

THUNDER

Interview by James Gaden. Photos by Jason Joyce.

Much loved British rockers Thunder have been on a roll with their output of late, with the magnificent 'Wonder Days' followed up with the spectacular 'All You Can Eat' set, leading to the successful 'Rip It Up' which paved the way for the electrifying 'Stage' live DVD and album, recorded at a sold out Cardiff Arena. Their newest album, 'Please Remain Seated', sees them shackle their usual exuberance in favour of some stripped down and re-worked versions of songs from throughout their glittering back catalogue. Fireworks headed to London to talk to the affable duo of vocalist Danny Bowes and guitarist/song-writer Luke Morley about how such a project began.

Before we start, I wanted to apologise to you Danny. You guys were my first ever gig, at Hull City Hall in 1996. I was in the Thunder Channel Fan Club and had a meet and greet. So for my first meeting with you, I boldly strode up, said I enjoyed the show and pointed out you "ducked out of some of the big notes tonight". I don't know why I said that – particularly as you're a much, much better singer than I am!

Danny: You're probably a better journalist than I am, so we'll leave it there. It's a nervous thing I think, we get this with fans. There are a few types, some are incredibly enthusiastic and bubbly. Some are so nervous they can't speak. And others are so nervous and excited they just insult us, so that would be you. And there are the blind drunk ones too.

Luke: Those are the best ones.

I wasn't even drunk though, so I don't have that excuse.

D: Easy done. I've been wounded ever since, mind you.

Sorry about that! On a happier note, I love the new album. I believe it all started after you re-recorded 'Love Walked In', which you released with the 'Christmas Day' single?

D: For years, we'd resisted doing 'Love Walked In' as anything else than what it always was, we didn't really see how else it would work. Nor did we feel there was a need, but there came a point where we were getting hundreds and hundreds of requests, particularly from people who wanted to use it at their wedding, because it meant a lot to them. However they were concerned that some elderly relatives might have their hair blown off by it because it is a bit of a power ballad! So

how to work was emerging as we did it though. After that first session, we had eighteen ideas and did another seventeen in a second session. We then boiled them down to twenty one songs, rejecting the ones that weren't different enough – some we abandoned while we did them because they didn't work. As long as it was different and felt right, that was it. It didn't have to be perfect, it just had to feel right.

L: The performance element was important; that we made it as live as possible, which gives that feeling of spontaneity – we literally didn't know where we were going to end up but we know from experience when you pull something off live, it's quite exciting and we wanted that on the record.

D: After that first session, we made a decision to not really listen to what we'd done. Then we went out on tour with Alice Cooper and at the end of the tour, we were waiting for a soundcheck and someone suggested playing the demos. What was really interesting was I couldn't remember doing half of them because they flew by so quickly, you didn't have time to think about them. Listening back, we had a perspective and some were clearly more obvious than others when it came to honing them down.

Was it totally democratic, or were there any songs some members really wanted on the record that others were totally opposed to?

L: There were only a couple of tracks where some of us wanted them on there but they didn't make the cut, but the rest of them were pretty clear. Everyone in the band brought in ideas of which songs to try, Ben I think said "What if we did 'Empty City' as a shuffle?" and that was as defined as the idea got. We'd find a key, find a groove and just wing it. Some were more feel based, we'd maybe just start out and it would take a life of its own. There was a lot of jamming, which was interesting because we don't normally write that way. It was nice having Tim (Oliver), the additional piano player and the girls, Emily (Lynn) and Lara (Smiles) singing, because it gave us more pairs of hands.

D: And it meant the styles could be a lot wider and would allow us to pull it off live. We used Eric Clapton's 'Layla' as a yardstick, there is an iconic song, which he then totally changed into another song, and it still worked. That was in our heads when we approached our stuff.

I liked the fact you didn't just do the well known tracks, you've got some deep cuts, stuff you've not played live before... you open the record with 'Bigger Than Both Of Us', which wasn't even on an album, you only put it out on a compilation, 'The Rare, The Raw And The Rest'.

L: Yeah, that was a B-side. That was Harry's idea, to try that one. He always liked it, we tried it and it came together very fast, so we didn't touch it, just moved on to the next one, done.

D: There were two schools of thought, go for the ones everyone knows, but might not be the best versions. Or go with the best versions and hope people get it. We were really enjoying it, so we hope that translates.

Just as an aside, like Harry, I also loved the original 'Bigger Than Both Of Us'. Why did that never make an album?

