

MICHAEL DES BARRES

Michael Des Barres has enjoyed a long and fruitful career as a charismatic lead singer and song writer for glamsters Silverhead, the voice of 70s rockers Detective, vocalist for Chequered Past and fronting the Power Station at Live Aid and their subsequent world tour. As well as a couple of solo albums, Michael stepped into the world of acting, which he first experienced a taste of as a youngster. With a resumé that includes appearances in Steven Seagal's 'Under Siege', Clint Eastwood's 'Pink Cadillac and TV work including 'Seinfeld', 'Nip/Tuck' and a recurring role as villain Murdoc in the hit eighties series 'MacGuyver', Michael has remained constantly busy. Finally deciding to come back to music, he has a brand new record, with a brand new band. Michael Des Barres embraces his late 60s British rock roots by inviting you to join him on 'Carnaby Street'. James Gaden was only too happy to attend.

Well Michael, I've been listening to 'Carnaby Street', I've seen how exuberant and enthused you are about it on Facebook, and I must say I've been playing it repeatedly since it arrived. I'm thrilled with it, it's fantastic!

Oh, that's such good news! I'm so glad. I knew people would dig it, but I have to say I've been rather overwhelmed by the response to it, it's been pretty good, James! I think people are just... there's been a tremendous vacuum for a while! (laughs) That's what so ironic about this whole thing, I can't believe the age of our audience, 80% of them are young 'uns! And it's because they haven't heard this! They don't know Steve Marriott from a hole in the ground. Now, hopefully, they will, and that makes me happy.

As I've been listening to the record, I started drafting my review for the magazine. One of the things I put was that the album is authentic music from the era of Humble Pie, The Rolling Stones, Free, bands like that, but it's authentic not only because of the way it is played, but because you were there, you know first hand what it was like.

That's exactly right, James! I try to explain to people, at sixteen years old I was in nightclubs, I went to school with Mitch Mitchell who said to me 'Hey, I'm playing with this black geezer...' It's not as if I'm Chris Robinson, God bless him. The Black Crowes were really the last band to have had that vibe, but it seems to have faded out now they are moving towards more of the Grateful Dead territory. I say this with all due respect, but for me personally, that style of music is like an overdose of Xanax, the Grateful Coma! (laughs) But this, this is my music! I was inspired by Terry Reid because were were fifteen years old, together. You're absolutely right, I'm not copying anybody.

I think the combination of your experience and knowledge of the music scene at that time, coupled with the group you have put together, has resulted in something very special with that feel. So I was wondering, how did you end up putting together the group of guys who make up The Michael Des Barres Band? Did you approach them one by one, was it via auditions - how did you end up with this collection of players?

That's a great question, and you're the first to ask! And I'm glad, this band has to be honoured, they really do. What happened was I went to Texas, I was recovering from an accident and I was living on a ranch there. I was playing acoustic blues there, I met Jesse Dayton and we used to fuck around and play. It was like "Oh my God, I remember this!" I've been killing people on telly for a long time, James! (laughs) So now, I'm on a ranch, no distractions, and I really got into the music again. I had worked, over the years for fun, with an incredible musician who has been my partner through all of this, his name is Paul III. He's the bass player on the record and I collaborated a lot with him. He is Linda Perry's bass player, and Linda produces Courtney Love, Christina Aguilera... the list is endless, but all these myriad of different musicians, he plays on their stuff. I said "Paul, we've gotta put a hot rock 'n' roll band together, you know, a truly great setup with two guitars, keyboards..." And he just exhaled and said "Thank God." (laughs) He said "Fuck it, I've got the guys!" and before we knew it, he'd assembled this group. When it comes to L.A. or London or any city that produces music, there is a core group of guys used to propel the vision of whatever artist they are hired to do sessions with. But in their hearts, their influences tend to remain the same, which are blues,

the Stones, the excitement and fun of The Faces, and the grit and soul of Free, via Wilson Pickett. That's the music that they love. So now, instead of interpreting a Linda Perry ballad for Christina Aguilera, they're playing in Little Richard's band! (laughs) I've always said we're more Little Richard than Lil Wayne! Therefore, the band is comprised of guys who have those references, and this band is like a vacation to play the music they were raised on, and their day job remains.

