

Michael Ball's Sunday Brunch - 27/03/2011

Interview with Mike Rutherford

MB: My special guest today is a legend in his own lifetime. He founded the musical juggernaut that was Genesis and sold over a hundred million albums. Not content with that he's had a hugely successful solo career and formed Mike and the Mechanics, which stormed the charts in the 80s with the hit single "The Living Years" before taking a break. Now he's back with a new reformed Mike and the Mechanics. A new single is out, a new album is about to be released, a tour is booked, and I'm a big fan. Mike Rutherford, how are you sir?

MR: I'm very good...

MB: Very nice to see you. So, Mike and the Mechanics is back.

MR: Yeah, it's always been a sort of...in a way a side project, it's kind of like the Traveling Wilburys, they quite enjoy sort of starting and stopping it, you know. And I love to write songs, the Mechanics is a great vehicle for it. In the end it was really myself and Paul Carrack, [and he's doing] solo stuff now. He'd done his time...

MB (laughs)

MR: He'd given... (laughs) Yeah, and so I thought well, I had a sort of project in mind, and wrote some songs. Andrew Roachford came down, Tim Howar, and it sort of felt good.

MB: Now Tim I know from the theatre, from stage work... How did you come across (them)?

MR: They all came through a producer friend of mine called Metrophonics Studios, Brian Mouldings, who's a producer guy who recommended a couple of names to try. And you know, they just come down and they write and try it out and it worked with both of them.

MB: And why did you want to keep the brand, Mike and the Mechanics?

MR: Well I mean I love to write songs, and it's a great vehicle to write for really, and I think the way I write is a kind of "sound." You know, whoever sings, there's a Mechanics sound that kind of comes out, like on the new album.

MB: How do you define that?

MR: Probably just the chords. I mean you hear a song, you probably know that could be a Mechanics song, I think just the chords I play, and you don't have to "try," it's sort of there anyway.

MB: And you wrote—previously you had B. A. Robertson writing with you, and Paul himself quite a bit. Is this [new album] just you?

MR: No no, I always co-write. I get a bit lonely, I get bored actually. I always co-write, and Andrew Roachford wrote a lot for this album, Tim Howar wrote some, and Chris Neil, so I enjoy that.

MB: And Chris you've worked with a lot, by the way...

MR: Yeah, always.

MB: And what's kind of the process for you?

MR: I start by noodling at home with my writing. I noodle and have a great time, write sort of mad bits, and then people come down and we try to develop them, you know. And some songs work and some songs don't, but you don't push too hard really.

MB: Do you know when you've written a really good song?

MR: You have an idea, yeah. I mean when you make an album, at the time you love it all, but you look back later and you can see what's good and what's bad.

MB: It's very true, isn't it?

MR: Yeah, I think, why did I do that, you know? (But this was pretty good.)

MB: This is a terrific new album. So when you were writing it, there's about 15 or so tracks on the album...

MR: Eleven!

MB: (gets noticeably flustered) Eleven, I beg your pardon! I'm sorry...

MR: (laughs) I can't do these long 18-track albums, I get fed up!

MB: (laughs) And they're all of a decent length, because we look back at Genesis, and was just saying, one of my favorite tracks of yours is eight minutes long.

MR: Those were the days...

MB: Those are the days! Going back to this thing, did you have all these written, ready to go in and go, this is the album? Were there a lot that you discarded?

MR: You throw away a lot, it's 11 out of quite a few more sort of bits or ideas, but in the sense or process of doing this album, along the way, everyone kind of came on board. Andrew Roachford and Tim Howar, and our old drummer Gary Wallis, it all started with

just me in my studio. So for the last few months, everyone sort of came on board, and we formed a team.

MB: And you're going on tour with it, aren't you, May and June.

MR: Yeah, we're gonna go out.

MB: So will you be featuring the old stuff as well?

MR: Oh, yeah, I mean you can't NOT really, and I think about four or five new songs is all you can do to be honest. It's always been the same with Genesis. And what's nice, I think, is that the Mechanics always had two singers—the "rock voice" with Tim Howar as you know, and the kind of R&B/soul voice with Andrew Roachford. He sings things like "Living Years" beautifully, "Over My Shoulder," and Tim does "Miracle" and all the sort of more rocky ones.

