

Status Quo

James Gaden interviews Francis Rossi

Back in issue 22 I was lucky enough to talk to Rick Parfitt when the mighty Status Quo released their excellent album 'The Party Ain't Over Yet'. I ended up getting to meet all the guys backstage at a gig in my hometown shortly after, and I'm very much looking forward to their next gig here in December. With the release of their superb new album, humourously titled 'In Search Of The Fourth Chord', I was given the opportunity to speak to Quo's other main man, Francis Rossi, to talk about the new record, the upcoming tour, and a whole load of other things as well.

I begin the interview by saying well done on an awesome new album. I start to say I'm really impressed with it and as I'm one of Quo's younger fans... but I get no further because Francis leaps in.

"Nothing wrong with that, I was young once," he says. "Listen, we're born... to get old. We die, and it's a sad fucking thing when we die. I had a manager die the other year, and he was fifty-something. Everyone kept saying how young he was when he died, yet I'm an old fucker and I'm still here. What's happening? Anyway, go on!"

I carry on my thought by saying as one of the younger fans, I feel that the last three albums have been probably the best three Quo have ever made. I know the seventies albums are the ones that spawned the classic songs, but before I can finish my sentence, Francis makes a comment which is exactly what I was about to say.

"Yeah, but if you really listen to those, and I do occasionally, and I realise that people go on about them all the time, and yes, there are some great moments in there. However, there's a lot of shite in there too. So yeah, like you say, people are always on about the seventies albums, and I do go back and check them out regularly and I compare them to the later ones which are not necessarily seen as 'the' ones.

"I think a lot of it is to do with people's memories of how things were back then, what they were doing then, how they were feeling then," he adds. "If you really want to evaluate, say, the 'Hello' album, there are some really good tracks on there, but God, there's some shite. There's some bad playing, bad timing, bad this, bad that. However, I think the same could be said for most acts when they look back. Sorry, I waffle a lot, people should have warned you!"

I laugh, saying not to worry, I'd rather have that, than someone who gives me one word answers! And I tend to agree with his theory. I suggest that if people started getting into Quo's work, they might start with something like '12 Gold Bars', where a record company has culled all the best stuff from a group of albums into one collection. Then a new listener immediately gets the misconception that the albums that spawned these songs must therefore have been the best. But for me, because I wasn't old enough to be a Quo fan back in the seventies, I find that their best three records, certainly for song consistency right across the album, have been the last three albums. Basically, since

just worked.

"Lovely. Stop it, you're making me all embarrassed now!" Francis laughs.

I bring the questioning around to the new album. The first thing that struck me about the new album was not just the title, which is very funny, but the actual cover itself, which is just classic Quo humour. So I ask where did that come from?

"Simon Porter, our manager, who used to be our PR man, mentioned the whole thing," Francis replies. "I always look at the titles of the tracks of the album. There's a great track on there called 'Electric Arena' which would have been a great title for an album. 'Beginning Of The End' would be a nice title. So I usually go through those first. But basically, ever since we did 'Rocking All Over The World' every tour has had to have something about it that we could hang on it. And that's not just us, most bands are the same. You can't go out and say 'We've got a new album, come and see us'. The tour has to have a name so it can all be tied together.

"So Simon came up and said 'What do you think to 'In Search Of The Fourth Chord'? I thought it was great from the humour angle, but I wanted to know what he planned for the cover. He showed me some sketched ideas which we went with that we loved too, but the last few months, where I've been doing various interviews, everybody has said, just like you, 'Oh, I love the title of the new album'. So straight away, before you've heard a single note of it, you already know it's us. And all those things, like I said, it's a necessity these days to come up with some kind of angle. You and I are talking about it right now, other interviews have been the same, even Ken Bruce on Radio Two said 'Quo have got an album coming out, called 'In Search Of The Fourth Chord' - what a great title!'. It just fits - it would be no good to Pink Floyd would it?" he chuckles.

I laugh too, and I comment that I think that's the thing, Quo have always had that tongue in cheek appeal. Like when they did the Coronation Street thing, and this album title, that kind of self deprecating humour is something people automatically associate with them.

"I don't see any problem with having a humorous angle," Francis says, "but it doesn't mean we don't take what we do seriously. Although we are tongue in cheek for things like this, it doesn't mean we want to be taken lightheartedly. You've obviously seen the shows, and I'm sure you'll have noticed it's intense on stage and we mean it. I have to say, you're making me quite excited here. I want to go out and play now!"

