

SOWING THE SEEDS

It's quite amazing when you consider that vocalist and guitarist Lindsey Buckingham has co-written the ninth biggest selling album of all time, in the form of Fleetwood Mac's legendary 'Rumours' record. Only his second record with the band, he penned three songs, including the huge hit 'Go Your Own Way' as well as a co-write - the contributions he and then partner Stevie Nicks had cannot be overlooked, as Fleetwood Mac became worldwide superstars. What is sometimes overlooked is the tasteful and skilled solo work that Buckingham has put out over the years. Releasing solo albums every so often, which showed off his skills as a songwriter, vocalist and guitarist with a distinctive finger picking style, he has continued to hone his craft alongside his work in Fleetwood Mac. With his sixth album 'Seeds We Sow', he has created a record that takes his love of recording songs with just vocals and guitar and meshes it with a fuller sound, to create one of his most accomplished efforts yet. James Gaden talked to Lindsey to find out all about it...

I'm impressed with your new album, I must say. It's a very strong record.

Thank you! It's funny - I didn't really plan on making a record this last year, Fleetwood Mac had just gotten off the road and the time opened up... so I thought I'd better fill it! (laughs) So, y'know, maybe one of the reasons it worked out so well was that I didn't have any agenda going in, it was kind of an off-hand thing. I think that a lot of stuff that I have been

working on over the last seven years or so, especially solo, all just came together in this one place.

That's what struck me - I thought this album sounds like a bridge between the sparser music of 'Under The Skin' and the fuller sound of 'Out In The Cradle'... I think it sits nicely between those two records.

Yeah - that's exactly where I think it should be placed. It does seem to harken back to 'Out Of The Cradle' a little bit, which is a good thing, a lot of people seem to like that one!

I noticed that throughout your career you've been very adept at taking personal things that have happened to you and crafting them into songs... was there any specific theme or inspiration behind the material on this album?

It's funny, the way lyrics have evolved for me, in terms of the process,

the approach. It's gotten kinda a little more elusive in a way, I think it's growth. I don't want to say my lyrics have become more poetic, but I do think they are more open to interpretation. Sometimes I'll write it and even I'm not entirely sure what it all means until I start putting it together, then I might have a finished lyric and think 'Oh yeah, now I know what that means!' (laughs) But I think when I did look at the lyrics collectively when this project was done, the thread that seemed to run through was to do with actions having consequences and the choices you make, while not always easy to define or to judge in the moment, given the perspective of time, sometimes quite a bit of time, you can see what is good in your own life, in your relationship, what is good or bad in the world. It's all down to this collection of choices we have all made in our lives. So there's kind of a karmic theme there, that's where the title comes from, sowing seeds... those come back later on in your life, be it good or bad. When I look back over the last ten or even twenty years, the way I've tried to work the big machine - Fleetwood Mac, with the small machine - my solo career, it's like a big movie scenario versus a small independent film mentality that goes with my solo projects... the two would seem to be opposed but in a larger sense they tend to support each other. In order to do that, you have to keep your wits about you and make choices based on a certain set of values. I guess I was able to feel that the place that I've arrived at as an artist, as a person with my family and everything, it all seems a lot of my choices were for the good. So I guess that's what is reflected on the album.

When you come to make a solo album, do you create a central theme before you start, like the karmic one on this record, or do you just write the songs and let them dictate the shape?

Well, it depends... you just mentioned 'Under The Skin' and when I did that, I basically said to the band that I wanted to do two solo albums more or less back to back, wanted to tour both of them and that they shouldn't bother me for about three years. Just leave me alone! (laughs) For 'Under The Skin', that did have a very specific idea, which was to try to do something very sparse, acoustic and intimate. This particular album... as I say, I think the only thing I committed myself to this time was taking on as much responsibility for the process myself as I've ever taken, which included playing almost everything, mixing it, engineering it all... that was like a painting process, building up layers. But no, on this album I didn't have a specific idea in mind, other than the approaches I have arrived at over the last ten years or so. One of those is taking one or two guitars at the most and having that be pretty much the bulk of the track, but still putting production values onto it. That's something which I've been very interested in for a number of years and I keep refining and expanding on it.

I'll ask about your production values in a minute, but when you said about taking control of all the instruments, is that because you prefer to do it, or is it just easier to play it yourself as oppose to trying to get another musician to capture what is in your head?

