

HUGH CORNWELL

You've probably been living in a cave if you've not crossed paths with some of Hugh Cornwell's music somewhere down the line. The former frontman for The Stranglers can boast songs like 'Golden Brown' and 'Duchess' as part of his repertoire, before he quit in 1990 for a solo career and to work as an author. With a prolific solo catalogue, he's about to add to that with his new album 'Hoover Dam' and he gives you the option of buying it, or you can have it for free. James Gaden called him up to find out what on earth is going on!

I believe you've just come back from the States haven't you?

That's right, about three weeks ago. I was doing a series of shows touring with The Jam. The shows had some good audiences, so it was good.

Excellent! The first thing I want to talk to you about is the new record you're bringing out, 'Hoover Dam'.

Yeah, it's quite different from anything I've done before. It's very stripped down and electric – and there's only three of us this time around playing instruments. It's just guitar, bass and drums which is how I play my shows live. So on this record it's the actual guys I go out on the road with. It's very true to what we sound like if you came to see us and it's very heavy. There's not an acoustic guitar in sight this time. It's a bunch of songs that have come along, and people who've heard them seem to think they're good songs too.

What struck me about it is when I was reading about what you've been doing, it said you decided to make this album using eight track analogue equipment from years and years ago, as oppose to the modern methods available today. What sparked the decision to do that?

It was to try something else. The producer is Liam Watson – he worked on 'Elephant' by the White Stripes. I like what he does and his studio has this equipment – that's what he uses. So I thought I'd give it a go.

Have you found it difficult to adapt to using more primitive equipment?

The principle is the same, but the main difference is having just the eight tracks. Nowadays you've got sixty four tracks, digital, however many tracks you want, so here that's all out the window. You have to make decisions as you're doing the record, and I liked that attitude. The way that technology has evolved, it means that you don't have to make decisions like that. Creatively, that does not make sense to me. I like going back the other way, the way Liam works, which is you make decisions as you go along about what you're doing. That makes the process go much faster, but you have to commit yourself. This means you end up with a very no nonsense, straight forward piece of work.

I think that that is refreshing, and the first few tracks that people have heard seem to have been well received, so we must be doing something right!

I imagine it stops any temptation to over play with extra overdubs, or adding outside elements and making the record too polished.

Exactly! I like doing stuff quickly these days. I've been doing it a long time now, and my patience has gone down over the years. I don't have the time to spend forever on these things.

The other thing is, I suppose if you go into the studio with the same line up as you tour with, and you're using the same gear, reproducing the album live must be quite easy.

Quite right! Funnily enough, that brings me on to another point, which is that when we finished recording the album, we were able to just play the album live in the studio and we filmed ourselves doing that. I'm in Keighley in the Yorkshire Moors at the moment, editing that performance which will make up part of the release.

Well that brings me nicely onto my next question – it says you are going to release the album as a CD, and it will have a documentary, the live video you mentioned, and interview, making of and photos all in one nice package – but, you're also going to give the actual album away for free as high quality MP3's. Why would you do that?

Well, I'd rather have 5,000 people to have this record and decide whether they like it or not in MP3 format, because if they do like it, maybe they'll want to buy the full package with the movie and everything. If I just did the physical package, maybe I'd only sell 200 of them. That's the way things are going in the industry at the moment.

Ok, I can see the sense in that – free download to me though, I think I always equate that to illegal downloading mentally, ie if people can get it for nothing, they won't buy the album. I'm old fashioned – when people send me promos to review, if I like it, I buy the record anyway to support the artist. A lot of people have entire record 'collections' which are made up by massive number of copied CD's that they've 'borrowed' from people and burned themselves, or download ed illegally or whatnot.

It just looked a weird idea to me on paper – you can either have the album for free, or pay for it to gain a few extras.

There's two types of people aren't there? This way, we appeal to one type, but make it available to everybody.

I heard the first few mixes of the new album and I was quite surprised – I

don't know exactly what I expected, but when I knew it was a trio and you were using old equipment, I thought it may sound a bit sparse, but it doesn't.

Oh no, we make a lot of noise! I'm currently about halfway through an acoustic tour and playing a few of these songs, and when the album is done, we go out and tour with a full electric band – we've been getting good feedback so far.

You've been really prolific since leaving The Stranglers – do you have a specific writing process, or are you one of these people who writes every day – what's sort of things do you do to keep the ideas flowing?

I've always stockpiled ideas, often lyrical ones. I'll read the paper and spot something that I think would make a good title or a nice lyric and I'll make a note of it. I'm always looking for things that I can adapt and use myself. I don't write every day, but I'm constantly looking for things to turn into song ideas. When I get to a period when I'm ready to start an album, I've got a batch of musical ideas which usually gives me enough to put together songs.

By doing it this way with subjects that have interested me, I don't really end up with any songs I throw away – everything I write about tends to be something I've seen and thought worthy of a song.

The other thing I was going to bring up was your triple live album 'People, Places, Pieces', which I thought was quite an idea – to make such a huge live album with over forty songs on it. But then you had 'Dirty Dozen' which was a selection of twelve songs from that triple album set – how did you manage to cut it down to just twelve?

Ah, well, I didn't have to get involved with that, I left that decision to my manager! The way I am with my songs, I could never have decided that! He gave me a list saying 'I think these are the twelve', and I just said that was fine.

Has it been successfully, with it being such a large collection?

Yeah, it has, and on the road, people love it. People come to see me and if they enjoyed it, that's available. You can get it online too of course, and it's going to be hitting the stores in America round about now I think.

You seem to be someone who understand the power of the internet and utilises it as a tool, as oppose to a lot of people who seem to shy away from it and do things the old fashioned way.

They see the internet as an enemy or a threat, whereas I see it as something you've got to embrace and use – just be a bit more inventive to create income. All musicians have to make a living so you have to generate income somehow. I don't think you should fight the internet, instead use it.

This release of 'Hoover Dam' is a perfect example – we're using the internet as a promotional tool to get the record in people's ears. If they like it, then they might buy it.

I do think you're running the risk though that people might be satisfied with the MP3's and not fork out for the physical product in this day and age of people expecting something for nothing.

Well, fair enough, but at least they're listening to my music. Maybe they'll play it to their friends – maybe their friends will think it's good, and they get it for free, then maybe they'll come to one of my shows. If they come to a show, maybe they'll buy the live album. I'll get 'em in the end! They'll buy something!

The other thing you've dipped your toe into is books – you did an autobiography, and a "song by song" book about your work. Is that something you'd like to continue doing, or are you done with that side of things?

No, I'm just finishing something off now actually that I've been working on for a year or so – I'm just waiting for some news on something, but yeah, I'm continuing that side of my output. I love writing prose, it's fantastic – completely different from writing songs.

My final question – you said being in The Stranglers was like having a noose around your creative neck. However, since nearly twenty years has passed since then, and there have been many lucrative reformations of big groups lately, would you ever consider a reunion tour?

What on earth would I want to do that for?

That's a pretty succinct answer – no room for misinterpretation there! Visit Hugh at www.hughcornwell.com

