

UNsung HEROES: MURRAY HEAD

Interview by James Gaden

He's starred in a legendary Rock Opera, a hit musical, had his own songs covered by the likes of Roger Daltrey and Cliff Richard, made a series of great albums and also worked as an actor. Yet Murray Head has had plenty of low points too, as he recalls from his rollercoaster of a career.

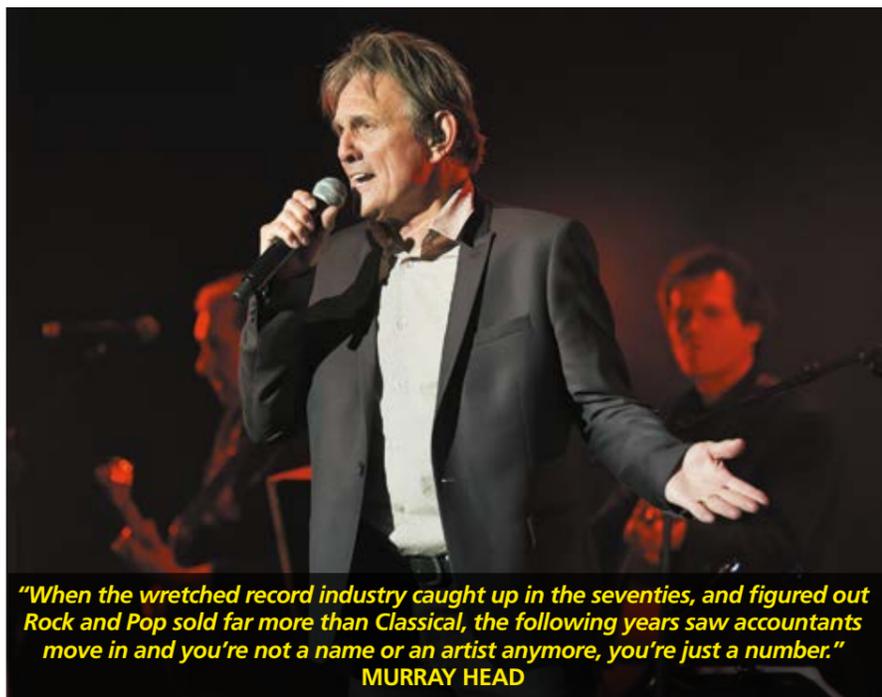
Murray Head started out with an eye on music as a vocation from a very early age.

"My mother was an actress, my father was a documentary film producer and their worlds dominated my childhood," he explains. "My mother played piano more or less intuitively and she bought a Spanish guitar for my father, inevitably with the idea of them duetting, but the guitar just sat in a cupboard for years. My best friend Ben knew three chords and that ability allowed him to pull very easily, so I thought I'd combine my desire to attract women as successfully as Ben with learning not three, but four chords, thinking that would definitely clinch it! I found out in fact that it was nothing to do with chords and singing songs, it was just Ben was much better looking than me! So I ended up saddled with four chords, a guitar and obviously started writing my own material. There was a need to express oneself. My parents often said I lived in a fantasy world, that was their way of saying they didn't understand my generation I think. Writing things down, writing songs was like putting messages in a bottle, sending them out, hoping somebody would hear them. When people mentioned a song I'd done and said 'Oh, I lived through something just like that', that fulfilled something I had been looking for, it was validation I wasn't living in a fantasy world.

"Because my father made documentary films he was a curious person and I found myself interested in all sorts of things just like he was," he continues. "My earliest songs, which I did at the age of twelve, were heavily influenced by culture and when it got to a few years later, around 1962, I was writing protest songs about things happening in America, heavily influenced by people like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. The idea of writing a song that complained about the world was fuelled by a fear of doom, started by things put in newspapers about nuclear weapons, America and Russia and all sorts of things that were written to frighten us. I wrote a song called 'You Never Had It So Good' which was inspired by a catchphrase coined by Harold Macmillan. All that sort of thing made me realise the need to express myself was more important than anything."

Another important musical ingredient was introduced to Head shortly after.

