

Returning to the Scene of the 'Crime

A Look Back on Operation: Mindcrime II

By BRIAN J. HEATON

Creating a sequel to what many consider one of the greatest concept albums of all time is a challenge that few would undertake, much less succeed at. Queensrÿche's release of *Operation: Mindcrime II* was heralded as a success by most though, thanks in large part to the dedication of Jason Slater, the record's producer and primary songwriter.



The road wasn't an easy one, however. Touring obligations, writing conflicts and an assortment of other issues produced unforeseen difficulties in the creative process. It was a unique experience for Slater, who despite the turbulence, looks back on the album fondly.

"We were writing and recording on the road, coming back to the studio and then stopping again to go back on the road, so the record was a little more difficult because of that," the producer explained. "It was just about as unorthodox a recording as you could make. The experience was cool though and I wouldn't change anything about it in hindsight."

Mixing the album was another story. Having pulled a number of all-nighters to get the album finished by the deadline, little did he know it had been pushed back a full month, which would have allowed some time to reflect on the record before mixing it.

"The time constraints during mixing was a total drag," Slater admitted. "We were heartbroken because we could have spent a lot of time on those mixes."

Changing Chemistry



One of the more unexpected twists in *Operation: Mindcrime II*'s development was how involved Slater and guitarist Mike Stone (2003-present) were in writing it. The limited writing of guitarist Michael Wilton was also a surprise, as many fans assumed the remaining original members of Queensrÿche would be creating the *Operation: Mindcrime* sequel.

Although Wilton (along with former guitarist Chris DeGarmo) was one of the majority writers on the original album, Slater felt it wasn't that big of a deal.

"This time, everyone's roles were different because there was no Chris DeGarmo. [He was] the guy who came up with the seeds for the majority of the music and played a producer role in the band, as well as being a guitar player," Slater said. "Somebody had to come in and pick up those jobs ... and this time out it was me and Stoney."

When pressed about how the lack of DeGarmo and lesser contributions from Wilton may have shaped *Operation: Mindcrime II*'s sound, Slater was steadfast that it really didn't matter. The producer was adamant that vocalist Geoff Tate was what makes the music definitively Queensrÿche.

"The common thread between Queensrÿche records is Geoff," Jason maintained. "If you listen to the band's albums as instrumentals back to back, if you didn't know [better], you'd think it was a different band, because they change stylistically so much from album to album."

Similarities/Differences to *Operation: Mindcrime*

Notwithstanding Slater's point about Queensrÿche albums never sounding the same, writing a sequel to *Operation: Mindcrime* obviously required some similarities to make the story flow properly from a musical standpoint. There were plenty of nods to the original album on *Operation: Mindcrime II*, most notably the chords in "The Hands" and "Fear City Slide."

One of the surprising differences, however, was a distinct lack of longer songs such as "Suite Sister Mary" or "Eyes of a Stranger." When first interviewed in 2005, Slater mentioned the band was going to "push the format" in terms of CD length and Tate was quoted as saying there were more than 80 minutes of music for the album. That wasn't the case on the final product though, a fact Slater readily admits was a label decision.

"All of the songs started out between five and eight minutes," the producer revealed. "But it came down to a label and marketing issue of it being a double CD. The label had no interest in it because of the increased costs, so we trimmed things down."

As it turns out, shorter was better in Slater's opinion.

"We found the songs got better as we honed them and made them more to the point," he said. "The longer versions were cool, but they just didn't make for as cohesive a record. It worked out well and I'm glad we did it."

For fans, a disappointing similarity to *Operation: Mindcrime* is that the sequel will likely have no outtakes, despite the longer versions Slater mentioned. In his mind, when writing for a concept record, once you have the songs that fit the story, the other song ideas are left alone to focus on the songs that will appear on the album.

"There is music there, but I wouldn't hold my breath for it to get finished," he cautioned fans. "Nothing ... is far enough developed to be released."

One aspect of the original Queensrÿche lineup's sound that Slater chose not to emulate was the guitar channeling. Although he admits that certain things needed to sound similar, Jason consciously avoided splitting the two guitar rhythms, mostly to respect the style of Chris DeGarmo.

The producer explained that DeGarmo was very much known for writing material where the rhythm guitars are doing different things and felt it would have been unfair to just rip it off.

