

Red White & Blues

Out of the ashes of a terrific melodic rock act called Jagged Edge came Myke Gray, a song writer and guitarist who would go on to form the much loved British rock band Skin. His Jagged Edge band mate, vocalist Matti Alfonzetti, went on to record with Road To Ruin, Skintrade, make solo albums and stay busy in the music industry as a producer. Many were pleasantly surprised when Skin reformed for Download, but after issuing a new album 'Breaking The Silence', Skin called it a day and played their farewell shows last December - leaving fans wondering what, if anything, might happen next.

The answer to that question is Red White & Blues - a superb new rock band which sees Myke reunited with Matti. With a brand new album just finished, and some high profile gigs with Bon Jovi, The Quireboys, Steel Panther and Whitesnake under their belts, Red White & Blues have caught people's attention. Being one of an extremely selected few given the chance to hear the new material prior to release, James Gaden thought the least he could do in return was chat to Myke and hear all about it...

I'm absolutely loving the new material Myke, but what I do have to ask is, it wasn't that long ago that the idea of even doing anything with Skin was unlikely, yet you reformed, played two tours and made a new studio album. After that, you called time on Skin, so what sparked off the formation of Red White & Blues?

Well, it all came about because, before Skin reformed, I hadn't played guitar in about six years. I hadn't even picked it up. I'd been concentrating on my other profession, which is a martial arts instructor, nutritionist and personal trainer, that was basically what my whole life was about. So, when we got back together for Skin, I rediscovered my love for music. I found it hard to believe I put the guitar down, because I got so much happiness and joy out of it. So really, Skin reforming started it - playing the old songs with them, and being the main writer for that band, it was very natural for me to write on guitar more than anything else. I'd probably spend more time writing on guitar than I would just practising it. So we did 'Breaking The Silence' with Skin and it all went fantastically, but I just kept writing.

I had all this stuff, and I spoke to Nev (MacDonald) about if he wanted to do another Skin album. He wasn't that into it, he's not the biggest fan of studio work, he's all about live performances. For me, it's an equal thing. So I'd written all these songs and I was thinking 'What am I actually going to do with these?' My initial idea was to maybe put out a solo album, but we'd had Matti (Alfonzetti) come out to support us on some of the Skin farewell shows. Backstage I'd been jamming with him and we would mess about - I'd play him something, he'd adapt it a little bit... that was probably the embryo that would become the catalyst for Red White & Blues. And now, I can't imagine not playing guitar again! (laughs)

That's good news! So, with you describing that process of how you and Matti work together, are these songs co-writes, or did you write the bulk and Matti tweaked the material to fit him?

We kind of have this agreement that everything is a partnership between the two of us, we don't get hung up on who did what. Matti did the production side and the mixing, and I think he'd be the first person to tell you I've written pretty much all the material. But that's not how it gets perceived.

Well that's good, plenty of bands have taken that approach, like Deep Purple always credited the classic stuff as a five way co-write, and Queen's later stuff was always credited just to 'Queen' instead of specific writers.

Exactly - you see, the way we see things, when you go on tour, there is a huge sacrifice made by everyone, so to suddenly start with 'Oh I did this, you didn't do that...', it defeats the object of what playing music is all about. We do it because we love it, we all have careers elsewhere, none of us think we'll get rich from playing music, because very few people do. It's very much about us all being equals and enjoying it.

I don't know if you got as far as thinking about any other singers after Neville was asked, but personally, after hearing this stuff, I think Matti sounds fantastic, I think it's the best I've ever heard him sing.

Yeah, I have to agree with you. In the studio, he is amazing. He's very fast, gets things done quickly and he

and we didn't have time to audition and break in a new band member, so we just went and got someone who has twenty years of studio experience, who we could count on to just come in, do the job and Che, we have known him a while, he's based in Manchester. We used a studio that was our Skin mate Colin McLeod's old studio. Colin's know Che for a long time, Che came in, learned all the songs in a day, banged them all out in four days, and then Matti and I went to Sweden to put the rest of it down. You'd be amazed at how many bands go down this route for drums, you pick someone who can play with a click, without a click... sometimes drums can take a very long time to get right. You don't want to be messing around in the studio, because they are very expensive.

You mentioned Neville not being a fan of studio work, but I remember you telling me when he and Matti sang together live, it was one of the best things you had ever heard and it was reminiscent of Coverdale and Hughes. Did you consider capturing this on the album?

Neville will undoubtedly get up and play with us live, but like I say, he's not a fan of being in the studio at the best of times. We also wanted to establish that this is a separate band to Skin. It has it's own life, it's own energy, it's own songs. Working with Nev for Skin is one thing, this is another. It's also out of respect to Matti, who is a superb singer in his own right. It's a different project. But undoubtedly you will see Mr MacDonald joining us on stage again, there's no question of that!

