

# UNSUNG HEROES: MYKE GRAY

Interview by James Gaden

Guitarist Myke Gray has enjoyed a long career playing guitar and writing songs for a variety of well respected acts such as Jagged Edge, Skin and Red White & Blues. After releasing his first ever solo album 'Shades Of Gray' in 2017, his first shows as a solo artist are looming. With a brand new band which has reinvigorated him, Fireworks decided this was the perfect time to look back at his body of work.

Gray first appeared on the scene as the guitar player in Jagged Edge, although this experience was far from an overnight success.

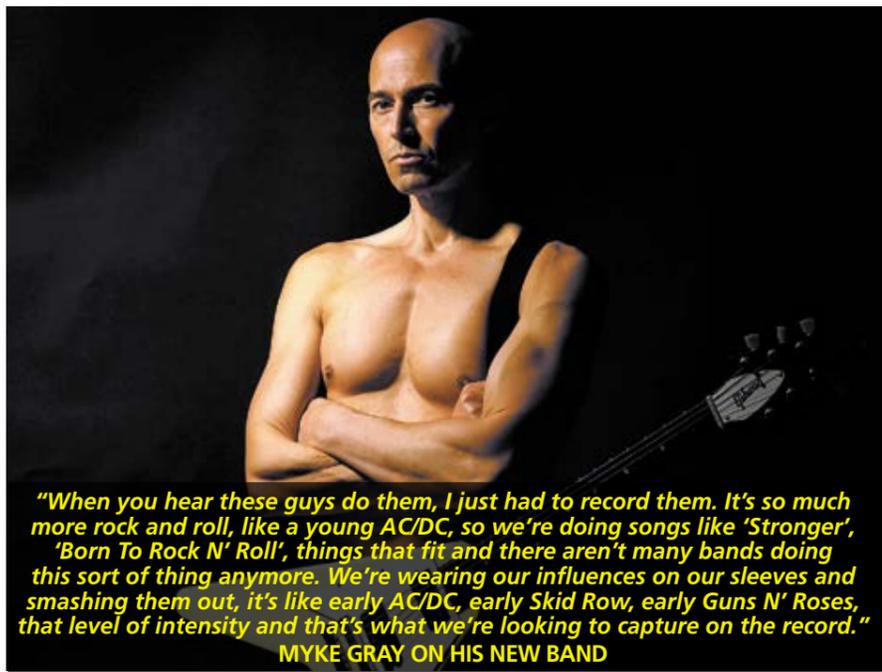
"From the age of eleven when I discovered guitar, it completely dominated my life," he explains. "When I made the decision that all I wanted to do was play guitar, I went through the process of learning to play, then learning all the solos by my favourite players, to finally writing songs. Jagged Edge went through about six different line ups, I started putting it together when I was seventeen. Eventually we ended up with a lineup that got enough attention to get us signed by Rod Smallwood. That led to a record deal but the driving force was always my desire to create music, to try and come up with riffs that would be listened to in twenty or thirty years time. Jagged Edge was my first attempt at that art form. I remember working with guys like Tony Platt and Chris Tsangarides, these names I'd seen for years and thought of as gurus, learning about setting up, writing songs, production. That period was the foundation of my knowledge in this business."

Jagged Edge, despite delivering an EP followed by a truly excellent debut album called 'Fuel For Your Soul', was unfortunately a short lived affair.

"We toured with Ozzy Osbourne on the 'No Rest For The Wicked' tour and we'd tried to get a deal and it wasn't happening," the guitarist reflects. "Then another label contacted us and said they didn't like our singer, but if we tried their singer they might offer a deal. So we recorded a song with their guy called 'Tied Up In Love', presented it to Polydor and there was a deal within 24 hours. That singer was Matti Alfonzetti and as a result, we'd not really had chance to get to know each other and work together. We were two very strong minded individuals thrown together, both trying to make it work. We made the 'Trouble' EP which was great, then we went to writing the album together. That's when we ran into problems regarding levels of commitment in the band. We toured and those problems just increased as time went on, people were not being professional, not delivering. The band imploded as a result. I was still managed by Rod, so I said we have to rebuild and start again. And that is where Skin came from. I hand picked each member, wrote all the songs and we got signed."

Skin exploded onto the scene with a self titled debut album and were immediately accepted by the Rock fraternity, thanks in no small part to the quality of Gray's songs. The album contained 'Look But Don't Touch', 'Money' and 'Tower Of Strength', charting strongly.

