

Francis Rossi

Interview by James Gaden. Photo by James Eckersley.

As an ever present member of Status Quo, Francis Rossi is a legendary figure in the Rock world. 2019 is shaping up to be one of his most involved in the music business, as it sees the release of an autobiography entitled 'I Talk Too Much', followed by a tour of unscripted chat shows, also called 'I Talk Too Much', where he will tell anecdotes from his career as well as demonstrate how some Quo songs were written. And if that wasn't enough, he has a new album of duets with Hannah Rickard called 'We Talk Too Much' to boot. Fireworks called up the charismatic frontman who answered the phone in his usual jovial manner...

(Sighs) Sometimes, you know, you pick the phone up and you think oh, what's this now... it's that bloke from Fireworks and you go oh no... Hello there! You were just going to let me keep going and going there weren't you?

It's always worth listening to how you answer the phone Francis!

Why is it called Fireworks Magazine anyway? I've been wondering, I can't make sense of it.

It's because our Editor, who formed the magazine, is a big fan of Bonfire and 'Fireworks' was one of his favourite albums.

[Laughs] Oh really? Oh. I wish I hadn't asked now, I was hoping for something more showbiz! This happens to me a lot. I knew this bloke once called Tex and I asked him once where Tex came from and he said, "I'm Terrance". I wish I hadn't asked. I remember working with Cozy Powell, and I'm no good with people's nicknames. Like 'Rhino' in our band, he's John to me. Coming up to 70 years old and calling yourself Rhino? Bollocks. Sting? Behave yourself. But I asked what Cozy Powell's name was and it was Colin. Where does 'Cozy' come from? Fuck off, you're Colin! Anyway...

You have a spoken word tour, a book and an album out. Quite a busy year ahead!

It seems that way doesn't it, but I don't start doing shows until June and then I finish in September, and like I've told you before I'm looking forward to finishing it already! I've actually been off since October and in that time I've had shingles, been bitten by a spider, which has left a hole in my knee and I fucked my leg up... so when it got to December and Christmas, because I'd been home so much, it didn't seem as magical as when I'd spent a lot of time away. I'm like that with this tour, I'm in the mindset when you think about school finishing and it's home-time.

The chat shows are an unknown quantity.

So with the book and tour called 'I Talk Too Much' and the album 'We Talk Too Much', which came first or was there always a plan to package everything?

No, I started making an album with Hannah Rickard after a chance discussion at Hammersmith Odeon once. I went to talk to her about something on the stage and we were talking about Country music. I ended up inviting her to do some writing and we wrote the first song on the album. I'd written a song called 'I Talk Too Much' probably about two years prior, which came out of a sequence of songs that I'd written which wasn't for anything specific, so I was in no rush to finish it. Shortly after I saw Russell Brand, a bloke with a bigger mouth than me, and he was ranting about politics and I thought, 'Yeah, I like that, he's got a point.' But he got a bit big for his boots – we all need to watch out for that, especially me – and he got slammed down because people said "Become a politician and do something about it then" and he didn't want to be a politician, he was just a guy airing thoughts and ideas. It reminded me a bit of me and that led me to write 'I Talk Too Much'. My manager Simon, and Mick Wall, had both been pushing me to do a book for some time and as Rick had died I thought about it and business comes into it as well. I ended up presenting the song to Hannah and she said, "It's called 'I Talk Too Much'" but it didn't matter, we still sang it together. There are things on there which we aren't bothered about – if you take them literally there are parts I sing which lyrically would mean I'm a gay bloke or a woman. It's not an issue for me, I'm just singing a song. So we agreed to record it, and I was discussing with Simon about what to call the book. I said I had this song and we realised it would be a good title for the book, the tour *and* the album. It all came together. That's the joy of it, you'll know that from being a journalist, where you take a long conversation and it'll come together into a piece you're happy with. I really enjoy the process of doing it all, that's more important than if it's successful. I've learned that over the last couple of years. Products sell so differently to when I started – how you get radio play, how you make a record, how you promote it... it's all so different now. But I get real joy from creating things, it's what I do and I feel like I'm alive when I'm doing it.

