

RETROSPECTIVE

LOOKING BACK ON CLASSIC ALBUMS WITH THE ONES WHO MADE THEM

This issue's Retrospective does things a little differently... the choice of album this time around is the classic Michael Thompson Band record 'How Long', originally released by Geffen in 1989. Under Thompson's name, you could be forgiven for imagining that the album was simply a vehicle for the six stringer to showcase the talents that have made him such an in-demand session player, appearing on records for the like of Michael Jackson, Cher, Michael Bolton, Neil Diamond, Madonna, Mariah Carey, Shania Twain, Michael Bubl  and literally dozens of others. However, the record was a melodic masterpiece, with an amazing vocal performance from 'Moon' Calhoun on vocals and song-writing contributions from Jeff Paris. Reissued in 2007 by Frontiers with bonus tracks, there was talk there would maybe be a long awaited second album. That has finally happened, with Frontiers proud to release 'Future Past' very soon. With a title like that, James Gaden figured that a discussion with Michael about both albums was a great way exploring both the future and the past...

We'll get to your new Michael Thompson Band record 'Future Past' in due course, but I want to go back and cover the debut Michael Thompson Band album 'How Long' in my Retrospective piece first... not only is it rightly regarded as a classic, it's one of my all time favourite albums.

Oh, God bless you! (laughs)

Yeah, my colleague Phil Ashcroft reviewed it when Frontiers reissued it in 2007 and I saw Jeff Paris was involved in some of the songs. I love Jeff's work and I love your playing, so I asked Phil about it and he recommended it to me. I bought it and absolutely loved every note on it. I'm addicted to it!

Oh man! So you didn't hear it the first time around?

No, I was too young, I'm only in my early thirties and all this great stuff had yet to hit my radar.

Oh yeah, you were way too young. It's cool that it was recommended to you. I was really glad that Frontiers reissued that record, I was lucky to get the rights back from Geffen.

We'll start there then - obviously you've done lots of sessions for some amazing stars - how did you end up landing a record deal for your own band back in the eighties? Was that something you always chased while doing sessions, or was it more fortuitous?

I had a band in the eighties prior to the M.T.B. called Slang. We had a guy singing called Billy Trudell - we kinda slogged it out for a few years in the club scene in L.A., trying to get a deal, doing showcases and gigs. We wrote songs and one of the guys who co-produced the album, Wyn Davies, he owned a studio and we ended up using that to do demos... a bunch of them ended up being the masters for the first M.T.B. album. Great White were using his studio too and they were managed by an English guy called Alan Niven. He liked our material that he heard and he had a major turnaround in 1987 I think, because he became the manager of Guns 'N Roses. His wife was assistant to the guy who signed Guns 'N Roses. They had a lady managing them and the first thing they did was get rid of her and place Alan as their manager. So all of a sudden Alan is this powerful guy and after years of us trying to get a record deal, in one week Alan is asking us 'Do you want to go with Atlantic, or Geffen?' (laughs) So that's how things work, which blew my mind after all the show-cases, because I was getting frustrated with people passing, wondering what it would take to get a deal! It's not like it is now where you can literally make the record yourself and put it out if you want to, back then you had to grab that elusive record deal.

Absolutely - you had Richard 'Moon' Calhoun on the album, who puts in an astonishing performance of soaring and emotional vocals, it's brilliant. The Strand has recently been reissued, which was the work he'd done prior to that, but he wasn't particularly well known before. How did he come into the frame?

With Billy Trudell being the singer, I'd always loved his voice but he got signed to a different band called The City, a gig he took because he was disillusioned about our failure to get signed. It was an exclusive deal which meant

when we did get signed, Billy couldn't sing on any other projects. So I ended up calling Moon - I'd always loved his voice and he was just known around town as a great singer. He'd done a lot of R&B gigs... he was the original drummer in the Gap Band, then he was the drummer and a singer in Rufus with Chaka Khan - he was just perfect so he came and replaced the vocals on the stuff we had with Billy Trudell.

Once he was on board, he contributed to writing some tracks, you wrote some stuff, Jeff Paris contributed... did you know Jeff beforehand?

Yeah, Jeff and I had known each other a while - I think around 1984 we had done some writing together. Funnily enough, Jeff Paris was going to be the original singer for Slang, before that became M.T.B. Wyn Davies had me doing sessions in his studio and he offered me some studio time, it was the first time anybody had done that. It was the year Quiet Riot were really big and Wyn said to me 'why do you go and write some songs and we'll cut them, we could do what they do!' I knew Jeff was a good writer and we had done some gigs together, so I called him up and we wrote four songs. The first one we did together was 'Right To Be Wrong', then we wrote one called 'Rock Tonight' and a couple of others. That was really the beginning of the project and Jeff came down and sang, he was the first voice on them. But then he was offered the deal on MCA as a solo artist and that's when I started looking for singers. So when you fast forward a few years, it ended up that I'd known Jeff for a long time, he'd known Moon for ages so it was a nice circle.

You mentioned 'Right To Be Wrong' there, that was included on the reissues as a bonus track, along with 'I Can't Let Go' which Jeff recorded himself.