"That's really Chris' thing and something he came up with that helped define Queensrÿche's sound," Slater said. "I didn't want to come in and just take that. We were



already making a lot of nods to *Operation: Mindcrime I* with the drum sound and harmonized solos."

Replacing DeGarmo



Operation: Mindcrime II marked the first full album guitarist Mike Stone worked on with Queensrÿche (he wrote "Losing Myself" on the band's 2003 release, *Tribe*). Replacing Chris DeGarmo was no easy task, but Jason was impressed with Stone's work ethic and writing skills on the record.

In particular, the producer called "One Foot in Hell" a prime example of Stone's abilities. The guitarist came in with the song completed and after Tate wrote and sang over the demo, they encountered some resistance from the band because of the song's style.

"That song started off as this blues rock thing and there was some tension within the band about it being used," Slater recalled. "So we had to turn that song into something the band would be proud of and want to play. It's hard as a songwriter to go back and rewrite your work to make it fit the confines of the record. Stone did that, and it really impressed me."

When asked if he had heard from DeGarmo about *Operation: Mindcrime II*, Slater said that he hadn't and really hadn't thought about it much, given he wasn't a part of the project.

"I think it would be interesting to hear his thoughts on it, but I don't see what difference it would make," the producer said. "I heard through Geoff five or six months ago that Chris hadn't heard it, but the guys in the band probably have more interest in Chris' thoughts than I would."

Introducing Dr. X and Completing the Story

One of the more exciting creative aspects of the record was Ronnie James Dio filling the role as the antagonist in the Mindcrime story, Dr. X. Although fans had a number of different ideas on who would fit the part, only Dio and Rob Halford from Judas Priest were ever seriously considered, according to the producer.

"Ronnie has an incredible delivery and his voice is just pure evil," Slater said. "Halford would have done a good job, but it would have been different. No one else could have come in and pulled it off as cool as [Dio] did."



The song Dio appears on is called "The Chase," and surprisingly, given such a landmark guest appearance, it's only slightly more than three minutes long. Most fans expressed surprise that the critical scene between the two main characters (Geoff Tate playing "Nikki" and Dio playing "Dr. X") came at the mid-point of the album, with no further appearance by Dio.

But Slater felt using Dio sparingly was the right move, despite how good both he and Tate sounded together.

"I think him [Dio] singing any more parts would have been gimmicky and would have taken away from the story," Jason maintained.

The ending of the story was another surprise for fans. With the critical scene featuring Dr. X occurring midway through, the latter half of the album describes Nikki's mental state and ultimate demise. Interestingly, the full story was a surprise for the guys writing the music as well. As Slater tells it, while Tate had the entire *Mindcrime* sequel essentially written in storyboard format, he didn't tell Stone or Slater what was going to happen.

Instead, the vocalist would come to them with a theme and then the duo would write songs to fit that theme. For Slater, it was a curious but effective way to create music.



"Geoff would outline it and we'd write pieces of music to that theme," the producer recalled. "Then he'd take parts of a bunch of compositions, we'd put it together and he'd come down after spending some time with it and put down a scratch vocal.

"He was clever to do that," Slater added. "If he was specific, then we'd get caught up with the story instead of focusing on the music."

Since its release in April 2006, fans have debated on the ending of the *Mindcrime* story. It concludes with Nikki meeting his love, Sister Mary, in the afterlife, after committing suicide. The pair expresses their love for one another and float away into parts unknown during "All the Promises," ending the tale on a twisted romantic note – not exactly a conclusion you'd expect from such a dark and intense plot.

That said, Slater (a longtime fan of Queensrÿche before working on the project) felt the ending was appropriate and needed to be concise.

"It didn't become 'Lethal Weapon 3' and go so far out it was unbelievable," he said. "It would have been easier for Geoff to keep it more vague and take the easy way out. But he didn't, he followed through with the story and it stands up on its own. Even if you listened to just 'II,' you get the story about revenge and a fair idea of what *Mindcrime I* is about. That's good writing."

The Live Presentation

To celebrate the conclusion of the *Mindcrime* story, Queensrÿche hit the road in summer 2006, performing both albums back-to-back in a Broadway-style presentation, complete with actors and multiple set changes. Many albums usually undergo some style changes when performed live, and *Operation: Mindcrime II* was no exception.