I think I've come to see it as a valid process. You could argue 'Man, this guy's a control freak!' and there probably is an element of that in there! (laughs) But when I look at the way Fleetwood Mac works, I'll go back to the analogy of making movies. With Fleetwood Mac, you need the script, or in musical terms you need to bring in what is basically a tangible song that they can listen to and take to the next level. The choices in Fleetwood Mac tend to be more verbalised, it's a more conscious process getting from point A to point B and quite honestly, in the band it can be a political process too. On the other side, there's the independent film, which is me going into my studio alone, spending six or seven hours a day in there... I'm like a painter, one on one with my work, and the process becomes more intimate and almost meditative. You can allow it to become more abstract and go in with a more open mind to what you might end up with, let your subconscious emerge. The work tends to take on it's own persona and life and starts leading you in directions. That doesn't really happen in a group situation because it's not one on one. I see them as two distinct ways of approaching songs and I think there is room for both.

I enjoyed the title track, because I heard it first online, but one of my favourites was 'One Take', I thought that was excellent. In amongst all those finger picked acoustic guitars on the album you just let fly with a couple of fantastic electric guitar solos!

Thank you! Yeah, that was one of those little barbs that looks at the world, I enjoyed that one.

I think the album has a very strong, clear sound - have you done it digitally? Are you someone who has welcomed the digital era with open arms or are you more old school?

I didn't do it analogue, I do have Pro-Tools, but I must admit I still have an old Sony digital reel to reel machine which I used quite a bit. Technology - it is what it is. I think it's a case of what you do with what you've got. It's hard to be objective about which way is the best, if there is a best way, but I was pleased how it turned out. It was nice to go in with a certain off-handedness when laying things down, without thinking 'I've gotta kill on this one' and then playing it back and have it come out so well. That was a nice surprise for me.

With the song 'Seeds You Sow', you gave that away free on your website as a precursor to the album launch. Did you feel you had to do that in this day and age, or do you like the fact the internet offers that chance for your fans to come to your website and hear something early?

In America, we've put this album out ourselves, I did make some forays into seeing what interest there might be from larger labels... what few there are left! (laughs) I spoke to a friend, Rob Cavallo, who I've known for years who was in a good position at Warner Brothers, but I realised that he couldn't change anything, the system would change him. I talked with my manager and we felt it was just too weird out there for an album like this, for someone like me, on a label. In the spirit of that, to put the record out ourselves, we could do it on our own terms and letting people hear something early allows you to loosen the formula up a little bit. Certainly using the website for that, we completely re-did it for when the album was done, that resonated with the spirit of how the album was going out, it seemed like the right thing to do.

I think with somebody like yourself, you have your own fan base who keep up to date with what you're doing and I don't think any of the, like you say, few major labels left could or would offer you anything you couldn't do yourself at this stage of your career.

It's true - for someone who is now in their sixties like I am, they'd look at me and think "Well..." There's a kind of built in momentum with my fan base, you're right. That comes with a built in fear of getting too involved, but I think people had enough respect for me to look at me, especially to the big companies, they're so beholden to the boardroom mentality where everything is about the bottom line, nobody at these labels have the kind of autonomy that I saw when I started. They can't make their own decisions for themselves anymore and I think they had enough respect for me to know they wouldn't be doing the kind of job I feel the record deserves. And that's fair enough.

The other big upside of doing it yourself is there are no label bosses asking for a specific style of track or wanting something more Fleetwood Mac-esque... or like when you were doing the original version of 'Gift Of Screws' and the label asked if they could actually take a bunch of the songs for inclusion on what became Fleetwood Mac's 'Say You Will' album.

Yeah, I can go all the way back to my first solo album in '81... Warner Brothers always kinda drew a blank on my solo work. (laughs) I always got the impression they were thinking 'Let's get back to what's really important!' (laughs). Part of the irony of trying to work specifically with the left side of the palette... it's funny, we did 'Tusk' back in 1979 which did represent almost a first solo album, but the band were very engaged in it at the time. Then it received a bit of a backlash because it didn't sell what 'Rumours' had sold. This edict came down that we weren't to go as far to the left anymore. Had all of us in the band wanted the same things for

the same reasons, then I guess I probably would never have made any solo albums. But that left side of the palette was left hanging out there and needed a way to be expressed. Warner Brothers were never too big on my solo work... jump to three or four years ago, when I did two solo records back to back, I did get a call about 'Gift Of Screws' because they said that was just the kind of album they wanted from me... because it was more Fleetwood Mac-cy! But even then, they still didn't do a damn thing for it. So putting this one out myself, I figure I can't do any worse! It'll be intriguing to see how it plays out.

Doing it yourself, you've got your best interests at heart, whereas a big label will always prioritise Fleetwood Mac, the big money maker. They might not want you to do too well on your own in case it impacts on that.

Yeah, and they have a lot on their plate. Rob Cavallo was telling me the numbers they have to make quarterly and that was one of the reasons he didn't feel too good about signing me. Oh, Rob, Rob, Rob... just get me in a studio, dammit! (laughs) But what are you gonna do?