Not much point going on then.

I know, I'm fucked! So sometimes I'm quite looking forward to seeing what happens, other times I'm wondering what I'm going to say, what will I talk about? I have it in the band; you'll do a rehearsal or turn up at a cold venue and really not want to be there but then you get on and it's great. There are times when I've been on and forgotten what bit is coming up next and you think, "Oh shit..." but you forget about all that, that goes away when things are working out. It's like women having babies. If they remembered what it was like having the first one they wouldn't let us go near them ever again. So if my brain goes, my composure goes. And I'm worried that might happen with the chat show, because it's all new.

Is that why Mick Wall is going to be with you, to keep you from veering off?

A lot of people think that but I did something with Johnnie Walker in Scotland and the reason I agreed was I wanted someone to lead me in to a Q&A. I hated the idea of it being just me like, "I'm here to address my audience." Pompous git. If I'm asked a question, fine, that's somebody asking me and I can say something in reply, so Mick will do that. He encouraged me to do it, and I agreed but the idea of me just walking out, saying "Good evening ladies and gentlemen" and then I just start talking, I'm an insecure little shit. If someone asks me what I think, then I'm fine. As long as it's not about politics. Or religion. Or gender. I didn't realise there were 27 genders... don't start me!

The album is more Country and Pop. It must have been quite refreshing to write without having to make a "Rock" album. You couldn't have released this as Quo.

No, not at all. We had an engineer change in the middle of making this album and I was talking to Hannah yesterday about already doing another one, whether it's successful or not. People have asked if we'll tour it – if it's successful, yes. But otherwise, I'm not going to go out and lose money for my own self-indulgence. I would make another record though. There is a crossover point, there's a song on here I wrote with Bob Young that we could probably have put on an earlier Quo record, it would fit next to a 'Claudie' or

'Marguerita Time', that sort of thing. As I've gotten older... I remember when we were in our twenties there was a school of thought that Pop music was just horrendous. It's all Pop isn't it? Pop means popular. But there was a mentality of "We're the real thing, the rest is shit." I actually like most music. So when Hannah and I were making this record she pushed to be as Country as possible and you can hear that in the opening song; there are a lot of references to that Americana thing. But if English and European people try too hard to be like that, the English don't like it because it's too American and the Nashville guys don't like it because we sound like pretenders. So we decided to just do what we do and the process accelerated somewhat from there. I enjoyed the process immensely and I want to do another one because I already think we can

do better. I know it's only just coming out but we finished it around the end of 2017. The last year or so has been a real learning curve for me so I want to do another. And I love singing with Hannah.

I can never get my head around when I ask an artist how long it took to make an album and they have to work it out because it's been sat in the can for six months or a year.

That's the world today. When we were recording in the seventies, we finished 'On The Level' in the studio, started mixing that night, finished at about five in the morning and that was it. You didn't get a chance to say, "Oh, I've fucked that mix" or notice if your ears were shot. So we did the mixes, went out for breakfast about seven in the morning in



Lambwath, went down to a place where they had the suspended room set up for the cover, did the shoot, sent it to be mastered and it was out! Today, the window of opportunity is so small about when you get airplay, *if* you get airplay, it all moves so fast. You have to have such prep time to make sure people hear it in that window, because then it's gone. Marketing is such a big deal, which is why we're doing the album, the book, the tour, roll it all out together to make people take notice. Like when we did 'Aquostic' – "It's Quo acoustic? That interesting. The two dickheads are on the cover naked? Really?" It made people take notice and it did well because we had equal amounts of people who loved it and who hated it. If you can get that, you've got a big buzz on your hands. "I fucking hate that new advert for so and so..." But you mentioned the product and you know what it is. I think it's a bit sad but it is what it is and that's why things take so bloody long now. I must say, a lot of my generation say the old days were better, but from a musical point of view I much prefer today where I can hear exactly what I heard three weeks ago, it's not like analogue where you had to put it up to the desk, find the mix to check, and you're not entirely sure it was set up exactly as it was last time. It is now on the computer and I like that.