"Although I couldn't really play it then, Blues music was very much in my psyche. I knew a guitarist at school who was a year above me and he came in with a Bo Diddley album in an attempt to get our music teacher to enthuse about it. Watching a classically trained teacher being confronted by R'n'B, and having no idea how to react to it, was very interesting. I paid attention and discovered the best R'n'B thing going, called Steampacket, which had Rod

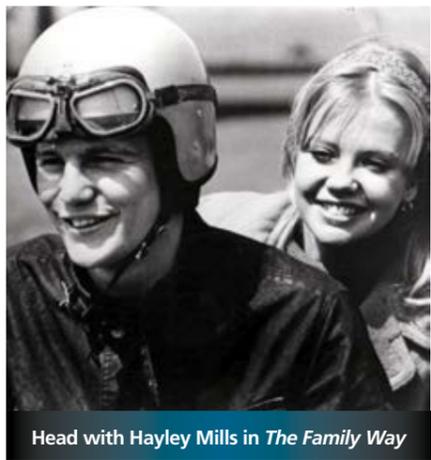


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MURRAY HEAD

Stewart, Long John Baldry, Brian Auger and Julie Driscoll. It was a wonderful era and I had found this way to express myself which had nothing to do with my parents."

While so many people look to shows like The X-Factor to get a start in music these days, Head's path wasn't so different, albeit much less grandiose.

"I was involved in a contest on the radio called the Cyril Stapleton Talent Search. Five people were scooped up by it, one was John Paul Jones, one was me and I can't remember the other three names. We all had some talent, in my case, my demos were put with Norrie Paramore, who worked with Cliff Richard and The Shadows. He liked my demos very much and that was how I got a contract with EMI,



Head with Hayley Mills in *The Family Way*

for three singles. I was only seventeen, so my parents had to sign the contract. They were both horrified and shocked, they had no idea I'd been doing this. I don't think they had any interest but as soon as I showed I was capable, my father immediately blustered 'Does this mean the boy should train then, have lessons for his voice...' to which Norrie, thank fuck, said 'For God's sake, no, leave him alone, the very reason we signed him is for his voice and unique approach!'. My father was from that generation which believed education could do everything. My generation was far more instinctive and intuitive, we had to be. This was right around the time of the Christine Keeler case and the Profumo affair which revealed the aristocracy had been getting away with murder for years and that was a fulcrum for a change in society."

The singer notes how societal changes manifested themselves in music and how this influence spread to his school, which produced several important figures in that scene.

"That change came across in music because the Rolling Stones were there as 'Rockers' and The Beatles came out as 'Mods', boys and girls had been educated in single sex schools, the birth control pill had arrived, boys started growing their hair long, wearing long coats and even lace, Mary Quant made the idea of short haircuts and trouser suits fashionable for women, the whole era was charged with an enormous energy. It was related to a Blues explosion going on in the suburbs, probably where people were the most stifled. After the success of Blues in

America, many of those artists who were on the wane over there were coming over here. There were so many bands. I saw the Rolling Stones play at the Station Hotel in Richmond in front of forty people – three weeks later you couldn't get in to see them. I had a band and from my school there was Paul Samwell-Smith and Jim McCarthy in The Yardbirds, Vic Briggs from the Animals, Brian May was in the year below me – we all nicked another races' woes as our own, and the middle class were desperate for a way to express themselves. The point I'm making it not one of us went into music for money. When the wretched record industry caught up in the seventies, and figured out Rock and Pop sold far more than Classical, the following years saw accountants move in and you're not a name or an artist anymore, you're just a number. That was when money became the priority and changed everything. But those who were motivated purely by the joy of expressing themselves and making music tend to hang around a lot longer."

With his deal at EMI secured for three singles, the young artist embraced his big break and also enjoyed an element of fortune.

"I put out a single called 'Alberta' which was backed with a song called 'He Was A Friend Of Mine', which I nicked from Dave Van Ronk from The Folkways. Thirty years later I discovered Dave had put Bob Dylan up for nine months, as a thank you Dylan gave him 'He Was A Friend Of Mine' and I'd been happily playing it with no idea. I didn't know anything about copyright or publishing and Norrie put it on the B-Side with my name under it! After Norrie died, I started receiving some royalties from it, right around the time I discovered it was actually Bob Dylan's! Thank God it was a modest sum, I've not been attacked by his lawyers yet!" he laughs.

Despite the excitement of getting a deal, the experience was quickly followed by a low point, something Head would discover would be a recurring theme.