MB: And how big is the lineup for the band?

MR: We're a six-piece, but I think having the two lead singers is a real big energy.

MB: Do they play as well?

MR: Andrew plays keyboard a bit, whereas Tim is more singing really.

MB: Shall we listen to the new single? This is "Try to Save Me," Mike and the Mechanics, and who's taking lead vocal on this one?

MR: Andrew Roachford...

(plays song)

MB: I see what you mean about that sort of Mike and the Mechanics sound.

MR: Yeah, that's one of the songs too that sounds a bit like, no matter who's singing it's got a sort of sound.

MB: Yeah, it's very distinctive. Is it, strange having new singers there, obviously with Paul Carrack and Paul Young as well of course, sadly no longer with us?

MR: The funny way I suppose I've done it a bit, I mean the first Mechanics album had five singers on it actually.

MB (laughs) Oh did it?!

MR: I had no idea what I was doing! And obviously it went down to two... And the funny way of it, you don't look for change when it happens, like when Peter Gabriel left

and Phil took lead, so when it happens you sort of get into it and something new comes out of it.

MB: Are you frustrated that you don't sing like them?

MR: Oh yeah, God, I'm songwriter, so I want the best voice in the world to sing it, which rules me out straightaway.

MB: You have done... I mean you DO sing...

MR: ...Just. Really, I'm not the best voice in the world. Trust me, I'm not being humble, the rest of the band would agree. (laughs)

MB: (laughs) Oh, gosh never mind. You can have a go, give yourself one, like Ringo did.

MR: Umm, it's way too late, the joke is on...

MB: You can always get the laugh. The album is out the 18th of April, you start the touring May the first. Do you enjoy touring?

MR: Yeah, I always do. I mean, I'm not a natural on stage, like some of those who live to be on stage like Andrew and Tim, naturally on stage. But actually I think they've relaxed me on this tour, we've done a few showcases so far, and they're both so comfortable on stage. It kind of rubs off, the atmosphere within in the band.

MB: With Mike and the Mechanics, it's about playing, the music for the concert. With Genesis it was far more about the production, wasn't it?

MR: Yes, which has always been nice about the Mechanics, it's a contrast to, you know, Genesis was a huge big production with a cast of thousands and lights on stage and setting, the screens. The Mechanics is just about the backline, it's a much more musical thing, and huge contrast which is nice.

MB: You don't miss the epic scale of the Genesis thing? I described it as a juggernaut, it absolutely was.

MR: Well, it was a huge machine, if you went they would still carry on without you.

MB: A few of them left. (laughs) It's interesting that those two projects, Genesis and Mike and the Mechanics, have gone through so many different lineups and permutations. What's the common thing, then?

MR: I think it has to be songwriting, good songs. You know if you've got good songs, you can make things work. Without good songs you're in trouble.

MB: You look at the development of Genesis, you listen to the early... I was just saying, I've suddenly rediscovered Trick of the Tail. That's a fantastic album, that's 1976.

MR: Yeah, just the other day. Honestly, I can't believe how long ago it was.

MB: I listen to it now, I wanted to play Ripples. It's one of my favorite songs of all time, and it's eight minutes long. You knew how to write eight minute long songs, I mean you know, that's a proper length of music.

MR: It was also funny with the freedom too, you couldn't make something work in two or three minutes.

MB: That was the first album after Peter Gabriel had left.

MR: The first one with Phil singing.

MB: Can we have a listen to "A Trick of the Tail," do you mind?

MR: Let's do it.

(plays song)

MB: So you haven't heard that in 20 years?

MR: About that. I mean you don't go listen to the old stuff, really, do you?

MB: I suppose not, though I recommend it.

MR: Tony Banks chords for that one.

MB: Yeah, it's really beautiful. You all met at school, didn't you, originally Genesis? And I was reading, you went to boarding school from the age of seven! That's young, isn't it?

