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One on One with Neil Kernon: The 20th Anniversary of Rage for Order

By Brian Heaton

Note to JB and BN – this is the unedited version. I ended up not doing an actual article out of this. Just using bits and pieces for AnybodyListening.net. These are the raw questions and answers.

Lets start at the beginning - how did you end up getting to know the guys in Queensryche, and how did you producing the record come about?

I had heard that Queensryche were actively looking for someone to produce the followup to "The Warning". I liked that album a great deal, so when I heard that I actively pursued the band rather aggressively.

Many years ago, the demo material from the Rage for Order album leaked out. There were a few cuts on that which were not included on the final record - "From the Darkside," "The Dream," and the title track, "Rage for Order." Can you talk a little about each of those tracks and why they ended up not making it onto the album (Rage for Order of course being morphed into Anarchy-X for Mindcrime)?

Well, to be honest, that might be a bit tricky as I haven't heard those tracks since 1985 when I was first played them. I do remember the song "Rage For Order" which had a very interesting rap-type vocal. It was very unusual. The music to the song was pretty much exactly as Anarchy - X turned out though.

Speaking of demo material, one of the things that stood out to me when I listened to it was the departure from Queensryche's "British Heavy Metal" roots to a more contemporary "80s synthesizer" sound. The keys were used in a very dark, almost gothic way. Yet on the final product, there were quite a few changes that "rocked up" that sound, with the guitars taking the place of some of the keyboard sections. Can you speak generally as to overall process on how the album's sound progressed through the demo to recording and production process?

Well, I think that's really an assessment that has to be made as you go in to start work on the record. Quite often, the circumstances under which a band rehearses affects the approach towards the writing process. For example, the guys recorded all those demos in Scott's parents' basement. The volume issues meant that Scotty's drums were screened off, and the guitars and bass were all played through Rockman units. The keys were all direct as well, so the sound of those recordings tended to be somewhat lifeless and flat. When you go into the studio you decide on the approach you will take, and we wanted to make a cold, stark, hi-tech album, so the first thing I gravitated towards was a tight, hard powerful drum sound. That

then sets the precedent, and we knew how tough the rest of the album needed to be, from a sonic standpoint.

Scott's drums were different than what he used on albums prior to the RFO sessions. This time, his set up was entirely electric drums, correct? Was that something you suggested, or was that something he wanted to do on his own? Either way, what was the goal with recording with the electric set up?

No, not at all. Scott's drums were entirely acoustic, and no triggers or samples were used at all in the drum treatments. I'm not sure where you heard that from but it couldn't be further from the truth. We recorded the drums in a massively live office park in Bellevue, WA. It was incredibly loud and powerful. This big bashy approach was definitely my idea. I brought in the Le Mobile truck from Montreal that I had used on many live albums and several other studio albums as well (Kansas - Drastic Measures, Dokken - Under Lock and Key). The reason I did that was to find a room that sounded amazing and then stick the drums in it and record them. That's it. I loved doing that

In the promotional VHS EMI sent out for the album, DeGarmo and Wilton talked a little about how they really tried a ton of different amp configurations before recording. Do you recall exactly what the struggle was - what sound they were ultimately going for, sound-wise?

Actually, to be honest, it wasn't really a struggle. This is a common situation. Finding the core guitar sound for a guitar based project is a very important process. The more alternatives and choices, the longer that process can take. I know that once we had the amps that belonged to Chris and Mike under the scrutiny of the recording microscope we found that they sounded a bit tired, so we looked around in Vancouver for some good sounding amps. It took a day or so, but we eventually found some great ones.

You've been quoted many times about how "Screaming in Digital" is your favorite track on Rage for Order. What is it about the song that has captivated you (FYI - I agree 100 percent)?

There was something magical about the vibe to that song for me. Really nasty, tense, hi-tech. I think it symbolised RFO for me. The only thing I had to suggest for that song was to make it longer - the demo the band played me was less than half the length of the final version, so we needed to flesh it out a bit. I still love that song.

How did the decision come about to include the cover of "Gonna Get Close to You" on the record? Looking back on it now, would you have substituted one of the RFO "leftovers" in place of it?

The label planted the seed that they wanted lots of radio play on RFO (and why not). So, it was my job to work with the guys, who at that point were pretty set in their ways about how they wanted their songs to be arranged. Prepro took a while, during which time I slowly emphasised to them the importance of concise songs for radio. There was no need to trim all the songs down to 3:45, but we needed several to be able to have an album campaign with some legs. So, we all talked about it and decided that we'd like one more song that was quirky and had single potential. We didn't want something that was out and out poppy, but something that had the potential to be dark and weird, but was still catchy. Lisa's song was suggested and we all loved that idea. We chose "Gonna..." over "Wait For an Answer", which Heart went on to record a while later.

