



HEAVEN & EARTH

Interview by James Gaden

'Hard To Kill' is the title of the new album by Heaven & Earth, a superb Hard Rock act who have picked up where their previous album, the critically acclaimed 'Dig', left off. The new album features eleven exquisite songs which will please fans of the Classic Rock genre, particularly those who enjoy Deep Purple and Rainbow. Lavishly packaged, complete with a bonus DVD, the set boasts an air of real quality and was voted #3 in our Top Ten Albums Of The Year poll last issue. Fireworks called up leader Stuart Smith to get the lowdown.

While Heaven & Earth have released three albums and guitarist Stuart Smith has been a professional musician for decades, for many people it was his 1998 solo album, titled 'Heaven & Earth' which brought him to the forefront, thanks in no small part to the star studded selection of guests which included Richie Sambora, Glenn Hughes, Joe Lynn Turner, Kelly Hansen, Paul Shortino and many more.

"Basically what happened was around that time I was in talks with Steve Priest about reforming Sweet, as I had played with them," Smith explains. "I ran into Keith Emerson who I knew because Cozy Powell had introduced us years ago. We reconnected, he was looking at putting ELP back together, so the idea came up about us forming a band and having some fun to warm up. We formed this group called Aliens of Extraordinary Ability and Samsung came down and offered us a deal. We said 'We can't sign, were not a real band, we only have one original song!'" he laughs. "However the guys from Samsung saw me jam some stuff with some friends so they came round to my house, had a few drinks and offered me a deal as a solo artist. The thing was, I had no band. So the first person I called was Richie Sambora, because he was my brother-in-law at the time, I married Heather Locklear's sister. I asked him to sing on my album and he said 'Sing? Nobody ever asks me to sing!' He was thrilled so he turned up and he had his guitar with him and said 'I figured I'd play something too' and that was fine with me. Then I asked Joe Lynn Turner and he accepted. It was a domino effect, once you had people the calibre of those two involved, word got around and

more and more people accepted, so it worked out really well. If I'd had a band from the off then it would have been a band project, but a solo deal is what I was offered... but a band was always my real intention."

This was something Smith would manage in 2001 when 'Windows To The World', was released under the name Heaven & Earth. He retained the services of Chuck Wright and Richie Onori from the solo album and settled with just one vocalist, Baton Rouge frontman Kelly Keeling. I ask if this was the version of the band Smith first envisioned?

"It was," he replies. "I had a hard time getting musicians to commit, especially when you haven't got regular gig work, which is regular money. If you can't offer that, musicians will go from gig to gig, band to band, to where there's money, they have to make a living. So we were aiming to be a proper band, we played some shows with Kelly Keeling as our singer, and then ultimately we had Kelly Hansen as our frontman for a while. We were actually making some traction with him and it was looking good for us... and then Kelly was offered the Foreigner job. He couldn't turn that down, it was a great opportunity and guaranteed money. He moved to them and I ended up playing a benefit concert in Los Angeles. For the last few songs I was on stage with David Paich and Steve Lukather from Toto, Carmine Appice and Slash, with Bobby Kimball and we were doing 'Hold The Line'. We finished and Bobby went off stage but the audience wanted more. I thought Bobby was just offstage, so I started playing 'All Right Now'. Everyone joined in but Bobby had

gone to the dressing room, so we're playing and looking at each other, wondering who is going to sing! Joe Retta was stood by the side of the stage, I didn't know who he was, he just walked onto the stage and started singing. Lukather came over to me and said 'Who the hell is that?' and I said 'I don't know - but he's good!'" Smith laughs. "That was my first meeting with Joe. I got his number, we jammed around, then Steve Priest got back in touch about doing the Sweet thing. I said 'Sure, I have just the singer!' and took Joe. We did a live record, but Steve didn't really want to do a studio album. Bruce Quarto, who is in charge of the label Heaven & Earth are with now, wanted a record but it boiled down to Steve being too lazy to come over to a studio four times a week. So Bruce said to me 'How about another Heaven & Earth album?' I was interested, I asked Joe, he said yes and we went from there. The result was 'Dig'."

