

RICK SPRINGFIELD

Interview by James Gaden

The name Rick Springfield usually brings to mind his smash hit single 'Jessie's Girl' from his 80s heyday, which saw him moonlight successfully as an actor in the soap opera 'General Hospital'. He has forged ahead with both careers, releasing a steady stream of strong, impressive albums, the latest of which, 'Rocket Science' is his eighteenth studio effort. Fireworks called the singer to discuss it.

You've done a whole spate of albums over the last few years that have been excellent, and this one has kept the bar high in my opinion. It's a little different to 'Songs For The End Of The World', 'Venus In Overdrive' or 'Shock/Denial/Anger/Acceptance' though, because you've woven a bit of a Country vibe into some of this material.

Yeah, I've always loved Country and I've been listening to a lot of it. If you want to make a song without using a machine you tend to end up in Nashville, that's where the players are. I always focus on great lyrics and great hooks and a lot of artists who are big in the Country scene today grew up listening to 80s Pop, and have that kind of sensibility. One of the tracks on the new album I wrote with Jay Demarcus from Rascal Flatts - he grew up listening to me and artists like me and he translated that into a Country feel. I've always liked mixing that vibe of guitars with some pedal steel. It's still a Pop Rock album, it's not a Country album, but it does have Country influences. It's been getting a very good reaction actually, I'm pretty excited about it.

Absolutely. You had me right at the first track - as soon as 'Light This Party Up' started, I was sold. It's a great track. That was made to be a concert opener.

Oh great, well I actually have started some shows lately with that, so good call! (laughs) We've played that and 'Down' live, and when the record is out I'll probably be adding 'That One' and 'Miss Mayhem'. They're great to play live, a lot of the stuff from the last couple of albums have been high energy, because they're more fun to do live. It's better than a ballad, because our live show with the band is pretty pedal to the metal, so those will fit in well, I think.

I think you have definitely favoured a more Hard Rock approach over the last few years, particular with 'Shock...' and there was a lot of energy on 'Songs...' I think you've gotten heavier in your tastes.

Sure. I was always a guitar player first, a lot of the stuff I listen to for pleasure is on the heavier side, I've always been a big fan of that. It's so much fun to play that stuff live. When 'Shock...' came out, that was probably the heaviest record I've ever done and it worked great live. As a guitar player, I enjoy playing. I think it's important that if you are going to put out new music, you have to make sure you put your best foot forward all the time, and that's what we've tried to do.

I assume you have more freedom as an artist now, as oppose to in the 80s when I imagine there was pressure on you to score hit singles or a popular video to appeal to a certain demographic?

Exactly, and wanting all that by tomorrow! Yes, I have much more freedom now, I have my own studio so we can go in anytime, it's as much fun now as it's ever been. I've always loved being in the studio and I love that process.

Have you written the material with Matt Bisonette again?

Yeah, Matt and I did the bulk of the songs, I wrote a couple with some other guys, but Matt and I have hit on something we both like and we'll continue to do that for the foreseeable future... until something happens to one of us! (laughs) We're both in the same place mentally, maturity wise, with what we're thinking about, and he's an amazing player too. He helps

make the whole band thing both challenging and fun.

One of the tracks here is 'Let Me In' which was originally a bonus track on 'Songs...' when that came out. This new version is probably the most Country thing on the record and I think it benefits from that. Why did you choose to re-work it?

I wrote it originally and when I demoed it, I thought about sending it to Nashville because I thought it sounded like it would be a Country song! The demo was pretty much what was put on the last album. We were looking for more tracks, because every platform needs more content. I never thought of it as a truly finished song, and I thought it was worthy of getting a proper work up, so we stuck it on this record. It's definitely better than the demo version, my demos are usually something I put down really fast so I remember the idea.

When you did 'Songs...' you did four different versions, with different covers and each with extra content. You've not done that this time...

No, because it was a lot more work! (laughs) There *are* bonus songs for this one, we did sixteen songs and there are thirteen on the record. We don't seem to have a problem coming up with material. Personally I miss the old five songs per side album approach, but now every platform wants something different, iTunes wants a bonus track, Spotify wants something different, so you have to have some extra songs. Doing the four different covers for 'Songs...' was just an artistic idea I had which I thought would look great. But it was a lot of work for sure.

Did you get any backlash about it, perhaps from completists who weren't happy there were four different versions to get?

Not really, it was up to them if they wanted to get all four versions. The real hard one to get for a lot of fans was the one we called the Russian one, with the red ray gun...

Yeah, that was what we got in Europe, that's the version I have!

Oh great! They looked at it as kind of a scavengers hunt, we heard quite a lot of positive things about people hunting them down.

So what bonus tracks are you planning for 'Rocket Science'?

We have some more original songs, we have some live stuff and a couple of acoustic tracks where it's just me and a guitar in the studio, so there's a few things to put out. There are three new ones that didn't go on the record that will likely be for iTunes and Spotify.

You recently have been doing some "stripped down" shows where it was just you and your guitar. Was that liberating, or terrifying?