You made the album available for pre-order on www.theredwhiteandblues.com - I was trying to figure out how long you must have spent writing the material. It doesn't seem very long since you did 'Breaking The Silence', said farewell to Skin, and now you have a new band with a new album!

It's actually really weird how fast it's all happened. I was talking to Matti the other day and he asked me 'How long have we been doing this, about a year?' I said no, less than six months! (laughs) I got a writing spurt when Skin reformed. The tour finished last December and I normally take Christmas off. But I wrote so much material in the case of three to four weeks over December and January and that was where the groundwork was done. Then Matti came over, and out of the fifty or so songs I had, he whittled it down to fifteen. We worked on them and got them up to speed, because originally I thought it might be acoustic based. But then we got the offer to play at Hyde

Park with Bon Jovi, then Download and the Steelhouse Festival, which meant we had to have a band. So we put a band together for those shows, which is when Nev came on board, with Daren Lamberton on drums. At that point, it became obvious this wasn't an acoustic project, it was a full blown rock band. Upon hearing the songs in this format, I then wrote a second batch, with the thought that it was a heavy band. I think I wrote another ten, and it was that batch which gave us 'Set My Sights', 'Counts For Nothing' and 'Good Times'. So really, two lots of writing spread over six months. The album is the composite of that.

So, after putting Dave Ling, Andy Copping and myself through the wringer trying to decide what was the best stuff, do you have a favourite?

'A Little Too Late' is probably the one I play the most, that is important to me. 'Let It Shine' is a big one too, because that was the first one I played to Matti. When he sang it, I just got that feeling that this would work. That was the catalyst song for this band. And 'Red White & Blues' is one... when I first started writing I didn't know who would be singing. When Matti joined, I started to write for his voice and 'Red White & Blues' is one that is perfect for his bluesy, soulful voice. But if you forced me to pick just one, I'd pick 'A Little Too Late'.

I liked the fact you have a song called 'Red White & Blues' - it reminded me of Bad Company, having a song with the same name as the band, especially with it being bluesy.

Yeah, although I got the idea from Rammstein! I saw them in concert and they have this song called 'Rammlied', the chorus is basically just the audience singing the band name back to them and it was one of the most powerful things I've ever seen in my life. I wanted to do something like that, and we played with Steel Panther the other night which went really well, and that was the song the audience sung back, so mission accomplished! (laughs)

You released the last Skin album 'Breaking The Silence' independently. I know you have already made 'Shine' available for pre-order on your website - are you going the full independent route again for this one, or are you hoping to pick a label up along the way?

The idea was always to do it ourselves, and the reason behind that was when Skin reformed to play Download, we approached Parlophone to ask if they'd re-release our

first couple of albums, and they said no. So I asked if I could licence the first album from them, because I figured there would be a whole load of people at Download exposed to our music who maybe didn't have it. They basically said no to that as well, so I decided I would never again let anyone be in control of when and where I can sell my music. Being headstrong, I decided to do it myself with Skin - and I've just found out that Parlophone have given the first Skin album to Rock Candy to put out! Why the fuck did they do that? Why couldn't I do it? So I'm very reluctant to go down that route because I just see record companies screwing bands over; they don't help them, they don't offer assistance, they just take the material, run it up the flagpole for a few months and then drop you, and there's nothing you can do about it. This way, if I want to do anything I have control over it.

I only found out yesterday that Rock Candy were putting out the first Skin album...

So did I! (laughs)

We cover pretty much all of Rock Candy's stuff here at Fireworks, I'm sure they'll have made a great job of it as always, but I was wondering about the Rock Candy release - last time we spoke you said you wanted to try and put out the first Skin album, and I was going to ask if you went to Derek Oliver or if he came to you. I didn't realise there was a third option which was to circumvent you altogether!

Oh yeah, Derek is a great guy, I really like him. But I hope that helps illustrate... I'm very into giving young musicians help. A lot of young musicians have very little idea of how the industry works. That all took place without me knowing. That's a good insight of how the business works. Initially, Derek came to us about releasing 'Breaking The Silence' on his label. But I didn't want anyone else involved, we declined and did it ourselves, and now he's ended up with the first Skin album. I like what Derek is doing and for anyone to still push rock music, more power to them, but I was very surprised that Parlophone wouldn't let the artist re-release their own stuff! (laughs)

As it stands, you have experience of doing it yourself with 'Breaking The Silence', you've seen the pitfalls of a record company, doing it yourself avoids any politics going on. And unless Simon Cowell backs you or you're on the TV, then there isn't such a thing as record company support.