Right, right, he did. Jeff was a writing partner for a while, we'd go a few years without writing together, but every time we did meet up, we would always end up writing at least one song. Sometimes it would be an R&B kinda song, or a pop tune, but he's a rocker at heart and so am I. We always got something, every time we wrote.

Despite the quality of the first album, there was no immediate follow up. Was that because you were too busy with session work, or did it not sell enough to create a demand?

What was weird, Alan Niven was a double edged sword. On one hand, he liked my music and respected me as an artist, but on the other he wanted to be the producer and when he was managing Guns 'N Roses his head got big and he was from the school of telling you what to do, making iron fisted decisions. From what I understand, he kept Moon and I away from Geffen. We went there just one time, when our track 'Can't Miss' was doing well on the radio charts here. He brought us to Geffen and everyone patted us on the back. But when our single, 'Give Love A Chance' was getting ready to be released, and we did this great video for it that nobody has seen... I gotta dig it out and transfer it to my computer. It was done by Nigel Dick who did the Guns 'N Roses stuff...it was a really good video, this was going to be our big single... and it never got released! At the time, we had no idea why, but it turned out Alan was at odds with Geffen, they didn't like him. We got caught in the middle and suffered from the fact they felt he was a megalomaniac, going in there and telling them he wanted



this, that and the other. They didn't respond well to that which was a shame, because I don't think Geffen had any malice toward us personally. We were disappointed with how it all turned out and we didn't wanna make another record with Alan. It was a good news/bad news thing. He got us the deal and in the studio he had some good ideas, it's not like he didn't contribute, but it's not like he was Mutt Lange, y'know? And he would act like he was. (laughs)

The last bonus track on the reissue of 'How Long' was 'Wheelchair', a new song written by you, Moon and Jeff. Moon had an accident which left him wheelchair bound and lyrically it deals with that... when it was put on the reissue, I thought with the murmurs that there was another M.T.B. album in the works, I assumed you, Moon and Jeff would be all involved, but that's not the case, it's a totally new line up. How come?

Yeah, that song is hard for me to listen to, I get teary eyed over it. It's such a touching situation. Really, this new M.T.B. album just started coming together, I never really sat down and said 'Y'know, it's time I did a new M.T.B. album'. I'd been working with this guy Larry King and before I knew it we had a few songs that were shaping up to be something that could become a real record. Larry was a real go-getter, setting dates to write, dates to finish them... and he's got a phenomenal voice. Moon still sounds great, but the high range that he had on 'How Long'... he's got more texture in his voice now and a good tone - well, you can hear some of that on 'Wheelchair'. But all the high stuff, which still fits with a lot of what I do musically, he can't really get up into that range anymore. With Larry, he can, as you no doubt have heard on the record! (laughs) With him being a good writer too, a lot of the time writing songs is all about finishing them! You can have a riff, an idea, but to see it through with lyrics and recording, that takes a lot of work and Larry was really into doing it. We had three songs, then four... I sent the first three to Serafino at Frontiers to see if he was interested in doing a record and he was really positive. So we forged onwards!

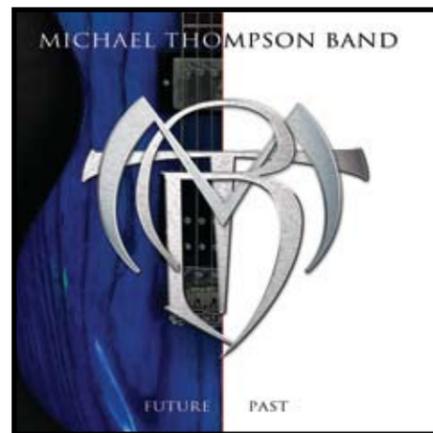
When I saw the press release for it, and it said Larry King was the singer, I didn't know him, so naturally I Googled him like you do nowadays, and all I got was Larry King the radio and TV talk show guy! I assumed it wasn't him, so I had to wait and see!

(Laughs) Right! Yeah, it's a different Larry!

Good! (laughs) I thought Larry had a great high range, but at the lower end, he's got a bit more gravel, a rockier sound than Moon who was all about the clean soaring vocal. I thought it made this a harder edged record, the other one is a little bit more West Coast. Did Larry inspire you to write more rocky material?

Yeah - and also, I'm aware of the melodic rock genre. In 1988, we weren't thinking of that, we just did the songs we wrote and they had rock and a lot of other influences there. This time I was a little more specific, I knew there were certain sounds and styles that weren't going to feature on this one, I was trying to keep it more in that melodic rock ball park.

I liked the new songs a lot, especially 'High



Times' which is fantastic, but one of the highlights for me is 'Can't Miss', which you have re-recorded from the first record. Did you do that to help tie the two records together, or did you feel there was something not quite how you wanted on the original?

