

THE BREAKDOWN ROOM

Behind the Scenes with Kelly Gray at S2k1!

By: Brian Heaton

Author Note: This Q&A was originally published in June 2001. It is now republished here in an abridged format, with portions of the discussion eliminated for brevity. In addition, the original interview also featured guitarist Scott Heard. Those bits have been deleted, and as such, some of the questions were slightly modified to reflect that change.

On Friday, June 1, 2001, Kelly Gray graciously took a break from S2k1 rehearsals for an interview concerning his place in the Seattle music scene, the evolution of Queensrÿche, and what the future holds for the band...

BDR: First, thanks for taking some time this week with me Kelly. Let's start at the beginning. When was the first time you started to play guitar, and what inspired you to do so?

KG: No problem Brian. I got into playing when I was 12 or maybe a little before that. I had a cousin who played, and I idolized him as a guitar player. His band was rehearsing at our house, and I was like a junior roadie for the band. I just picked up the guitar and started playing one day. I really started playing alot when the first **Van Halen** record came out, and latched onto that sound. The roadie work for my cousin's gig really helped me learn how to multi-task. I'm always the guy who sets things up and makes sure the sound is right.

BDR: What were some of the early influences on your playing style?

KG: Well, **Led Zeppelin** was really the first band, but then there was **UFO** as well. Really, it was all the guitar-based guys back then - **Blackmore, Deep Purple, Ozzy, Van Halen**. Anything that was guitar related. I'm actually a very unbiased listener. I like it all. **Genesis, Rush**, I could even play the entire *2112* album from beginning to end.

BDR: What was the first song you learned to play from one of them?

KG: I think it was "Stairway to Heaven" from **Led Zeppelin**. The funny thing about it was that I dabbled in guitar when I got into junior high school. I was in a beginning guitar course, and I failed it. ***laughing*** Six months after that, then I was totally into playing. That's where Geoff (Tate) falls into this. Around that time, two of my buddies

and I used to go down to Geoff's house all the time and bug him to join our band. Man, that was 23 years ago. Its been a long time.

BDR: That's when **Myth** (Kelly's former band with Geoff – ed.) started up right?

KG: Pretty much. Originally, we didn't have any vocals. I believe Geoff was in a band called **Paradox** at the time, and after some time went by, we had a guy named Brent Young playing with us, which started us doing original tunes. We ended up doing shows with **The Mob**, which, of course, was Eddie (Jackson), Scott (Rockenfield), Michael (Wilton), Chris (DeGarmo) and Geoff. They were doing cover songs and Geoff liked the fact we were doing originals, so he got together with us for awhile. It was all really weird.

BDR: What did you do after Geoff left **Myth** to start **Queensrÿche**?

KG: Not much! ***laughing*** I think there was a couple of years I didn't do much of anything except work and play a bit on my own.

BDR: Was that period where you started getting into producing bands?

KG: A lot of it started back when I was younger doing the engineering and roadie stuff for my cousin. Then out of necessity, I started doing my own band's engineering and producing, and then other bands wanted me to do it for them. I ended up having to quit my day job because I had too much producing work to do. One day I did that first **Candlebox** record, and the whole world blew up. Everyone and their grandma called me after that **Candlebox** record. People from the **Kiss** camp, **David Coverdale's** camp. I never intended to be a record producer. It was never really my passion. I was always a guitar player. But at the end of the day, having that background is a huge benefit.

BDR: Is it difficult to separate the artist from the producer?

KG: No, not really. I've been doing both for too long. You develop your instincts about music and learn how to just listen to people. The goal is to come up with something inspiring. That doesn't mean that it has to follow a certain order in order to work. There really isn't a rule in producing. You can't second-guess yourself. You're not going to be able to please everyone. There is a pretty good chance that if you enjoy it, other people will too. Like I said earlier, I am a really unbiased listener, and that helps when I produce other bands.

BDR: How did it feel to become one of the guitarists of **Queensrÿche** after making most of your living as a producer, and basically being a fan?

