

RETROSPECTIVE

LOOKING BACK ON CLASSIC ALBUMS WITH THE ONES WHO MADE THEM

This issue's Retrospective zeroes in on a short-lived but powerful act called Chequered Past. Featuring an all star line up of ex-Silverhead/Detective singer Michael Des Barres, former Sex Pistol Steve Jones, ex-Iggy Pop bass player Tony Fox Sales and two members of Blondie, Nigel Harrison and Clem Burke, the group had serious pedigree - along with serious addiction problems. A band that possessed a fearsome energy live, they took to the studio to record their one and only album and headed off to support Duran Duran on tour. When Duran Duran's Andy Taylor was looking for a singer to replace Robert Palmer in The Power Station, he approached Des Barres, who performed with them at Live Aid and took off on a world tour - not to mention carving out a career as a successful TV and film actor as well. The result meant Chequered Past got a little lost in the shuffle, but James Gaden holds the opinion the album still stands up - so he got in touch with a member of genuine rock aristocracy, Marquis Michael himself, for the full story.

As I mentioned when I approached you for this interview Michael, I started a section in Fireworks about albums I think were criminally overlooked and one of the ones I selected is Chequered Past, I think that definitely fits the bill.

Fantastic - I love the phrase "criminally overlooked", I think that's absolutely hilarious... because we were overlooked and we were certainly criminal! (laughs)

Shortly after Detective ended, you issued your solo album 'I'm Only Human' and the year after we had Chequered Past. Did you instigate the forming of the band, did you prefer being in a band than a solo artist?

Well, when I did the tour of England in '81, supporting the Mike Chapman produced 'I'm Only Human', Nigel (Harrison), who, as you know, is my long time collaborator, was in my band for that tour. It was such an amazing experience on that tour, because I was literally facing my past. I hadn't been back in years, since I left in '74. We bumped into so many extraordinary people that we started to joke that one was coming face to face with one's chequered past. I'd met up with Steve Jones, the Generation-X boys..., my first agent, my first lover who was a dancer with Pan's People, the dance troupe from *Top Of The Pops*... I was faced with the spectres of my past. So we created an idea of 'Michael Des Barres and his chequered past'.

When we came back to America, I think we went to New York and I knew Steve, because I had flown to San Francisco to see the final Sex Pistols gig because, I realised, the jig was up when they arrived. We formed a relationship, his girlfriend suggested we play a gig at the Paris Lounge and it was Frank Infante on guitar, Clem and Nigel, along with me and Steve. We played and it was packed and great, we opened with a cover by the Go-Go's, we did 'Vacation'. It drove the punk people insane because they were so shocked, with Steve Jones wired out on heroin and a drunken band, playing the Go-Go's. It was too much for them to handle! But you had to love it! So we went back to L.A. where Steve moved in with me, Pamela and my kid and we formed the band. That was the genesis of it.

You mentioned punk there, you'd done glam with Silverhead and classic seventies rock with Detective - did you have a specific direction you wanted pursue when the band formed?

I think the direction was to go under the skirts of teenage America.

(Laughs) Sounds good! Were any other musicians considered for the line up before the quintet was settled on?

You know what James, in all honesty, it was never a serious thing. It was instinctive. I've never done anything with a note of seriousness attached to it, it's always been pretty instinctive. The minute I start to think about something James, I usually over-think it. So I avoid thinking as much as I can - I'm not being glib, I'm telling the truth. When you deal with something so chaotic and spontaneous and unconventional as rock and roll, if you calculate it, it will sound that way. That was our downfall, ultimately. Even though I love the album, it was a calculation. That band instinctively play live, so the personnel wasn't a cast of sorts, it was something that just occurred. It manifested, y'know?

So it was the power of the band live that proved elusive to capture in the studio?

Yeah, exactly. That's the problem with most recordings, especially today, when you are recording in such an unnatural, digital manner. My new band, we literally recorded four songs recently in one day. I had just read Keith Richard's book and he told how the Stones recorded sixteen songs in four days and six of them were number ones! I've always preferred to do it quick and Chequered Past were signed to EMI, who insisted we use a particular producer and it was a calculated record. Especially with Steve and Clem Burke, they had been freed from the bonds of their old bands so they wanted to express themselves in a natural way. Live, it was a very, very exciting band. But on record, it lacks that spontaneity that drove that bunch of guys.

You mentioned the producer there, which was Michael James Jackson. As the record company wanted him, did he have a quite hands on approach?

To be perfectly honest with you, the band was riddled with substance abuse problems. It was a very drug orientated band, except for me, I had just gotten sober. I came back from London in 1981 a complete wreck. I looked at myself in the mirror and I saw Iggy Pop's mom. I thought fuck this! Vanity got me sober. You can imagine being in an environment with the amount of drugs being consumed around me. It was very difficult to corral that group into any kind of discipline required to make an album. There were many rock and roll clichés flying around the universe at that point!

