

UNSUNG HEROES: HENRY PAUL

Interview by James Gaden

He's a recurring Outlaw, had his own band and formed platinum-selling Country act Blackhawk. Currently carrying the Outlaws forward with a brand new record, Henry Paul is a long way from being done yet.

For someone who has enjoyed as much success as a guitar player, singer and songwriter, it would be fair to assume that Henry Paul was always going to be a musician, but that's not entirely accurate.

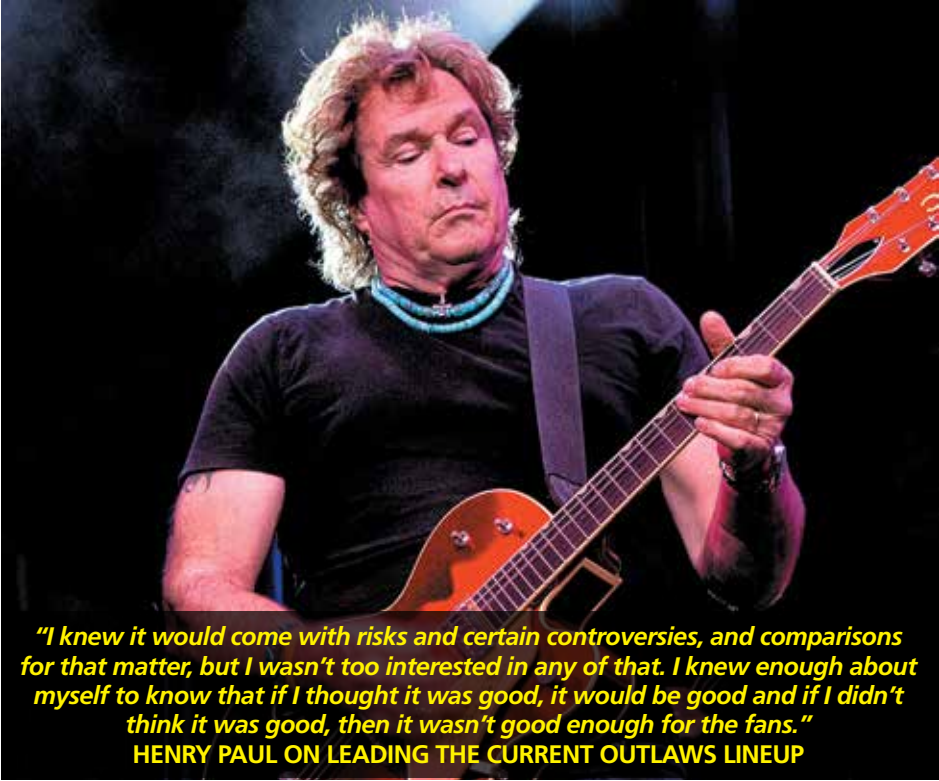
"I think like all young people, when you're trying to decide what it is you want to do, it's a perplexing proposition to begin with," he explains. "That goes for everyone, but if you're me, I had a deeply ingrained artistic agenda. It wasn't clear whether I'd be a painter, a writer, a singer, a songwriter or an actor, but I knew I wanted to be an artist in the true sense of the word. I ended up getting a guitar and found I could play, I found I could sing, so I started trying to write songs and I gained a sense of who I was in an abstract sort of way. My position in my peer group and my comfort performing in public led me to choose to be a singer and song writer. I made that decision in my early twenties and once I had that direction I pursued it dogmatically. I moved to New York, got an apartment, started knocking on doors, playing little Folk clubs and eventually got spotted by a guy that worked for Columbia Records. I did an audition, it went well and the ball was rolling. But it all stemmed from wanting to be an artist and do something creative."

Paul played in various outfits but it would be a band called the Outlaws which would take him to the next level. Their self-titled debut album, released in 1975, contained the single 'There Goes Another Love Song' which was a Top 40 hit in the US. The album also contained the hugely popular 'Green Grass And High Tides', an epic ten minute tune that became the cornerstone of their live set. It gave all three of the band's guitarists a chance to shine and each of them also happened to be lead vocalists in their own right.

