

SAMMY HAGAR

Sammy Hagar has racked up a hugely impressive forty years in the music business, a feat matched only by the quality of work he has released over the years. From the classic debut album by Montrose, to his early solo work, a stint with HSAS, the Geffen years with hits like 'I Can't Drive 55', all the way to fronting Van Halen, touring with the Waboritas and forming supergroup Chickenfoot, Hagar has always set the bar high. His latest CD is simply called 'Sammy Hagar & Friends' and features an amazing collection of stars including Kid Rock, Joe Satriani, Chad Smith, Michael Anthony, Neal Schon, Nancy Wilson, and many more. James Gaden called the Red Rocker to discuss how it all came together.

Sammy Hagar's enthusiasm regarding his new album is apparent from the minute he answers the phone. He's delighted to hear I'm impressed with the record – he confides he has been enjoying it himself! Working on each song as a separate entity, he's only recently had chance to listen to the album as a whole, playing it in his car and at home.

"I was planning to do an anthology," he explains. "A four decades album, cherry picking songs from each era... a little Montrose, early Sammy, stuff from the Geffen years, 'Van Hagar', and then I was going to write four songs that were like tributes to the eras. I was going to try and write a new 'Rock Candy' would be the easiest way to put it. When the songs started coming together for that idea, I started liking what I was writing and got even more inspired. A few people then started writing songs for me and submitting them and suddenly I was like 'Shit, I got a record here, what am I doing?' So I just went ahead and kept recording. The first song that was written for me was 'Bad On Fords And Chevrolets' by Ronnie Dunn from Brooks & Dunn. His vocal was so good on the demo of that, I didn't think I could sing it any better than he did! So I said he should sing on it with me and it was so damn organic, I gotta tell you. I love making records and music this way. It's really the way to do it. All the business is out the window, you're not thinking of any reason for it like 'Oh boy this is going to be big'. You just keep on going with your head down and you come out the other side saying 'Damn, that's interesting, and different...' and I didn't plan anything! I'm in love with this record!"

The CD means Hagar fans get a full new album instead of four new songs and a collection of work from his past. However, the numerous styles on 'Sammy Hagar & Friends' still manages to nod its head to Sammy's many musical endeavours. 'Not Going Down' has a serious Montrose vibe, there are songs about cars and the cover of Jimmy Buffet's 'Margaritaville' could easily have come from 'Livin' It Up'.

"Because I planned on doing a Montrose style song, a car song from the car era, a lifestyle song, this album has just ended up being me. I listen to this record and everything I like, everything I've done musically, is all here. Then to bring in my friends, that's just like my lifestyle. I don't really have time off, I'm always doing something whether it's jamming with

my friends at Cabo Wabo, making music, messing around with my restaurants, I have two or three different bands... This record is what I do. Sometimes I'll meet up with Toby Keith and sing like that. I get with Denny Carmassi and Bill Church and we rock like that. This album is an extension of who I am today. I'd compare it to my book, which is a couple of years old now – this CD is pretty much current, you're right up to date! I like exposing myself like that, I have no problem showing myself to the world."



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The album features some Hagar originals, some songs written for Sammy and some cover versions. Hagar, Neal Schon, Michael Anthony and Chad Smith, (forming a lineup with the initials HSAS to match the band Sammy fronted with Neal in 1984) jam out a live rendition of the classic 'Going Down'. More surprising is their awesome take on 'Personal Jesus', by Depeche Mode.

"That might be my favourite cover tune I've ever done, I must say," Sammy eludes. "That was so last minute – I was on the way to the studio, listening to an alternative radio station. Whenever I'm working, I don't like to listen to classic rock, because I don't

want to be influenced by the very thing I've helped influence!" he laughs. "I don't want to listen to my own shit, so I try to listen to weird stations, alternative music or eclectic blues... anyway, 'Personal Jesus' comes on the radio as I'm driving to meet Neal, Chad and Mike. The song ended right as I pulled into the studio. I walk in, hug, hug, hug, laugh, high five... then I ask if anybody knows 'Personal Jesus'. Nobody knows it. So I download it in the computer, we listen to it, 'Oh yeah, I remember that, that's a bad ass riff...' and Neal start playing it. Boom! Just like everything else on this record, it came and within a couple of hours we had it. It was ass kicking – that's a live vocal, the bass and drums are live, nothing was fixed. Neal kept his original guitar and just overdubbed some stuff in the middle to add a little more production, I brought in the gospel singers and we took it to church, with a heavy groove! People have said 'Oh, why would you cover Depeche Mode?' Listen, I don't care who wrote that song, that is a bad ass riff. You can play that on a violin, a fricking banjo, a ukulele, it's still a heavy riff!"

While not entirely a duets record, there are several tracks where Sammy shares the vocal duties. One of the standouts is a beautiful ballad called 'All We Need Is An Island', featuring Nancy Wilson of Heart. The pair work so well together, I assume Nancy was the one he always had in mind for that song.

"Er, no," Sammy laughs. "I hate to say she wasn't first choice because that sounds degrading to her, but I didn't think of her right away. My first thought was... okay, this is going to scare everyone! My first thought when I wrote it was it was an ultimate love song: you, a woman and an island, together, it's all you need. I thought it was a romantic thing – so I needed a girl on it. I thought 'Who is the most current, biggest female star out there?' Aside from Lady Gaga, because I don't wanna duet with Lady Gaga! Believe it or not, I thought of Taylor Swift. I talked to my manager about it – she had just come out with a record called 'Red' so I thought she must know who the Red Rocker is! Then I find out her guitar player is a huge Sammy fan. I was going to do it, but then I got cold feet. I thought it would be so embarrassing, a guy my age, if we did a video, she'd look like my granddaughter! Fuck that! I decided to go with someone more my own age group, so I called up Nancy, I've known her a long time. Instead of choosing Ann, because she's a lead singer, I wanted someone to sing harmony parts around me. Then Nancy asked if she could write a verse. I was kinda nervous, because it was all from my perspective – I asked her 'Are you gonna write some girl shit?' and she said 'Absolutely!' So I let her do hers, then I'd tell her whether I wanted her to sing her lyrics or mine. When she did it, it was just great. It became the best duet on the record."