L: Fuck knows. It was 1992, 'Laughing On Judgment Day' sessions, I'm not sure. Maybe we thought we had it covered, we did a lot of songs for that.

D: I blame the record company.

L: Good idea. Me too.

With you being the primary writer Luke, was there an occasion where somebody suggested one of your songs and you felt the new version lost the essence of what it was about in the first place?

L: No, not at all, you can't be precious about it. If anything, the more outlandish the suggestions, the more interesting the process got. I looked at it as "We've done it that way. Let's try this way".

D: Also, it's a testimony to the song, if it stands up in a totally different arrangement, then it's proof it was a good song in the first place.

Were there any songs you were really hoping to include that just wouldn't work?

D: We tried a few we had hopes for but for whatever reason they just didn't make the grade...

L: 'Until My Daying Day' is a good example, we tried that but as the first two minutes of the original is entirely acoustic, when it kicks in, because of the metre of the vocal and all the bits in there, it's quite difficult

to move anything around, whereas others had much more scope. It just ended up like a quieter version of the original, it wasn't interesting enough, so it had to go.

From your point of view Danny, as the singer, Luke normally brings you a demo and you have to relate to it and perform it. Here you're doing them in different styles, did you have to approach them like they were new songs?

D: Yeah, for sure, because the feel has changed and so has the key in a lot of cases. The kind of dynamic you bring to the melody when you're singing full pelt is completely different to doing a Johnny Cash impression! There was some cerebral work there where I had to do the song justice but also make sure you sing it well. Sometimes I thought I nailed it, others I thought "I wish I was better at this sort of style" but we're all human, you're limited by what you've got.

'Loser' is one that stands out to me, I think it really connects more with the lyrics in this new style.

D: I'm glad you liked that because from a vocal point of view, that was the one I struggled with the most. There was no time to sing all the words, so I had to knock some out. But which ones you take out can be crucial.

L: You can't take out the word 'Loser', can you?

D: No, you couldn't! (laughs) But the

rhymes, the metre, it all had to be tweaked, that was one of the biggest headaches for me.

L: It's more poignant in this style, the original has this big Rock riff but you get the sense more of what it is about in this version. It was a strutting Rock track and now it's got an introverted Blues thing going on which suits the lyrics better.

D: The original is more angry whereas this is more sad and low.

Were there any you recorded which you thought ended up being better than the originals?

L: If you ask my wife, she thinks all of them are better!

D: So does mine! We don't think of them as better, just different. If it's good in its new version, we hope it maybe has a chance of being liked by someone who didn't like it the first time.

L: Like our wives.

D: Yeah, it was interesting hearing their view – "this is good, much better than what you normally do". Thanks very much. I hope you're enjoying this holiday we're on darling, which was paid for by that music you don't like!

As you've done with previous albums, there are all kinds of bundles and packages available, including a deluxe two disc version, which adds another seven songs. Did you decide which songs went on which disc, or did the label do that?



D: Oh no, no, no, no, the label don't decide that!

Okay, because my follow up question was going to be if any were on the bonus disc that you felt should have been on the main album?

D: No chance. We make those decisions. In fact, to be fair, the record company didn't even hear the album until it was done. They signed us on faith, we told them what kind of album it was, we said it would be great and they took it on our say so that it would be good and different. So we chose the twelve for the album and the additional seven for the bonus. We wanted the strongest album possible, but we recognised we still had a load of tunes that were pretty good, we knew some fans would want them, so we do the deluxe option. We've got an album we're proud of that makes a statement and there's more if the fans want more.

L: The other factor with the songs on the additional disc was some of those were ones we've done in the acoustic style live, so they aren't exactly the same as what we did live but they seemed not quite as interesting as the ones on the main album because we'd already done something with them before.

You're going to be touring the album and playing the songs in this style live, with the extra musicians. Considering you pretty much winged this record and laid things down spontaneously, does that mean you'll have to really study the record in order to reproduce what you did?

L: We've always had a bit of room for improvisation in our shows, electric or otherwise, we don't stay too rigid. There are key moments, which are tied to lighting cues that can't change but within that we've always had a degree of spontaneity. We'll do the same here, we'll have some key points and leave room for improvisation. We opened for ZZ Top years and years ago and their show was identical every night, from the guitar choreography and those little things they do, right down to what was said between songs. That's not us.

D: We couldn't do that if we wanted to, we aren't disciplined enough. And we'd find it boring, just doing it exactly the same every night. So because we can't do it, we turn it on its head and call our spontaneity a strength!

