

SOUND & VISION

April 19, 2017

Procol Harum Fuse Sonic Shades of Past & Present With Novum



One shot. That's all most bands have to make an impact on our continually fractured and very much divided music scene these days, but one could argue it's always been that way ever since the pop brigade began taking hold in the 1950s. And as the rock culture started exploding in the mid-'60s, new bands cropped up daily, all trying to capture the zeitgeist of the artform with a failure rate that went way beyond the pale, to say the least.

It's never easy creating music that can stand the test of time,

but that's exactly what Procol Harum did 50 years ago when they released their indelibly seductive debut single, "A Whiter Shade of Pale," on May 12, 1967. An alluring mono mesh of Gary Brooker's affecting vocals and piano lines, Matthew Fisher's wistful Hammond M-102 organ, and dreamscape-inducing lyrics, "Pale" firmly planted dual flagpoles in both the then-burgeoning prog and psychedelic camps, and it remains as vestally impactful today as it instantly was back then. Though "Pale" singlehandedly sealed their position in rock history, Procol Harum continued to make sonic waves from the late '60s on into the '70s with heady tracks like "Shine on Brightly," "A Salty Dog," "The Devil Came From Kansas," and "Conquistador." Fast-forward to the present day, where Procol Harum continues to shine brightly as evidenced by the sweet and salty sounds of *Novum* (Eagle Rock), out on April 21. From the primo piano/guitar interplay of "I Told on You" to the orchestral leanings of "Sunday Morning" to the focused insistence of "The Only One," *Novum* is a staunch blueprint for how best to fuse the eternally classic Procol Harum sound with modern sensibilities.

Novum's intuitive vibes had very much to do with being recorded live in the studio. "The comfort level was there — the trust we have in each other, musically speaking," Brooker (in the hat in the above band photo) details. "We've been playing live together for 10 years as we stand today, but we'd never been in the studio. And until we got in there, I don't think we realized how invaluable everyone really was. We didn't have to ramp up at all; we flexed our muscle. And with us, I think that muscle comes out with the drums and the bass."

I called Brooker, 71, across the Pond to discuss the live approach to cutting *Novum*, the ongoing impact of "A Whiter Shade of Pale," and why he still likes playing with orchestras. But the crowd called out for more. . .

Mike Mettler: Did you have a specific game plan put into

motion with your producer, Dennis Weinrich, as to how you wanted both yourself and the band to sound on *Novum*?

Gary Brooker: When it comes down to the ultimate technicalities, that's what you have the engineers and producers for. As long as we can go, "Wow, that's a good sound!" after we walk into the control room — that's that.

But apart from that, the game plan was that we were going to play everything live in the studio, where we were all playing at once.

Mettler: So that gives you a different feel when everybody is looking at each other and you have that unspoken interaction? That is, you can look at Geoff [Whitehorn, guitarist] and Josh [Phillips, Hammond organist], and you all just know the groove you're going for?

Brooker: Yeah. I mean, it worked really well doing it like that. There weren't very many overdubs at all. It's the first we've done it like that for a long time.

Mettler: And you're pleased that you captured the exact sound you wanted for the record that way?

Brooker: Time and the audience will tell, but hopefully it sounds like a band playing together in a studio.

Mettler: In terms of how you want people to listen to *Novum*, are you still a fan of the vinyl form?

Brooker: I like vinyl, because once upon a time, that's all there was. I think CDs were a great advancement. I felt you could get a better sound with a CD. You do have limitations with vinyl in regards to the volume of things.

But you did ask me how I'd prefer people to listen to it. Call me

old-fashioned, but I think you get a big pair of speakers, you turn the volume up, and stick on the CD — or the vinyl, if you like the scratchy stuff. Or MP3s, if you like having those little “pimples” in your ears, the earbuds. I suppose people can do that too.

Mettler: Well, there will be people who go to services like Spotify to stream this record. And Procol Harum is pretty big on Spotify too. “A Whiter Shade of Pale” has over 13 million listens there to date, for example. But, honestly, that’s a track I prefer to listen to on my pair of floor-standing speakers after dropping the needle on the original mono 45.

Brooker: Well, it was made with that in mind, of course. That was the only way — the mono recording.

Mettler: Do you have a preference between mono and stereo for listening to your music from back in the day?

Brooker: I think all of our first album was only recorded in mono, but why? (slight pause) Stereo did exist then. Stereo just gives it a wider picture for what you hear. It’s a better sound, stereo is. There’s no doubt about that.

[*Procol Harum* was released in mono on vinyl in the UK in September 1967, with a subsequent rechanneled stereo version released in the U.S. The album was cut on multitrack but those original tapes have yet to be found, so a true, approved stereo mix isn’t possible until, or even if, they’re ever discovered.]

Mettler: I’d sure love to hear “She Wandered Through the Garden Fence” in stereo someday. We mentioned your debut single, “A Whiter Shade of Pale,” which is coming up on its literal 50th birthday on May 12. Did you have any perspective then on the fact that the song was going to have such a lasting

impression with so many listeners over the years?

Brooker: No. I don't think anybody has recorded something or written something and then thought, "Wow, this is still going to be big in 50 years!" (MM laughs) I don't think Frank Sinatra even thought that with "Strangers in the Night" (1966). Or probably Paul McCartney, with "Yesterday" (in 1965, from The Beatles' *Help!* album). Now, I'm not saying these are direct comparisons — just as the length for how something lasts. I don't think you conceive of that, in terms of that amount of time.