KG: It was kind of ironic really. I was doing the **Brother Cane** record and I came up to do some work for Bob's Garage, a small radio special **Queensrÿche** was doing (June

1997 – ed.). We did “Silent Lucidity” and a few other songs that day, and the guys and I talked about me producing the next **Queensrÿche** record.

After that, Chris got a hold of me about helping me wire some stuff in his home studio. I didn’t know anything about what he was up to at the time, and then I never heard anything from **Queensrÿche**. Out of the blue, Geoff called me up one day, and told me Chris left. We started talking about guitarists ... and Geoff tells me he was thinking about me. I’ve known each of these guys before they even knew each other. There is a history to it. The only one I didn’t know that long was Michael, but still, I knew him in **The Mob** days. I’m the historical element of **Queensrÿche**. Geoff and I did some good things back in the day with **Myth**.

BDR: Wasn’t the first original version of “Walk in the Shadows” a **Myth** song?

KG: Yeah. Actually a few of the classic **Queensrÿche** tunes were. “Walk in the Shadows,” “Take Hold of the Flame,” and “No Sanctuary.” The lyrics to those were written by Geoff and then he re-translated them into **Queensrÿche**. I have the original versions of those songs still. I have a lot of things that people would like to get their hands on. A pretty sizable rack of old tapes and mixes.

BDR: You and Michael are quoted in an earlier issue of the band's fan club magazine “Eye on Queensrÿche” as having “instant chemistry” when you started playing together. Why did it work so well off the bat like that?

KG: I think it has to do with growing up in the same camp. Mine, Michael’s, and Chris’ guitar playing is not that different from one another. We all listened to **Iron Maiden**, **UFO**, **Judas Priest**, and we all learned the same solos. I think that in itself is the basis for a chemistry that works really well. Writing a song together can be easy when you have a good melody happening. It’s cakewalk after that. We (the whole band) come up with ideas and then let Geoff hear it. I am a true believer in letting singers write their own lyrics and letting them dictate the direction of the song. Musicians make music, but it is basically noise until we have lyrics to it.

BDR: While we’re on the subject of writing songs, before *Q2k* came out, there were four tracks listed on queensryche.com) that never made it to the album. Whatever happened to “Discipline,” “Monologue,” “I Howl,” and “Til There Was You?”

KG: The way the writing process works, sometimes we don’t get the vibe on where to finish a song. Actually, “Discipline” could probably get resurrected. It is a cool tune, it just wasn’t done yet. It’s a very “**Queensrÿche-ish**” song. “Monologue” is something that Eddie wrote. It’s a little wacky. ***laughing*** The vibe is a little too “punkish” for Queensrÿche though. (“Til There Was You” was performed by **The Geoff Tate Band** at The Catwalk on June 1, 2001 – ed.)

BDR: There were very mixed feelings about *Q2k* from the fans when it was first released. The lyrics were shorter and simpler in comparison to prior releases, and the

guitars weren't as prominent. However, the vibe of the album was more reminiscent of older Queensrÿche material because the passion and aggression was back in Geoff's singing, and the music in general. What were you guys trying to achieve when recording it, and what was up with that comment of "putting the ass back in Queensrÿche before the record was released?"

KG: *Q2k* has a healing element on it. Being a little looser on the song writing helped the guys bridge the gap and move forward. It's not the greatest record, but it's a good, solid record. It gave the band some confidence that we were able to do it, as I am sure there is a bit of security lost in the ordeal of losing Chris. It was a good kick in the pants. When I signed on, I was full of energy and ready to go. Having me in the band, there was immediate gratification because we were able to record and produce it with no waiting. On *Q2k*, a lot of those tracks are directly from that spontaneous writing element. They were written and recorded at the same time. "Breakdown" was actually a one-take from a rehearsal. The main portion of it is live.

