



# Status Quo

Interview by James Gaden. Photo by Tina Korhonen.

Over 118 million albums sold, thousands of concerts including performances in front of royalty, featured in the Guinness Book of Records for having more hit singles than any other band in British or international chart history... there's not much that Status Quo haven't achieved. One thing they hadn't done though is made an album without the presence of beloved rhythm guitarist and vocalist Rick Parfitt, who passed away in December 2016. That's all changed now, as the band issue their thirty-third studio album 'Backbone', with ever present Francis Rossi flanked by long term members Andrew Bown and John 'Rhino' Edwards, augmented by the young blood of drummer Leon Cave and guitarist Richie Malone. Fireworks spoke to Rossi and Bown to hear about life in the Quo camp.

**Before we get to the new Quo album, Francis, last time we spoke (in Fireworks #86) you had just done your album with Hannah Rickard and were preparing to embark on your spoken word tour. You weren't sure how it would go, what did you think now you've done it?**

**FR:** It was fucking excellent. I really liked it, it started to get a little formatted but that's understandable in a way because certain things everyone found funny, so I told them every night. We had one girl, she came to fourteen shows. That's a bit off-putting, because you know she's heard the joke, seen the pictures, but she seemed very happy. That would really be the only negative I could think of. I found it really enjoyable, really relaxing and it obviously served my ego. I met a lot of people too who I don't think would have met me or anybody from Quo before, because we were going to places the band wouldn't normally go to. I'd sign books afterwards, anywhere up to a hundred, and people would thank me for coming to their town, I realised I was talking to people who were maybe ten minutes away

from home. It's not like going to an arena where they have to pay sixty fucking quid for parking and felt obliged to buy a programme or something. If they want to buy a book they could but there was a distinct feeling that people were thankful for me coming to their town, so I really enjoyed it – hence doing another sixty of them next year. There's so many things on now, in the arenas and the stadiums, it's like TV box sets, you can look and say "Oh, The Eagles are on, oh, Fleetwood Mac are on, oh, Pink is on, oh, Quo are on..." There's something big on everywhere all the time, and I think that "something special is coming" has been lost, that worries promoters. But this worked well.

**In that interview I asked if there would be a new Quo album and you said you didn't know...**

**FR:** And that was the party line I was told to give. If I'd been allowed to tell the truth I could have told you then and there, but I had to bullshit, which is a part of the business I hate. I had to pretend to you I didn't know if there would be another Quo record when

in truth we'd started making one several months before we even spoke. But if I said it then, when it comes to doing press prior to the album coming out people like yourself think "We know there's a new Quo album, so fucking what?" I mentioned to Richie the other day, I was watching TV the other night in bed and within twenty minutes of each other a Madonna album was being advertised and a Springsteen album being advertised. All to say "This is coming out, will you order this?" The business wants you to buy it in advance now.

**Yes, you mentioned last time how carefully managed releases have to be these days. On to the new album itself – I really like it.**

**FR:** I'm pleased, and I've found some old school fans are enjoying it. One guy said he thought it sounded like 'Dog Of Two Head' and another guy said "Oh, it reminds me of the 'Quo' album and this track sounds like 'Is There A Better Way'". I thought "Er, what?" It doesn't sound anything like any of those things – however, those are all *positive*

comments. However people are interpreting it, it all seems to be positive.

**AB:** We're very happy with it. Francis said he thought it was worth us giving a new album a go and that's when we started collating the songs. There is self doubt for sure, you think "Is it worth doing a new album?" because you will slave away on it, nobody sells records anymore so you're not going to make real money, that's why everybody is on the road.

**FR:** It was an interesting process because initially I didn't want to do it, because I knew there would be comments like "It's not as good without Rick". Some days that will spur me on, others I'll think "Fuck it, leave it alone then."

**I remember you saying before though, that Rick wasn't as involved as others on some records.**

**FR:** Ha! Understatement! The more Rick got into that "Rock persona" he was developing, the less he'd contribute. He'd just turn up for pictures, which made things

fractious between him and I.

**AB:** Yes, it's fair to say there were some albums that Rick was not particularly involved in. There we go with the truth, that's never very good! (laughs)

**So what was the catalyst to start a new album?**

**FR:** I had this intro I use when we are about to go into 'Down Down', just something I mess around with, and John kept whispering to me "I'd like to work on that with you". So I said one day we'd look at it. I sent him that piece, and I sent Andrew a piece which ended up becoming 'Backing Off'. Whereas Andrew and I write in the same room and we finished that in the back of a tour bus, with John, we never sat down, it was all done by sending each other bits back and forth. When Richie came in with 'Get Out Of My Head', I left that alone. He'd not written for us before and I was thinking of saying "I'll write it with you", or putting John or Andrew with him. However, if we'd done that, Richie's pacy, almost 'Roadhouse Blues' feel could well have been lost because one of us more experienced guys would have said "No, what you need to do is..." and we could have just wiped out what was there. I added the "Oh no she said" bit to it and thought "Actually, that's fucking marvellous". We all felt really enthused recording it, John particularly said how much he loved playing on it. So something happened, I think it was probably me saying I didn't want to do it unless I produced it, picked the material, decided the order, I was a little dictatorial at the beginning but I'm delighted with the result, personally.