Exactly - to get away from the depressing business and back to the music, the last track on here is 'She Smiled Sweetly' which is an old Rolling Stones number... you've covered early Stones stuff before on other albums. What is it about that period that you connect with?

There's 'that period' - the covers that I've done have all been from around that same 'Brian Jones in his prime' period, if you wanna put a label on it. It was the Rolling



Stones when they were most influenced by the Beatles, most influenced by Brian Jones and the European elements he brought into the mix. I found that to be just a really strong time for them - not just the obscure tracks like 'She Smiled Sweetly' but the singles from that period, 'Ruby Tuesday' or something... clearly the product of someone other than Keith Richards coming in and playing. I just think that period has a lot of hidden gems that are relatively obscure but I've always held them dear, and 'She Smiled Sweetly' was one of them. That's the only song that wasn't written brand new for this album. It's been around for a few years waiting for a home.

Yeah - didn't you originally have it down to go on 'Gift Of Screws'?

It nearly was, and I'd thought about putting it out even before that! (laughs) Bouncing around for one of those solo albums that got folded up into being a Fleetwood Mac album... it's been around for a while, about fifteen years I'd guess.

When you start writing songs, are you the sort of artist who always writes guitar parts and builds songs around them, or do you sometimes have a lyric or melody line come to you and you have to write around that?

It's usually a little guitar thing that sets of a notion of a melody - it doesn't take much to get started. You can let the imagination go and relinquish control, let the process lead you and come out the other side. The writing and recording tend to happen roughly at the

same time. It's hard to distinguish, I'm not a Bob Dylan who goes into a studio with the song written and all the lyrics done on paper. I was actually thinking of trying to write on the piano again, because I haven't done that for years and I was curious to see what might happen. I'm sure I'd end up with something quite different, but I haven't gotten around to that yet.

I wanted to ask you about your vocals - you have a distinctive voice anyway, but I think there's a very specific style to how your voice sounds on this record, some parts are little more than whispers, and the effect of it doesn't sound like anything else I can think of. Do you have something you use, or some trick you do to achieve that?

Not really - I think part of it will be whatever EQ I'm putting on it for that particular song. I'm not a big fan of plate echo, I do like repeat echos, I've certainly used that on some of the acoustic guitar pieces and I've probably done it on the vocals. But there's nothing specific I can put my finger on though, I think it's hard for me to be objective about what I'm doing there.

I've been told there will be a DVD to follow this album?

Right - 'Songs From The Small Machine'. Originally it was gonna be released with the album, but I think it'll come about a month, maybe six weeks after the album. It was a very strange process because I got together with my band and we rehearsed for six weeks. We worked up the show we were going to perform, because it contained a lot of new material from this album. We went to a theatre in L.A. and filmed the show. We played that one night, after six weeks of rehearsal, then broke for three months. (laughs). Sort of strange! So now we're back rehearsing so we can brush up, and we have a new front of house guy so we're working with him. But it's been a fairly convoluted process in order to hit the road. But the DVD turned out really well, I'm really pleased with it.

I'll look forward to seeing it! With that in mind, and with the amount of work you put into your records, what gives you more of a thrill... creating the albums so you have a tangible finished product, or playing the songs to an audience?

Oh boy, that's tough! It's apples and oranges, but I'd say that there is something about the live performance, even though there is a repetition to it, I do enjoy the live show. It's a rite of passage every night and usually, by the time you're done with the set you feel the best you've felt all day. You're shared this thing with a few thousand people, shared it with your band... and I enjoy that because the guys I go out on tour with, I have a real camaraderie with... and it's a lot more scaled down from what Fleetwood Mac does, it feels more centred. I have to say I do enjoy that.

Finally, speculation has been floating around about this for a while - is the Buckingham/Nicks album finally going to be officially released on CD?

Stevie has an album out right now as well, and when she was working on it I spent quite a bit of time over at her house... probably more time with her off the road than I had spent in ages. It's so funny with Stevie and me, this is someone I've known since high school and obviously we've had a fairly difficult story to play out together at times, and you'd think by now there would be nothing left to work out, but apparently there is and I find that to be incredibly sweet. The thing between she and myself is still a work in progress and we did talk about it... I think the reason that album never made it to CD was down to inertia. We have talked about the possibility of putting it out, maybe sometime next year or the not too distant future, and you could put some bonus tracks on there, re-release it properly. We haven't set a timeline or made a decision yet, but I think it would be appropriate. Maybe we could figure out a way to do some shows, just the two of us - that would be a nice change of pace too. So nothing is set in stone by any means, but things will happen next year... I'll be shocked if there isn't some Fleetwood Mac action next year. We'll have to wait and see!