'Dig' was a superb Hard Rock record and saw the pairing of Smith on guitar and Retta's excellent vocals form a musical match made in, er... heaven. Smith agrees.

"Yeah, it's funny, I don't tend to listen to my own stuff. When you play something hundreds of times from inception to final recording, the last thing you want to do is play it again. A while back I had a long drive to do and 'Dig' was literally the only album in the car, so I put it on and I thought 'Yeah, this isn't bad!' It's probably a bit darker than 'Hard To Kill' as an overall album."

I comment that having the same musicians throughout the record probably helped to give

it a more cohesive feel, but I inadvertently make the guitarist chuckle.

"Yeah, that's not the case live," he laughs. "We can't take Kenny Aronoff out because he's contracted to John Fogerty. He had enough time to make the album and Ty Bailey, who was planned to be our regular keyboard player, he got the offer to play in Katy Perry's band. I still tease him about it, I say 'Oh, you could be playing a solo at this point Ty, instead of just pressing one key for Katy Perry' and he laughed and said 'Sometimes it's not even one key!' But I understand, we all have families to provide for so it's no problem."

With two albums with Joe Retta on vocals, one with Keeling and an all-star solo album, I ask if the Retta era is the one set lists are primarily made up from.

"We've got two sets for when we're playing a lot of shows, that we can switch between. Both sets comprise mostly of the 'Dig' and 'Hard To Kill' albums, especially as we're promoting the new one. We do play some songs from my album too. I don't think we've done anything from 'Windows To The World' with Joe. I'm not sure why. Maybe because the setlist soon fills up!"

There was a five year gap between the release of 'Dig' and 'Hard To Kill' so I ask Stuart to tell me how long a Heaven & Earth album usually takes to make.

"We took two and a half years. That sounds a really long time but we're not lazy, it's because our writing process is quite long. Generally I'll come up with a riff and the band will say if they like it. I'll put the ones they like on my iPhone, then Joe will work it up with me and we'll send it out as an mp3 and see what changes need to be made and what ideas the others have. We can do this with just one song about fifty times. So two and a half years sounds a long time but it isn't, not for the way we write, and then *craft* the songs. Also, we wrote about twenty-three tracks for 'Hard To Kill' and we narrowed it down to the ones that were flowing the best, the ones that seem to write themselves.

"Then it's on to recording," he adds. "With 'Dig' we all went in together because we were at Ocean Studios, which had enough isolation rooms for us. In the old days of making a record it didn't matter if the guitar bled into the drums a bit, but now they want stems for movies and stuff which have to be clean, isolated tracks. Oceans Studios gave us that, but we did 'Hard To Kill' at Kenny Aronoff's studio. We were all in there looking each other in the eye, but the main process there was getting the bass and drums down, the guitars couldn't be too loud in case they bled. I couldn't get my proper sound there, so I did my parts and Joe's vocals elsewhere and then we gave everything to Chris Lord-Alge to do the final mixing. He's amazing, he's done so many great albums and the sound he got out of it is huge. It's out on vinyl too and there's a huge difference to my ears, I think the CD sounds a lot more brittle to the vinyl

version on a good record player. There's just something about vinyl, that's why I'm glad it's making a comeback."

The lavish packaging applies to the CD as well as the vinyl, with my copy being a chunky digi-pack housing a thick inlay booklet, CD, DVD and download card so you don't even have to rip the CD to get a copy for your iPod.