If you look at how a record deal is structured, the actual artist gets so little money out of a record deal, the chances of you making, or even recouping any money, are minute. If you take the revenue all yourself, the chances of you recouping are actually very good. For example, we only have to sell 1,000 copies of the Red White & Blues album to recoup the entire cost of making the record. If we'd signed with a label and sold 1,000 copies with them, typically the band would only make about £100 out of those 1,000 sold. Why would we do that? An average band will make about 10p per album sold, once you've paid your tax, the record label takes their cut, etc. If we take care of everything ourselves, not only do we own the material forever, we have the chance to make money back which we are happy to put into long term marketing. If you notice, most record deals involve one advert in a magazine like Fireworks when the album comes out, and that's it. You never hear of it again.

I interviewed Brian Howe for this issue as well, he released a terrific album on Frontiers but he spent nearly three times his advance to make his album and get it right, and he's got no chance of making that back now, especially as it was on illegal download sites a week before it was even released. He's done the same thing as you for his new EP, done it all himself and put it out digitally. I love to hear the reality of labels, people have such a misconception that if you land a record deal you've 'made it'.

(Laughs) Most record labels don't really give advances anymore. What they would do is, you give them the album, they take care of the marketing side. But they don't give the band any cash at all. Back in the day when Skin started, it was that advance that sustained you. Even at our peak, when Skin had a top ten album and were playing to a couple of thousand people a night, we were making no more than £150 a week. That was it. We never made more

than that, and that was with what was perceived to be a deal with a major label. Bands exist on very little money.

I'd think then, with that in mind, when you're out playing with bands like Steel Panther, Whitesnake and The Quireboys, you're likely to sell more albums at gigs than online or any other kind of outlet you might consider, because you're appealing to a collective audience with an appreciation for that type of music at source.

I would say so. I remember Skin went to Japan once, supporting Helloween. Bear in mind we had a deal with a major record label, they had sent us a very long way, Helloween were playing to like 5,000 people a night, and we were doing eight shows with them. When we arrived, we discovered the label had 100 copies of the album... in the whole of Japan! This gives you an indication of what you get from a record deal - there's no guarantee it will be run well! With Red White & Blues, we can take the album out to shows with us, we can see first hand how its selling and take care of it as a business. It's more hands on, but the majority of bands have a really hard time getting a record company to do what they should. The reason is the label have so many acts, so much back catalogue, that a lot slips through the cracks. Even though Red White & Blues are small, I'd rather do this and take care of business properly, then give it to someone and watch them piss it up against the wall, and not be able to even take my music back from them afterwards.

God. That's scary.

(Laughs) I could tell you so many stories like that, it's frightening.

On a more personal level, I think you have a distinctive song-writing style and sound, a lot of stuff of yours I recognise certain things you do. Was there something specific that shaped that style you have?

Oh, thank you, that's very kind of you to say, James! I think I have to have an emotional connection with the lyric. Or sometimes it's because I enjoy playing the riff. I'm quite a physical person when it comes to playing. I play very much from the heart, if I sit down and try to work out what to play, as soon as I get onstage I play from the heart and what I planned goes out the window. The same thing tends to happen when I record in the studio, I play more by instinct. Lyrically, I need to have some connection to it - songs like 'Count For Nothing' and 'A Little Too Late' are good examples. It's hard to verbalise, but I have to believe in what I'm playing.

I told you a couple of weeks back Matti had a new CD coming out, and you didn't know! Have you heard it yet?

(Laughs) Not yet, but he didn't even know it was going to be released about the same time as ours. He's bringing me a copy when we meet for rehearsals. I'm sure it's very good though.

I suspected that might be the case, I've heard other smaller acts saying they had finished a record but sometimes it gets put on the back burner in favour of the higher priority stuff and ends up getting released further down the line.

Yeah, he actually told me the album had been finished over a year ago. He was surprised it was coming out now, but that's one of those things.

In all honesty, I've heard both, and while Matti's is a good, solid melodic rock album, I think Red White & Blues blows it away.

I appreciate that, thank you. I think Matti would say that Red White & Blues is his priority as well. He'd been working on that album while I was still with Skin, we'd never even had a conversation about what is now Red White & Blues, all this has happened since he finished it.

Don't worry. In a month or so, when the advert has expired, nobody will mention it again!

Yeah, exactly! (laughs)

Thanks Myke, I hope the new album sells well for you, so you can keep on doing what you're doing, because I really do love this new stuff.

It should be me thanking you for all your help, mate. I hope we do everyone proud when we're out on tour!

