

THUNDER



Interview by James Gaden. Photo by Jason Joyce.

One of the UK's most beloved bands, it seems hard to comprehend Thunder first burst onto the scene back in 1989 with their classic debut album 'Back Street Symphony'. Over the past thirty years they have played countless live concerts, as well as making a string of great albums. To coincide with their 30th anniversary the quintet of singer Danny Bowes, guitarist and song-writer Luke Morley, bassist Chris Childs, drummer Harry James and keyboard player Ben Matthews have personally compiled Thunder's 'Greatest Hits', a twenty eight track, two disc anthology, leaving no album without representation. Fireworks chatted to Danny to hear more about what's been going on in the Thunder camp.

Danny and Luke last spoke to us in Fireworks #85, for the release of Thunder's 'Please Remain Seated' album and supporting shows, which saw the band reimagine a selection of music from their back catalogue in new, more laid back styles. The album was superb but the band had some trepidation about the live performances done in the same style. It all worked out wonderfully though.

"I have to say the shows were a complete and utter revelation to us," Bowes enthuses. "When Luke and I confided in you that we were concerned about how well they would go down we were being absolutely honest. The fact that they were all seated shows and we'd never played for that long before, those were major worries. To be honest, we weren't sure if we had it within the music and the arrangements to keep an audience engaged for nigh on two hours, but I have to say it really worked. It showed off the musicality of

the tunes and it showed just how attentive our audience is capable of being when they aren't jumping up and down!" the singer laughs. "We had no idea how it would go and we were chuffed to pieces with the outcome, it was brilliant every single night."

These days anything successful tends to demand a sequel, whether it's a film franchise or a band doing something different to the norm. Status Quo found the glowing success of their 'Aquostic' record was reason enough to record a sequel, so it seems only logical to ask if Thunder have similar plans.

"I see no reason why we couldn't do it again... the only thing would be whether we feel we have it within the music," Danny responds. "Having taken this explorative journey so to speak, we invested a lot of time and took a lot of tunes into the studio and ended up with

about half of them making the cut. That did exhaust our creativity in the process though. So I don't know if we're *capable* of doing it again and having it be as rewarding as the first time around. The shows were fantastic but as to whether we could make another record like that, I'm just not sure."

The next project the band have ready to hit the shelves is a double album simply entitled 'The Greatest Hits'. While there have been several compilations of Thunder material put out, this one differs as the band themselves were hands on with the track selection. I ask if the idea came about from scouring the back catalogue in preparation for 'Please Remain Seated', but that was not the case.

"It was a fairly dull reason to be honest," Bowes says candidly. "We were well aware of the fact that it was thirty years of the band, as we formed in early 1989. People kept asking us 'what are you doing for your 30th anniversary?' and frankly our initial reaction was 'well, nothing really, because although we formed thirty years ago, it's not like we've been going for thirty years because we've had two years off on two different occasions'. It didn't feel like a big deal to us, it was other people getting excited for it. We did a record deal last summer with BMG, which was for 'Please Remain Seated' and our next studio record. They mentioned an idea of doing a 'greatest hits', so I said that would be okay as long as they were prepared to grab that nettle and make it career defining. We wanted something on there from every album – which means when you think back, we've been with a good number of record companies over the years, so they would have to have a licensing conversation with every single one of those labels. That is a *big* nettle to grasp, because labels only care about their stuff, they don't care about anyone else's. So I said as long as they were prepared to have those conversations, let the band curate it and choose the tunes, then we'd be up for it. BMG said they were prepared to accept that and they did, they sorted everything and we are absolutely thrilled with the result."

The 28 tracks on offer really do give a great overview of the band's output over the years and it is refreshing to see every record represented. I ask if Danny felt any of Thunder's records had been overlooked.

"I don't think so, we don't think albums have been overlooked generally because our fanbase is very loving, very proactive and very vocal, they tell us what they think, good or bad. The fact that they care enough to do that is a big plus for us and we're always mindful of that. The fact that they have been buying albums in droves for thirty years is a big deal, so if we're going to do a greatest hits, it had to be our selections and it had to cover every album, otherwise you're doing the legacy down and doing the fans down."

Hardcore fans will naturally own all the tracks anyway but if having, as Danny describes "all the key tunes in one place" isn't enough, to sweeten the deal there is a previously unreleased cover of Led Zeppelin's 'Your Time Is Gonna Come' included for good measure.

