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Steve Bowe - Q&A (Q4/2011)



What are you up to at the moment?

I'm really busy getting the new "Soundscapes" album finished. I'm really enjoying it as it has given me an opportunity to get so many ideas out of my system after "Finest Hour", which was great to do, but restricted a lot of my musical ideas so I could keep things in the theme.

What's with the Battle of Britain theme in "Finest Hour"?

Well I make no secret of the fact that I have a huge nerdy passion for all things to do with World War 2 aviation. I found it really helpful when planning my debut album to give it a theme as it really helped me focus, and although it may be a bit self indulgent I couldn't help but use this as the theme. It's not actually a bad theme to use, as it has a broad narrative and contains a huge amount of potential for pathos and drama so lends itself very well to a musical interpretation. It's also my humble tribute to those who endured that particular piece of history.

So how did you approach it in terms of composition?

I planned it really scientifically. I mapped out the broad stages of the history and condensed them into a series of elements that could each be approached as a separate piece of music. I always knew I wanted to start with the Churchill "Finest Hour" speech, it's such a great opener. However this did mean the whole project was delayed for about three months because I had to get permission from the Churchill Estate to use it and the wheels turn slowly! But It was worth the wait, I wouldn't have had it any other way. I deliberately used a full range of musical genres across the album, mainly because as a debut I felt it should showcase my whole range of styles. That's why you end up with everything from orchestral like "Sceptred Isle" through rock like "Adlertag" to pure chill out like "Sunset Over London". Of course we also originally had a big band number in "Night on the Town" but after a number of preview listeners had heard it, it was clear that this particular number just did

not fit with the pathos of the rest of the album, so we removed it. I still think it's a great number but it is so radically different from everything else I do that unfortunately I had to take it out.

Why is most of your work instrumental?

Because I can't sing. Seriously though I just find it easier to write and record instrumental music. There's no messing around with other artists and the various other technical issues associated with writing and recording vocals and I can just get on with things. I just find it far more productive and the type of stuff I write and enjoy is best suited to the instrumental genre. I like the listener to interpret the music in their own way rather than have their hand forced by the lyrics. I'm not averse to vocals in general and as you know, have used them on a couple of "Finest Hour" tracks where I felt they were essential and I'm really grateful for the help I got from my friends Pauline and Jo - they really came up with goods for me! Despite what I am saying here, I do love the sound of the human voice and as you know I often resort to choral sounds and vocal samples as they really lift the music into a whole new zone I think.

How do you get your inspiration?

Like most writers I guess. Often it comes from something I hear on TV or radio that gets me going, sometimes it just appears in my head. On a couple of occasions I shall admit to having pinched ideas and hooks from some of the music I used to write for the bands I used to be in, more years ago than I care to remember. However I can never sit down with a blank project without some idea of what I am going to do, even if it's only a rhythm or hook line, or maybe a melody. However more often than not the end result bears little resemblance to what I started with. But that is true of most composers I suspect. The important thing for me is to end up with a song, even if it has no words. By that I mean it should have a proper melody and structure. I do not like music that goes nowhere, or is based purely on a cool drum beat or sample. Maybe that makes my stuff a little "traditional" rather than "experimental" but that sits fine with me and also, I hope, makes it a lot easier to like!

What are your main musical likes and influences?

Where to start! I love any music that connects with me. If I had to list a few musical influences, I guess I would come up with the likes of Mike Oldfield, Enigma, Jean Michel Jarre and of course I am also a big fan of classical music, being inspired by composers such as Mozart, Holst, Sibelius and Grieg to mention just a few. Of course being primarily a pianist I am also heavily into Chopin and Debussy. I also admire the great recent movie composers such as John Barry, Hans Zimmer and Danny Elfman and I suppose my ultimate fantasy ambition would be to achieve what they have. When listening for pure pleasure I usually resort to a combination of loud rock such as AC/DC or Rush or when I'm feeling more mellow some classical piano works and concertos. I also have a bit of a thing for virtuoso guitarists like Jeff Beck and Dave Gilmour, and more recently I'm really getting in to Joe Bonamassa.

So how would you describe the new album?

As I said, "Soundscapes" has given me an opportunity to get back to writing great music without worrying about a theme. In general it contains more pure electronica than "Finest Hour" and I've been a little more adventurous with the sounds and rhythms. I think you'll find the style a little more consistent as well. It still has one or two classically styled pieces such as "Ile de la Cite" and maybe "Caledonia" but otherwise you'll find much more emphasis on sounds, rhythms and hooks. I really wanted to create an album where every track has something special and memorable about it, and avoid any filler. I hope that's what I've done, I think so. The name "Soundscapes" was decided on long before any music was actually laid down, I knew I wanted to create something that described ideas, stories or places in sound and that is really the only theme I've tried to stick with. Each track is a little adventure to listen to, I hope.

What's next on your to-do list after "Soundscapes"?

Well, initially there will be a lot of promotional work which I hate but it is a necessary evil! I will probably start working on a third album in the new year but one thing I'm particularly excited about is that I am hoping to put a stage act together in the first half of next year and start touring. It depends how well things go in the meantime but that is what I really want to do long term, to perform this music in front of a live audience. Ideally I would need a full choir and orchestra, but that is probably a little ambitious at this stage, so we're currently planning the band personnel and technology and I'll keep everyone updated on progress.

Finest Hour is currently available online through iTunes and Amazon.co.uk and also direct from the ***BoweMusic*** website.

Soundscapes is due to be released at the end of September 2011.

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