The "putting the ass..." comment was actually from Damon Johnson. ***laughing*** I think there is more "groove" to *Q2k* than what was done in the past. *Hear in the Now Frontier* was really Chris' game. That album evolved through a single mind and in my opinion, that approach isn't the greatest thing for **Queensrÿche**. Historically, when they work together they come up with their best stuff. When you lean on one person too much the music is not as deep. Fans talk about getting back to the roots of the band all the time, but in **Queensrÿche's** case, which one? All of the albums are different. I never hear the same thing in any of the records. Basically the root is...can each album be different again?

BDR: Did you guys come up with the solo for "Falling Down" right off the bat? That was a return to the classic "trade-off" solo of years past.

KG: Michael started writing it, and I produced it. I guided him through and then we decided to double up on it. It felt good. We kept things loose and not so rigid. I would like to continue the trade off solo, and find a way to do some interesting guitar stuff as long as it comes across as unique and doesn't repeat itself. I'm not a big solo guy to be honest. I like good heavy riffs. Geoff and I will disagree on this, but I think solos are best left to those who can do them – like Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, and Eric Clapton. I can bust out some serious chops but I like laying into a riff and making my fingers bleed in chords.

BDR: Right before Seattle '99, you guys did an interview with KISW (the Seattle-area's major rock radio station) and debuted "Liquid Sky," "Breakdown," and "Sacred Ground." Those tunes sounded much different on the final version of the album, "Breakdown" in particular, where Geoff's screams and overall vocal aggression were toned down a notch. What was the reason for those changes?

KG: I think that Geoff felt better about it without those screams. Geoff is not really a screamer. I don't think he should be either. He's a strong melody singer. I think that

is why he chose to change it on “Breakdown.” He doesn’t need to scream to be powerful. That’s what’s so unique about his voice, he doesn’t have to kill himself to get his point across. What sets singers apart is not the ability to sing, but the ability of phrasing. It’s that human element of phrasing that “wows” people that the good ones like Morrison, and Dylan have. That is way above the ability to sing. Not saying that Geoff can’t sing, Geoff is an amazing singer of course, but his phrasing is the thing. He has that skill, and I trust his judgment.

BDR: When you stepped on stage for your first show at Seattle ’99 (Kelly's live debut with Queensrÿche. – ed.) how did you feel?

KG: I just didn’t want anything to screw up. I’ve played a lot of shows, but I hadn’t in a long time. It went by pretty fast. There is a lot more adrenaline than a normal show though. Seattle ’99 was a testing ground, and I think it went along really well.

BDR: Do you think the Seattle ’99 show gave the band that final push of confidence they needed to continue on after Chris left? Geoff sounded pretty genuine when he asked the fans to let you all know what we thought of the new material.

KG: I think so. When Chris left, there was an empty feeling in all of them. He was a major part of the band, and even though they wouldn’t want to say this, the band probably felt they had to prove themselves all over again.

BDR: When you play live, a lot of your solos for the old songs are different than what Chris used to play. Is that a purposeful change to put your own stamp on things?

KG: Yeah, because while I could sit down and learn these things note for note, I have to put my two cents into it. I’m not a robot. Honestly, I don’t remember solos all that well. ***laughing*** I come from a little more blues-based background. I’ve never been a very static solo writer. I like writing melodies and that kind of stuff.

BDR: You guys took a big risk changing the vibe of “Jet City Woman” when you play live, changing the arrangement so it builds in intensity. Was it your idea to do that?

KG: Kind of. I always like when things kick in like that. I really enjoy that sort of dynamic. I do all the heavy stuff in that tune.

BDR: Did you sit down and learn all the old **Queensrÿche** songs note for note when rehearsing for the tour?

KG: I would go through and get a vague idea to it. Michael helped out a lot. There is a lot of independent chording where Michael and Chris are doing different things, and Michael forgot some of it. We actually had to go back and listen to some live recordings because you can’t pick it out on the record.

BDR: What are some of the older tunes you like doing?

KG: Actually, I love playing “Empire,” “The Needle Lies,” and “Speak.” Those riffs are really hard. I love the old stuff.

BDR: Fans always criticize what songs are played at shows. Some want all the older material, some want the more “epic” sort of tunes, etc. How do you guys go about deciding what to play on tour?