As many fans know, RFO has a three-tiered lyrical theme - personal, political, and technological. When you initially heard what the band wanted to do lyrically, did your approach on the production end change? If yes, how so?

Not really. While lyrics are of course important to the songs and the album, plus with the "concept" tie in etc. we had all decided that this album should sound a certain way - that being cold, hard and cruel (seriously, that was the word we used all the time during the record). We wanted it to be uncompromisingly cold sonically, so that scene was already set, lyrics or otherwise.

The song "Prophecy," which appears on later versions of the Queensryche EP was finally recorded and produced by you during the Rage for Order sessions. Do you recall how that came about and why they finally just ended up recording it?

Well, once we'd got the drum sounds, Scotty ended up tracking all his drums in just over a day, so once we were satisfied that all the tracks were solid I suggested we cut any other things that we could (without wasting expensive studio time learning them of course). We had quite a few other things to cut, namely Scarborough Fair, Rage For Order - the song, and the last one suggested was Prophecy, which was being considered for inclusion on the Decline of Western Civilisation Pt 2. Ironically, there was a mammoth cockup and the wrong version was sent to mastering (namely the demo done at the same time as the self titled EP). So, when the EP was re-released on CD, our new version of Prophecy ended up being included on that instead.

Many bands nowadays record and release "the making of" DVDs when doing the writing and recording of an album, providing an in-depth look at things. Sadly, at the time, this wasn't really done for RFO. So, to give fans a little taste of what it was like, can you share any funny or interesting moments you recall from the sessions? Perhaps one or two of each?

Some of the more interesting moments occurred while recording FX for the album. One of my favourites was in "Chemical Youth". While Whip and I were tracking his lead guitars I had told him that shouting through the guitar pickup could make

an interesting sound. So, once the l/gtr had been completed we set about tracking some shouting through the amp via the pickup. Michael, in his inimitable way, decided to do an impression of Vivian from the Young Ones and started shouting "Neil, you bastard" at the top of his voice, while I recorded the result onto some blank tape for use at a later date. He was crouching on the floor screaming this insult over and over again when the door burst open and in rushed several of the studio staff, the studio manager and receptionist etc. all looking very alarmed. We just looked at them standing there, and they just asked "Er..is everything ok? We thought there was a fight going on"

I was apprehended by the Vancouver police while recording Geoff doing burnouts in his car, in the underground parking lot of our hotel. They said we had to stop as there had been some concern from tenants. I was, meanwhile, armed with loads of mobile recording gear, all strapped to me, so we assured the cops that we'd stop, but instead waited a while and did more once they'd left. By the way, all of these bits, the tyre squealing and the shouting were all used on the album.

It is noted somewhere in the Rage for Order liner notes that you played keyboards a bit on the album. Do you recall what song(s)?

I think I played most of the keys. I know that Geoff played some stuff that he had worked out already. Anything that needed to be done in the studio (Neue Regel, Screaming etc.) I just did.

In your opinion, what has made Rage for Order so revered by the fan base?

Well, I don't really know. I just know that it was ahead of its time. It was uncompromising as opposed to really pandering to radio's requirements. Maybe the album cover artwork and photos? Hehe...

Looking back upon Rage for Order now, is there anything you would have liked to have changed/improved on the album had you had more time to work on it?

No, not a thing. We had plenty of time to make the record. The only thing that upset me was the fact that the mastering got messed up. The initial pressing of the CD was very quiet and bass-light. Apparently the remaster has addressed that, which is a very good thing.

Piggybacking that question, with all the new technology out there now, would you be open to ever remixing Rage for Order in 5.1? What are some of the things a mix like that would bring to life on the record that may not be as easily decipherable on the original recording?

I'd certainly be interested in that. RFO would lend itself to a very spatial mix as there was so much going on throughout. To be honest, I think everything that is

"indecipherable" was intended to be that way, as in the samples in the tracks - we just wanted them to be there but hardly audible. That's really a common technique in industrial, where you can barely make out things - it makes the listener work harder.

Rage for Order was the launching pad for the band's most famous record, Operation: Mindcrime. If you had been given the chance to produce Operation: Mindcrime, how would your vision have differed from the final product?

Well, I was supposed to do OM, but my schedule got screwed up working with Dokken, so that ended that dream.

RFO marked the beginning and sadly, the end of your professional work with Queensryche, so far. Would you still like to work with them again?

I'd love to! I would have loved to have done OM-2. Maybe we could all do RFO 2 together? I'd be totally into it!!