How was writing with Hannah? Was she a bit starstruck or reticent writing with you, considering how many famous songs you've written?

I love the girl, she's great. If she was over-awed she never showed it. She was in a band and I was looking for a fiddle player for a solo album I never actually finished. I met her, liked her, loved her fiddle playing and I asked if she sang at all. She worked on the second 'Aquostic' album as well so it wasn't like she was coming in cold, just meeting me to write. When she starts singing with me, oh blimey – it just clicked. We just sat, played acoustic, had a cup of tea, went for a wander round the garden, start again the next day. You basically just live together for a few days. My wife is very good facilitating that and the end result is that hopefully you have some material that you like. But it's hard to be objective, I don't really know if I like it until a couple of years later when I can look back and think, "Well that was a mistake wasn't it, that sounds shit." That happened to me a lot in the seventies. When we made an album a year, sometimes two, you had no time to analyse. When you listen back to them you'll think the bass is loud, the voice is too low, that's out of tune, that's sped up... whatever it is, you just judged it in the moment. The negative of using computers is there are so many pretty much perfect records around, with the playing and the tuning and the timing all spot on, when you hear something a bit different you love it to death. As for the lyrics, unless Bob Young comes in with something, Hannah and I would frequently look at each other and just wonder what we were going to write about. So we had working titles for all the songs. The first track, because it goes doo, doo doo, we just

called it 'Doo Doo'. Another was 'La La La'. We even struggled to come up with working titles! We just loved the sound so we'd just go with those names until we came up with real lyrics, because you can't get away with using the working ones...

Was Bob Young involved much in this album?

Hannah was ill at one point when we were working on it so I said to her I would bring Bob in to keep things going. He wrote on 'Good Times Bad Times' because it's a 3/4 and Hannah really liked the lyric of it. Bob helped just push things along while Hannah wasn't well.

If you enjoy the creative process so much, how was it doing the book? It's done in conjunction with Mick Wall, so I'm assuming it's via a series of interviews? You didn't have total control there?

No, it wasn't like I've been sat there with pen in hand, that's bullshit. I talk in tangents so I really didn't want to read it before it came out, but Simon convinced me I should in case things were wrong. If I talk live once I've said it, it's gone, the idea of reading back things I've said, I just think "You smug git, sat there thinking you're wonderful." But I read it and chronologically things were wrong because I drift off, and Mick the poor sod has to decipher that from the tapes. We went over the whole thing. For example there was a section where he had Alan Lancaster's mum down as being Spanish and what I actually said was it looked like she could have had Spanish blood in her. Lots of stuff like that, so it was good that I read it and Simon read it. There were misquotes about Rick and I, regarding what he did and didn't do, what I did and didn't do, so now everyone seems pleased with it. But then again, the publisher isn't going to say to me "Christ, what a sack of shit you've got there – when shall we put it out?" are they?

How is life in Quo now without Rick?

Marvellous – people don't want me to say that but it's true. Some fans of Rick felt we shouldn't have carried on and it won't be as good without Rick. It was basically exactly the same thing that was said to Rick and I when Alan Lancaster and John Coghlan weren't in the band anymore. That made me and Rick dig in and work really hard to prove them wrong. Some people don't think we did, others thought we did alright. That's how we feel in the band now, we don't feel the band is all about one person. Maybe we're wrong, but while that criticism hurt for me personally, it made me feel like, "I'm gonna show you!" Whether I do or not, time will tell. When we first brought Richie Malone in I thought "Smug git, you're not Rick." However, he's blossomed into something, Leon Cave on drums has blossomed and the band has turned into something – I'm not sure what it is, but there's something that's changed and I love it. I don't know whether it's the dynamic or having different personalities

there or what it is – it might be a musical tweak because when Richie first came in he was playing everything as it was, now we're all excited by the music and have a good time. It feels like we did in the original band when we were in our early twenties, that we are fighting against something. So those people telling me we shouldn't carry on, I thank them for giving me something to fight against.