KG: Making set lists are really dependent on the energy value of the songs. Sometimes certain tunes just don’t have the gas and they don’t make you feel good when playing them. Not that they are bad, but you want songs you want to play.

BDR: Another question about the live performance I had was about the song “One Life.” You handle the monologue for that tune on the record right? On tour though, when you guys played it at the first Las Vegas gigs, it seemed like Geoff did it. Was there a reason for the switch?

KG: Actually, I was sick during those first few shows, so Geoff did it. When we were recording the album I had this idea I showed Geoff and did it for him, and Geoff said he liked it, and when I asked him if he would re-do it, he said “no way, I like that, let’s keep it.”

BDR: One question I’ve been dying to ask is how and when did you guys decide to play a couple of cover tunes on tour. You did “Bullet the Blue Sky” by **U2** and “Join Together” by **The Who** right?

KG: Yeah, those were the songs. Boy did that become an accident. ***laughing*** We weren’t talking about playing covers, and then Scott started playing “Bullet the Blue Sky” one day at rehearsal, then I started playing, then Mike started, Ed started getting the bass groove on it, and then Geoff strolled out and started singing it, and it sounded great, and we decided to do it. **Queensrÿche** really never did covers live before except for “Scarborough Fair” and “Gonna Get Close to You,” and chances are, not many people had heard of **Lisa Dalbello** before they read the credits for *Rage for Order*.

BDR: What’s ahead in terms of the band’s goals for the next few months?

KG: I think right now, Geoff has his solo thing, Michael’s dabbling with his, and we’ve (Kelly, Scott Rockenfield, and Scott Heard) got **Slave to the System**. As musicians, you’re drawn to things that help you hone your craft. This isn’t stepping away from **Queensrÿche** or anything like that. This is what we do. We make music. It helps you develop as a songwriter and emotionally its cool.

BDR: So new **Queensrÿche** material is in the distant future? Fans have heard rumors of a concept record...

KG: We've been writing. I think if we come up with a cool concept, we'll do it. But after you do the first one (*Operation: Mindcrime*), it takes the impact out of it. You're competing against that record. **Pink Floyd** did it though, so if Geoff comes up with a great idea for it, it'll be a possibility.

BDR: You said that the writing has begun. Do you have any musical vibe for the album yet?

KG: Actually, we have some really cool stuff. It's just a matter of letting everyone finish up our side projects and really focusing on it. I can't comment too much because there is nothing finished. We have about ten things floating around out there, all very different than one another. I think the main focus is to let everyone free themselves up and sit down to find out what the next record is going to be about and how it is going to go. I think it is going to be darker, but whether it will be guitar laden, groove laden, or what the tempo will be like, I'm not sure. Everyone wants it to be heavy. That seething type of feel to it.

BDR: What's the scoop on the new manager, Lars Sorenson?

KG: I've known Lars for a long time. He's worked with me on projects in the early days before Candlebox. For Queensrÿche, because it is a localized family business now, we wanted someone local. Lars is a good guy, and fits perfectly.

BDR: My next question is a controversial one, because it deals with a band many people compare with **Queensrÿche**. That band being **Dream Theater**. What are your feelings about them?

KG: I understand that fans compare bands, but when I heard their concept disc (*Metropolis Part II: Scenes from a Memory* - ed.), it annoyed me. The main character in the story is named "Nicholas." I mean come on. Nikki - Nicholas, it's borderline plagiarism! I didn't have an opinion of **Dream Theater** before that.

BDR: The first three tracks of that album are similar to the progression of *Operation: Mindcrime* as well, aren't they - an opening introduction, instrumental, and then an aggressive rocker?

KG: There is this beef I have about people taking advantage of someone else's hard work. That idea was already there. I don't have any respect for people who can't find their own ideas. When we were in Europe, people asked if we were going to tour with them, and I said, "Doesn't hearing that get redundant?" If you listen to **Dream Theater**, you're listening to **Queensrÿche**. That stuff really bugs me.