I noticed when I was reading the lyrics of the album, the song 'Carnaby Street' is the thematic centrepiece, it's the title track, the cover art is reflective of that... did you write that song and decide that would be the one to lead the way, or were you struggling for a title and wrote something specifically?

That's a fantastic question - it was in fact the last song I wrote. That's fascinating, because all of the songs have joined in an unconscious thematic way. I hadn't given any thought to that, I was just writing. At the end I had about twenty five songs and we were breaking it down. It started very much with Jebin Bruni, our keyboard player... the keyboards really dictated that sort of Georgie Fame, Zoot Money, late sixties R'n'B and I thought "Fuck, it's really thematic sonically." So then it was a question of what to call it. I didn't want to be too on the nose, so I chose 'Carnaby Street' as a title, which made me think "Well, I suppose one should write that song." I've always resisted those songs that middle aged rockers

write to "sum it all up", to reminisce, to say how you loved John Lennon like a brother... Of course you can write them to be cathartic, but I didn't want something too overly sentimental or overly nostalgic. I wanted more of a tribute, a joyous anthem song that characterised the amazing cultural revolution of that decade. So it was the last song written for the album and when I came in that day, I remember it like it was yesterday. I walked in and said "I've got something I want to play you." We played it and we got teary eyed - when I sing "Everything you've heard is everything I've seen"... almost every question I'm asked is "What was it like, Michael?" James, you're a young man who is an aficionado of music, you've studied it and you've asked questions. I'm one of the only people left standing who you can ask! It's not like I read about that shit, I was written about! It was a glorious time, imagine Second World War England turning into a velvet paradise, fuelled by hashish and Sonny Boy Williamson. Incalculably interesting when you think about it. Young white dudes adopt the blues as their voice. So I wrote that song and I mean every word of it, the Union Jack was in the hands of The Who, we did follow Ray Davies' every word and every bump and grind from Mick Jagger. It was an incredible synthesis of great British eccentrics with the carnality of the blues, as interpreted by the likes of Brian Jones, Alexis Korner, Long John Baldry, John Mayall and The Rolling Stones.

On the subject of songs you have written for the album, I remember you giving us a preview by putting out a video of 'Hot And Sticky' on the net before the album came out. I seem to remember it had raunchier lyrics than the version on the record. Did you have to tone it down a bit?

I didn't want to appear overtly gratuitous, when I played it, women who I really love and respect - it just seemed a little too... I was going to say "on the nose", but it's another part of the anatomy. (laughs) I'm a very romantic man who has led a decadent life and I think that led to that version. (laughs)

I liked the song but I did think the lyrics originally were a little... to the fore, shall we say? I think the version on the album is the better of the two.

I'm so glad you said that James, that makes me very happy - I don't like to edit myself but I certainly don't want to be perceived as sexist. I don't believe in that at all, as you know I defend Miss

Pamela's (*Des Barres, Michael's ex-wife*) honour at every occasion, and have gone to actual physical violence to protect her innocent experience. It's not like I don't champion women and I felt it was a mixed message. I want to be clear.

While we are talking about alternative versions, you posted a version of 'You're My Pain Killer' with female backing singers and a horn section which I thought was very effective. Did you think about doing the whole album like that at any point, or was it purely an experiment?

Well, I thought "fuck that!" and I didn't want the record to sound too calculated. Horns and girls, it's almost like telling the same joke twice in a row. I'll get into all that if it's cool, if 'Carnaby Street' connects I'd happily go out with twenty dancers and recreate that joyous sixties rock and roll revue. But this album, we actually went in and cut it in seven days, that's it - pretty much live. We could go in and add some beautiful girls to sing on it but I think it would stop sounding like a rock band. Even when Steve Marriott used 'The Blackberries', for me it sort of lost that feel - I just wanna hear him! For this, our first time around, I think we should be naked and raw.

When we last spoke for the Chequered Past article in Fireworks #49, you were working on the material for this record. You originally planned to put the album out independently, but ended up signing with Gonzo. What was it that drew you to them, what did they offer you that was better than doing it yourself?