"When the Outlaws started," Paul responds, "not unlike bands like The Byrds, Buffalo Springfield and even The Beatles, we had three, well actually four singer-songwriters in the band, because I'm including Frank O'Keefe in that. He never sang lead on a record but he was a good singer and while he wasn't prolific, he was a songwriter of significant talent. We all had ideas about how the music was going to go and that manifested itself in our style. With Hughie Thomasson, myself and Billy Jones, we had three uniquely different voices which made for, in my opinion, an interesting sound."

Not only did the band boast three guitarists who also sang and wrote songs, drummer Monte Yoho and bassist O'Keefe weren't shy about contributing material either, which must have made whittling so many contributions down to a ten song record quite a task.

"There were some politics and that fell more to the producer. We were all prolific writers to a degree but our touring schedule then was so



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HENRY PAUL ON LEADING THE CURRENT OUTLAWS LINEUP

demanding it would often get in the way of our creative output," Paul recalls. "We all put or best foot forward when it came to writing songs and it was a point of pride getting one of yours included on a record. It helped make sure what we were all contributing was as good as it could be."

After the band issued 'Lady In Waiting' in 1976 and 'Hurry Sundown' in 1977, Paul found his time in the group was coming to an end.

"I think very early on in the Outlaws I was the band leader and in many ways things were initially formed around me. I had definite ideas about what I wanted to do musically and how I wanted to get there, but I think that after the first album came out, Hughie and Billy received a great deal of notoriety for their singing and playing, and Hughie started getting pushed more toward the front. The dynamic started changing and like with most groups, the push and pull of different musical agendas have issues that come with it and that is usually very damaging to a band's future. I'm referring to a standpoint of original membership, in our case it kind of forced me to move on. It wasn't really my decision, but I certainly tried to make the most of it by forming my own group, getting my own deal, my own manager and my own agent who could keep me on the road. It was an eye opening jolt of an experience; it was hurtful in a way but also beneficial for me to grow as a man, a band leader, a businessman and a committed member of that community of people who go out to do what they love. I went out to prove myself and put together The Henry

Paul Band, ready to get back in the fight."

Paul's self-titled band issued their debut album 'Grey Ghost' in 1979, a strong record not a million miles from his previous group in style. That naturally begged the question if any of the material was originally meant for the Outlaws?

"In reality I wrote them from scratch but 'So Long' was something that I think the Outlaws would have benefitted from recording, I think that could have been a hit for them and I think the song 'Grey Ghost' would have been a significant song for them too," Paul muses. "Of the other songs on the record, 'Lonely Dreamer' would have been another great addition to an Outlaws record, but all the songs on that album became what they were from the musical relationships from the people involved. I probably wouldn't have written any of those if I hadn't been in the situation I was in, faced with the pressure of rebuilding my career. It really got my ass up in a morning and made me go to work, putting together that first album."

When The Henry Paul Band issued 'Feel The Heat' in 1980, the direction had changed, with Southern Rock and Country influences giving way to a more Rock orientated sound, which worked very well.

"I had an A&R Director from the label in my ear," the guitarist explains. "He'd seen the writing on the wall for Southern Rock at that point. Back then, the Allman Brothers had broken up, Lynyrd Skynyrd had people die in a plane crash, The

Marshall Tucker band had splintered and was no longer as popular as they were, so I think he was trying to help me reinvent myself. What I found out was I was getting a more honest impression from the guys in the band at the time. So for sure that album was more Rock orientated, it gave us some ammunition to beat on the door of the audiences a little more, but our sound changed. When we did the 'Anytime' record after that, that had a bit of the original sound back and some of the Rock stuff, but at that point it was pretty much over for us. I recorded one more album in 1982 which was just named after me, but that was basically an obligation to the label rather than a serious effort to compete. It had all started to come undone by then. The Henry Paul Band didn't hang around long after the party was over, put it that way."

The Outlaws had carried on without Paul with some success throughout the seventies but once the 80s came around, Hughie Thomasson was the sole original member and sales had dwindled. Both he and Paul felt the time was right for another bite of the cherry.

"Hughie and I had the same manager and I think he saw that the Outlaws without me in it wasn't what it was and he suggested we reconcile. I was up for that because my first love was the Outlaws, being in that band had done marvellous things for me. My own band had come to the end of the road so it seemed like the right time. We ended up recording 'Soldiers Of Fortune' a couple of years later, where we tried to make the Outlaws fit in to the musical landscape of that time. That was obviously very challenging, having to change our stripes if you will, but there was some good songs on that album. I worked very hard on that album as a songwriter, I had a hand in writing the majority of the songs on that record. By then I was co-writing with some people who helped me become a much more prolific writer. It was a turning point for me because when I left the band for the second time, it sent me in the direction of Nashville because of the writing community there. That was really beneficial to me as a songwriter later in my career."

