there last week, to a mate of mine, Chris Kinsey. He produced Noiseworks’ ‘Touch’ album and he produced a load of Stones albums. I asked him if he could send my version to Ronnie - I’m waiting to find out what he thinks, I’d love to hear his opinion! Ronnie wrote it in 1972 and I don’t think he even fucking remembers it! (laughs)

For UK readers, ‘Testify’ is available as an import and is highly recommended - also visit YouTube where you can see an album sampler and view the Electronic Press Kit for the record.