L: And now we have the recordings as a reference point if need be. As it was all pretty much live, at least we have a feel for what we did instead of winging it like the first time.

D: That's why we left that studio chat and background noise in. One, because it was too difficult to get rid of it and two, because it made you feel like you were in the room with us. It helps the listener understand it's a very organic process.

How come you couldn't get rid of the noise easily?

L: It was technically challenging because normally you'd record with headphones in isolation but we didn't do that here, we had microphones just recording the room on top of the individual microphones, so we have sound

spilling in from each other.

D: We had to give up some control over the audio in order to get the vibe, it was more like recording a live show. That meant there are imperfections, but we celebrate that because it sounds and feels the right way.

L: There were a few mixing issues as a result where something was too loud, or too harsh and it had to be EQ'd and it was quite a process. The mixing was a bigger challenge than the playing.

When it comes to taking this on tour, logistically is it more expensive because you have more people coming out with you?

D: Yes. And we're playing smaller places, so we make less money. Which tells you this is much more about an artistic choice. If it's stimulating for us and for the fans, then it worked. I think they'll struggle to sit down for the full gig, and so will we. So it'll be interesting to see how it works out! Are you coming to a show?



Maybe York, that's not too far from where I live.

D: I don't think we've played York before.

L: Yes we have.

D: Really? Was I there?

L: It was you singing, yes.

D: He's got total recall, this bloke.

L: The reason I remember that gig is because afterwards we got a clipping of a review from the local paper, I love those. It basically said we brought a load of tired old rock clichés, slagged us off and then finished with a comment that we "even had the temerity to cover Whitesnake's 'Love Walked In'", so it was obviously a well-informed journalist. (laughs)

I went to a terrible Thunder show once.

L: Was this the one where you insulted our singer?

No, it was Sheffield City Hall, my family all love Thunder so we booked one of those coach trips where you get the gig tickets and coach all together and they drop you at the door. We pulled up only to find the show had been cancelled because Danny had lost his voice.

D: Oh no. We must have pulled that at soundcheck, because unless I'm in bed dying, I always try to go on.

I'm not blaming you, but obviously everyone was disappointed. Some people on the coach wanted to stretch their legs, so the

coach driver let them off and they decided to go to the pub. But half the people had stayed on the coach because we just wanted to go home. The driver said he wouldn't leave until the others came back, so to try and mollify those of us who stayed on the coach, he put a film on. It was 'In The Line Of Fire' with Clint Eastwood. I love Clint. So we went all the way to Sheffield to watch Clint Eastwood, in a film I already owned and had seen several times, on a little TV inside a coach.

D: I feel like I've ruined your life.

L: It was maybe karma for him insulting you.

D: Now you mention it, I seem to remember hearing he was coming. (laughs)

Your last few albums have done really well. If this one is super successful, does that mean you'd have to do a sequel? Would you write originals in this style? Or is this a case of "done it, move on"?

L: Whatever we do, we have to feel there's quality and purpose in what we're doing. If this is really successful we'd go "wahey!" and head down the pub and worry about what to do later. The creative process of writing new songs goes on all the time so we'll see, this might be really successful, it might not, we'll see what happens.

D: You don't make it because you think it'll be successful. You make it because you think it will be an interesting process and as a result we all learned something about ourselves and each other by doing this. It would be naive in the extreme to think everyone who likes our other records will like this. Some people will wonder why we bothered.

L: Some people will have already made up their minds they don't like it, and it's not even out yet. Most of the comments are positive fortunately, but there will be some negatives.

D: Opinions are like arseholes though, everybody has one.

And some of them stink.

L: Yes!

D: We're not bothered about everyone liking it - we're really not. As long as most of them do, and appreciate what we've done and why, that's fine. It's inevitable that we will all take something away from this record that will end up going into our next record, whatever that might be. It might appear in the writing or the playing, but one thing I do know is we had to be incredibly restrained making this record and I'm not totally convinced we can be that restrained again - I could see the next record being a noisy one. We like making a big noise, we're good at it!

'Please Remain Seated' is released on 18 January 2019 through BMG, as a Standard 1CD, Deluxe 2CD (bonus tracks), 180g standard black, gatefold double vinyl, Limited edition transparent orange double vinyl (retail stores only), Limited edition transparent white, orange & black splatter double vinyl (limited to 1000), Digital - HD, MFiT and standard. To browse all options, visit www.thunderonline.com/

THUNDER

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