"The credit for that has to go to Bruce Quarto," Stuart explains. "I really only thought about a booklet with some lyrics and thanks in, but Bruce wants it all to be first class, like 'Dig' was, so he pushes that. The reason the DVD is in there, on 'Dig' we spent a horrendous amount of money on the videos, because we hired girls and cars and horses, mansions, all kinds of stuff, it cost a fortune and we got two videos out of it. I watched what Joe Bonamassa was doing and he basically just films the band playing the songs through, so we did that, but we did it for every single song on the album, so for a quarter of the price we got videos for every track. So there's a DVD with the CD version which bands don't do."



Quarto Valley Records make the effort to go the extra mile, unlike a lot of labels which act as little more than distributors in today's market.

"Yeah, Bruce is great. We made the first album and he was asking questions, saying 'Once you've made the record, then what?' and we told him what a label would do and he'd say 'And what do you get out of it?' I'd tell him the numbers and he said 'That doesn't seem fair. Do you *need* a record company?' I explained you didn't *have* to, you could do it all yourself hiring distributors and promoters etc, but I warned him it could cost anywhere up to a million dollars. He replied 'So?' and that was the start of Quarto Valley records! We're with him, he's just signed Paul Rodgers, he has Edgar Winter who is doing a tribute to his brother Johnny, he has original Wings drummer Denny Seiwell and he's doing a Cream project, so things are taking off for him. People are taking notice, the label is a contender."

You can clearly hear a Deep Purple and Rainbow influence in the Heaven & Earth style, because Smith was not only heavily influenced by Ritchie Blackmore, he was fortunate to have

been mentored by him.

"I was classically trained originally. My father was an RAF pilot and I was on the base and these guys said they had a spare ticket for a concert and asked if I wanted to go. I didn't care about Rock music but my dad wanted me out of the house to give him some peace. I was pretty bored until the last act, when this guy comes running to the front of the stage and started playing these classical runs with so much emotion and volume. Watching Ritchie play like that got me into Rock music and a few years later I got to meet him. We had a lot in common from the classical training to many other things and got on really well. I was playing in England in 1983 and everything was more geared towards dance music, Duran Duran, stuff like that. Because England is a small market, if you weren't playing what was fashionable, you might starve. Ritchie had brought in Joe Lynn Turner to Rainbow to focus on America as a result. He told me to move there - he said America was so big, it didn't matter what you were playing, there was a place for it and Rock was doing well. So I moved out there and started a band. Ritchie would help us out, he'd come and sit in on gigs and made sure it was announced on the radio beforehand, so 1,500 people would turn up because Ritchie was there, as Rainbow were huge at the time with MTV. He taught me a hell of a lot, not just about the guitar but his attitude toward playing. One of the most important things he said was 'It's not what you put in, it's what you leave out'. You get all these guys who play a solo and they'll be blazing up and down the neck saying 'Look how fast I can play!' but it's totally removed from what the song is about. They're missing the point. Ritchie is the master of taking a melody, working with it, then incorporating some blazing stuff at the end which makes you go 'Christ!' Ritchie does things that are appropriate, whereas some guys who shred, after five minutes you've heard everything they can do. He was my main influence, I had posters and everything of him in my room. I remember once he came with me to see my mother and the first thing she said to him was 'Oh, you're not just a cardboard cut out!'"

Smith is eager to point out he is not the only ingredient in Heaven & Earth's wonderful sound.

"Ritchie's influence is always in my playing but Joe Retta is a prolific writer," Smith replies. "He writes melodies and some guitar parts. In fact the song 'Anthem', most of that was Joe. I think I just wrote the bridge. Joe stayed at my house for a while so the two of us drive the bulk of the material, as Kenny and Tyler were out touring. We don't have much in the way of ego problems either, if there's something Joe or I strongly believe in, we'll fight for it, but we're relatively objective. I'd have no problem as the guitarist, if Joe comes up with something better, I'm fine with that. And he's the singer but the lyrics to 'Bleed Me Dry' were all me because that was a deeply personal song. I gave that to him and he actually added guitar parts. So the ego thing is rarely an issue. We're too old for that!"