"'Alberta' didn't sell a light, I didn't have the NME ingredients necessary to have any street cred, so I learned about failure early. Because I came from a cosy background, the agent I met when I was signing the recording contract suggested she also put me forward for acting roles and the first one I got was in a thing called The Family Way. I was in love with music but I had nothing to lose. It did well and I did get to sing in the film. The song was even going to be released as a single. Ironically Paul McCartney was brought in to do the rest of the soundtrack though, so my song was completely overshadowed. Norrie passed me on to his cousin David for another single until finally I met an apprentice A&R man, who turned out to be Tim Rice. I was singing for a band called the Blue Monks And The Dirty Habits doing Blues, Soul and Stax songs, with the odd original. Tim heard us and I recorded 'Someday Soon' which was put in The Family Way but there was no press for me."

In a bid to earn money Head would try other ventures, which he feels in hindsight perhaps



Head with Ian Gillan, Yvonne Elliman, Victor Bronx and Barry Dennen as part of the original cast of *Jesus Christ Superstar*

were to the detriment of his musical aspirations.

"I did some incidental music in nightclubs and then would play as an act later on to make ends meet. I actually modelled in Honey Magazine with the caption 'Flash Harry', much to my dismay! But it brought in money. I found the dole extremely uncomfortable, I preferred being poor! Acting was good for income, but from a musical point of view, actors pretend to be other people for a living, so when an actor makes a record, they are viewed with great suspicion. And I agree, I think my singing is completely apart from any acting I do."

Tim Rice had yet to become the renowned lyricist he is today, but that early work with Murray would make a big difference to the singer's career just a few years later.

"Because of my film work, people considered me an actor rather than a musician because nothing had happened with my singles. Three years later Tim Rice called me and a saxophonist called Chris Mercer, asking us to come to Andrew Lloyd Webber's flat. There, he and Andrew played 'Jesus Christ Superstar' to us, which is nothing special, it's a three chord trick, and I had a cassette recorder with me. Andrew played it on piano and Tim sung it. I still have this cassette where you can hear it, it finishes and Chris and I are totally silent for about a minute until you hear me say 'You're fucking mad'. Everybody knows the story of the Bible backwards, I couldn't see why people would want a Musical of it, but Tim



Head as Judas in the promotional video for *Jesus Christ Superstar*, 1970

stated this was done from Judas' perspective. I agreed to do it and Chris Mercer contacted his mates in The Grease Band, so he brought Bruce Rowland, Alan Spenner, Neil Hubbard and Henry McCullough in, presumably on the basis that it was a big project so it would be good money."

The Jesus Christ Superstar album, dubbed as a Rock Opera, was well received, charting in the top ten in several countries and reaching number one in the United States, laying the foundations for stage shows, films and productions for years to come. The song 'Superstar', performed by Head, was also a hit in several countries. The calibre of musicians involved helped knit together Lloyd Webber's Musical Theatre background with serious Rock pedigree. Deep Purple's Ian Gillan, John Gustafson and Manfred Mann's Mike D'Abo all featured in the cast.

"The reason that album was as good as it was is due to the fact The Grease Band are the rhythm section, they gave a real credibility to the exercise," Head alludes. "I was playing Judas opposite Ian Gillan as Jesus and I enjoyed it, I listened to it for the first time in about thirty five years and I think the angst ridden performance I gave was the right one. My heroes were Otis Redding, Sam And Dave and Ray Charles, which gave me an obsessive desire to sound black. I contacted Decca in America, much to their embarrassment, to offer myself for promotion for Jesus Christ Superstar over there, and nobody had the bollocks to say to me 'Don't bother, we're re-casting with Americans!'" he laughs. "Imagine that, an album that did well all over the world and they want to re-cast it, the only person from the album they kept was Yvonne Elliman. But it was worth the trip because when I went over there several people went 'Really? I thought you were black!' which was the highest compliment I could hope for. I always had a voice in my head saying 'You're not black though, who are you kidding?' which harks back to that 'being an actor' thing, so I spent the next several years trying to figure out who the fuck I was."

Head's work as Judas led to him being offered the chance to make his own record, which he took, delivering an ambitious, unusual and impressive concept album of his own, entitled 'Nigel Lived'. The album followed the story of the fictional Nigel, a young singer who sets out to make it in the music business and succeeds, only to succumb to drug addiction. The packaging included the lyrics as diary excerpts and boasted a sprawling list of stellar musicians including Cozy Powell and Phil Chen. It would be fair to assume Head created a character because he still wasn't sure who he was as an artist, but in fact it was inspired by something more sombre.