"We did that last summer, as part of a session for 'Please Remain Seated'. When we were in the final run throughs before we went in to record the album, I got a call from the guys at Planet Rock saying they were doing a '50 Years Of Led Zeppelin' thing and making a big deal of it. They were asking all different bands to submit a cover version. As luck would have it we were ready to go into the studio, so I mentioned it to the band and told Planet Rock if we came up with anything I'd send it over, and if not, then we'd never bothered!" the vocalist laughs. "We had actually already played 'Your Time Is Gonna Come' at one of our Christmas shows, so when we had the conversation, everyone was up for the concept and we had the extended band at our disposal, because we had the two girl backing singers and an extra keyboard player with the five of us. We weren't always all together at the same time, things were pretty fluid but that day we were all there. We'd played it before so we had a go, cut it live, did four versions and picked the best one. It's super live, no overdubs, just done, it is what it is. It's not one of the obvious tunes that have been done to death either, we tried to pick something we

thought we could do a good job of. I don't think ours is that different to Zeppelin's, we've just got more people on it!"

Thunder have always excelled at covers, particularly at their famous Christmas concerts that Bowes mentioned. However, while the band have laid down a handful of phenomenal studio recorded cover versions like 'Gimme Shelter' (which is included on the 'Greatest Hits' set), Danny is quick to shoot down my query about if the band had ever thought of a full blown covers album.

"I think it would be a really easy thing to do and therefore probably a bit lame," he says dismissively. "I think we'd all much rather challenge ourselves with new music – we like doing covers, they are fun and we always do them at Christmas because it's our knees up, our end of year celebration. After that we get blind drunk and we do nothing else. So yes, to play covers is a really good laugh and those who buy tickets for our Christmas shows know the format, they know they're going to get some big Thunder tunes, they know they'll get some Thunder tunes we play less often and they know they will hear some covers. They embrace it and we all enjoy it, but just because playing covers is an easy win at Christmas doesn't mean it would result in an album that would stack up."

Playing live is something the band have always done well and a one off, intimate show at The Garage in London will see them hit the stage in a much smaller venue than they normally play these days.

"Yes, that was booked specifically to help launch the album, it will be a big old 'Greatest Hits' full on electric show and it sold out in a day, which was amazing. All the proceeds from it will go to Childline NSPCC, it's a total fundraiser with everything going to charity."

That's not all. Danny will also be hitting the road in October with Luke for a series of 'Unplugged & Unscripted' shows and the mere mention of it makes Danny laugh.

"Oh yeah... Benny and I did a tour, in fact with did two, two years running, and they were incredibly enjoyable, very funny and we just couldn't believe it. We basically drove from show to show amazed that people were paying us to do it! Literally, we did the first show in Gateshead and one of the guys who used to work for us as a guitar tech lived there and he came to see it. He came backstage afterwards and I asked what he thought of the show and he said 'I'll be honest, it was like being on the tour bus but with a load of other people there'," he chuckles. "I think that's the appeal, it lets people into our world. Ben is a very different character to Luke, Ben is like a malevolent evil child, out to scupper your plan at every turn, so in that instance I'm more like the straight man keeping things on track, while Benny is doing his best to just ruin it. That makes it funny and we had a lot of laughs with the audience, and made it interactive where we got audience members up to play percussion, it was great fun. Luke is different, I think he will be more serious and I will assume the Benny role, although not to the same extent. Plus we have Mick Wall with us, we didn't want to just do an acoustic gig, we wanted something more revealing and Mick could interview us, ask some deeper questions as we've known him forever, he was there right from the start and witnessed some serious carnage... which I'm hoping he won't bring up! So we'll talk, answer questions and burst into song every now and then but we want to keep it loose and not think too hard about it, take it as it comes. I think it'll be different every night and a really good giggle."

As Danny mentioned the deal with BMG included a new Thunder record, it seems only sensible to ask what's happening on that front and the reply is a good one.

"We've already started, Luke's been writing for a good while and we've recorded some already, with more to be recorded later in the year. We're hoping to have it all done by the end of this year and release it sometime next year."

Thunder – 'The Greatest Hits' will be released by BMG on September 27th in four formats: 2CD, expanded 3CD [featuring a live session recorded and streamed at the Planet Rock studio on 18 Jan 2019], 3LP and Digital.