"One thing about that album is it was produced by Keith Olsen. That was a totally different level of producer to what I'd worked with before. A band is very similar to a football team. When you put your band, or team together, as you go



*"When you hear these guys do them, I just had to record them. It's so much more rock and roll, like a young AC/DC, so we're doing songs like 'Stronger', 'Born To Rock N' Roll', things that fit and there aren't many bands doing this sort of thing anymore. We're wearing our influences on our sleeves and smashing them out, it's like early AC/DC, early Skid Row, early Guns N' Roses, that level of intensity and that's what we're looking to capture on the record."*  
MYKE GRAY ON HIS NEW BAND

through the divisions, you need higher quality singers, drummers, producers to get to the next level. You're hoping to find a Ronaldo or an Alexis Sanchez but you have to work your way up the divisions to attract that level of talent. Obviously Neville MacDonald is a fantastic singer and he raised the bar of what I expected from a singer and on tour, he delivered every single night. He is a Messi or a Ronaldo, he gives you 100% every time. He set a very high standard for everyone I'd work with after that, and Keith Olsen was the same. He taught me about production, his care for getting vocal and drum takes, once you have had that level of professionalism, anything other than that isn't good enough. Ronaldo can't go and play for a second division team because the people around him aren't good enough to compete at his level. And when you've had people like this help you make a hit record, it's the same for music."

With Grunge being in vogue, for their second



Gray and Alfonzetti in their Jagged Edge days

album 'Lucky', Skin darkened their sound a bit while still retaining their Classic Rock foundation. When they released their third album 'Experience Electric', things were starting to go awry. Confusingly when 'Experience Electric' was released, Japan got an album called 'Big Fat Slice Of Life' which had seven tracks from 'Experience...' but six that weren't present. Myke reveals why.

"At that point we were out of control of our careers and out of control with our music. What you describe is a prime example of why I now create and sell my records myself, without a label. We recorded 'Experience Electric' in London but we had a Japanese label who wanted something different specifically for Japan. So they put together a new track listing with different songs and that's where that release came from. Moments like that make you realise you have no control over your music, you hand it over to a label for really very little money and then have no say what they do with it for the next twenty five years. I'll never go a label route again. I decided that when Skin reformed in 2011 and I asked our old label if they could re-release the old albums. They said no. So I asked if I could release them. They said no. And there was nothing I could do. That's one of the reasons I'm re-recording material now."

Skin would unfortunately call it a day after that and Myke drifted into drug use, which he states was the reason for his next project, Schism.

"Like everything I've ever done, I put Schism together, I was the catalyst because music is the extension of my creativity, every day I wake up and think "what can I create today?" When Skin

ended, the band were broke. I fell into a world of cocaine and I started to do loads of session work and write music for adverts and things like that. Then this crazy project came into my head which was completely fuelled by a fucked up mindset caused by cocaine. I wrote all these crazy songs and I needed crazy band members to perform them! We made a record, I wrote and produced it, we supported Thunder and I think we played about 150 shows. It sold quite well but a lot of people don't remember it. It was a bit like the Blink 182 sort of vibe that was going on at the time, Punky songs with Melodic vocals."

The sessions Gray worked on during this period included doing music for commercials and dipping his toes into the Pop genre, even producing Right Said Fred and co-writing a hit called 'You're My Mate' with them.

"I actually made enough money from that to buy my house which was nice considering when Skin broke up I barely had a thousand pounds in my bank account. Those were dire times, Skin never made any money, it was always taken by others. So while that wasn't the greatest music I've ever made, it was the most profitable. I just needed to make some money and that was a lifesaver. I've done music for Weetabix and Frosties and all sorts, it's something to pay the bills. Sometimes the desire to eat and pay your mortgage outweighs whether it's cool or not!"

Skin would return in 2009, thanks to an offer to play Download Festival.

"Andy Copping asked how we felt about it and I hadn't played music for years, but my gut feeling was it was the right thing to do and luckily the other guys felt the same," the guitarist reflects. "I'm really glad we did that and then we made 'Breaking The Silence'. It was a big step for me because once the musicians agreed to make that album, that was the first time I'd overseen the making of one of my own records alone. People get drawn into a fantasy that musicians are all in one room making the album together, but it's rarely like that. The drummer came over and laid down the drums in a couple of days. There was no bass player, no Nev, just me and the drummer, he goes back to America, I do the guitars by myself, bass player flies and does the bass parts, flies out and then vocalist comes in and does the vocals. And of course, when they leave, I'm left comping all the takes together to get the best possible version of each performance. The vocals alone can take a week and that's what the job of the producer is. That was the first album I did that myself and also did it without a label. Because it worked I realised that's how I would do it from then on, just take complete control."