"What provoked it was in those years, from around 1964-68, I lost quite a few friends to heroin. It seemed to be to be a middle class problem as much as a working class one. There was a lot of praise for 'Swinging London', a concept where London was the place to go to 'make it'. You could get a job modelling, like

I did. 'Nigel Lived' was about finding identity, he is swept away by the ease with which he succeeds, which is the A-side and is unaware of the dangers he faces on the B-side. I had worked for six months in a drug centre to understand that culture and what heroin does, it turns people into liars and con men, something that people will do anything for, much like people do for money these days. Drugs are there for people who have an identity crisis. Look at all the streets covered in graffiti, people are desperate for identity and that's what 'Nigel Lived' was all about. It was also a way which I could tackle all sorts of different music I loved."

However, the experience of making his first album off the back of a successful Musical venture was not everything the singer expected.

"Again, it's tied to that theme of failure. I do Jesus Christ Superstar, which wasn't that warmly received in England at first, but the album exploded in America – only for them to go and re-do it with a new cast! What was interesting though, is the Grease Band were paid to play on the record and everybody involved was given the option at the time of either taking royalties from the record, or accepting a session fee. Everyone, with the exception of myself and Ian Gillan, went for the session fee. They probably all thought it was ridiculous and wouldn't do very well, but I enjoyed it and I think Ian thought the same, we'd rather take royalties for a performance than session fees. Of course that turned out to be a good decision financially and it allowed me to go on doing my thing. 'Nigel Lived' was very painful because there was nobody stopping me. I was signed by John Hammond, you can't get better than that, and working with him in the same studio as Bob Dylan and Paul Simon, I had to pinch myself. And that was just for demos. Then he signed me with CBS, you can't get better than that, I thought everything was working out. Then of course the sales team had no idea what to do with it... 'It's what, a concept album'? Even Jesus Christ Superstar wasn't seen as a concept album at that point, that would be something like Tommy. The sales team blanked it, because there was no single on there, and the first royalty statement I received said it had sold nine copies. That had to be a lie, you can't sell as few as that! So my world crashed. I thought Jesus Christ Superstar would take me somewhere, yes I got the CBS deal from it but that didn't work out. Musicals are very different, it's more about the writers than the performers. These days Musicals are highly efficient, packed with bloody good singers and actors, but they are rarely highlighted."

For his second album, Head took a different approach.

"I moved down to a farm in Wales in the hope of being self sufficient and living off the land. While I was there, the local lads were telling me records were a waste of time, stick to playing live. So I tried that, didn't find it very gratifying and couldn't make a penny out of it. The lads who proffered that advice would incorporate twenty to forty minute guitar solos and I just thought it was self indulgent. So I

tried to find the voice that came from me most naturally. Out of that came 'Say It Ain't So'."

It was another song that again boasted stellar supporting personnel with Bob Weston, Jim Cregan, Tony Kaye and Murray's brother, actor Anthony Head, all appearing on the credits, with production handled by Head's Yardbird's chum Paul Samwell-Smith. It saw Head hit his stride as a songwriter, with Roger Daltrey, Gary Brooker, The Hollies and even The Nolans all covering the title track and Cliff Richard plundering the album cut 'Never Even Thought' for his album 'Green Light'.

"Cat Stevens had decided to go Muslim, so I realised Paul Samwell-Smith would be freed up. I sent him six demos to try and tempt him," Head explains. "He agreed to do two of them and eventually did the whole album, which he then sold to A&M and Island. And for five minutes, joy! Somebody wants my record! And it was reviewed by Julie Birchill who thought it was about Trotsky and Stalin, which is wasn't at all, and she was a militant red at the time... maybe she still is. Anyway, when she found out it wasn't about that at all she really trashed it in her review because she'd been made a fool of. And the Time Out review for 'Say It Ain't So' simply said 'It Ain't So'. That was it. So



Head in the promotional video for 'One Night in Bangkok' from Chess

once again, I found myself in a position where I'm doggedly going 'That didn't work, fine, I'll try this...' and I'd accept whatever work came my way. It's been up and down all the way. But that's also motivation to carry on, because I've never earned enough to retire. Whatever I made on one album I'd put into the next."

