



Interview with Ian Gillan by James Gaden

After leaving Deep Purple in 1973, vocalist Ian Gillan retired from music for a while, before coming back with the Ian Gillan Band, a Jazz Rock fusion act. However it was the formation of the Hard Rock act Gillan that really put him back to the fore. The Gillan studio albums have been reissued as a stunning vinyl box set, so Fireworks joined the singer for a trip down memory lane.

The vinyl box set is quite striking, with each of the albums meticulously reproduced, something Gillan is very appreciative of.

"They were good covers in those days, when people bothered with vinyl, the artwork was much better," he states. "Everything changed in 1982 when the CDs started to come in. Before that, making an album wasn't just about writing and recording the songs, there was this whole process of everyone piling in, building up a portfolio for the artwork, great discussions on what the cover should be like, lyrics were printed that were legible, whether you were going to have a gatefold or just a single cover with an insert... it was all very exciting, and when you bought a vinyl album you would tend to sit with the lyrics and really listen to the record. It was a significant product you could actually sit and enjoy."

The Ian Gillan Band and the Jazz infused sound were dropped in favour of following a more Hard Rock sound with Gillan. Keyboard player Colin Towns featured in both groups, and his songwriting was a key factor as he and Gillan penned almost the entire debut album 'Mr Universe' between them. I inquire if Gillan knew of Towns' writing credentials when he initially hired him.

"No, you can never see in advance how human chemistry will work," he responds. "I think the

Jazz-Rock thing with John Gustafson and Ray Fenwick had run its course. There were some clear indicators to me, we were headlining a festival in Sweden and the band started off with a Jazz-Funk like feel, and I noticed the audience basically just stood around, scratching their heads as if to say 'what do we do to this?' That made me see the writing was on the wall and it was time to change, but I didn't quite know how to do it. The band were determined to carry on that fusion path, there was some musical snobbery there I think, whereas I realised we were getting away from our roots a bit. Colin was in the band and I think he was feeling a bit like that, these things had been building up. One day he was sitting at the piano in the studio and he was playing a song he had written called 'Fighting Man'. The other guys were basically taking the piss out of it, and I thought what he was doing was beautiful. That was the catalyst really, that song. I didn't have the heart to fire the other guys, so I effectively quit my own band, took Colin with me and made a new group called Gillan, aiming to rebuild toward a more direct style of music. We recorded 'Fighting Man', put it on 'Mr Universe' and that was the key to the transition. I had no idea that's how things would work out and don't get me wrong, I respect all the musicians I worked with, but times change, personal chemistry changes and things move on."

While 'Mr Universe' was a superb album and a great statement of intent, the follow up 'Glory Road' was arguably even stronger, an opinion shared by the man himself. "I like 'Glory Road'... I'm not saying that's my favourite album, but 'Mr Universe' was very interesting, it was kind of a hybrid thing where we had recorded stuff before we got the Virgin deal, it was an evolutionary album. When we did 'Glory Road', one of the things that did it for me is 'Unchain Your Brain'. I always remember Ritchie Blackmore saying that mid tempo stuff is easy to write, it's the really fast songs that are hard to write. 'Unchain Your Brain' is just fuck off Rock 'n' Roll basically. Then we had 'For Gillan Fans Only' which was added to it as a free album, it was all outtakes from the studio that we didn't really know what to do with. We gave it away so you had a two albums for the price of one deal, but I felt it gave a real insight to the fans of what went on in the studio and the sheer fun we were all having. If you dumped me on a desert island and made me listen to the buggers, 'Glory Road' is the one I'd pick."

With this chapter in his career closed, I ask Ian if it has made him listen back to any of the band's work.

"To answer that question, I can't deal just with these albums, frankly I don't play anything from my career. When I listen to music... I have a

somewhat eclectic collection. I tend to listen to flamenco guitar, a lot of obscure radio stations playing African music, I'll listen to Blues, early Rock 'n' Roll occasionally... but again, it depends who is coming round the house. If I'm just playing a game of pool it can be anything from the jukebox. I don't put anything of mine on unless someone specifically asks, because I know them all."

The band's third album, 'Future Shock', would see them start to incorporate some cover versions in their repertoire, the first being 'New Orleans'

"We did, it was fun to do covers, but my favourite thing from that entire era also appeared on that album, which was 'No Laughing In Heaven'. My rebellion was complete with that. I remember when I was thirteen years old, going to confirmation classes and the priest saying things and I'd say 'But what about these miracles, Father?' and he'd say 'Oh, God moves in mysterious ways,'" the singer laughs. "So I'd say 'Well what about this immaculate conception?' and he'd respond 'Ah, God's work is beyond all understanding, just have faith my son.' I thought that they were trying to separate my intelligence from my faith, this was just blind faith, it was rubbish. Later on, I realised all these people who were holier than thou, these people who were going to be going to heaven, were not the people I wanted to spend an

eternity with, that was for sure! It all clicked for me, and I haven't looked back. It became obvious to me that man created God, and all the problems started from there, from witch doctors through to popular religions now. All the conundrums and mysterious things connected with God suddenly made sense. 'No Laughing In Heaven' was the first real public statement I made about that."

And the band would make that statement on 'Top Of The Pops', albeit without their distinctive guitarist Bernie Tormé.