Skin played Download again in 2010 and were advertised as playing the next year, only to pull out days before. While no official explanation other than Neville had left the band for "personal reasons", on his Facebook page Gray mentioned "having a slot on the biggest festival in Europe only to have a musician walk out a few days before because they didn't like the way you got them there." While he dislikes dwelling on negatives, he does offer a little more information.

"To clarify, we didn't break up, people left prior to Download. We were booked to play shows and people left which meant I had to pick up the pieces and go again. I'm glad we made 'Breaking



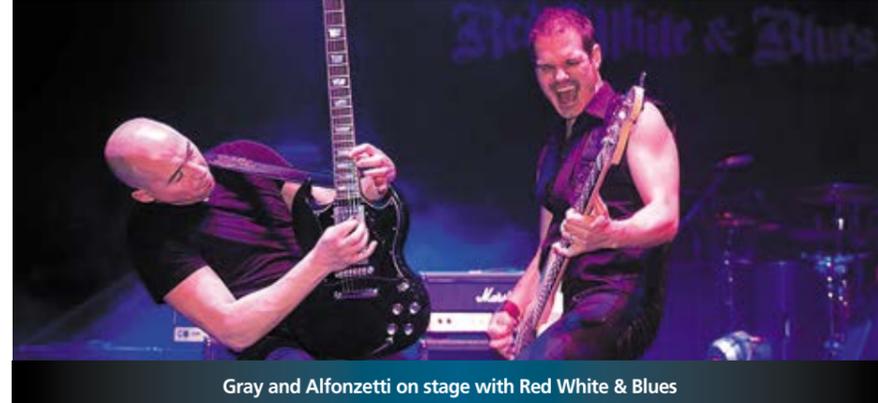
Gray with a reunited Skin after their performance at the 2009 Download Festival

The Silence' and played with the Little Angels but when people left prior to Download it was impossible to continue as Skin." And when asked online if Skin would ever get back together, Gray replied "Not in my lifetime."

His next move was to put together Red White & Blues, which saw him reunite with Matti Alfonzetti from the Jagged Edge days.

"When Skin were active I'd been told there was a limit how much people could do because of day jobs, other commitments etc, so it was in my mind Skin would have to stop anyway at some point, which was how Red White & Blues came about – literally from my desire to keep playing and writing," he says. "Matti had toured with us, playing acoustically and I played 'Out In The Cold' and 'You Don't Love Me' with him which was nice, getting back together like that. It also showed how well we worked together so Matti came over one weekend and we went through the 100 songs I had written, to find out what worked, what suited his voice. That's how I work, I write for a singer and you have to know that singer and know what they are capable of. We got about 15 songs from the 100 and that was the foundation. I wrote all of it and Matti produced everything so it worked well, we toured with Whitesnake, Chickenfoot and Lynryd Skynyrd and it sold very well, it actually outsold the last Skin album. I thought there were some really great songs on there and I'll be playing some of them with my new band."

"The plan was that was going to be the next band, take it to the next level," he continues, "but the trouble with bands is there are always external issues that need dealing with, from personal stuff, day jobs, kids, paying the bills... it's very hard for bands to make money so you have to have other things to meet your financial needs. Then you have egos as well, like with the football analogy. You have highly creative people and everyone



Gray and Alfonzetti on stage with Red White & Blues

demons, get over my divorce, get over betrayal from people I'd worked with, it kept my desire to make music alive and was the catalyst for me to want to work with a vocalist again."

Which leads us to Myke's latest project, building a new band to play his first ever solo concerts and perform music from his entire career. He's recently re-recorded Skin's 'House Of Love' with the new line up and it sounds fantastic.

"I decided to do a solo concert which would celebrate my music through the years. I've worked with some really high quality singers so I put some feelers out and I spoke to my friend Laurie Mansworth (of Airrace) and he recommended a guy called Andrew Hunt, who sings for a band called Buffalo Summer. I got in touch and to his credit he said "To be honest, I can't sing these songs, but I know a man who can". He was a friend of Blackwater Conspiracy's Phil Conalane and gave me his number. I didn't know Phil at all, but he was a big Skin fan, we spoke on the phone and he came over to my house, he knew all the Skin songs, stood in my studio and with total commitment banged these songs out like he owned them. As I played them I closed my eyes to hear it with clarity and he could sing everything. And he had such passion. I knew immediately he was the guy. So we're making an album, re-recording tracks from the thirty or so years I've been making music and hopefully people will enjoy these versions.