Another low swiftly followed, despite the obvious quality of the material on the record.

"I had a three album deal with 'Say It Ain't So', I went on tour supporting Elton John and was introduced to Paul Simon's manager. But then Paul Samwell-Smith decided he didn't want to produce the follow up and because of that, Island didn't want to move forward with me, so I was dumped prematurely. I think they should have at least done the second one. Fortunately, 'Say It Ain't So' did well enough in France that Phonograph there signed me, so I had to pick my way through a legal nightmare. I was going backward and forwards, the label said to release me from my contract I had to deal with Paul, Paul said it wasn't up to him,

I had to deal with the label, so I learned if you get a really powerful lawyer you can sort things a lot quicker. I got Allen Klein, who tackled the Beatles and the Stones, he walked in and got me out within two hours!"

Head would continue to release fine records like 'Between Us', 'Voices', 'Shade' and the superb live album 'Find The Crowd' but it would be another Musical, entitled Chess, that would bring him to the fore once more. Much like Jesus Christ Superstar, Chess was a double album penned by ABBA's Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, with Tim Rice writing the lyrics, to pave way for stage productions. The score contained a fascinating mix of traditional Musical Theatre fare like the show stopping 'Anthem', Pop such as 'Heaven Help My Heart', and out and out Rock such as 'The Deal'. The songs on offer included cast members' Elaine Paige and Barbara Dickinson's number one hit duet 'I Know Him So Well', while Head's character sang the Pop tune 'One Night In Bangkok', which was a hit single all over Europe and in America. Unlike with Jesus Christ Superstar, Head, Paige and Tommy Körberg would all make the transition from the album to the stage show, which ran for three years.

In 2018, the English National Opera staged a big budget Chess revival in London, with theatre legend Michael Ball as the headline name alongside Mike And The Mechanics frontman Tim Howar, who took the role originally played by Murray. Head himself was advertised as appearing in the role of The Arbiter, but unfortunately pulled out a couple of months prior to the shows.

"I just couldn't hack it!" he states candidly. "The thing with Jesus Christ Superstar was they made an album of what would be in the show first, despite the cost. The album would hopefully generate a couple of hits and that would drive people to the show. Chess came about fourteen years later, by which time the industry had changed quite a bit. However, because Chess had Tim writing the lyrics and the guys from ABBA doing the music, it was a good selling point, so they did the same again, album first and then the show. By recording an album, they brought in the Royal Philharmonic so it gave you the ability to have a single like 'One Night In Bangkok' with an orchestra on there, a two minute introduction, everything but the kitchen sink – but as it was part of a double album you could afford it, you'd never manage it otherwise. It was a great single but by making the album first, you've cemented the approach. You can't be fucked around by a director in the show saying 'I want to hear it like this' because the style has been set, the role is already created on the record. Rehearsals are all about repeating the tried and tested formula on the album. So when I was asked to return to the show thirty years later, it wasn't as Freddie, the American chess player I played originally, I was offered the role of The Arbiter. And I had no idea of the kind of extravaganza they had in mind, with pyro and huge screens, cameramen everywhere doing close-ups and a large group of people on stage. It was put on by the English

National Opera so there's a big promotional thing and with this different approach, the size of the show... the number of people involved who are all from the Musical industry, which is totally different from Rock 'N' Roll... then you have to play a role as it was done years ago, by someone else. My enthusiasm faded fast and with it comes an incredibly smug bunch of people. I don't read music, I was being asked to learn stuff by ear and they said I was making them nervous. They had asked me to take part without an audition, which was flattering, but I think it was simply to attach my name for people who remembered me from the original show and album. The Arbiter only has one song and I don't really get on with Musical Directors. I'm not used to taking direction. So we mutually agreed for me to drop out. I enjoy myself much more playing two or three hour concerts here in France with my band. I play thirty to forty gigs a year to people who appreciate me.

"I remember for the verse of '...Bangkok' Benny saying 'Do you remember The Loving Spoonful's 'Summer In The City'?' and it was similar phrasing. It reinforced something I've always felt about Musicals, they have to have songs people have already heard in some form. They might not even recognise where it's from but it's there. I knew it would be fun to do and it was nice it was successful, but I was mindful it might kill off fans of 'Say It Ain't So' because it's so far removed from my own stuff. 'One Night In Bangkok' was very popular, but that was ABBA and Tim. 'Say It Ain't So' and the subsequent



Playing live remains Murray Head's passion

albums are me. They are my voice, what I think. And as a result it's really fucking hard to put '...Bangkok' into a setlist! Having two or three calling cards is better than none though, it allows me to keep playing live, which is nice."