MR: That explains a lot, doesn't it?

MB: I'm a product of a boarding school, and I hated it, absolutely hated it.

MR: I hated it all the time. If you go back to the schools now, they're great. I think we caught a funny time when they were very repressive...

MB: Harking back to Edwardian. Were you caned a lot, and disciplined?

MR: Yep. I was thrown out actually of public school. I got halfway in and was kicked out.

MB: Good for you. (laughs) So what inspired you, is that what helped you get into music?

MR: Well I think... Funnily enough you're in a horrible repressed boarding school, and you're in a band. You had some three or four mates in the school who played music. That's the real sort of escapism. I'm sure writing with Phil and Tony kind of got me through...Not Phil no, Peter.

MB: Peter, not the other one.

MR (laughs): They all blend, got me through school.

MB: Is there any chance...? Phil announced his retirement, didn't he? Is that for real, or a rock and roll retirement?

MR: That's how he feels at the moment, I mean time will tell if that's what happens. I mean, I think it'd be a shame as he's a great talent, but that's how he feels at the moment.

MB: Would you be interested?

MR: In retiring? (laughs)

MB: We know you're not going to do that, Mike. Would you be interested in Genesis having another fling?

MR: Well yeah, I mean I love to write, and you know we always write very well together.

MB: About the performing, do you like that?

MR: Well yeah, I do. I've always said, "Never say never." You know people say, what about Genesis, I say, "Never say never," and then a couple years ago off we went for a nice long tour and it was fantastic actually. So this is hopefully just time out for Phil.

MB: And also for you, have you ever been interested in exploring other genres?

MR: I've tried writing for other people a bit, but it's quite hard, because you sort of have to say, "What kind of song do they like?" I can't do it that way. There's such a freedom of writing for Genesis and the Mechanics.

MB: You write what you want. I always seem to harken back to this, but there is a theatrical nature especially to early Genesis stuff, which was your go of writing for that genre, for [a] musical.

MR: It could be. I mean I'd love to, but it's quite hard to find the project that works. The film has to find you, I think.

MB: You have to find the right story. Other than that, life is pretty good; you've just become a granddad.

MR: I have, thank you very much yeah, well done [daughter] Kate with Lily Grace. Yeah it's nice I think, over the years I've managed to still be married to my same [wife] Angie, and I've still got a nice family life.

MB: Yeah, you haven't been sort of "ruined"... Haven't been ruined by rock and roll excess.

MR: And actually, what was a real pleasure on this last album, I must mention it. My youngest son Harry, he's 23, he engineered it and mixed it.

MB: Well I was going to ask about that. He also plays drums on it a bit.

MR: Yeah, it's a real pleasure with a, working with one of kids, and b, seeing you've got the talent, and the years, and the kind of know-how to get somewhere, and it works well you know. So that was a real plus for me.

MB: Is he going to carry on doing it?

MR: Oh yeah, I think Harry's got real skills. He's done my album, he's working with someone else now. I think he's got the right approach to get somewhere.

MB: He's got the right genes, I would imagine. Listen, I can't wait to come and see the tour. I think it will be really good, it's a great album. Mike and the Mechanics out on the road again, the album as I say is out on the 18th of April. Catch them at a theatre near you, and it's an honor to see you, Mike. I've got to finish with one of the greatest songs, "The Living Years," which I have actually recorded myself. For people who don't know this song, what's the inspiration behind it?

MR: First and foremost, I must mention B. A. Robertson here, because we wrote the song together, and B.A.'s a great writer. Really what was happening was his father had just died, and my father had just died, and we both had a gap and then had young babies. And it's really about not being able to talk to your parents or someone close to you like that—in their lifetime, missing the moments. We came from a different generation than our parents, and not too many talk until it's too late. I've had such an amazing response, I'm sure B.A. has, too, over the years. People write to me and say they'd fallen out with their parents, hadn't spoken for years, heard the song, got on the phone and rang them up, and it changed their lives. Which for me as a writer, is a wonderful thing to happen to you.

MB: It's perfect, absolutely. Thanks ever so much Mike, really nice to see you.