That could be seen as something of an understatement, as it would lead to a band called Blackhawk. Comprising a trio of Paul, Dave Robbins and Van Stephenson, the group produced a collection of contemporary Country tunes which included several hit singles. Blackhawk's first album sold over two million copies in the United States.

"It was extremely successful and liberating from the standpoint of my self-worth as an artist," Paul states proudly. "I got a great deal of pride and reward from having that level of success so late in my career. It also reunited me with Clive Davis who first signed the Outlaws; I found myself mentioned in his book. I was the only Outlaw who was, which made me feel good. I had the work ethic to pursue my artistic agenda and I think that is the main difference between success and failure."

Blackhawk continued to sell records in large numbers and even when Van Stephenson died of cancer in 2001, the group eventually reconvened



The Outlaws in 1976 - L-R: Frank O'Keefe, Hughie Thomasson, Billy Jones, Henry Paul

a year later for 'Spirit Dancer' which saw Randy Threet join on bass and vocals to resurrect the band's impressive harmonies. Harmony vocals are an integral part of Paul's writing, from his start in the Outlaws to present day.

"I have a voice where if you're in a room with me singing, it's not going to be like Toto, it's more stripping paint off the wall!" he laughs. "But my voice can carry a melody and other singers can attach themselves to it and it works; harmonies were my first musical love. Bands like The Beatles, The Byrds, those were my musical mentors along with the snotty, sneering appeal of Bob Dylan's mid-60s musical personality. Those things were very attractive to me, just Dylan's imagery as a lyricist was inspiring – and not just to me but a whole generation. As I've grown older, I've gotten better at everything – writing songs, singing, making records, being a member of a group, I improved at all those things. I think that's why the Outlaws have had a good run here over the last ten or twelve years, because I surrounded myself with good people, tried hard to write good songs, make good records and take care of the fans."

That brings us neatly to Paul's third stint with the Outlaws, reuniting with Hughie Thomasson, Monte Yoho and David Dix in 2005 for some shows. The band was fleshed out by Paul's Blackhawk colleagues Threet and Robbins, deputising for Jones and O'Keefe who had both passed away. After being together for a year, Paul turned his attentions back to Blackhawk. Sadly, in 2007 Thomasson also passed away. The obvious question is did Paul feel he had to take the mantle of responsibility for keeping the Outlaws going?

"I did," he says without hesitation. "Monte



Blackhawk in 1995: Henry Paul, Dave Robbins, Van Stephenson

called me up the night Hughie had died and said 'Henry, what am I going to do?' So I said to him, "Monte, you and I will put the band back together, I'll bring in some friends and we'll continue to go." The decision was made in that moment. I knew it would come with risks and certain controversies, and comparisons for that matter, but I wasn't too interested in any of that. I knew enough about myself to know that if I thought it was good, it would be good and if I didn't think it was good, then it wasn't good enough for the fans. We made a new album called 'It's About Pride' and it offered a significant contribution to the Outlaws legacy from the standpoint of its quality, its personality and its enthusiasm as a piece of work. It's a very uplifting, energetic record, undoubtedly well written, well played and well sung by the guys we brought in. I felt I was off the hook when we delivered that, I could breathe a little easier. You can't put out a new Outlaws record and have it just be so-so, it had to be great."

Which brings us bang up to date with the latest album from the Outlaws, 'Dixie Highway', which was exuberantly reviewed by Chris O'Connor last issue. Paul describes the process of how it came to be.

