



JOANNE SHAW TAYLOR

Blues Rocker Joanne Shaw Taylor has seen a steady rise in her audience, touring hard while releasing three excellent studio albums in the form of 'White Sugar', 'Diamonds In The Dirt' and 'Almost Always Never'. She captured her live show with her release 'Tales From The Road' and has now exploded back onto the scene with her brand new album 'The Dirty Truth'. With Planet Rock A-listing the lead single 'Mud Honey', the album hitting the top 40 in the UK album chart and Shaw preparing to go out on tour with none other than Whitesnake legend Bernie Marsden, James Gaden caught up with the six string songstress to hear all about it.

I absolutely loved 'Almost Always Never' and I was a little worried that I would be comparing this new one unfavourably with it. Yet as soon as 'Mud Honey' started up, I was blown away!

Oh, fantastic! I'd had the song 'Struck Down' for ages, but I always intended calling that 'Mud Honey'. The second album was meant to be called 'Mud Honey' but I changed my mind because there is a band called that, even though we're from different genres. So it was put to one side and I ended up writing lyrics and calling it 'Struck Down'. With the song that did that become 'Mud Honey', I just thought screw it, it sounds good as it is! It's weird for me because while I'm really happy with how this album turned out, it's hard to be objective. When you put a new album out, it's always your favourite. I don't know if that's just because it's the freshest or what. All the albums are like my children, but now I've got a few under my belt, there are some similarities between them, yet they're all different. I like that about them.

There's a definite growth to your song writing that can be heard across your four studio records. You tour a lot, so do you have a fixed idea of what

sort of thing you're looking to write when it's time to go in the studio?

With this album, I wanted to go back to using Jim Gaines as producer. He did my first album and I used a different producer for 'Almost Always Never', which was quite a different album for me. I decided I wanted this one to be more stripped down and roots-based like 'White Sugar'. So with that in mind I intended writing a more traditional album. Unfortunately, I find with song writing you write the songs that are inside you, and I ended up with ones that were more Rocky and more Soulful. It becomes its own animal really, what mood you're in affects what songs you get.

So was it that style that made you go back to Jim Gaines as a producer? What does he offer you that fits with your style so well?

There were two reasons I wanted to go back to Jim. Like I said, I wanted to go back to the 'White Sugar' style and as Jim produced that, it made sense. Secondly, Jim has many talents and he's great with guitar. He knows what a song needs and because I write a lot, you don't want to put a guitar solo in a song just for the sake of it. He has a great ear for what is needed as well as for tones, which is

why so many guitar players use him. I trust him because we've become good friends over the last few years. Last year was manic because I lost my mum and touring around that, was very hectic. To go back to Jim and his wife who I'm close to, Jim has a very laid back vibe and it was like a retreat.

The way you described the material as "Rocky yet Soulful" is pretty much how I heard it. You've got the Blues-Rock of the early stuff and the Soul element I enjoyed so much from the last one, I think the blend here is perfect.

Oh, that's good to know. 'Mud Honey' even got A-listed for Planet Rock which was just fantastic, they really got behind it. I was at a friend's house the other day and 'Mud Honey' was playing. I sort of accused her of illegally downloading because the album wasn't out yet, where did she get it? She indignantly told me she was listening to Planet Rock! (laughs)

The other great thing about this album is obviously everyone knows you as a guitarist, but vocally I think this is your best work to date. You've got a real distinctive huskiness to your voice. Is that all natural, or something you've honed by emulating someone?

It's just come along on its own really. Singing wise, it's taken me a long time to get my voice to a point where I'm quite happy with it. I'll hold my hands up and say singing never came naturally to me, unlike guitar playing which I found came to me much easier. I've just spend a lot of time touring and

it's evolved. It's not something I've practiced hugely, I sort of open my mouth and hope for the best! (laughs)

Do the producers, like Jim, help with that side of things?

Jim's really good, one thing I will say is I think these are the first songs I've written with my voice in mind. It's taken me a long time to write melodies that are suited to me as a singer, rather than a guitar player. I have a slight speech impediment from when I was younger and I tend to mumble a lot, certainly my diction can be improved and Jim is fanatical about being able to hear what the lyric is, so he's great with that.

How long did you spend making the album? It sounds quite raw, like you cut a lot of it live.

Yeah, I think we spent maybe twenty days putting it down. There was an odd day off here and there so it was more relaxed than the other sessions I've done with Jim where it was usually ten days or two weeks. It gave me a bit more time to play around and being relaxed, I did most of the vocals and the solos in one or two takes.

I thought, with you saying you weren't naturally confident as a singer, that you might have spent a bit longer on the vocals, but if you've done them all in a couple of takes, that's even more impressive.