"This is the first time I've got a designated

person for each role. In Skin, Neville used to play guitar too, and it's tricky to play and sing, especially Skin songs. So sometimes we didn't have a second guitar, but now I have Adam, who is there to play all those parts how I would play them, so we have a twin guitar attack like AC/DC or Judas Priest, so it's heavier. In Red White & Blues, Matti played bass and sang, once again the focus is split between two things. But now I've got Wayne Banks who is incredible, just the best bass player I've ever worked with. He lays down this foundation with Matthew Blakout on drums, whose energy and enthusiasm was a big reason why I started playing again. Their sound is so much heavier, it's really exciting and then we have Phil smashing out these tracks like a young Bon Scott - it's much more rock and roll and powerful which is why I felt I had to record some of these songs with this new line up."

Myke has also re-done 'Take Me Home', the sole vocal track from his solo album 'Shades Of Gray', which was sung by Lorraine Crosby. On the new version he has handed the role over to Kimberly Ann Jennett of Voodoo Blood.

"This girl is a superstar," he enthuses. "She was presented to me by a Youtube clip and I've worked with so many great singers over the years - Sam Brown, Chris Thompson, Phil Mogg, Roger Daltrey, Neville MacDonald, Matti Alfonzetti... I know a good singer and she's amazing, she's like a UK version of Lzzy Hale. That was really why

I got her to record it for the video, I just wanted to help her and get people to listen to her. I got her to re-record the vocal on 'Take Me Home' and she did four takes, all off which were great. Then she said "I'm just going for some fresh air" which I've never seen a singer do, she came back in, did another four takes which were all killer and she's just incredible. We made the video and had fun but I think she's one of the most exciting vocal talents I've seen in my life. Her band Voodoo Blood will open for me at my show in London."

Despite being a prolific writer, Gray does not anticipate penning new material for the album he's working on at the moment.

"It's all old songs with the new band, because when you hear these guys do them, I just had to record them. It's so much more rock and roll, like a young AC/DC, so we're doing songs like 'Stronger', 'Born To Rock N' Roll', things that fit and there aren't many bands doing this sort of thing anymore. We're wearing our influences on our sleeves and smashing them out, it's like early AC/DC, early Skid Row, early Guns N' Roses, that level of intensity and that's what we're looking to capture on the record. We're hoping to have it done by the end of the year, if we get a good reaction at Steelhouse and Download and people care, then we'll look at taking it on the road."

View the videos for 'House Of Love', 'Take Me Home' and 'Infinite Power' on Myke's YouTube page or visit [www.mykegray.rocks](http://www.mykegray.rocks)



**ESSENTIAL MYKE GRAY**

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

**Jagged Edge 'Fuel For Your Soul' (1990)**



Gray's first band only made the 'Trouble' EP and this album, but what a great album it was. Singer Matti Alfonzetti and Gray wrote a series of superb songs such as 'You Don't Love Me', 'Out In The Cold' and the title track. Gray would take bass player Andy Robbins with him to form Skin and would later reunite with Alfonzetti in Red White & Blues, but it all started here.

**Skin 'Skin' (1994)**



Skin's debut album is packed with great tunes from the anthemic 'Look But Don't Touch' to 'House Of Love' with Gray's fiery fretwork complimented by the immense voice of Neville MacDonald, who can bawl his way through 'Money' or deliver power ballads like 'Tower Of Strength' with ease. The reception to this record put Skin at the same conversation as the likes of Thunder and Little Angels as British rock hopefuls.

**Skin 'Breaking The Silence' (2010)**



While Skin's 'Lucky' and 'Experience Electric' album were very good, the reunion album 'Breaking The Silence' reverted back to the more Classic Rock sound of the debut. The enthusiastic 'Good To Be Back' sums up the mood of the record nicely, with 'Stronger', 'Born To Rock 'N' Roll', 'Trigger Inside' and 'Redemption' being highlights on an album full of great tracks.

**Red White & Blues 'Shine' (2011)**



After the collapse of Skin, Gray reunited with his old Jagged Edge band mate Matti Alfonzetti for RW&B. They put together a killer record with Gray's trademark Hard Rock playing and writing fronted by Alfonzetti who has improved a great deal as a vocalist. 'Stand Up For Rock & Roll', 'Counts For Nothing', 'Let It Shine' and 'A Little Too Late' stand out but the whole album is all killer, no filler.

**Myke Gray 'Shades Of Gray' (2017)**



A chance for Gray to wear his influences on his sleeve and let the guitar do the talking, his first solo album is all instrumental, except for the final track 'Take Me Home' which is sung superbly by Lorraine Crosby. Efforts like 'Kill The Masters', 'The Shattered Illusion Of Love', 'Maverick' and 'Staring At The Ocean' prove what a skilled and versatile player he is.



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