Did you and Rick ever discuss a plan about what would happen if one of you wasn't there?

Many times. In fact, we first saw Richie many years ago and Rick said, "Fucking hell, he's good isn't he? If anything ever happens to me, get him in. In fact, I've got a better idea, get a lookalike in for you, get him in and we can stay at home." That was Rick. When he stood down from the band, he was quite taken that we brought Richie in. That worked out really well; I had no idea Richie would fit in as well as he has. Rick had that X-Factor, he made us look good. And he liked being out front. When that photo was taken at Band Aid of all the artists, I was at the side next to Jody Watley. I really don't like being in the forefront of photographs. Rick was the opposite, he pushed forward and said "Oi, shift up" and got his arse in between Sting and Nick Rhodes. Rick was that kind of guy, he had a magical look, the archetypal Rock star with the blonde hair, everything about him. He made Quo look good.

Have you considered another Quo album? I'm torn because I don't want to think it's over as far as new Quo songs but I'm not sure I'd accept a Quo album without Rick on it.

I don't really know. I think my manager and agent would want me to but I can imagine a lot of fans don't. There were a few albums where Rick really didn't contribute much but I know what you mean. We have material around and I'm always writing, but I honestly don't know.

Unless it was originals in more of the 'Aquostic' style, because I always thought Rick wasn't as into that as you were?

It's interesting... I told you before that project came out of an acoustic version of 'Down Down' that was done for an advert in Australia. It got a great reaction and Simon said we should do a full album like that. Rick's immediate reaction was "Yeah, yeah!" and mine was "No thanks." Partly because I thought I'd be doing all the work. Rick would do that sometimes, turn up and then say "I'm going out" and leave it to me. So Simon actually talked me into it and the first couple of sessions with Andrew and John were so enjoyable, that was when I was hooked.

Regarding online comments, I read one that I thought might make you laugh – when the press release for 'We Talk Too Much' went out on Facebook

the first comment on it said "If this was the direction Francis wanted Quo to go, there's no wonder Rick wasn't happy."

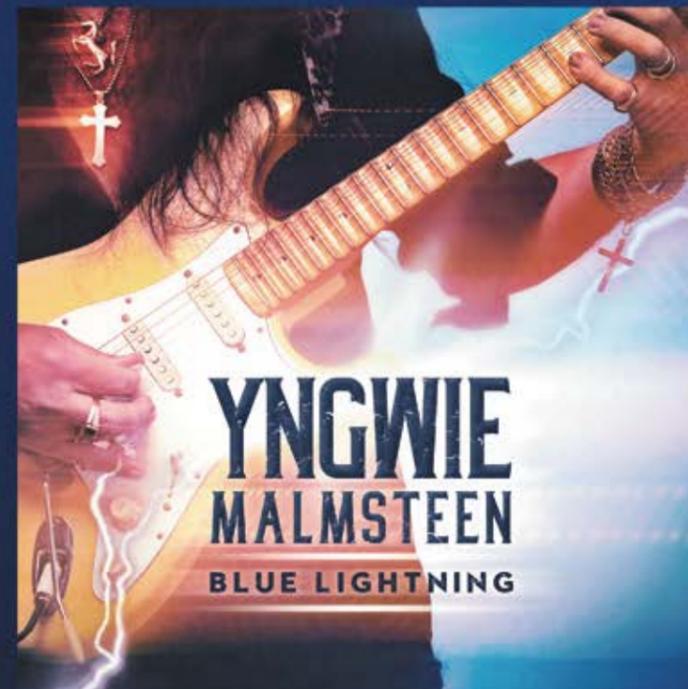
[Laughs] It has nothing to do with Quo! The album would have been made regardless. If Rick was still living, he'd have still put his solo album out as well, regardless. Quo doesn't factor into it, but that kind of comment would influence Rick. I've said before that Rick was a cabaret singer, which he was, that was where he came from, but that became an insult to him. Getting drunk, doing drugs, falling over and being an arsehole isn't "Rock". It's over-indulging and we shouldn't do it. Rock is the music, the other shit is what most people do at a weekend. The times we were all on stage a total mess, taking money off people, it was just wrong. And you should have been with Rick in a morning when he was hung over – good grief! Tell you what though, when we did the Frantic Four reunion shows, Rick worked his fucking arse off on that tour.