When I looked at the credits on the record, everything on the record save for one cover version, was written or co-written by yourself. Did you take control of the writing because the band were a bit out of it, or did you have songs before you even started?

I always have songs. They were amazing musicians and I'd come in with stuff and it would be de-constructed within moments. It was a very collaborative bunch and when we were focussed, it was almost transcendental. Just amazing - you get Clem Burke and Steve Jones in the same room, it'll explode. And it did! As I say, on some nights, in front of a packed rock and roll club, it levitated. But when it was a case of showing up at 3:30, booked in the studio for seven hours, the minute things became planned, it lost that chaotic spontaneity and that was the last thing that benefited us.

You mentioned you like to lay stuff down quickly, and that sounds like it would have suited Chequered Past, so how long did you spend in the studio?

No time at all - it was done very, very fast. The guys could execute their parts very quickly and I've never... except for Detective of course, because we were so indulged by Led Zeppelin and we recorded the album twice, spending over a million dollars, taking three months to get the drums down... (laughs) What were we like! The golden hey-day of excess and indulgence! So from then I've always worked quickly, and I loved that we did the Waylon Jennings song 'Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way'. That was really fun and the way Steve played on that really rocked. It exists in it's own vacuum and it's taken on new life as things do in this internet age. It's a



pretty good document of where we were at then. I'd have loved to have recorded that live.

There is a little bit of live footage of Chequered Past on YouTube, there's a performance of 'Underworld' which is pretty explosive and a bit more dangerous than the album version!

Yeah, I know the clip, it was a good indication of the madness of it, and we got crazier than that! It was a TV show we did, but in a club, I cannot tell you what it was like. The band had the fire like The Stooges or MC5, it was more in that direction.

You mentioned the Waylon Jennings track, that was one I wanted to highlight because I thought it was fantastic, although somewhat left-field in terms of choice. How did that appear on the record?

Well, 'left-field' was tattooed on our asses! (laughs) So, anything that was obtuse, obscure, a bit mad - we'd do it! That song, it evoked Steve's ethic which was 'I'll tell you what punk is, you don't tell me what punk is'. He had that ideal that he lived and breathed and that was enough, he didn't have to follow any rules you lay down. He loved that song and it's a simple song, two chords, and the theme of the song, 'Are you sure Hank done it this way?' That appealed to us, how we worked.

I'm only in my thirties so I've come to follow your career completely out of sync. I first heard you on backing vocals on Gene Simmons' solo album. I thought your voice was great and was told you had fronted Silverhead and Detective. When Rock Candy reissued Detective's first album, I got it and absolutely loved it. One of my colleagues here told me to try Chequered Past as they were well worth checking out, and I fell in love with that album too!

Wow, that is fantastic, it's so interesting to hear of younger men your age discovering these bands I was a part of. It fascinates me, because those records captured real moments in time and I'm very proud of Chequered Past. When you make an album yourself, you get caught up in the emotion as oppose to the actual product. You tend to think of it more emotionally as oppose to how it sounded, so through people like you, and your colleagues who say 'Listen to this track, listen to that track' who can listen objectively, you can say 'Fuck!' (laughs) I don't wish to denigrate the work in any way when I say it lacked the spontaneity, objectively I know it's great rock and roll music, emotionally I thought we were better live.

Chequered Past supported Duran Duran, and it was those shows that led to your invitation to take over from Robert Palmer in The Power Station, right?

Exactly right.

Did that invitation scupper plans for a second Chequered Past album? Or with you saying it wasn't serious, or put together to fit a set agenda, had you not thought that far ahead?

No, we hadn't. It was a one off album, after we had finished it the substance abuse was completely out of hand and impossible to control. I had written 'Obsession' with Holly Knight that year and I decided to take a few months out to have fun. I was out in Texas with my friend

Don Johnson who was shooting a movie there and I got a call saying 'Come to New York, there's a band who need a singer, they want you'. That was that, The Power Station was the next six, seven months of my life. By the time that was done, Chequered Past had splintered off into different directions. Blondie had reformed, et cetera.

After The Power Station, you did your solo album 'Somebody Up There Likes Me'. That's another of your records I really like - in fact, I was sorely tempted to do the feature on that but I elected to go for Chequered Past instead. I thought some of the material from 'Somebody Up There Likes Me' was in the same sort of vein as Chequered Past - if those guys had taken that material I think it would have sounded quite at home on the Chequered Past record.

Yeah, I think all the records I'm involved with have a thematic similarity. 'Somebody Up There Likes Me' - I liked it, that was a good record. We had some great players on there, and I think it was ignored primarily because the label went down just before it was released. It's the same old bullshit James, you know the story, you might be in your thirties but I can tell you know the way it works. If nobody at the label is doing anything for the record, forget it, it'll die. I had The Tower Of Power on that record, I had Jonesy on there, Andy Taylor, an amazing production by Bob Rose, I really enjoyed doing it. And yes, there's a thread running through it that ties it to Chequered Past, there's a thread that ties all my shit together.