They offered me worldwide distribution and I just fell in love with their whole organisation, headed by Rob Ayling, whom I met and who knocked me out with his enthusiasm and his guerilla, D.I.Y. pragmatic view of how to get the record out to people. I don't have any desire to be managed anymore, but I really did need to relinquish the pragmatic side of how to get my music across. He was really helpful with that and remains so. What people have to realise is that even though I have a lot of followers on the internet, it's not enough. I wanted to be heard in Yugoslavia, they're all Murdoc fans! (laughs) And I wouldn't have been able to do that without Rob. It would have been impossible to reach as many people as I'm reaching daily now, it's amazing what's happening. Rob has been able to get it out there. He impressed me, it's a very unique label. They deal with the fringes of music, this is really their first original rock 'n' roll record.

From what I've seen, they are doing a great job. I saw on Facebook that the album had caught them unawares with the response and you had run out of stock in some places because of the speed it was selling, which is encouraging! With you mentioning your Murdoc fans there, it's weird, reading some of the Facebook posts you get, obviously I know you from Silverhead, Detective, Chequered Past, The Power Station... but some people think this is your first record, they think you're one of those "actor turned singers"!

(Laughs) Yeah, I know! It's an interesting phenomenon, but I accept it. I've been in the business for forty years, but my thing is self expression, whatever form that takes is irrelevant. In this instance, I didn't want to express somebody else's vision, I wanted to really concentrate on what I wanted to say and what I had to bring to the table. I've been hitting my marks and killing people and all that stuff - I even did 'ALF' for Christ's sake! I've done everything and anything to stay creative and my choices have been more for the love of self expression than the material sometimes. This time though, the only person who will make the decisions will be me. The music business doesn't exist - what a time to make an album! There is no music business, there is no tour support, there's no this and that... but I think it's the best time to make music. There's no committee, there's no board that says "Where's the single?" or "Oooh, the cover is too..." I don't want those questions anymore, it's silly. If people dig Murdoc and like what they've seen of me as an actor, then great. They're probably saying "Oh my God, Murdoc in eyeliner? Jesus Christ, what the fuck is this?" (laughs) "Where's his flame thrower, for fuck's sake?" My flame thrower nowadays is a Les Paul with P-90 pickups. It's all the same, I'm shooting rockets one way or the other! (laughs)

I've bought the limited edition version of the album with the bonus DVD. It literally only arrived an hour ago, so I haven't had chance to view it yet. What have you put on there?

Well, there's four live videos from a show in the Viper Room. There's the Live Aid performance, the video as the original '16 and Savaged' from Silverhead, there's an interview with me which you might enjoy about 'Carnaby Street' which I tried to answer questions in an honest and entertaining way, and a couple of videos for 'You're My Pain Killer' and 'Hot And Sticky'. There's some interesting stuff. It's nice, it's honest and funny and joyous - it's my philosophy: be pleasant, be in the moment, have a great wardrobe.

(Laughs) I'm looking forward to seeing it! It'll be nice to see The Power Station at Live Aid again, it's been a long time since I've watched that.

Oh yeah, that was a hell of a day! Forget about it. Insanely interesting. Two weeks after I got hired, and I was in front of two billion people. You know the story.

When you joined the Power Station, you came in and fronted the world tour, but you only actually got to record one song with them, 'We Fight For Love' which was used on the end credits of Schwarzenegger's 'Commando' film. Did you ever feel you missed out, not getting to make an album with them?

You know James, your question is totally valid and here's the answer: I don't regret fuck all. If I regret, then I'm taking myself out of the moment. I am Edith fucking Piaf! (laughs) I was so grateful - that year 'Obsession'



was number one all over the world, I'm hanging out, Chequered Past is drug addled, I'm sober, what do I do? The phone rings, can I come to New York... two weeks later I'm at Live Aid. Shocking. I toured everywhere for six months, private jet... "Where's my sushi?" (laughs) All that fantasy bullshit that you had when you were nine, singing in the mirror with a hairbrush, all of it came true. Duran Duran were at their peak, it was just the most exciting time. I knew Robert Palmer, I loved Robert, I knew Vinegar Joe, I toured with them. It wasn't like I was conducting some Machiavellian manoeuvre to replace Robert Palmer, I had the deepest respect for him. But Chequered Past had supported Duran Duran and they remembered me. In terms of going further than a tour with it... even though Andy Taylor was veering more toward rock 'n' roll, that wasn't the style I was most comfortable with, shall we say. It's difficult to do that when I had many other things I wanted to do - the Power Station experience was like the end of a chapter for me. Within months I was doing 'MacGuyver' and movies, which I did for the next twenty years. As a child I wanted to act and I got my foot in the door as it were. I made my solo album 'Somebody Up There Likes Me', the label collapsed, the same old crap, so I thought "Fine!" I had written the theme song for 'Commando' with Andy and was happy to move on to the next chapter of my life. Then two or three years ago, that changed to this period of my life. So no regrets.