"Yes we did!" Gillan laughs. "Bernie wasn't there because we were on tour in Germany, and I got a call from Virgin Records saying that they had managed to get us on 'Top Of The Pops' that week. They were going to pay all our air fares to get us there and back and coincidentally it fitted in perfectly with our two nights off, so I told the guys in the band and there was general grumbling. Bernie in particular was unhappy, saying he wasn't going as it was his day off. I said Virgin had been fantastic, we were lucky because they had thrown their weight behind the band and invested, they were paying all the travel and accommodation, so I was going and the bus was leaving at eight o'clock in the morning. I said if you aren't on it, that's your decision... and Bernie didn't come. So I ended up calling Janick Gers. He came down, practiced furiously for two nights, and he was in the band. Bernie was a great guitar player and a great guy, but that was his decision."

The addition of Gers on guitar had little impact on the band, as the first album to feature him was 'Double Trouble', with one album of studio songs and one album of live material.

"Yeah, Janick is a genius, and a really easy guy to work with too. He has his own ideas and opinions and he's very professional. He's easy going by nature and a lovely bloke. He fitted in right away."

The band's final album was 'Magic' which was considered by some as a more commercial record than it's predecessors.

"It's funny, we never gave any thought to whether it could be 'commercial' or not," Gillan explains. "I literally only tried to do it consciously once in my life and that was for 'Machine Head'. The record label asked for something more commercial and Roger Glover

and I sat down and we wrote 'Never Before' and it was awful... well, it wasn't awful, but we had things like 'Smoke On The Water' on the same record and nobody was paying any attention to that! A lot of people in the business, with all due respect, don't have a clue what's going on. If you play something over and over there's every chance it'll catch on, but nobody really knows what'll be big in terms of quality. I wouldn't know if 'Magic' was more commercial, because it's all a matter of perception – maybe a style was developing as a band evolves, things can get smoother round the edges, some of the aggression can peter out... I dare not analyse it because I might come up with an answer and I don't really want one. All I can say is



"I will forever treasure the memory of Portsmouth Guild Hall where I walked on stage, opened my mouth and literally nothing happened. The entire audience sang the entire show for me, at the top of their voices. It was the most emotional thing that has ever happened in my professional life. I'll never forget that, it was wonderful."

IAN GILLAN

that any commercial feel that might be there wasn't planned."

The Gillan band itself was put to bed as the singer controversially joined Black Sabbath in 1983, but the vocalist insists that Sabbath was not the reason Gillan ended.

"The Sabbath thing was done in one day, I went out and got pissed with Tony Iommi and Geezer Butler, and that was it," he laughs. "I have no recollection of what happened, just the next morning my manager phoned me and said 'Ian, if you're going to make important career decisions, I wish you'd call me first so we can talk about it.' I had no idea what he was on about and then he tells me I had agreed to join Black Sabbath! So that was purely out of

alcohol. It wasn't anything to do with what had gone on with the Gillan band. It probably had run its course and it was time to move on, I do have to say I was extremely grunted at the time, I have no regrets about Gillan and I think this box set is a testament to the good times we had. But nothing lasts forever, and it was time to move on. I'd been having some problems with my voice during that time, in fact I'd had to cancel some shows because I had no voice at all. It was kind of scary, being a singer and losing your instrument – it was like being a guitar player and having all of your strings break at the same time. The two Harley Street doctors I saw, both of whom said I needed six months to a year off, both of whom

collaboration, Gillan returned to his true home, Deep Purple, where he is still vocalist to this day. Purple have recently been working on a new album and I inquire if it is nearly complete.

"It's finished as far as I'm concerned, I haven't heard it yet!" he responds. "Bob Ezrin won't let me hear anything when I've finished singing. I'll say 'Can I have a listen?' and he'll say 'No.' No playbacks, no rough mixes, nothing, he doesn't let anything out so I'm looking forward to hearing it like you are. Last I heard it was sounding okay."

In my opinion, the band's last album 'Now What!?' was one of their best for years, and I have high hopes for the new one.

"We've got the same team and it's been a joy to make," Ian enthuses. "Over the course of the year the writing sessions are always fun, you go for ten days and just play music all day, pick out the good bits and they become songs. It's a long process because you think you have about twenty five ideas, but once you whittle them down you've probably got only three or four that are really good and can be developed into songs. So then the process repeats itself with another writing session and after about four sessions you have enough for a record, go in a studio and record it all in another ten days. I'm not sure when it's coming out, but I can't wait to hear it."

Ever the workaholic, Gillan is also planning some solo shows.

"I am, yes, it's been impossible to do any because Deep Purple's schedule has been so heavy but I did manage to book out November and I have ten concerts planned, doing it with an orchestra, the Don Airey band, and I have my daughter's band as the opening act. I plan to do a real mixture of stuff, Purple stuff and other potted material from my career. I've not settled on the repertoire yet, but it sounds damned exciting to me."

I ponder how difficult it must be to pick a set list when you have such a large back catalogue.

"When you look at it, I've written over 400 songs, so there's a lot to choose from! I'm lucky to be able to do a solo thing, I haven't been able to plan anything for three years because things have been so saturated, the schedule is so busy. So I can't wait to do these shows, it'll be a nice change – it was either that or go on holiday!"