While not strictly a duet, 'Father Sun' is

obviously special to Sammy, as it features his son Aaron providing backing vocals.

"Aaron's a good singer – if he sings by himself, I don't think he sounds like me, but when we sing together, it sounds like one. Like the Osmonds, the Jacksons. The Everly Brothers is a classic example – you can't sing like that unless you're family! It sounds like me in the chorus, but that's both of us. Aaron's singing all of the parts, I'm only singing one. I'm always impressed when he sings with me. That song is my special song. That's my favourite one I wrote. I'm a sun worshipper. I was in Bora Bora with my family and these musicians would come out and play Tahitian ukuleles. They are eight stringed instruments and so bright sounding, they hardly have any bottom tone. Then they have a drum, with a lady hitting on them with a stick – not even a real mallet, just like a stick from your yard, with fabric wrapped around it. I just loved this music, so I bought one of the guy's ukuleles from him – I kept at him and I got it, by paying him more than I think he made in a year! Then I borrowed a guitar, because we were in the middle of nowhere, and wrote 'Father Sun', with that drum in it. When I got home, I added the electric part and I love it, it's very deep to me. When the sun comes up, for me, everything happens. When the sun goes down, I go into a whole different mode! But when that sun is up and it's bright and beautiful, it motivates me."

Some songs on the album were written specifically for the Red Rocker, raising the question of whether Hagar sought out writers or found they came to him via serendipity and luck.

"Both!" Sammy replies. "I asked Jay Buchanan from Rival Sons to write a song for me, because I discovered he was from my home town. I had no idea he's from Fontana, California. It's a rough, tough town. He's told my manager when he was a kid, about five or six, he used to go to a burrito stand with his mother. It's the same stand I used to go to. I had a paper round and for \$25 you could get this burrito that was big enough to feed you for the whole day. When I made it, they cut out a picture of me from a newspaper and put it up on the wall. One time just after I left Montrose, I went there and they asked me to sign it."

It's been up there forever I guess. So Jay's Mom used to take him there and say, 'That's Sammy Hagar, he's from this town, he's rich and famous'. It apparently had an effect on him that he wanted to do the same. I had no idea. Here's the craziest thing – I love that band! I loved the first album, but when I heard 'Keep On Swinging' from the second album, that fucking song kicked my ass. Those guys are the shit! Then I find out my manager manages them! How small is this world getting?"

"So I asked Jay to write a song for me, in the vein of Montrose, because Rival Sons are a retro band as far as I'm concerned, they're throwbacks. He fucking came up with that song and I thought it was killer. So I called up Denny Carmassi and Bill Church, the surviving members of Montrose, and we nailed it. I'm in love with the CD as you can tell, but that song, when it comes on after the first track, if that doesn't put the fur up on your arms then you have a problem!"

The Montrose feel is so well captured, it's a surprise to find it wasn't penned by Sammy himself.

"I love that!" Hagar exclaims. "That's the kind of song I would do. You would think that I wrote 'Bad On Fords and Chevrolets' too. Ronnie Dunn wrote that song for me because he's a car guy and he knows about my car songs like 'I Can't Drive 55'. That one I never asked for, he just called me and asked if I'd be interested. Hell yeah! More than any other song, that's real Sammy Hagar. That's the most fun to sing on the record. Being a singer, you look for lyrics and those are just pure rhythm."

The album also features a bonus live track from the Montrose tribute concert. Despite earning a well-deserved reputation as a superb live performer, there's precious little available from Sammy's early years, especially full concerts. I ask about

the possibility of these seeing the light of day, even if it's done digitally via iTunes.

"I've got a ton of stuff, I can say I've recorded at least 70% of every show I've played in my life, be it a board mix or whatever," Sammy reveals. "It's all sat in a warehouse but man, to dig through that, I'd have to be so bored! It's funny you asked about that though. I did have one of my crew dig up a bunch of live stuff. I don't want to get into a Van Halen thing, but when I was thinking about doing the anthology record, the Van Halen guys were giving me trouble about licensing the songs, they didn't wanna give them up. So instead of pursuing it, I thought fuck it, I've got a million live recordings of those songs, with them or with my band. So I told my guy to dig through and find every damn Van Halen song I performed! He dug it all up... and I didn't even listen to it because I didn't do the anthology!"

"I know the fans would love it, but I just want to move forward. I don't want to dig stuff up to sell to my fans. I'd rather give it to them if I could, but there's always problems with copyrights and paying songwriters if the songs are co-writes, you can't just give it away. I don't want my fans to buy old stuff. If I want them to reach into their pockets, I want it to be to buy my new CD, or to see me in concert, buy a bottle of my booze or have dinner in one of my restaurants. I don't want to sell them old stuff, I'd rather give it to them – like on the new CD you get live stuff from the Montrose tribute. I like that, I like giving people things. Maybe I'll keep doing that – but I don't like going backwards. I've got to keep moving!"

The new album 'Sammy Hagar & Friends' is released by Frontiers Records on 30th September. More info: www.redrock.com.