You sound very much like someone who goes with the flow and doesn't get too bogged down with things.

Yes, it's been an amazing experience and it continues every day! The things I'm asked to do, the things that are

going on, are fantastic. Last year I did a huge commercial with Ashton Kutcher for Nikon. It was so irresistible to me, it was on a lot, on Marina Del Ray, with gorgeous girls, I sat on a boat with these girls, they paid me a fortune. Ashton Kutcher was Ashton Kutcher - I'm quite prepared to do whatever comes in, if it's fun! And as long as it doesn't interfere with 'Carnaby Street', because now I really have to focus on that! (laughs) The point I'm clumsily trying to make is I'm open to whatever, I don't have that thing where I think "Oh, I couldn't do that, that's way beneath me..." Nothing is beneath me! (laughs) Except the woman I love!

(Laughs) On the subject of doing things you like, you recently went to Japan and played some reunion shows with Silverhead - what was the reaction to that like?

It was absolutely phenomenal. I'd say indescribable, but I'll try! Pete Thompson was Robin Trower's drummer, he goes to Japan and a promoter comes up to him and asks if Silverhead will reunite and play a couple of shows in Tokyo. Pete says "I'll get back to you". He called everybody, we all said "Are you kidding?" The band ended badly, shall we say, like all bands do. Like a relationship - I don't know of a 'good' breakup, in terms of your personal life or a band. So, personally, I thought it was a real chance to say how much I loved those guys and how much it meant for me to be in Silverhead. There was really no closure to it. We just drifted apart in a cloud of hashish.

We all said yes, but we all live in different countries. We had to actually meet in Tokyo to rehearse - can you imagine that? We had this rehearsal room and I walk in... there they are. We all just crumpled to the floor. Thirty eight years later, we are all in a room, singing the songs we wrote as young men! It was astonishing - it was like riding a bike, we know the DNA of those songs. I looked around at one point, and everybody had their eyes closed, imaging they were twenty pounds lighter! (laughs) Although in my case, I wouldn't exist if I was twenty pounds lighter! However, within an hour, it had become "Rob, turn the fuck down, I can't hear myself!" We reverted back to those same people from '72! (laughs)

When we got on stage, halfway through the first song, it was shocking. I realised that Silverhead only ever played to audiences that had no idea who we were in the most part, except in New York and L.A. But for most of the shows, nobody knew who we were, we were always trying to win over an audience. When we walked out in Tokyo, it was filled with fifty year old glam rockers and teenagers, all with lip gloss on! To look out and see that... they knew every syllable of every song. We never had that. Two things had happened. One, we got the recognition that I guess we needed. Two, it gave us the closure of something beautiful.

Fantastic. Did you record any of the shows?

Yeah, all of them! I have a crew who have been shooting a documentary on me, they've been doing it for a year, they flew over. So we had a four man crew shoot everything and we recorded it. Pete has turned into a wonderful producer so he is messing around with the tapes down in Texas, he lives in Fort Worth. I don't have the time to do that, or the inclination. He's doing it and it will come out at some stage. If someone wanted us to do it again elsewhere... perhaps we will, but certainly not in the near future.

To wrap up, I'll go back to 'Carnaby Street' - it's been added to iTunes recently, which is one of the few things from your career that is available digitally. There's a lot of your back catalogue that's very hard to find.

I know, I'm aware of that. There is some glorious stuff, I think, that has fallen by the wayside. But it hasn't worried me, I must stress, I have no ill feelings about "Oh, I was never... they didn't get it..." That's all nonsense. Wherever I play is always full of people that love me. If that's the requirement to be loved, I have that in my life. If the requirement is to have a beautiful home, I have a beautiful home. I have fame, but not that sort of massive fame where you can't leave your house. I think it's beautiful, I feel accomplished, happy and satisfied about what has happened. Then I dismiss it, because it has got nothing to do with what is happening today. Later this afternoon, I'll be rehearsing with the best rock 'n' roll band in the world, that's how I feel!