"Going back to the very beginning of wanting to be an artist, I kinda see the finished thing in my mind before I start it and I work toward that goal. Sometimes it's easier than others to write a good song, but making a qualitative decision about which songs go on the record is now strictly my choice. We have Billy Craine, whose writing relationship with me is really quite special and goes back to when I first put my own band together. Then I have a significant investment in my co-writers Steve Grisham and Dale Oliver on this record. Steve wanted to sing, write and be a creative part of the band and I wanted that too. On the previous record Chris Anderson had the same attitude, wanting to be involved and be a visible member of the group and I worked hard to help them achieve that. I had a very enthusiastic view of my band-mates, I wanted them to be happy with what they did and how they did it. I know Steve is really happy with his contributions, not just as a singer and a writer but as a guitar player too. When Chris left it was because of dissatisfaction of his role in the group and it did make a big change in the band's musical personality. I think Chris really needed a band of his own to make himself happy, I don't think the Outlaws offered him enough musical input and freedom. From my side, I won't



Henry Paul pictured with the current lineup of the Outlaws

relinquish control of the group because it's a brand I've got a strong vested interest in, I've seen it through lawsuits and all kinds of ugly chapters. So I decided when we brought Dale in, that would be a good and necessary decision to help prolong the life of the band. His relationship with Steve blossomed and they have a really affectionate, musically equitable style and man, I tell you, it's made the Outlaws a better band. As much as I love 'It's About Pride', 'Dixie Highway' has things on it that 'It's About Pride' just doesn't have. I don't know if it's a better record, but it's a damn good one and the fans are embracing it."

There's also a nice throwback to Paul's first stint in the band, as the album includes a newly

recorded version of 'Heavenly Blues' which originally appeared on 'Hurry Sundown'.

"SPV asked me to consider re-recording an older song and I thought that was a great idea," the frontman explains. "I always thought on 'Hurry Sundown' that 'Heavenly Blues' was a nice contribution but maybe a little bit overlooked musically. I thought my vocal performance on the original wasn't really what dreams were made of, so if I was going to go back and redo anything, it should be that one. I think we've turned it into something significantly more interesting musically and my vocal performance has mirrored my improvement as a singer over the years. I really enjoyed the opportunity to do that song again because I was never completely happy

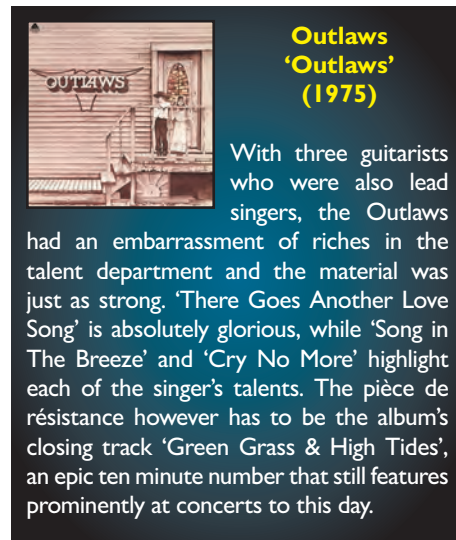
with that first version. I think we've breathed new life into it and made it what I wished it had been back in 1977."

To bring things full circle, the new album also contains a song that was constructed from a demo made by the original Outlaws bassist Frank O'Keefe, with Paul offering a heartwarming explanation as to why.

"Frank is one of those guys who came and went from the Outlaws early, he was on the first two records and then he was gone. Frank was very hard on himself, he also suffered from some substance issues, but his personality, both musically and as a human being, was really appealing. He was such a nice and soulful guy and so important to the Outlaws musical personality. Listen to his bass playing on 'Green Grass And High Tides', it's out of this world! Over the years he's been sort of forgotten and because I'm in control of the group and the brand, I can do things like bring Frank's contributions to the forefront as a gesture of affection and respect. I've heard more than enough about Billy Jones and Hughie Thomasson, they had high profile roles in the group and that was great. It meant Frank was overlooked though and I thought this was a great way to pay tribute. I hope you all check the record out over there. Good luck to all you guys in the UK, I hope we get a chance to come back over there to play for you sometime but until then, stay safe!"



5 releases which any true fan of the artist's work should experience...



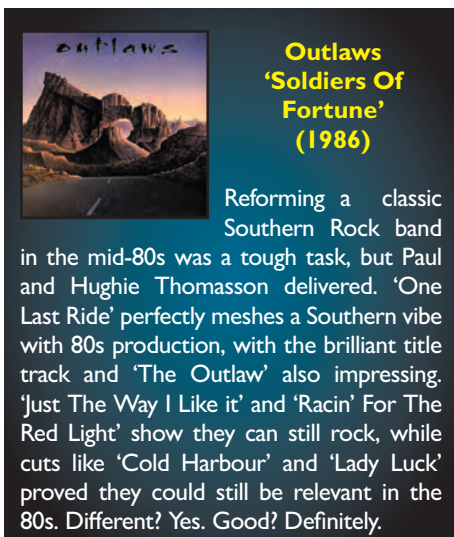
Outlaws 'Outlaws' (1975)

With three guitarists who were also lead singers, the Outlaws had an embarrassment of riches in the talent department and the material was just as strong. 'There Goes Another Love Song' is absolutely glorious, while 'Song in The Breeze' and 'Cry No More' highlight each of the singer's talents. The pièce de résistance however has to be the album's closing track 'Green Grass & High Tides', an epic ten minute number that still features prominently at concerts to this day.