A bit of both. (laughs) I wasn't sure I could pull it off, because it's a storyteller thing, there's as much talking as there is playing, although it doesn't necessarily show that on the DVD or the CD. It evolves continually, it's a very different show now to what was on the DVD for example. There's different songs in there, a couple of new ones I wrote specifically for it, we actually just worked one up yesterday to add in. About half the songs have been replaced and I love it, because the changes are easy, there's just me, I don't have to rehearse with a whole band. I can switch it up on the night. We

did one show and our gear didn't make it. I have a laptop which plays along to add a little something extra, I went into a studio and recorded a whole bunch of parts to add in to what I'm doing on stage. None of it showed up, so it was literally just me and my guitar, so I wrote a song backstage about how fucked up the airlines were. (laughs). It allows for that kind of thing.

Since doing those shows, has that influenced how you write now, because you perhaps have a thought about how these new songs could translate to the acoustic concerts?

No, because I do play some electric in those shows too, and generally my writing process starts on the acoustic anyway. I usually start with a title, something that catches my ear, that creates a feel and then I sit down, play chords, sing and hum until I hit on something I like. There's no committee, just me and a room and if I stumble on something I like I'll lay it down on a digital recorder. I'll come back a day later, and if I still like it, I'll finish it musically and then flesh out the lyrics.

You've written a lot of songs now, eighteen albums worth... do you ever revisit your old stuff?

Yeah, eighteen albums, God! No, I don't listen back unless I need to check something out for a special event - like we're doing a fan event where we're going the Bahamas, the fans come down, we party, drink and play different sets for five days. We'll often pull out an album and play all of it, usually something we haven't done in a long time, so I'll listen to it then, but otherwise no, I don't hear it unless it's on the radio or something.

Is there a particular album you like playing live?

Yeah, everybody loves to play the 'Shock...' album actually, it's really good fun to play. It's heavy and just guitar, bass and drums.

You had quite a few loops on that album too.

That's right, I'd gotten quite into the whole loop thing back then and I wanted to use that so I could keep the verse fairly lo-fi, then have the real drums come in at the chorus and really flesh it out, that's a method I've used quite a lot.

I loved that album because it was serious Rock, it was hard edged, it was dark, modern, but it also kept a lot of the hooks I've always associated with your music, which you have a lot of on this new album.

Thanks - hooks are the most important thing. I listen to new stuff all the time for ideas and you're always affected by what you listen to, which is why there's a Country feel on this new record, because I've listened to a lot of that lately.

That was one of the things I spotted, it's quite subtle on most songs, I actually heard more Country elements with headphones on that I didn't hear originally on my speakers. I think the fusion is great, it still sounds like one of your albums but there is that extra element there.

Yeah, that's because we had it in the demos, but we weren't sure it would work when all the other guitars were on there. There were certain licks and things to be played by the pedal steel players, or the banjo, and I wasn't sure mix-wise how it could be done. We actually found a guy in Nashville who was a great mixer and he had done a lot of stuff like this. He mixed a couple

of tracks and he put the instruments exactly where they should be, which is what you're saying - they don't take over, they are just subtly there to give it some sonic depth. It's a good sounding record and I'm really happy with it.

You've enjoyed a long career in music and acting, but you also branched out writing a biography that was very well received. Creatively, was music always the first thing you wanted to do?

Very much so. I lived in England when I was a kid and I'm old enough to remember The Shadows, and Hank Marvin was a big influence on me. My parents had a tennis racket, I turned it upside down and pretended it was a guitar. My parents got the idea and bought me a real one, and that was the driver of everything for me. I taught myself and what you did back then was find a guy who was better than you, became his friend and learned as much as you could. (laughs) That and I listened to records and learned from those.

So what's next for you, is it pushing this album on tour?

Well I want to do a lot more acting, starting this year, but it's all workable. I had an Australian tour booked and then I got the part in the 'Ricki And The Flash' movie with Meryl Streep, so I had to cancel the tour but that stuff happens, you can always re-book the shows. So yeah, I will be touring, but I also want to do more TV and movie stuff.

When you branched into acting, did it have any negative impact on your music career? In the regular world, you can move from one career to another and nobody bats an eyelid, but in the music world, if a musician says he's going to act most people scoff, the same as the idea of an actor making an album is often sneered at.

Yeah, with me, people thought I was an actor first. I really got my notoriety from 'General Hospital', even though I'd done three or four albums before that and had 'Jessie's Girl'. 'General Hospital' really got me noticed, and when the stations who were playing 'Jessie's Girl' found out I was in this soap opera, they stopped playing the record because they thought I wasn't a real musician, they thought I was a soap guy who had been given a song and managed to sing on key for three minutes. But I figured if I stayed in long enough I could dispel that, and now it's not an issue, but I did have to fight it. Outside of America it wasn't a problem.

How did you end up as an actor?

I was between record deals, and I met the wife of a manager I was leaving at the time. She asked what I was doing, I said nothing, and she suggested I go to acting class. It really saved my life, I met new friends who I'm still close with and I fell in love with the whole thing. I think music and acting are similar arts so I didn't find it was a giant leap.

I'm really glad it worked out for you, but I'm even happier that you're still making records, especially the quality of the material you've put out.

Oh, thank you. It's a crazy world out there in the record business now, but I still love making music and will continue to do it. I'm a big believer that if the song is strong enough, there are other ways to get it noticed. All you can do is write the best music you can and see what happens. That's all I've ever done.