I tell Francis I'll be in attendance when they come to play Hull in December. It's almost a pre-Christmas tradition.

"Hull... which one is that? I need a minute to figure out which place is which."

I explain that Hull is the one where somebody is always ejected within the first verse of 'Caroline' because there is always a total idiot going well over the top.

"Oh yeah, I know the one!" he laughs.

I laugh too and tell him it happens every time they play here! Only last year I witnessed it happen and I remembered a couple of days later I saw on (bass player) Rhino's tour diary online that he said Hull had some of the nicest architecture he'd seen in a city centre, and held the record for the swiftest ejection of the tour. Yay! Way to go, my home town.

"Yeah... some of those halls, you know, they're hard to play," Francis says. "I think we might be too loud for a lot of them. But there is definitely something about being able to see the whites of their eyes... making eye contact, there's a two way thing going on. Like, last week, we did a festival in France and there were about 40,000 people there, and the barriers were forty feet from the stage. So that's a whole different ball game as a gig. You have to project differently. Sometimes I hate the British tours, doing small venues because they're small and they're hard work, they make you sweat, they're too fucking loud... but after all that, there is something about being that close to other humans. There's a vibe there than can be magic. Some night's I've come off stage and thought 'Jesus, I wish we could have done that in front of 20,000 people', but in fact, you can't, because you lose the intensity created by the more intimate crowd."

I mention that I thought the new album sounded live too. I know the last two albums were recorded pretty much live in the studio. Did the band follow the same principles for this one?

"Yeah. We went to a studio in London that had a large room, sort of a library," Francis replies. "It was the kind of place we were looking for so you can get a decent live drum sound in the room. That goes for the whole sound in general. If you close mike everything, you get a tight signal. But if you open it up, you can hear the room it was recorded in, as oppose to just the instrument itself. That's what we wanted.

"When I listened to early Chicken Shack and early Fleetwood Mac, they would do that a lot. You could hear on the record those guys were in a room, you could hear the sound of the room. For some reason, I find that creates atmosphere. It made me think 'God, I want to be in that room!' I remember hearing a record by The Who, listening to it in my ex-mother-in-law's house, with my ear to the speaker, and there's a break in the song and you can hear Keith Moon as he's belting shit out of this drum kit doing some sort of yell in the background. It made me think 'Cor, it must have been great in there!' That's what I was hoping to capture."

I say that I think if a band who are a good live act make a record that has been too polished, it can lose something. Like it's polished to death.

"It really does," agrees Francis, "and I think a lot of acts, certainly us included, have been guilty of that many times. But, to contradict that, I hear records by newer acts that have definitely been polished and they're just perfect, yet they still sound fantastic. I played some of the latest Anastacia record the other night - the fucking record, Jesus, that's serious work! It's polished to hell, but it still works.

"It fascinates me with lots of black rap records and the like. They use drum machines, but yet it still has a feel. A white boy uses a drum machine, and the feel is gone. Weird. I don't know why I threw that in, but I just thought I would!"

I laugh and mentioned that works as a tenuous link actually. One of the tracks on the new album I was going to pick up on has a feel about it - an Indian feel! It's not something I would have readily identified as being Quo. 'Pennsylvania Blues Tonight' - a song on a Quo album with the word blues in the title, and I get an Indian intro. It completely threw me!

"Oh, I love that!" Francis states, clearly happy with me making a point of singling the track out. "Bob (Young) and I were writing it, and we had most of the music worked out and we were working out the lyrics, we had stuff about seven lonely travellers, we got to the chorus, we had the melody and we were trying to make something fit. We were sat going 'da da daa... blues. Blues, we need blues in there'. So we had all these words and we asked my wife, sort of as a joke, because we'd been sat there for hours trying different words and it just wasn't coming. She just threw out a

couple of words, and one of them was Pennsylvania. Bob and I looked at each other and thought it was perfect, so that's what we used.

"And that is just like you said - it's not blues, it's got fuck all to do with Pennsylvania, but it just sounds good! That's another thing I love about rock and pop. Why does it sound good? Fuck knows, it just does! I just love that track, I'm really happy with that."