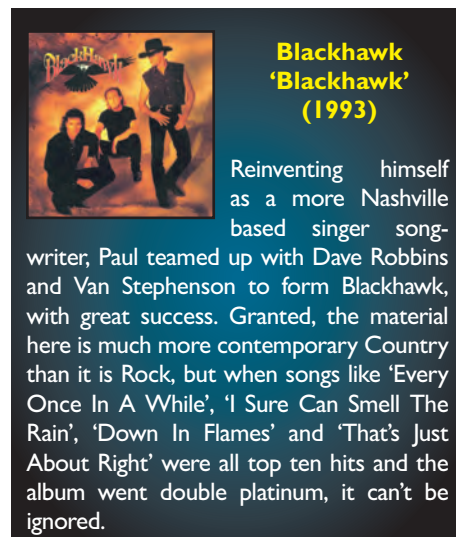
Henry Paul Band 'Anytime' (1981)

While Paul's band's debut album 'Grey Ghost' is rightly applauded, it didn't veer far from his work with the Outlaws. 'Anytime' showed a whole different sound, the Pop Rock brilliance of 'Living Without Your Love', 'Keeping Our Love Alive' and 'Hollywood Paradise' brimming with commercial appeal. While the original Southern vibe had mellowed, having Jim Peterik co-write almost all of the tracks made for catchier, more mainstream orientated tunes.



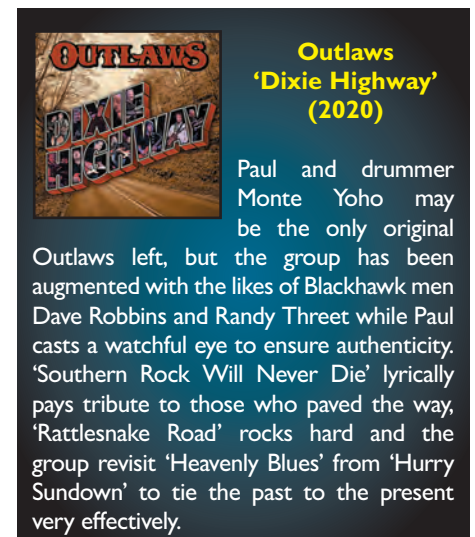
Outlaws 'Soldiers Of Fortune' (1986)

Reforming a classic Southern Rock band in the mid-80s was a tough task, but Paul and Hughie Thomasson delivered. 'One Last Ride' perfectly meshes a Southern vibe with 80s production, with the brilliant title track and 'The Outlaw' also impressing. 'Just The Way I Like it' and 'Racin' For The Red Light' show they can still rock, while cuts like 'Cold Harbour' and 'Lady Luck' proved they could still be relevant in the 80s. Different? Yes. Good? Definitely.



Blackhawk 'Blackhawk' (1993)

Reinventing himself as a more Nashville based singer songwriter, Paul teamed up with Dave Robbins and Van Stephenson to form Blackhawk, with great success. Granted, the material here is much more contemporary Country than it is Rock, but when songs like 'Every Once In A While', 'I Sure Can Smell The Rain', 'Down In Flames' and 'That's Just About Right' were all top ten hits and the album went double platinum, it can't be ignored.



Outlaws 'Dixie Highway' (2020)

Paul and drummer Monte Yoho may be the only original Outlaws left, but the group has been augmented with the likes of Blackhawk men Dave Robbins and Randy Threet while Paul casts a watchful eye to ensure authenticity. 'Southern Rock Will Never Die' lyrically pays tribute to those who paved the way, 'Rattlesnake Road' rocks hard and the group revisit 'Heavenly Blues' from 'Hurry Sundown' to tie the past to the present very effectively.