Oh, good! (laughs) You can overdo it as well. With tracks like 'Mud Honey' and 'Dirty Truth', those were basically first takes. If you capture the vibe, I don't think you need to worry about pitch and vibrato and all that stuff being spot on. You just want the right feel and usually that happens in the first take.

As your last release was a live album, do you think making that helped keep the mindset of not polishing anything too much?

Yeah, I think it did actually. Once you realise you can do what I consider to be a relatively good album that was recorded in one go, on one night, it does mean that you don't need to over-think things in a studio. Having that level of trust with Jim, if he says it's fine then I believe him and I'll move on.

You say that, but this took twenty days compared to ten last time. It's a slippery slope, your fifth studio album might end up taking longer than 'Chinese Democracy'.

(Laughs) To be honest, the reason it took twenty is we'd do a take and then go and sit down for an hour. It was pretty lazy compared to how I started. The schedule was kind, not strict for a change!

Do you write on the road, or do you need to switch off completely to be fresh?

I do tend to avoid writing on the road. I had about three months off at the start

of this year because I'd been touring so hard and I wanted to set this label up for myself. I wanted some time with my family and I intended to write during that time. I couldn't come up with anything! I played in Australia and I had a couple of days off when I got back. I stayed in Michigan and wrote basically all of the songs on this record in those two days. I've got a good work ethic, but never underestimate the power of panic! (laughs) As much as I'd like to write on the road, planning ahead to write a song a week so I've got a stockpile, I just don't think I can write under those conditions.

I know what you mean - the first time I saw you live, you were supporting Glenn Hughes who I've talked to many times. He once told me he writes a song a day and he has something like 3,000 tracks in his vault.



Glenn's a great guy; it was like that when I spent some time with Dave Stewart. He just said 'Right, let's write a song now' and about an hour later you have one done. It just doesn't work for me, I find my albums are a snapshot of where I am at a particular time. I couldn't have written this two years ago and I probably won't write like this again. It was just what came out over a couple of days in April, and hopefully something similar will happen when I have to write next April!

How do you write - on acoustic?

Mostly I work in Garageband on my Mac. I can whack an idea out there and figure out if it's any good and if I can write some lyrics to fit it. It's a really good way to quickly build a song idea and see where it can go.

Is the UK still your biggest market or are you breaking through anywhere else?

We do very well in Australia. The UK is the biggest market though. I've not done that

much European touring really, as oppose to the States which I've done for five years or so. The UK has a good scene and the people like to see one of their own do well, I've been playing here since I was a nipper, so I'm a sixteen year overnight success story! (laughs) Having people like Joe Bonamassa doing well has kicked open the door for my sort of stuff, the audience is less traditional with the umbrella of 'Blues'. There's a big guitar audience here, whether you're from the older generation of Blues-Rock like Kossoff and Cream, to the newer generation who like harder edged players like Zakk Wylde. People like Joe and myself are in the middle somewhere. There's a lot of different genres in the 'Blues' bracket.

Do you listen to Blues yourself, or is that just the sort of stuff you write?

I have very diverse taste in music. I'm currently on an Ella Fitzgerald kick, along with Dean Martin. If I do listen to Blues, it's stuff like Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters, the old school stuff. I enjoy that because it's nothing like what I do, and I listen to a lot of me! (laughs) I'm less inclined to listen to new Blues-Rock, which sounds terrible, because I want to support the scene, but I need to keep my playing fresh, if I listened to other Blues-Rock it would be too much like a busman's holiday.

Last time we spoke (Fireworks #54) we talked about your cover of Frankie Miller's 'Jealousy'. Did you consider any covers on this one?

I did actually, I've written something like thirty originals in four years, so because I was panicking about the writing, I thought maybe I'd bought myself the right to do a covers album. The problem was I couldn't find any! There are obviously loads of songs I love but I'm just not any good at picking ones I could do, I don't have that ear. I don't know what's good for me, and ones I do think about tend to sound nothing like what I've written, so they don't fit with the rest of the album!

You'll be back touring again soon, this time with Bernie Marsden, which I think is a great pairing. How did that come about?

Just management talking really, Bernie was up for doing it, so was I and I agree, I think it's a good pairing. I'm a huge fan of Bernie and he's a really lovely guy. I have a Rock side and I'm a Blues guitar player, so we have some similarities to our careers, but we're different kinds of players so I think it'll be fun. We're going to play together at the end so I won't waste that opportunity!

It must really validate your work as an artist when you think you've got Bernie Marsden opening for you. That must feel good?

Absolutely! What can you say? I'm just chuffed I get to meet him! (laughs)