**AB:** I think Francis did what was needed. It's what the world needs frankly, a benign dictator. Francis chose all the material, brought in some songs of his own, worked with me on one, worked with John on a couple, picked a song from Richie and Leon and we all think it worked very well. Somebody has to be in charge and that's the way it was. And people are liking the record, so it looks like it was the right decision.

**FR:** It was all getting formulaic and political, everyone had to have 2.2 tracks per person, Rick had to sing so many, that's just how it was. It should be on merit but politics rules, not just with this band but with most bands. This time I was all about quality control, that's why Leon only got one song on, which Andrew and John were so taken with. I'm not saying the others he submitted weren't good, they just didn't feel right.

**I liked the fact all the songs were written by the band in house, the only outside writer is John David's 'Better Take Care', which is notable because both Rhino and you, Andrew, get to sing parts on that.**

**FR:** Yeah, we have one of John David's, he's written some good songs for us like 'The Party Ain't Over Yet', 'Red Sky' 'Rollin' Home' and various other things.

**AB:** I'm a big John David fan, they're never straight forward songs and he always write terrific lyrics. And yes, I was allowed to sing a few words – licence to sing! That was before the guys said "That's enough, come away from the microphone." (laughs)

**Well since Rick passed you and John have both been singing more in the live shows, you've all pitched in.**

**FR:** It made sense to me, when John sang a certain bit it just sounded right to me, so bringing him in, Andrew in, if it's right, it's right. Even with the mastering, I did it differently because I realised Quo was becoming formatted. When we made an album the two guitars had to be this loud, so Rick's guitar had to be the same as mine, there was more and more harmonic distortion and compression, Rick has to scream in here, I need to trim the bass a bit there. I have to do this and that, and we ended up with the sound of Quo being in a very narrow band. Not here, there's space in this, there's air. Someone said "It doesn't sound like the records that are out there" and it doesn't, because it's fashionable to compress the fuck out of things and I've not done that. Compression is the norm now, but it never used to be. If I'd made it sound like the records out there now, it would sound like any other Quo record. You can have mastering pre-sets, you put it on and the guitars poke out and the bass rumble goes and it sounds like a Quo record. But to me that sounded tired. I wanted it to sound different. Compression, if you look at the files, there's no waveforms now, it looks like mown grass. That's alright if it's on the radio while you're in the shower because you're not really listening, but when you sit and *listen* to the record, it gives a really horrible, almost spitting out sound. It was so disheartening to put all that work in and then have the life squeezed out of it at mastering – like one of those sausage making machines that takes all the meat and forces it out in a certain shape. I didn't want that. I'm very pleased with the result, but it won't appease us like when we used to sell thousands of albums a day. Reviews have been good, but it might die on its arse by Christmas.

**I liked the fact you went with something a bit different to open the record. Usually you have something fast like 'Beginning Of The End' or 'Two Way Traffic', but 'Waiting For A Woman' is nothing like that.**

**FR:** Again, that was part of the format of the latter day Quo albums, so I put that first by design. Everybody loved it when we recorded it. There was only one guitar on it, no double tracking, just one guitar with a big amplifier sound in a room, no processed guitars, so I suppose if anything, that harks back to 'Dog Of Two Head'. Capturing that sound of the room, nice and big, I thought if we open with that people might think "What the fuck is this?" and stay with it long enough to get to the second track. John and I had done 'Cut Me Some Slack' and I wanted that early on the record, a friend of ours heard a snippet of it and said straight away "Oh, new Quo record!" I thought shit, that's too easily recognisable, if we put

that first people might think “Yeah, it’s Quo” and switch off. So I thought if we open with something a bit different, if they don’t like it and are about to walk away then ‘Cut Me Some Slack’ will bring them back and the third track, ‘Liberty Lane’ is something a bit more Pop and different again.

**I was impressed with Richie Malone, not just how he’s fitted into the band as a guitar player, but with his lead vocals. I was impressed with ‘Get Out Of My Head’ but in concert he’s been singing some of the songs Rick used to do live, like ‘Big Fat Mama’ and ‘Mystery Song’. I thought he did a great job on them.**

**AB:** Richie has a great voice, he’s really nailing ‘Mystery Song’ and I think he sounds a bit like Rick, but he’s actually got a much better voice than Rick had. He’s young and full of life, got a very good voice - urgh, he makes you sick!

**FR:** Again, back to that old format thing. Before it was “Well Rick needs to sing two of them”. Why? And as I have told you many times, I didn’t like his later vocals when he was singing gruffly, when he was trying to be the Rock star, when his real voice was the one you’d hear on ‘All The Reasons’. We used to do Everly Brothers duets! But in later years he wanted to be the Rock guy, which I didn’t like. So I definitely wanted Richie on there because he’s got a great voice. ‘Mystery Song’ has been going down a storm lately, I don’t know why, but Richie sings it very sweetly.

