

ANN WILSON

Interview by James Gaden. Photo by Kimberly Adamis.



Ann Wilson is one of the all-time great female Rock singers. Best known for fronting Heart, alongside her sister Nancy, the band have enjoyed great success, selling over 35 million albums to date. The sisters also indulge in solo projects, and with Heart currently on a hiatus, the vocalist has taken the opportunity to create 'Immortal', a covers album made up of material culled from the work of great artists the world has lost in recent times. Fireworks called Ann to find out more.

When did the idea for 'Immortal' come to you?

It started to become clear to me around the time Chris Cornell and Tom Petty passed away, Chester Bennington too. It all seemed to happen at once, it was like an exodus. I felt a pressure to do something – not be content just to write a tribute to them, I wanted to honour them, which gave me the idea for the record.

It wasn't until I read the press release that I realised that all the artists whose

songs you've used on here are no longer with us. The idea that Tom Petty or George Michael aren't here anymore just doesn't seem right.

Exactly! George Michael... Amy Winehouse, David Bowie, Glenn Frey, then you just go back a few more years and we lost Gerry Rafferty, it's crazy.

When I looked at the list of songs, it's an eclectic mix anyway with material from Amy Winehouse, Leonard Cohen, George Michael, David Bowie, Cream,

Audioslave... and on top of that, you've dramatically changed arrangements on them too. To use Gerry Rafferty as an example, you've covered 'Baker Street' but removed the saxophone part. That's a really brave decision, but I must say, the song still works.

To consider removing that iconic saxophone line, that was a big deal to me because I felt it was a great song anyway, but the saxophone played a big role in making it a hit single. So to take that out, I had to sit down and come up with a whole different way of approaching it. I'd sit and think about how it would sound if it had been a Pete Townshend song. I thought what if I took the lyrics from a pissed off point of view like Pete writes, maybe someone telling a business to stick it – when you listen to the lyrics it brings to mind someone walking the streets just wanting to go home. That's what I thought it was about anyway.

When you make the decision to re-arrange an iconic song you love, do you run the risk of losing what made you love them in the first place?

Oh yeah. As a singer, I really pay a lot of attention to the words and what the message of the song is, so I wanted to make a bed for those where the words could really come out. With a lot of these songs, they are songs people maybe haven't really listened to for the words. For example I know people who know the song 'A Thousand Kisses Deep' but they're like "Gee, I never really listened to the words before" and to me, I don't know what it is they are listening to then! [laughs] I wanted to really bring the words to the fore here.

That happened to me with 'Life In The Fast Lane', the new arrangement made me listen to the words a lot closer than I normally do.

Fantastic, that's what I was aiming for. I thought putting in a more tribal groove worked for that one and I'm glad you liked it.

Were there any songs you considered but couldn't make work?

I was pretty careful with my selections. The only problem I had was I was looking for a Linkin Park one to do but I couldn't find one I could really get inside of, so I felt I'd be better not bothering, not if I don't think I can deliver the message as intended. They were the only artist I didn't have any success with. And I wanted to have an album with ten songs – ten great songs is better than fourteen mediocre songs – not that Linkin Park did mediocre songs, but I didn't want to do a song that I didn't feel, love and believe.

Trying to narrow down one Tom Petty or one David Bowie track must have been tough.

Oh yeah, for Bowie I just tried to think what song of his could I do which was a bit deeper, I didn't want to just do one of the hits. I thought it would be good if I could find something that would resonate with today's

world, so I went for 'I'm Afraid Of Americans' which I think hit the nail on the head. By transferring it to a sort of world music feel, I thought it really gave it a new dimension.

Did you have any guest musicians to help out on the album?

Yes I did. For 'You Don't Own Me' and 'Luna' I had Warren Haynes from Gov't Mule playing guitar. On 'Politician' I had Doyle Bramhall II, and I have an excellent guitar player from Seattle called Tyler Boley. He's unknown but he's just crazy brilliant. I also brought in Ben Mink to play on 'Back To Black' and 'A Thousand Kisses Deep'. They're all superb musicians, really good players.

How long did you spend making 'Immortal' – was it all done in one period?

No, I live in Florida now so we worked on it in spurts. If you put all the time together it would probably be two, maybe three months, but because of everyone's schedule it was done in pockets over more like a five month period.

You have Mike Flicker producing, who will be well known to Heart fans as he produced the early stuff like 'Dreamboat Annie' and 'Little Queen'. What is it he brings to the table as a producer that makes him your first choice?

Mike believes in me and he understands what I mean when I describe what I want. He understands my language! [laughs] He knows how to produce technically too, so bringing him in kept that old, good feeling there and it was a really nice collaboration. He's a real stickler for getting the highest quality sounds as possible, so we actually recorded to tape and then transferred it to digital for editing. So we have that warm feel to it. But digital editing is great, it's a lot better than back when I started where you literally had to cut bits of tape with a razor. Now people are better players and better singers, so we have to edit less anyway, but it's much easier digitally. We have the best of both worlds.

When you selected the songs for the album, did you have any thoughts in the back of your mind about taking them into your live show?

I always think about what a song will sound like live when I record one and even though the album isn't out yet, I've put 'You Don't Own Me', 'Life In The Fast Lane', 'Back To Black' and Chris Cornell's 'I Am The Highway' in my show already. They seem to be going down really well.

And you're going out on the 'Stars Align' tour with Jeff Beck and Paul Rodgers. That's a pretty impressive bill!

I'm really looking forward to going out there with those guys. Paul Rodgers is one of the greats and I've been such an intense Jeff Beck fan for years. To be able to watch him play live every night, it doesn't get any better.

Do you think you'll be able to play shows in the UK to support 'Immortal', or would it have to be as part of a package like the 'Stars Align' tour to be feasible?

I'm working on it, talking to management and they always say "Oh, I dunno, it's pretty expensive to get everyone over there" but I want them to put their minds to it and find some way to get me over there. It's been about a year and a half since I played there and it's time I did it again.

Heart are currently on a hiatus, do you have any plans on when the band will be back?

Not at the moment. We don't have any deadlines for Heart, Nancy is busy with her solo thing and I've got mine so we're letting it air out. At the moment I just want to get the album out, play my shows and hopefully get over to the UK in the process!

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