

FOREIGNER

After a successful career recording a series of genre defining classic songs, on multi platinum selling albums, things started to take a turn for the worse for Foreigner. After an initial falling out between songwriter/guitarist Mick Jones and singer Lou Gramm, Lou eventually returned to the fold and made the underrated 'Mr Moonlight' album before being diagnosed with a brain tumour. Having to take time off to deal with his health issues, Foreigner ground to a halt, before being resurrected by Mick Jones a few years ago. Featuring a completely new line up, they toured relentlessly to enthusiastic audiences everywhere, before releasing their first new song, 'Too Late' on their excellent double CD career anthology 'No End In Sight'. 'Too Late' promised good things, and finally, a new album from Foreigner, titled 'Can't Slow Down' has arrived. James Gaden rated it as the best album he heard in 2009, so he jumped at the chance to meet up with Mick Jones and singer Kelly Hansen to discuss it's European release in March.

Hi guys, good to meet you - I actually have interviewed you once before Mick, on the telephone, when you were promoting the 'Alive And Rocking' DVD - I said I was going to see you in Manchester,

and I was going to be trying to give Kelly a run for his money by singing along from my seat, and you laughed, which I thought was very rude. (Both Mick and Kelly laugh). Nevertheless, you were



right! It's a joy to meet you both in person. I'm absolutely blown away by the new album. I think it's wonderful.

Mick: Really? That's cool.

I actually reviewed Chickenfoot's album when that came out, and I wrote "If I hear a better album than this, this year, I'll eat my hat." Then your record came out, I heard it and thought oh, thanks a lot.

Kelly: (Laughs) So what flavour hat do you like?

One with a lot of seasoning! Because we haven't had a Foreigner album since Mr Moonlight, and there had been a major line-up change, and Kelly came in... I wondered how it was going to sound but when I heard the new record I thought this really is... it's superb, I don't think there's a weak moment on it.

Mick: Really?

Absolutely - I bought the American version on import, because I didn't want to wait until March, so I've got the three disk version with the remixes and the DVD on it. I was wondering, when a lot of bands get a new singer, more often than not they head straight to the studio to work on some new stuff and introduce them that way, whereas with Kelly, he was introduced on the road singing the songs we all know. Do you think that worked out better?

Mick: I felt it was important to reintroduce the band live, and once we started, the band just got better and better and it was good to spend time together on the road, get familiar with each other, get comfortable... which didn't take long actually, but we just found ourselves getting caught up in touring. We went pretty much all around the world, and by the time I realised it, we'd been on the road for three years! (laughs) The original idea was to do an album somewhere, but I suppose I was a bit nervous in the beginning, doing an album after such a long hiatus, it was a bit daunting. But once we finally made a start about a year ago, things just started to come together and in a way, I wish we'd done it a little earlier! (laughs) Who knows, this might have been the right time.

Doing it this way, I've seen you live twice since Kelly joined, and both shows were fantastic. Kelly, you're such a good fit for the band, I don't think of you as 'Foreigner's new singer'... you're simply the vocalist of Foreigner for me. When I heard the record, I never thought of you as a replacement for Lou, I'm so used to you singing the hits live, so when the new album came out, I accepted this lineup as Foreigner straight away.

Kelly: From my perspective, I feel that, it wasn't that we planned it but I think it was better for me that we waited this long. Like Mick said, it didn't take long to get comfortable because we all like each others company and get along. After that initial point of getting along, you live together in the trenches, touring can be tough and you get burned out, but you're all in it together. You get to a different level, a groove, an understanding together and we've got that now, it's a deeper place. I feel that I was getting more and more of a feel of what it is to be in this group, so for me it was good that we waited.

I think you add to the stage show too Kelly - vocally you're superb, but I think you're a better frontman than Lou was with the band, I think you add a more visual presence live.

Mick: Yes, it was my hoped we'd maybe develop

that with Lou, but Kelly has come in and taken us to an exciting level live. Through that time, as Kelly said, we've got to know each other and inspire each other to play. I've rediscovered my passion for guitar playing again, and we started writing again... there's no end in sight, and we can't slow down! (laughs)

Absolutely! The first new thing I heard from you guys was on 'No End In Sight', because you put 'Too Late' on there. Was that the first track you wrote, as a bench mark?

Mick: Yeah, it was a transition song, almost.

I loved it, it was the new band but it sounded like the same band that made all the other great tracks on that collection. It was classic Foreigner, and the whole new album is like that.

Kelly: There never was this consciousness, of trying to sound like Foreigner. What naturally comes out of Mick in the form of his writing, his guitar and keyboard playing, we weren't thinking about how to make it sound a certain way, that's just how it was. Part of it is perception. If you blindfolded someone, told them to taste something and told them it was pizza, they might assume it's pizza. There's an element of that, but mostly we're just writing songs and unconsciously sounding that way.

Another big ingredient has been Marti Frederiksen, who has been instrumental with his role, as a producer, co writer and remixer. I know him from his work with Aerosmith... how did he come to be involved with Foreigner?

Mick: Well, the first time I really worked with Marti we ended up being asked to write six songs for a film called 'Still Crazy' - have you seen that?

Yeah, it had Bill Nighy and Billy Connolly in it.

