

EYES OF A STRANGER

Michael Wilton Discusses the Future of Queensrÿche

By BRIAN J. HEATON

Queensrÿche has earned a reputation as a band that defies categorization. Dedicated to pushing its musical boundaries open, rather than building on a popular sound, the group is heralded in the industry for its brash, risk-taking style.

Ironically, it's that steadfast commitment to evolution that appears to be a source contention between guitarist Michael Wilton and vocalist Geoff Tate, as the group struggles to find a direction for its ninth studio effort.

"Queensrÿche has always been about reinventing itself," Wilton explained. "It makes it interesting as a musician. But we need to be reminded that this is a business, and with doing a 180-degree shift in style, there is an inherent risk that is involved. It's a 'don't bite the hand that feeds' kind of thing."

Fan support for the band's diverse approach has waned in recent years, as declining album sales and smaller venue bookings tend to support the guitarist's fears. Other high profile bands have experienced similar problems once they strayed too far from a signature sound. Faced with criticism from both fans and peers after the release of *Slang* in 1996, Def Leppard stepped back and revisited the vibe of its multi-platinum *Hysteria* days with the 1999 release of *Euphoria*. The album revived the older fan base, and quickly achieved gold status.

Convinced that a more aggressive tempo would be advantageous to the band's career, Wilton has pushed for a return visit to Queensrÿche's earlier roots – a position apparently not supported by the band's lead singer.

"I believe this album should be hard and intense," Wilton maintained. "What I have heard so far is not that. I have no desire to change Queensrÿche into an adult contemporary band. This should be a Queensrÿche album and not a Geoff Tate solo album."

Lately, the vocalist has downplayed his reputation as one of the more defining voices of the hard rock/heavy metal genre. In various interviews during the past year, Tate has revealed that he isn't a big fan of heavy metal – the brand of rock Queensrÿche took to new heights in the 80's - preferring the sounds of his R&B, dance, folk, and classical music influences. These admissions have caused fans, as well as Wilton, to question the future of the band.





"If a band has no passion and becomes stale, then I think it is time for things to change," conceded Wilton. "It all depends on where the loyalty and focus of the band is heading."

"I love the hard aggressive music, but I think those days are dwindling in Queensrÿche," the guitarist added. "But I will always stick to my guns and be true to what got me this far."

Looking toward the future, Wilton formed Soulbender in 2002 to satisfy his craving for a hard-hitting vibe. A straight-up, heavy metal-oriented five-piece band, Soulbender consists of Wilton, guitarist Dave Groves, bassist Marty Vankieth, drummer Wes Hallam, and vocalist Nick Pollock.

"Originally, Soulbender was just going to be a project band of mine," Wilton explained. "But when I got my musicians together, magic happened that I had not felt since the early days of Queensrÿche."

Capitalizing on that magic, Soulbender worked on a variety of tracks in 2002, in hopes of landing a recording contract. To further those ends, the band is playing sporadic "one-off" gigs, hoping word of its performances will spread among the fans, and eventually, garner the attention of labels.

Despite their stylistic differences, Soulbender opened up for Tate's debut solo performance in June 2002. A stark contrast to Tate's more subdued and eclectic presentation, Soulbender ripped through a set of blistering cuts, including "Clockwork 'N Compass," "Three Towers," "Princess," and "6&9." The show resulted in a rousing ovation from the hometown Seattle crowd.

When asked about the differences between Queensrÿche and Soulbender, Wilton was adamant on stressing his new band's love of the heavy metal sound, and shed some light on how dissimilar the inner-workings of both groups are.

"For one, we all write the songs together, and love what we do," the guitarist said, referring to Soulbender. "Everyone in the band is pretty much equal, we all love metal and are confident we can add much to the genre."

Whether it is with Queensrÿche or Soulbender, Wilton continues to experiment with many of the latest trends and tools of his trade. One such trend is the widespread usage of alternate guitar tunings, particularly "dropped-D." Incorporated in Queensrÿche's 1999 release, Q2k, Wilton has continued its usage with Soulbender, enjoying the advantages and depth it brings to his sound.

"Low tunings make the guitar sound better," he said. "I think it fills the low midrange frequencies and really fills the mix. ESP (whom Wilton endorses) has a 7-string that is cool. Having a low B string really changes the playing spectrum."

In addition to Queensrÿche and Soulbender, Wilton has discovered an ability and passion to write outside the hard rock/heavy metal genres. Penning a song entitled



"Tomorrow Starts Today," in 1997, he gave the piece to Aury Moore, a local artist who expressed interest in the tune.

"She rewrote the lyrics because they were a bit dated," he explained. "It is now called 'Breakin' Me.' I have found that I can write in other styles, and have had offers from people who want to buy my songs. It's actually kind of fun."

Queensrÿche, however, remains Wilton's main concern. Commenting on his recent contributions to the band's on-going song writing process, the guitarist alluded that the passing of his mother has had a profound effect on his work.

"It has been a very dark year for me," he admitted. "The music I have written is just an extension of what I have been going through. What the band decides may be in a totally different direction."

With the new Queensrÿche album due in early 2003, Wilton insisted that his dedication to the group remains strong, regardless of the creative differences between himself and Tate.

"I have been pretty consumed in writing the next Queensrÿche record," he maintained. "I definitely know where my priorities should be."

Editor's Note: At press time, multiple sources had indicated that guitarist Chris DeGarmo had returned to Queensrÿche after a lengthy hiatus, and the five original members were rejuvenated and working diligently together on the group's upcoming release. However, neither Michael Wilton, nor the other members of the band would comment on these alleged developments. Queensrÿche's ninth studio album is tentatively scheduled for release on April 14, 2003, through Sanctuary Records.

For more information about Michael Wilton, Queensrÿche, or Soulbender, please visit <http://www.michaelwilton.com>, <http://www.queensryche.com>, and <http://www.soulbender.com>. All photos are courtesy of <http://www.michaelwilton.com>.