And on top of all that, you even had Melanie Griffith in the video for 'Money Don't Come Easy'.

Yes, and that can't hurt can it? (laughs)

Not at all! Again that's the wonder of the internet. I'd never had seen that video if it wasn't for YouTube, but there it is, preserved in digital glory to be called upon at any time!

Yeah, it would have been buried. Melanie is an old friend, I thought it would be great to do a video with her and mercifully, she agreed. It was really fun.

On the subject of the internet, I read on there that when Freddie Mercury died, Queen approached you to replace him and you turned them down. Is that true?

It sounds so trite to answer that question - those are shoes that would be very difficult to fill.

Oh, absolutely. It was one of those things - as a Queen fan, when I have heard people mentioned, some of them sounded plausible, some of them sounded ridiculous. I personally wasn't thrilled at the appointment of Paul Rodgers to front the recent tours, but I went and he made me a believer and I completely re-evaluated my opinion of him. He wasn't trying to be Freddie, he stayed true to himself and did a great job. With you, I think you have the flamboyance and your own style and your own career path to have been a contender, but I wasn't sure - some of it sounded like wild speculation.

Yes, there is a theatrical thread that would have continued, but you can't replace anybody like Freddie. To me, this whole thought of replacing someone in a band is an anathema - you cannot duplicate greatness. It's great because it's different. To 'replace' someone with such supreme genius as Freddie, it's unthinkable. I got the impression it was a 'let's carry on because we're pushing forty and we need to hit the road to get away from our wives' kind of rock and roll. Fuck that! (laughs)

Regarding flamboyant live performances, another thing I found on YouTube was a clip of a song called 'Soul City' that you did with your Free Love Foundation project. I thought that was absolutely superb - did you actually record any of those shows or songs?

Yeah, we did, I was so into it, I loved it. When I first began it was all about Otis Redding and Wilson Pickett. That was my thing, along with Muddy Waters, Little Richard - and Oscar Wilde! (laughs) But soul music has influenced everything I've ever done, like it did Terry Reid, or Steve Marriott, or Rod Stewart, or anybody who sings

the way I sing. That was wonderful, a twelve piece band - oh my God, how much fun is that? It was for the fun of it because I was doing TV stuff and I was busy working as an actor, but I did it as... I was going to describe it as a labour of love, but it certainly wasn't laboured. It was the free love of that music and wanting to feel it. And besides, I've always wanted to wear a red velvet cape!

(Laughs) You're one of the few who can get away with it!

Yeah - me and Joey Heatherton! It was great, we did record stuff and one of the ballads, called 'Please Stay', I'm doing with my new group, the Michael Des Barres band. I've kept a couple of guys from that band in my new band.

That brings me perfectly to my last question. I'd seen on your website that you were doing a new solo CD called 'Frontman', then you put together the Michael Des Barres band and were re-doing some stuff - you put up some clips of songs like 'Little Latin Lover' which sounded like you were going back to the seventies rock roots. Is that what 'Frontman' will be like, or is that shelved in favour of the band work?

It's coming out, I've been in the studio with Steve Stevens who has been playing with us live. I recorded and wrote some songs with him which will also be on this album. I've six songs recorded and we've played half a dozen gigs. It's been unbelievably exciting for me with this band, it's an incredible band and there's a lot of information on my website - you can also Facebook and Twitter me to hear about a lot of my activities. There's a band page on Facebook too, please join that. I'm really excited about it, man. I feel so energised by it. I went to Austin and worked with a lot of blues musicians, then I came back and wrote these songs, I put a band together and now I'm playing it all. It's a joy for me.

Do you have any specific release in mind or are you playing it by ear?

Well, I just want to spend the rest of the year playing and recording, then maybe in January put it out. I'll put it out, I've been very lucky in my life and my career where I can do it myself. I will pay for it and do what the fuck I please, I'll play where I want, hopefully people will dig it and I'll become the President of the United States!

ALBUM DETAILS

1. **A World Gone Wild** (Des Barres, Jones, Juber)
2. **Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way** (Jennings)
3. **Let Me Rock** (Des Barres, Jones)
4. **Never In A Million Years** (Des Barres, Jones, Edmonds)
5. **How Much Is Too Much** (Des Barres, Jones, Holden)
6. **Only The Strong Survive** (Des Barres, Jones, Japp)
7. **Underworld** (Des Barres, Jones, Sales, Harrison)
8. **No Knife** (Des Barres)
9. **Tonight And Every Night** (Des Barres, Jones)

BAND LINE UP

Michael Des Barres - lead vocals
Steve Jones - rhythm and lead guitar, vocals
Tony Fox Sales - rhythm and lead guitar, vocals
Nigel Harrison - bass
Clem Burke - drums

Additional Musicians

Lawrence Juber - acoustic guitar
David Lindley - slide guitar

Produced by Michael James Jackson

Recorded at: Ocean Way Recorders, Hollywood, CA, with additional parts recorded at Sunset Sound Factory, Lionshare Recorders and Clover

Released on EMI in 1984