Mick: Right. It's a funny movie... the director for that film was the director for the video of 'I Want To Know What Love Is'. He called me and said they had some songs from Dave Stewart and Jeff Lynne, but it wasn't gelling, so they called me and asked for some tracks. I asked how many songs they needed, and was told 'at least five'. I asked when he needed them, and he replied 'Next week?' (Laughs). So, I looked at Marti and we said let's go for it. We went in at the deep end, came up with some songs that sounded pretty good. We got together a few years later and wrote a song for Ozzy, called 'Dreamer'. We did a bit of work with The Cult and kept in contact. I felt Marti understood what it would take to make this album a vital album. I was hoping we'd retain the identity of the band, while moving on a bit and showing Kelly's voice and range off. It's a new chapter in the story and Marti was integral to the whole thing.

Was it that which led you to get him to remix some classic tracks for the bonus disk?

Mick: Yeah - he took the original tapes and worked with them using the advances of technology today, making them how we wanted them to sound at the time.

A lot of bands do that now, making things sound as they wanted to years back, before the technology was there. Was that something you'd always had in mind to do, or was it to sweeten the deal for a fan buying the record?

Mick: We wanted to give a feel that you were getting more bang for your buck, which is why we included those remixes. In England, it's going to be the live disk recorded from 2005 instead.

Ah, nice. I'm even happier I bought the American version then, because I've got that! (Laughs) Kelly, with the setlist, I imagine 85% - 90%

of it writes itself, so are there any Foreigner songs in the back catalogue you look at and think 'Man, I'd love to take a shot at that' - or are there any you would dread?

Kelly: There's a bunch of tunes we have done at some point or another live that we don't do every night because we simply don't have time. We've done 'Soul Doctor', 'At War With the World', 'Break It Up', 'Headknocker'...

'Nightlife', I know you did that.

Kelly: 'Nightlife'...

Mick: Yeah, what happened to 'Nightlife'? (Laughs)

'Nightlife' is a great song!

Mick: Yeah, we were starting the show with that.

Kelly: I think when we put 'Too Late' in the set, if we kept 'Nightlife' in we had to lose one of the classic tracks, so we took it out.

Mick: We should think about putting it back.

Kelly: Yeah, it was cool to open with that. There's a bunch of other tunes I'd love to do - Mick has written a LOT of great songs.

So many tunes, so little time?



Kelly: (Laughs) Yeah! But they're not just great listening songs, they're great singing songs for a vocalist, but you can't do a three hour show with this material, it's too difficult.

Well that's what I was going to ask - you've got so many great songs on the new album, but your setlist is packed anyway, so what stuff were you looking to play from the new record?

Mick: In the States, we've been doing 'Can't Slow Down' and the single we have out there, which is 'When It Comes To Love'. I have to say, I wasn't expecting them to go down as well as they have with them being brand new songs, but the audiences are really into them.

Kelly: So we've had to make the set a little bit longer.

Mick: But it's a pretty exhausting set. People will say 'Well why didn't you play an extra half an hour?' If you're playing those songs, there's no let up.

Kelly: I'd love one of those people to get up and try it, just once!

If I tried it, there'd be a lot of very disappointed people.

Kelly: Yeah, and you have to have it recorded and be made to listen to it! (All laugh)

The closing song on the new record is 'Fool For You Anyway', which was on the very first Foreigner record. Was that a conscious choice to bring things full circle?

Mick: It was an opportunity to work with my stepson, Mark Ronson. He had heard what we were doing and loved 'Too Late'. He came up with the idea of doing 'Fool For You Anyway' which is one of his favourite tracks.

I think the combination of Mark's production and Kelly's vocal have made it more soulful. I like this version more than the original - did you go back and listen to it Kelly, or just go in to put your own take on it?

Kelly: I knew the song, but I didn't go back to it. I'd actually like to work it up acoustically - we do that with the songs from time to time and I think that would be great.

The acoustic 'Say You Will' you do live is fantastic. I thought it stole the show first time I saw it.

Kelly: That's a lot of fun. Jeff Pilson did most of the arrangement with that. I've had people tell me that they're absolutely convinced we're using samples and tracks for that. I've looked at them and asked 'Are you serious?' We don't do any of that. I guess it's a compliment.

It is, because there's not many bands out there who can do it, but you guys can. I was going to ask about another UK tour, because the album is due in March?

Mick: We're looking at maybe doing something in April... we've got a festival show booked in July, but we might do a full tour of England in September. We'll do Europe, but England, obviously for me, is a priority.

Was it a long job to write the material for this record?

Mick: It came out quickly... we started with me writing a couple of initial ideas with Marti. We tried out with some outside writers to see because I was open to all ideas, but Kelly came into the picture with the writing and we felt our way around and ended up with the three of us working closely, getting comfortable and started laying the basis of the songs as we went. We started in L.A. at Marti's home studio. Everybody very kindly appreciated I didn't want to be away from home all year, and Marti has a portable studio which we took backward and forward from New York to L.A. Marti would get a suite, stay in the bedroom and we'd use the rest of the suite as the studio. We became quite familiar with this hotel, the Benjamin in the heart of New York. I wanted the vibe of the city because a lot of the other albums started in New York. I think the feel of being in New York adds some excitement. The songs just started to come. We stay in the room 10 hours a day, playing, pottering around, seeing what happened.

It was well worth it. It's the album of 2009 for my personal taste. I'm not saying that as a sycophant because I'm sat here with you both either - I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it!

Mick: Really? Heeeeyyy! (Kelly laughs as Mick leans over and gives me a high five - you don't get one of them everyday!)

'Can't Slow Down' will be released on 1st March.

For more information, visit www.foreigneronline.com