Mettler: And yet here we are talking about it, all these years later. One thing I love about "Pale" is hearing the Bach influence on it, like that brief nod you have to "Air on the G String" [a segment of the second movement in Johann Sebastian Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D major, BWV 1068, which can be played entirely on the lower, G string of a violin].

Brooker: It's in there, yeah.

Mettler: Putting all the pop, rock, and classical elements together like you did there shows they really do go well together if meshed properly, wouldn't you agree?

Brooker: It all depends on the musical influences you've got turning around in your head. And I think those three things you mentioned there all turn around in my head! There are a few bits more in there as well, too.

Mettler: What's been your ultimate goal as a songwriter?

Brooker: Let's talk about it in terms of the writing. It's always been our intention to write something that nobody's ever written before. Sometimes you get, "Well, this is going to be a little bit rocky," but at the end of the day, in most of the Procol Harum

songs I have written, you won't find that they've copied anything. Of course, there are influences and inspirations in there, but striving to do something very original and very different — it's the same criteria today as it was in 1967.

Mettler: I would agree with that. The name alone, Procol Harum, defines the sound of the band itself. Another good example of that would be “A Salty Dog” (1969), a song that's unto your own universe. Nobody else could do that or record that.

Brooker: Well, that's very nice of you to say. Whenever we sing or play “A Salty Dog,” we feel it's really our audience's own thing, this one — which makes it refreshing to play, every time you play it.

Mettler: “Our tears were tears of joy,” as somebody said there in the lyrics. . .

Brooker: Our tears were tears of joy, yeah.

Mettler: To return to the *Novum* universe, I love hearing the orchestral elements in some of the songs. I'd love to hear you do “Sunday Morning” with a full orchestra, in fact. Is that something you've thought about?

Brooker: We just did it a few weeks ago! (chuckles) We played with an orchestra and a choir in London, at the Royal Festival Hall [on March 3, 2017]. We wanted to preview a couple of songs from the new album, and that was one of them. I wrote out an orchestration and we got the choir in it, and it turned out really well.

Mettler: I'm sure the audience literally got to experience “different shades of living,” as I believe the line goes. And obviously, you've played with orchestras throughout the years.

Is there something to that sound you like as a composer that just makes sense to you?

Brooker: Well, it's pleasing on my ears, personally speaking. I like the sound of it. I like the sound of all those strings playing, the sound of the cellos. I like the roll on the tympani, and the bangs and crashes when they come; all those sounds that they can make — which, I suppose, a modern keyboard player can also make, like Josh Phillips. He plays the string parts of “Sunday Morning” from pizzicato strings to French horns, to everything!

Mettler: “The Only One” is another track that seems to lend itself to that kind of orchestration.

Brooker: Yeah, I think I'll probably run that one up someday, and do something for it. We only did one from the new album at the Royal Festival Hall because we thought, “Well, we won't do two.” But that can live for another day.

Mettler: Maybe we'll get lucky someday and hear you do it that way over here in the States.

Brooker: It's the kind of thing where somebody has to invite you, really. The orchestra has to invite us. It's been done very successfully in a lot of places, though not that much in America. There are a lot of classical sticks in the mud in American orchestras, more than the European ones.

Mettler: Well, at least you have the relationship north of the border with Edmonton, from many years past. [This is a reference to *Procol Harum Live: In Concert With the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra*, which was recorded at the Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada on 18 November 18, 1971, and released in April 1972.]

Brooker: Yeah, well, we all speak the same language.

Mettler: That's right. I bought the 45 of the *Edmonton* version of "Conquistador" and I remember wanting more of that sound, so I bought the album right after that. A lot of the Procol Harum album catalog was hard to find back then, but now you have everything at your fingertips, essentially, though I have to imagine we'll be getting vinyl for *Novum* as well.

Brooker: Yeah, that's the plan with it. The artwork is nice and big on it.

Mettler: That's great, because the cover artwork done for *Novum* by Julia Brown is so wonderful — and it ties into the first album too. You really want to see that cover art in the much bigger format, and not with a magnifying glass.

Brooker: (chuckles) Yeah, the cover is probably more of a nod to the 50th anniversary than the rest of the material.

Mettler: For you as a listener growing up, what was the very first record you bought yourself or was the one that turned you onto music, period, as a kid?

Brooker: Probably one of the best sounds I ever heard come out of a jukebox was Ray Charles, "What'd I Say" (1959). The whole atmosphere of it, the keyboard playing, the singing, the drumming — everything about it was, "Wow — is this what music is? If it is, I like it!"

Mettler: Can't argue with you there. Another thing I like hearing on *Novum* is the character of your own vocals, which remains very individual in the live-in-the-studio setting. These days, there are producers who take that kind of character right out of the lead vocals, which I think is a mistake.

Brooker: Dennis Weinrich was a very good vocal producer. You've got to have somebody on the other side of the glass in the studio who can say, "Yeah, Gary, that was it," or, "You know what? I think you can do one better." You have to trust that person, and Dennis was very, very good with vocals.

Mettler: Well, I for one can't wait to put the needle down on "I Told on You."

Brooker: And the little secret is, when that one comes on, you have to turn it up a little bit louder, and then it goes *BANG!* right through your speakers.

Mettler: Volume is important as you mentioned earlier, and how you use that in your arrangements is not something to be taken lightly.

Brooker: No. We've always had dynamics, but I also think that's one of the things younger people are missing. They're quite happy going to a concert and have their ears blown out to kingdom come standing in front of those gigantic speakers, but then they listen to most of their stuff through little tiny things in their ears. I'm not even talking about a decent pair of headphones. They listen to an MP3 through pimples! (both laugh)