What did you think to his solo album?

I didn't listen to it, because as I mentioned to you once before, Rick loved playing ukelele and he was thinking of doing some songs by Frank Ifield and maybe doing a ukelele album. But that was the real Rick, not the Rock persona he developed. While he had that look, that's not who he really was and that was the cause of a lot of the problems between he and I. I felt in the end, when he was singing all gruff, he was becoming a caricature of himself – he didn't sing like that. Listen to 'All The Reasons' on 'Piledriver'. Beautiful stuff. That was the real Rick. Somewhere along the way someone told him that wasn't macho or Rock enough. So when I saw what songs were going to be on his album, a lot of it was the noisy Rock stuff and that wasn't Rick to me. I'd have liked the semi-Country style he spoke to me about.

Even though I've always thought a solo album should be about artistic expression, not an extension of your regular band, if he had done a ukelele album or something Country-infused, he'd have been patted for it because of his image.

They'd have been really disappointed, you're right. I knew some of the songs he had been thinking of, there was one his mother used to sing, I think it would have been great...fabulous songs, but it didn't happen. Listen to the early Quo albums, Rick always had at least one of those softer songs on there. I don't know who convinced him he had to be "Rick The Rocker", getting shit-faced and falling over. And people would say, "Cor, isn't that great?" They do the same with Keith Richards, look at a picture of him passed out on the floor with a heroin needle sticking out of his arm – "Wow, that's so Rock N' Roll." No it's not, it's an idiot out of his tree. Some people thought that's how Rick needed to be and that wasn't the Rick I knew and loved.



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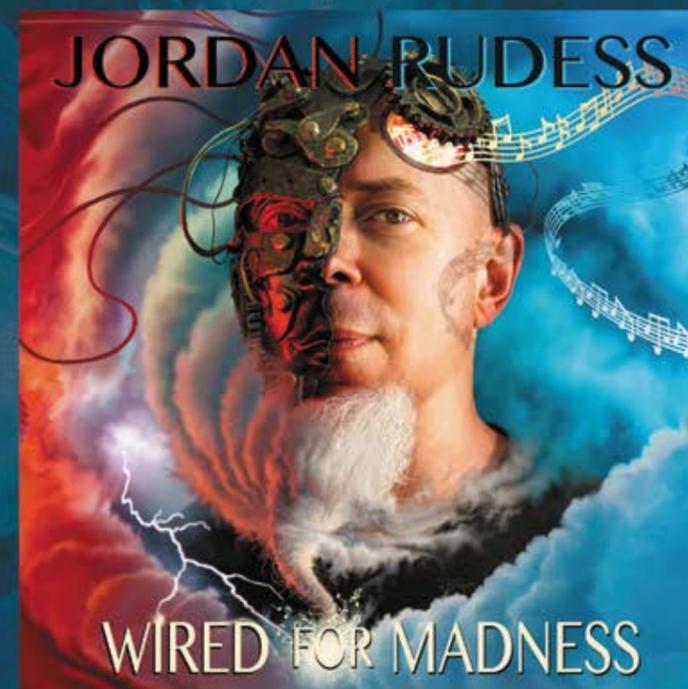
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