I found it stood out to me because it was so unexpected, and different, but the more I listened to it, the more I liked it.

"It's a fine line we have to tread. There's our hardcore fans who really just want to hear 'Forty Five Hundred Times' over and over again, and then there's the worry that we alienate everybody if we go too far away. I think that 'Pennsylvania Blues Tonight' just stays within the boundary," he laughs.

I think so too. The first track 'Beginning Of The End', which was also the single preceding the album, kicks things off in a way that it couldn't be anybody else but Quo, so I think the die hards will be delighted with that. The second track is the same sort of thing, so by the time the listener arrives at the third one, I think the band have some breathing space to put something a little different in, which is why I think that one works so well.

"That's one of the things I enjoyed about this album," Francis tells me. "It has light and shade. It has some variation but within reason. I think some of our albums, like you said about the '12 Gold Bars' thing, some fans want us to make an album which is basically another '12 Gold Bars', when in actual fact that wasn't an album at all, it was tracks pinched from all different records. It's a mistake to try and make a record to match that.

This one has some typical Quo like you say, it has 'Electric Arena' which is slow blues, there's a bluesy track called 'I Ain't Wasting My Time' that Bob and I wrote which is a bonus in England, there's the rocky stuff Rick and John have written, there's the single John and I wrote, there's the wacky ones I wrote with Andrew... to me it allows each person in the band to contribute who they are, but at the same time keeps the continuity of Status Quo.

"Listen to me, I sound very enthused! Ask me again in eight months if I still think the same!" he laughs.

I have to ask him when it comes to songwriting, how does that happen? I know Francis said the band play all the songs out live in the studio, but when I look at the writing credits I see one Matt wrote himself, one John wrote himself, some Francis wrote with Bob... so my question is how do they get the material to the stage where the whole band can start playing it live?

"We tend to make demos," Francis explains, "and the demos are tweaked to be as close to what you would hear on the record as possible, to make the idea sound like one of our songs, and everyone by that point knows how to play it. John and I write in a weird way. There was a track on the 'Heavy Traffic' album I really liked called 'The Oriental'. I had the little riff, and John liked it and came up with something which I thought would be the verse, but in fact ended up as the middle eight. John was desperate to write a song using just two chords, so he goes away, comes back days later and we mess around for ten minutes, then he goes away again and comes back, then we finish off the lyric and that's it.

"The same thing happened with 'Beginning Of The End'. I gave John a few bits and off he went. With Bob, I sit and write with him, and the same with Andrew. We work on the principle of 'bring something to the table'. We have basic ideas. Some of mine I'll look at and think 'I'll go to John with that, or this one is definitely better to take to Andrew'. Rick and I never write together because we're opposites all the time and we spend so much bloody time together we don't want to spend time writing together as well as everything else!

"The best thing about having everyone contribute," Francis adds, "and then making demos from there is it means new music, new babies so to speak. Better than doing a fucking covers album, where you know what you're going to hear..." Quo have just done a version of so-and-so' - yeah, so what?"

I'm only too delighted at new music from the band and I know that they did three covers albums in seven years - 'Don't Stop', 'Riffs' and 'Famous In The Last Century'. Some fans thought three albums of covers was two too many, and the band themselves didn't seem that enthralled with doing two of them.

"I thought 'Don't Stop' was ok, and that was what made me think about using Pip Williams again," Francis tells me. "The song 'When You Walk In The Room' from that album is one of the best records we ever made. He structured that song for us so well. Again though, on that album there's some shit we really shouldn't have done. But there you go. Loads of people have tried to make albums, and nobody has made an album that everybody loves! You can take a huge album like 'Rumours' or 'Hotel California', but even then, those albums have done say, forty or fifty million worldwide. If they'd done forty or fifty million in America alone, it would still mean over two hundred million didn't buy the fucker! I'd love to see someone make a record that so many HUNDRED million buy. It would be amazing if someone could do that."

Yeah, I reply. As long as you liked them. Francis laughs. I decide to ask about the writing process for the current material. With the band making three albums in pretty quick succession, do the guys write all the time of do they set time aside after a tour to write and then go in to record it all?