Head has continued to act and issue solo albums, and it's worth noting 'Nigel Lived' was recently given a lavish reissue by Intervention Records, becoming their best selling reissue to date, to which Head joked "I can only conclude some works take half a century to be appreciated!". However it's the live setting that really fulfils him.

"I like the fact I've gone full circle, when I started, you played live in the hope someone wanted you to record. Then when you got an album deal, that was where the money was so you had to tailor your live set to push the album. People used more and more devices in studios as technology moved on that you couldn't use live, so people got into the habit of putting DAT tapes on the desk to drop in. That completely removes all spontaneity from your show, you have to match what's on the tape. It's subtle, but it puts an unpleasant lid on the energy you can get at a concert. You can't get off on it. And nowadays, records are basically wiped out because people stream more, so we're back to it being all about live performance."

The singer feels he has at least another album in him, but he pulls no punches about how he feels the music business has evolved.

"The three big earners for me should be 'Say It Ain't So', 'Superstar' and 'One Night In Bangkok'. Yet I'm not getting what I was contracted to, trust me. But it's all about proving it. The record industry is a vile, vile industry full of lazy bastards in my opinion. That's why I think it's grotesque these days when record labels, what few there are left, boast about how much they are making from streams when they've done nothing toward it. But I can't talk about the industry with my family at all, because my daughter does PR for Taylor Swift – she looks at me as if to say 'You had your chance mate, fuck off!'"

ESSENTIAL MURRAY HEAD

5 releases which any true fan of the artist's work should experience...

Murray Head 'Say It Ain't So' (1975)

A superb and eclectic collection of songs, from the much covered title track, the gentle electric piano drone of 'Boy On The Bridge', glorious acoustic ballad 'When I'm Yours' or seductive groove or 'You're So Tasty', everything is held together by Head's superb vocals. Whether it's the Classic Rock of 'She's Such A Drag', or the acoustic love song 'Never Even Thought', every song here is a winner, sung and performed exquisitely.

Various Artists 'Jesus Christ Superstar' (1970)

Unusual yet highly effective, this Rock Opera concept album sees Ian Gillan portray Jesus with the silver throated whisper-to-a-scream approach he employed with Deep Purple, opposite Head's raw and emotive Judas. A great blend of 70s Rock and Musical grandeur, with Gillan's showstopper 'Gethsemane' juxtaposed alongside Head's 'Heaven On Their Minds', 'Superstar' and the great 'Everything's Alright' where the two leads are joined by Yvonne Elliman.

Various Artists 'Chess' (1985)

Another album to pave the way for a Musical, here Head takes on one of the lead roles, performing a great selection of songs from the killer score by ABBA's Benny and Bjorn with Tim Rice's lyrics. He delivers the Melodic Rock of 'What A Scene! What A Joy!', duets with Elaine Paige on the Funky 'Florence Quits', rocks out on 'The Deal' and swaggers though the Pop hit 'One Night In Bangkok'. Better still is his angst ridden delivery of the powerhouse 'Pity The Child'.

Murray Head 'Nigel Lived' (1972)

Telling the story of a young musician who travels to London to make it, achieves his dream and succumbs to heroin addition as a result, 'Nigel Lived' is a unique album spanning the gentle 'Pacing At The Station', 70s Funk of 'Big City', beautiful ballad 'Ruthie', frantic Rock of 'City Scurry', angelic 'Pity The Poor Consumer' and agonized Jazz wail of 'Junk'. A grower for sure, but an album that offers huge rewards for repeated listens and your complete attention.

Murray Head 'My Back Pages' (2012)

On this album Head covers songs that played a major part in his life, in chronological order. He tackles a wide range, staying close to the originals on 'Gimme Some Lovin'', 'Avalon' and 'Dust In The Wind', while re-working 'Won't Get Fooled Again' and James Brown's 'How Do You Stop'. The eclectic mix also includes contemporary tracks like Dido's 'White Flag' as well as a great energetic take on Midnight Oil's 'Bed Are Burning'.