Although he's an experienced touring musician and understands what has to happen to perform a record live, Slater was apprehensive about seeing the songs he wrote performed. According to the producer, it took awhile before he felt comfortable hearing the changes the band had to make in order to present *Operation: Mindcrime II* to an audience.



"It took me a few shows before I could actually make it through the set," Slater admitted. "It's hard, because you have an emotional attachment to the songs that you've written and then the band does what it needs to do with the material for the live show. But by the second or third time, I went in with a little more of an open mind, and some of the stuff during the live show is better than what's on the record."

Specifically, Slater was enamored with the live version of "Circles," an interlude piece that bridges the death of Dr. X to the next portion of the *Mindcrime* story. The studio version of the song contains numerous sound effects and hundreds of guitars overlapping one another.

To play it live, Wilton and Stone changed the piece to a haunting harmonized guitar solo, with Tate's vocals meshing well with the sound.

"I really wish we had that on the album," Slater said. "They came up with that in rehearsals, and it was much cooler."

Documenting the 'Crime



To capture the saga on film, Queensrÿche elected to record its three-night stay at The Moore Theater in its hometown of Seattle, Wash., on Oct. 13-15, 2006. Called *Mindcrime at the Moore*, the separate CD and DVD offerings will be released sometime in summer 2007.

Although he didn't record the shows, Slater is mixing and producing the audio that will accompany the footage, which will be available as both a stereo and surround mix.

The 5.1 surround process was a tricky one for the producer, with the toughest part being the microphone difficulties on stage.

"There were so many microphones on stage [and combined with] the band and stuff coming off of tape, it creates challenges during the mixing process," Jason said. "As a musician, you're trying to entertain the crowd [instead of] making sure you're playing is precise and the audio is sacrificed."

One of the biggest hurdles Slater faced while mixing *Mindcrime at the Moore* was the bleed from the vocal microphones. For example, depending on where she was on stage, Pamela Moore's headset microphone picked up the drums, guitars and backup vocals at various points, making it difficult to sort out.

Slater is confident the band's fans will like what they hear, however.

"As we're sitting here doing the interview, the mixes are being copied to be sent to the label," the producer revealed. "I think it's something the fans will like and from what I've seen of the video, the footage is great and hopefully I did the audio justice to go along with it."

Not surprisingly, as with all live albums, overdubs were done on *Mindcrime at the Moore*. Anyone who was at the Seattle shows knows that Geoff Tate was sick the entire weekend and various technical problems were encountered. It's all part of the process though, according to Slater.

"Yeah, there were some things, but nothing that isn't routinely done," Jason said regarding the overdubs. "One of the things we completely replaced was the spoken dialogue that was originally on a tape. We thought it would be cooler if it was [Pamela Moore] doing it."

Fans that attended Queensrÿche's show at the Gibson (formerly Universal) Amphitheatre in Universal City, Calif., received a special treat. It was the only show on tour where Ronnie James Dio was able to participate and reprise his role as Dr. X. In Seattle, the shows featured Dio on film, above the stage.

The band had the Universal City footage recorded, and it will be available as a bonus feature on the DVD, along with the non-Mindcrime encore songs of "Walk in the Shadows" and "Jet City Woman." As Slater explained it, he showed up for the show because he was in town for a meeting, and Queensrÿche had just been informed that this would be the only time Dio could perform with the band on tour.

"There were no preparations to record it, as no one knew," Slater recalled. "A film crew was hired, but they didn't get any type of audio recording system. So I ran around and sent all of the instruments from the stage to the different channels of the seven cameras they had. It won't sound the same as the rest [of the *Mindcrime at the Moore* audio], as it was a last second thing, but it'll be a cool bonus feature."

As for future work with Queensrÿche, Slater admitted he didn't know what the band's plans were. But he was glad to have been a part of the entire Mindcrime sequel process, and pleased at the overall success the band has had during this run, including *Operation: Mindcrime II*'s debut at #14 on the Billboard Top 200 chart.

"Overall, I'm really proud to have worked on the project," he said. "The record has some legs and keeps selling and doing well. It blew me away, to be honest. My expectations weren't that high. You can't be blind to the fact that part of it is that it says 'Mindcrime,' but you also can't be blind to the fact that if it sucked and said 'Mindcrime' it wouldn't have made the chart."

For more on Queensrÿche, visit www.AnybodyListening.net.