"I constantly write. Andrew constantly writes. But recently, a couple of tracks from the new album were written on the bus," Francis reveals. "When I get on the bus after a show, I have a bedroom in the back. There's an acoustic on the bed, and electric on the bed and a little amp plugged in. I have an iPod, so when I get changed I'll put on Pavarotti and listen to a bit of opera, or an Italian lesson. Then I'll go to the fridge and eat something. After about twenty minutes, I'll pick up the acoustic. Because we're just back from a show, the sound is so different, I get a different vibe. So certain songs will come out on the road. They take a long time, I'll write them in little bursts. But it means I end up writing in different ways, which gives more ideas, which seems to end up with a better end product. And I hate to refer to songs as 'product' but I'm afraid that's what they are."

I comment that it's not called the music business for nothing.

"Precisely. To rally against that notion would mean you should stay at home and play in front of your parents for free and nobody need every know who you are!" Francis laughs. "Then we can all be these wonderful musos without worrying about earning a living.

"It's funny, I heard a thing Pat Metheny was talking about last night, and he's a fantastic player. He said that it isn't so much playing the instrument as allowing the idea to come through that. Otherwise, what happens is you're just some virtuoso player. Sometimes you get better results if you play without a ton of musical knowledge and theory, because the idea can come out unimpeded. Now I'm a better player, I might fill a section with a flurry of notes, where as when I was much younger I'd have just thrown in one big chord! The better a player you become, you start to think



'Well I can't just play a chord, I have to do something more than that' so you have to try to not overplay."

One thing I wanted to ask is when the group have made three albums like the last three which are solid right across the board, that must create some real setlist problems. Obviously a certain amount of classics have to be in the set, so time for newer songs is limited. I mention that I thought the way they got around it on the 'Just Doin' It' tour using medleys was excellent. So has Francis had any thoughts as to what new songs will be put in?

"I think we'll do two or three of the new ones," he says. "We'll do 'Beginning Of The End' because it's the single. Rick may go for 'Alright' or 'Gravy Train', but we will do two or three. We could easily go out and totally restructure the set, but the problem is some of the audience may only be coming to hear old stuff, and if we put in a bunch of songs from the last five years they'll be thinking 'what the fuck is this?'. You may know the newer songs just as well as the older songs but a lot of others won't.

"We have a following that we wanted for a long time, and we are not the kind of band who'll turn round and say 'We can't play that shit anymore, we need to stretch ourselves!'. It sounds good in print, but the reality is that's not what your following are after. If you went to see David Bowie, you'd want to hear David Bowie's songs. You'd be rather disappointed if he played a full set of things he was working on and ignored his past!

"So, if we didn't do 'Whatever You Want', 'Forty Five Hundred Times', 'Rocking All Over The World', those sort of songs, people would leave saying 'what the fuck did I go and see them for?' and that's not what we're about."

I think that's fair enough. To wrap up, I know that the band has released the album on Fourth Chord records, which is the debut release on their very own label. I asked what made them think about that?

"It was just about time we had a go at it I suppose!" Francis remarks candidly. "With downloads and things like that it gets harder and harder to make an impact. With a single, you don't make money on



singles anymore. Record companies will start looking at accounts and say ask themselves why they're doing it, and our days of having a hit are behind us because of the way things are structured, so it's not really going to put any bums on seats.

"We talked about it for some time, and mainly in England, we don't really need a record company. Rick and I do the promo, there's nothing we need from a record company investment wise because we're not a new band trying to break out. Any investment needed we can provide ourselves and decide exactly where and how to spend it. A lot of shit goes on in record companies - I'm not knocking them because they've been very good to us over the years, but for us, we think we can do it and thought it was time to try."

I ask if the band are looking to just do it for their albums, or maybe look at signing other people?

"In time maybe, but it's very early," Francis replies.

"I'm working with an upcoming act who are extremely good in my own time, but I wouldn't necessarily think it's a wise move to put them on a brand new label. It would be unfair to a new act, an established record company would probably serve them better for introducing them to the world. However, when they got more established it could be a good idea. I could push my daughters work through there, but that's not a good idea. I don't want to make people think we're pushing it just because it's our kid's stuff. It's a business, so we need to be wise about it."

That sounds very wise. I'm all out of questions, so I wish Francis luck with the label, the new album and the tour which I'm looking forward to attending.

"No problem. I've got to get changed and do a photoshoot now. Oh, I fucking hate them. And I've got to look at my own face. Oh God!" he laughs. "Thanks very much, and I'll see you on tour!"