

DON AIREY

Legendary keyboard maestro Don Airey has played with a who's who of rock greats. Despite being a full time member of Deep Purple and notching up roughly 250 album credits, Don has also found time to make his fourth solo album 'Keyed Up', an eclectic mix of Rock and Classical influences with some talented guests. James Gaden spoke to Don to find out more.

You have the same guys as your last solo outing, Carl Sence, Rob Harris, Laurence Cottle, Darrin Mooney... are these your "go to" guys for solo work?

Yeah - I've known Rob since he was about 17 actually, he lives quite near to me. We've been writing stuff on and off, doing gigs, we did one on Saturday in our local pub. He's a fantastic player. He's known for his funky stuff with Jamiroquai, but there's another side to him, he's a wonderful Rock guitar player. Rob's on most of the tracks, but there's one or two where I had to swap and change.

You recorded the album pretty much live. Did you have the stuff pre-written?

Carl and I have become quite a good song writing partnership, so we had about six things for the album and I had a couple of the instrumental ideas. Looking back, I think the record was made in about three weeks total, five or six days for the tracks, a week for the overdubs and vocals, then three or four days to mix it. Pretty spontaneous - we record it live because we want the spill from the drums into the organ, that's how you get that sound.

You've included a new version of 'Difficult To Cure' which obviously Rainbow fans will remember. Why did you decide to revisit it?

We often play it when I go out and play live. Years ago we played it with Rob and Darrin, along with a bass player called Alex Meadows who appears on the record too. We added Beethoven's fugue in the middle. Afterwards, all the guys said "That was the hardest bloody thing I've ever played in my life!" So I thought I would have to put them through that again. (Laughs). It nearly drove Rob Harris mad!

I did feel that was one of the standout guitar parts on the record. Great stuff!

Oh, it's phenomenal. The guitar solo on there was just one take. It was his second crack at it. Just amazing. Ewan Davies, the engineer, when Rob had done it, he came out and bowed down to him!

You have a mini suite toward the end of the album, which features Graham Bonnet guesting on vocals as well as the late, great Gary Moore on guitar.

Yes - the mini suite is actually dedicated to Gary. The tune Graham sings is an Irish folk song that we did with Colosseum II in 1978 as a single. It came from Gary and the words are about him. It was just a piece of luck getting Graham. He's from Skegness and he was over for a few days visiting his brother. The studio was in that neck of the woods and I just asked if he fancied coming in for a morning to sing a song. He's an amazing guy and an incredible singer. He did a fantastic job on a song he's never had to sing before.

Is that your favourite part of the record?

I think so, because it features Gary and uses some Colosseum II material. I think Gary had in his head a thought that he might get back with John Hiseman and I just for old times sake and do something. I think he realised what a great band it was for its time, people still talk to me about it. The suite ends with 'What Went Wrong' which Gary actually plays on. I believe it was the very last thing he recorded. Gary wasn't in the best of spirits that day, so the session kind of ended and I thought we'd finish it another time. Of course, that terrible thing happened, so I didn't know what to do with the track. Ewan Davies had the original version with Rob playing which was sent to Gary as a guide track, and he married the two up as like a guitar duet in a matter of minutes. Some of it is heart rending - a real testament to Gary's playing. He put everything into his playing and paid a pretty high price, but what a musician! I was nervous about using it because it's a fine line, I didn't want people thinking I'm exploiting my relationship with him, I wanted to put it out because I think it's something very special.

I believe 'Blue Rondo A La Turk' has a connection to your early life?

Yes, that was the piece I played on my first ever radio broadcast when I was 14. It was for the Sunderland pianoforte annual concert, it's still going. It caused a bit of a sensation because I played a jazz piece at a classical concert. I played Chopin first, then went onto Dave Brubeck. There was someone from the BBC there and they fixed it up that I went and played it live on one of their programmes.

I'm not a keyboard player, but it sounds quite a complicated piece to have been tackling at that age?

It is, at the time for somebody to be playing in 9/8 was unusual enough. It's got nothing to do with Mozart, the Turk reference was because Dave Brubeck heard the rhythm via a street band in Istanbul, took it and wrote something to it. My version is like a tip of the hat to Keith Emerson, it utilises Bach and it's my way of saying, "Hi Keith, I can play this too!" Not as well as him though! (Laughs)

How do you find time to make solo albums when Deep Purple takes up so much of your life?

Deadlines play a great part. Musicians are naturally lazy people, but if you know you're in the studio next week, you'd better have some material! For this record, there was one day when I got up at 5a.m. because I had Alex Meadows and Tim Goodyer coming in to do three tracks, and I didn't have much! So I put three songs together by 11a.m. - much to my own amazement! (laughs)

Regarding Purple, I think the new album 'Now What?!' is the best thing the band have done since 'Purpendicular'.

We were all surprised at how well it's been received. We did a lot of homework on it and had some intense writing sessions before hooking up with Bob Ezrin for ten days. Bob Ezrin works in mysterious ways! All the backing tracks were done in six days - he's like an express train and you don't cotton on to what's happening, he just works so quick. When I got the mixes, I was dumbfounded. I couldn't believe it was us!

For me, the key was your Hammond sound - it was more to the fore, it felt more like a Deep Purple record than previous efforts to me.

I spoke with Bob at the start of the session, told him what my setup was and he said, "Yeah, I know!" He was so far ahead of us. The previous records, Michael Bradford was a great producer but I think he saw the Hammond as more of a background, almost synthesizer effect, rather than the guts of the band. The guitar and the organ were equal originally. I'm glad you liked it. We just got a gold record through the other day - it's like the old days! (laughs)