Well, to be totally honest, we went through the year writing and we only had ten songs. I wanted another and I thought about maybe re-doing 'Can't Miss' as a bonus track, but we ended up doing 'When You Love Someone' acoustically as a bonus. Yeah, I threw it together and asked Larry to recreate it in the style Moon laid down. Larry is a studio quality singer, he's done a lot of sessions, so he put on his best Moon and went for it! (laughs) I think it worked and I think fans of the first album would appreciate it.

Yeah - when it came on, because Larry sings a bit harder than Moon, and because I love the first album so much, when the riff started up I thought 'Oh God, don't kill it...!' but no, it worked really well. Larry did a hell of a job!

(Laughs) Yeah, when I started arranging it, because we'd already done it before, I was

thinking 'well, what else can I do with this?' but it's got a good riff, and I think it might go down well for anyone who maybe didn't hear it first time around.

This new record features a main four piece band with various guests, as oppose to the first one where you and Moon were the only constants and guests appeared on every song. Did you want a more band orientated feel, or is it just easier for you?

It turned out that we did it a little different to what I normally do. We wrote the tracks in my studio and I laid down my parts to a drum machine, and I added some bass. Then Larry had his guys he uses all the time, he lives in Chicago and he has a really good studio there. He used his guys Khari Parker, who is the drummer and Alan Berliant, the bass player. It was totally different to me calling up guys I knew and having them come down, it was like receiving a Christmas present when I got back the tracks with what these guys had done on it! I was just knocked out by what they did, I loved it. I'm hoping we can see it through to do some live stuff and working with those guys. I actually haven't even played in the same room as them!

It's weird how that is becoming the norm nowadays thanks to the internet!

Yeah... the fact they played together to my stuff - I'm a session musician, I'm used top building up a song sometimes just from a click track, so I could put all the feeling I wanted into it as if I was in the room with them knowing the could do the same. I do think the finished tracks sound like we were all together. It is the way a lot of people work now.

One final thing I wanted to ask you was about another record you did, which I absolutely loved, the T.R.W. 'Rivers Of Paradise' album, with John Robinson and Mark Williams. Is there any chance of another one, or was it strictly a one off thing?

I think it'll be a one off. It's weird, the coincidence of both Moon and Mark Williamson being being paralyzed and in a wheelchair.

Oh - I didn't know that!

Yes, and Mark has Parkinsons too. He can still sing and he still sounds really good, but his health is really frail, Mark has been really going through it. So we haven't talked about it. Actually, even though that only came out a few years ago, all those songs had been written and we had cut demos of them as a band called Revolver. We had done it in the 90's, it was great, we had that full album of stuff but we all got busy, we didn't have a deal and the songs sat there for about ten years! So I was really happy the songs saw the light of day. It was exactly what we set out to do, which was a blues-rock, Aerosmithy kind of influence that were we after, but I think Frontiers want more melodic rock stuff. Some of those tracks fitted the bill but some of it was too bluesy and they aren't into that at all. That was why I was very aware of what I was doing on this record.

So now you've done this album for Frontiers, what is next for you, more sessions?

Yeah, I'm always doing sessions, I'm lucky enough to have that as a job, even though the record business has been so down the last few years. I do that, Larry is coming out here next week, he's really smart with this stuff, he wants to start writing for the next album already! I'm also hoping, maybe next fall, we could get hooked up maybe with the Firefest thing, play some dates in Europe - if we could do it, break even and make it feasible, I'd love to do that. I was thinking, I haven't talked to them yet, but I'm friends with Mitch Malloy and he just did the Firefest thing and he then went and played Spain and Italy and stuff. I was thinking about maybe getting Mitch, Jeff Paris and me, do a little package tour? I think that might generate enough interest to make it work. I'm looking at that.

That would be cool! The last time I saw you, you were playing guitar with Michael Bolton on his live DVD at the Royal Albert Hall.

Oh yeah! That was fun, and it was so great to be able to play on that stage. That was just a little two week thing I did with him. It was nice, I love when I can do something like that and it ends up on a DVD or something that hangs around.

This is it - my girlfriend is a big Bolton fan, like I am, and I bought her it. My two favourite guitarists, out of who is still around and working now, are yourself and Paul Gilbert. We put the DVD on and she went 'Ooh, Michael Bolton' and then I saw you and went 'Ooh, Michael Thompson!'

(Laughs) Oh wow! That DVD came out really well. It was fun to play, because half the songs in the set, I had played on the records!

Yeah, you've got some C.V. on you, haven't you?

Yeah, it's something you do and you sort of forget about it as you move from one thing to another. Then you see it all in a big list and go 'Oh, did I really appear on that?' (laughs) I was lucky to hook up with David Foster, Babyface, Mutt Lange and get my break in the business. I obviously did something they liked, and it was a dream of mine since high school. That, and being a rock star!

Well hopefully you'll get some more stuff written with Larry - if you could shorten the gap between M.T.B albums, that would be good!

(Laughs) I know! I'm hoping this gets received well enough and Frontiers get behind it, they seem to be pretty into it. To do another record is a labour of love because you don't really make much money from it. You really have to have your own studio like Larry and I do to pull it off without going way in the red. But I'm hoping to do another, and if we can get some dates set up, even better!