**AB:** Leon has been a breath of fresh air too, John and I call him ‘nephew’. He’s probably due the title of ‘Loveliest Man In Rock N’ Roll’. He’s getting married soon... in Slovenia. Really convenient. It’s not like we’re not on the road enough already – couldn’t he have had it in Richmond? We’ll have to kick him out of the band. People have been kicked out for less... I’m joking, that’s not true!

**You played a couple of the new songs live on the recent shows when you were guests for Lynyrd Skynyrd. With Richie now fully incorporated into the fold, is there a temptation to put some more new ones in to say “This is where the band is at now”?**

**FR:** I’d like to put two more in to be honest. But what we did was not announce the new songs when we played them live, we just do them and they seemed to go down well. Otherwise if you say “Here’s a new one” people will say “Don’t know it” and go to the loo. I think we can do four and like I say, ‘Cut Me Some Slack’ and ‘Liberty Lane’ have gone down really well – I know I’m bound to say

that to a journalist, but it happens to be true. I’m surprised at how well they’re going down to be honest, which is why I’m thinking of putting in more. We run through them in soundcheck and they’re sounding tremendous. Plus, because I chose which songs went on the record, there isn’t one I don’t like, which is not a position I’ve really been in before with Quo.

**AB:** It’s Francis’ call at the end of the day because he’s the leader, but we all know that if you don’t play your big hits, some people, rightly in my view, will want their money back. And Status Quo are in the terrible position of having, at the last count, 67 Top Forty hits. I think that’s more than anyone else, anywhere in the world. Which is amazing. Even if we just picked from those, we’d be doing two and a half hours. So to try and make room for other songs, I wouldn’t want to see Status Quo if they weren’t going to play ‘Down Down’ or ‘Rockin’ All Over the World’, would you? Therefore, you’re strapped for time anyway. Doing new material live can be trying for the audience. I’ll quote Mike Love, who said something very memorable to us about the Beach Boys philosophy when we worked with them on ‘Fun Fun Fun’. He said “Play your



hits, and fuck off”. I’ve never forgotten that! They were good, fun guys and we take that on board, we don’t want to be one of those bands who say “We’re going to play the whole first side of our new album...” and watch people going to the loo.

**It’s fashionable for bands to play all of a classic album these days, or a big chunk of new material but I imagine with your hits having been spread over so many years that’s not something you could really attempt?**

**AB:** Nick Mason’s ‘Saucerful of Secrets’ has pretty much gone that way entirely, and Pink Floyd would do that, but I don’t think it would work with Quo. Maybe I’m wrong but I don’t think people would want to hear us play the first five songs of ‘Backbone’ or anything else as part of a show. We have to fit in the hits and that only leaves a certain amount of time for anything else. There’s a reason why I’ve played ‘Rockin’ All Over the World’ 4,622 times – I’ve just made that number up by the way – but it’s because people want to hear it.

**I think the cover artwork for this is excellent as well, very striking, as soon as I saw it I thought “That would be a**

**good T-shirt”.**

**FR:** It does look good doesn’t it? I think it’s all come together really well, I just have a nagging feeling that it’s fifteen years too late. I think back and think how we used to shift loads of albums and these days we just don’t... but it’s funny, back then Rick and I used to always check to see where we were in the running – chart positions don’t mean a lot nowadays. When we charted in the old days it meant we were being heard all over the place, you have no idea now. It’s sad, lamenting the loss of a business I’ve spent my whole life in, it’s dying, unless something miraculous happens in the next five years.

**AB:** The game was up in 2000 with Napster I think, when people were downloading thousands of pounds worth of recordings for nothing. It was over, all gone overnight, millions of people downloading music for free. That said, we’re a band that keeps moving, it’s interesting for any band to change a bit. To hopefully improve. And I think Status Quo, as a band, have improved over the decades. I think musically we have become more interesting. I think if you compare the ‘classic’ 70s albums with the later ones, I don’t think the 70s ones make it as a whole, some of that is very much, to use a phrase, “of its time”.

**FR:** In the here and now, I’m just very, very pleased with our new album. I said before that I really enjoy the creative process now – we did ‘Bula Quo’ for the film in 2013, before that the last proper Quo album was ‘Quid Pro Quo’ in 2011 and for me, that was us in the formula. Everything was pretty much in the key of A, pretty much the same tempo, I did half, Mike Paxman produced half, it was the closest we got to an AC/DC record. And I realised that was us following other people’s ideas of what a Quo album should be. That definitely suffered from the 2.2 tracks per person approach – songs that were “yeah, nearly...” but not quite. Our front of house guy said to me very honestly “I thought the band were better than this” on some of those songs and he seems elated with the new record, so we’ll see what happens. People often say to me ‘Hello’ and stuff like that should be what we’re doing – well that had little songs from Rick, some Hard Rock stuff, so I think light and shade is what we’re looking for. I wasn’t sure how ‘Aquostic’ would be received and that did very, very well. Prior to that I wasn’t enthralled about making albums at all, but since we did ‘Aquostic’ and I did my album with Hannah, which also did well and is still in the Country charts, I’m really enjoying writing material again. It’s a really great feeling – even if it doesn’t work, I really enjoyed it. I hope people do like it though!