



MORTLAND

Interview by James Gaden

While they may be a new name on the scene, Mortland are made up of musicians with pedigree. Formed by vocalist Matt Moreton and guitarist Andy Shortland, both of whom had worked with Tom Galley and Cloven Hoof, the band took shape with the addition of Evil Scarecrow drummer Jordan Spencer, before being augmented by versatile players Dave Buckley and Nick Watson. Fireworks spoke with Andy Shortland to hear more about Mortland.

The story begins back in the mid-nineties, when Shortland would meet Moreton and join him in a popular Queen tribute band called The Royal Family.

"Yes, Matt and I got involved in that in 1995, would you believe, which makes us sound really fucking old – we were only 12 at the time!" he laughs. "I was working in a music shop with Jim, the bass player. Matt had popped in one day and said they needed a Brian May and a John Deacon. Jim said he could play bass and put me forward for guitar. I met the other boys, Karl Smalley and Simon Wright, and we started gigging properly later that year, which sounds such a long time ago now. We played in Japan, the Middle East, went across Europe and did some theatre tours in the UK, as well as corporate gigs. It was a great experience really, about as good as it ever gets playing in a band, doing all the things that bands do. Going round playing those songs in your early twenties, you weren't bothered about earning money, it was just a really good time travelling the world. We also learned so much about the discipline of how to be in a band and put on a show."

After chalking up a lot of live experience playing as Brian May, complete with curly wig, The Royal Family then morphed into a new show, 'Whole Lotta Metal', which featured an additional guitar player and no less than three vocalists, playing timeless Rock anthems ranging from Led Zeppelin all the way to Metallica. One of those vocalists happened to be former Black Sabbath frontman Tony Martin, whose Sabbath segment midway through the show was the reason this writer went to check it out in the first place.

"The Darkness had made a real splash in 2003 and we thought there was a hunger for Classic Rock again, so we put that show together and having Tony as part of it helped shed the 'tribute band' tag. It meant we could be ourselves a bit more, no costumes or anything. We also had Carl Sentence, who is now with Nazareth. It was great fun, we did two tours with that show and it was great. Having Tony there really daunted Matt – just listen to 'Headless Cross'! And Carl is a singing machine who had been with Krokus and Persian Risk, so the bar was high – Matt held his own though,

and stepped up. A lot of people thought he was the star of the show, even though he was the least known."

The quality of the band and Moreton's vocals caught more than just Joe Public's eye as the pair found themselves drafted in to work on a new Phenomena record, overseen by Tom Galley, called 'Psychofantasy'. Shortland would find himself as one of three guitarists on the record, alongside Glenn Hughes' sideman JJ Marsh and Galley's brother Mel, famed for his work with Whitesnake.

"I got drafted in by the drummer on the project, Orlin Radinsky, who I knew from another Queen tribute, they wanted a guitarist to help bring their demos to life. They were having a bunch of guest singers come in, so I said they needed Matt. He had created a bit of a buzz from the Whole Lotta Metal shows so they brought him in and he did a great job, he stepped up again. Tony Martin was on there too, along with Keith Murrell and Glenn Hughes, a real high caliber of singer. And Matt's contribution was a good as anything on there – plus it was a huge thrill for me to be able to write on songs Glenn Hughes would sing, that was a dream come true."

The pair's contributions didn't go unnoticed and a shortly after Moreton and Shortland found themselves as members of a revamped Cloven Hoof, who released an album of new material called 'Eye Of The Sun' in 2006.

"'Psychofantasy' helped our profile and Tom Galley, who masterminded Phenomena, was involved in putting the new Cloven Hoof line up together for Lee Payne. I was asked to join, so again I suggested Matt, and I think we created quite a cool album. Sadly it didn't go much further because they ended up going back to their original singer Russ North, but a lot of people liked it. I'd happily revisit that if the opportunity arose... So that all happened in quite a busy period."

The pair would reconvene in 2009 for Carbon Soul, an outlet for their own music which issued an album called 'Dying Days' the same year.

"After Cloven Hoof we forged together with James Hartley, the guy who produced 'Psychofantasy', to record the Carbon Soul album," the guitarist explains. "It was a chance to showcase what Matt and I could do on our own, rather than working under Tom Galley's name or Cloven Hoof's, this was just us. I'd written songs right from the Royal Family days, so that idea was always there but it was about choosing the moment. It was a good record but life gets in the way. I became a father and I ended up working with some other bands including The Subterraneans, who were the backing band for Hazel O'Connor. I also got involved with people like Toyah Wilcox and some of the Ska scene which was a real departure for me, very different styles, but it was good to stretch myself."

It was at this point that the seeds for what would become Mortland were sown.

"When that came to a close about 2015 I did things here and there, still getting my Brian May on for other Queen tributes now and then. In 2016 Matt and I talked about doing something, probably covers. We got Jordan Spencer from Evil Scarecrow, who is, without doubt, the best drummer I've ever played with and he's young, so that lit a fire under us. It made us start writing music again and in 2018 we had a handful of songs to start recording. I asked a friend, Dave Buckley, to produce it and he got very energised by the project. He said 'Two things. One, I want to join the band. Two, you need to make a full album'. So I agreed! We started writing more and came up with the name Mortland, which is obviously a culmination of mine and Matt's surnames, and you could look at it as meaning 'land of the dead'... and nobody else had ever used it, so we settled on that! It took us about a year to hone the ten songs down and figure out what our sound would be. We had no real remit, it was just writing cool songs we liked that hopefully people will enjoy. I felt completely unfettered by any expectations or constraints because we could do whatever we liked. We weren't being put in a box like 'Oh, let's be like Metallica, or be a 70s Classic Rock band', I just wrote riffs and we wrote about subjects that aren't as well worn as some; there's no love songs in our canon yet. We just worked on the basis of did it sound cool and did it suit us? If the answer was yes, it was in. Not that I'm comparing us to bands like Led Zeppelin or Queen for one

second, but they never worried about whether their material fitted a certain genre and neither did we."

Mortland kept their feet on the ground regarding releasing the album once recording was complete.

"It was self financed and we worked on the basis that we'd make it and then offer it to labels," Shortland eludes. "We had some discussions but they didn't go very far, and honestly, we got bored of waiting. The mechanism is there for us to put it out ourselves, we put it on Spotify, it's not hard to do. That's brilliant, but also bad at the same time because it means there is so much stuff out there, you might get lost in the noise, so it's a case of finding how to stand out. You have to build it organically, we'd love for someone to come along and offer us a load of money to make a bunch of records but I don't think that's very likely and I don't think that happens in Rock much at all now. The thing is, if you get a large advance, you only owe it back and that could lead to constraints on what they want you to be and certainly they wouldn't allow you five years to build things up. I don't think that is what it's about, I think it's more about steady growth and it means we can be more true to ourselves. In terms of making money, it's more about selling merchandise than it is records now because some people would rather stream."

With their debut video already surpassing 11,000 views, the album available digitally and a physical version not far behind, things are looking bright for the Nottingham based outfit.

"I'm already writing for the second record," Shortland states. "We want a follow up out as quickly as possible, we want to strike while the iron is hot. We've booked a few gigs for next year, we want to rehearse in January and try and get some support slots or get on some festivals. We're only just beginning this journey but we're all quite experienced and we've started now. The reaction to our first video was very positive so we want to keep things going."

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