I Hear a Voice From Long Ago Al Harlow Interview Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine Issue 21 February 2011





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I Hear a Voice From Long Ago Al Harlow Interview Port Alberni, BC. February 2011



Prism was formed in the 1970's in Vancouver, BC, bringing together an interesting spectrum of talents and musical styles. Early Prism talent included: Ron Tabak - Lead vocals, Lindsay Mitchell - Lead guitar, vocals, Tom Lavin - Rhythm guitar, John Hall - Keyboards, Ab Bryant - Bass, Jim Vallance - Drums, keyboards, Bruce Fairbairn - Horns, Tom Keenlyside - Horns. Al Harlow worked in the Vancouver scene before joining Prism. His writing, singing as well as his bass and guitar work have been a mainstay of Prism, in the decades since the band has formed. The current version

of Prism is driven by Al Harlow's desire to keep the music alive, and by the talent working with him.

The band's current membership is:

Al Harlow: Lead guitar, slide guitar and lead vocals.

Gary Grace: Drums and vocals. **Tad Goddard:** Bass and vocals. **Marc Gladstone:** Keyboard and

vocals.

A listing of Prism's members over time is available at www.prism.ca, as is concert information and other news.



While Prism's music spans a wide variety of subject matter, a significant amount of their music has a science fiction theme. That, and the love of much of their music in general, inspired me to do this interview. SF related songs from Prism's thirteen albums include: "Armageddon," "Big Black Sky," "Hundred Years," "In My Image," "Satellite," "Spaceship Superstar," "Take Me Away," and "Take Me to the Kaptin." (Issue 12 of Neo-opsis includes a discussion of some of Prism's SF themed music, in the article "Capturing a Feeling With Music.")

Pre-amble to the interview, chatting with Al Harlow and Gary Grace.

Karl: I saw your concert in Langley. Jerry Doucette and his band got everyone dancing and cheering, and you guys kept everyone dancing and cheering. When I left the concert, I walked through the casino beside the concert hall. It was full of people looking mostly bored, pulling slots and such. I was thinking, "oh man, you guys should have come to the concert and had fun."

Karl: I'm talking with Al Harlow



Al Harlow and Gary Grace, playing "Take me to the Kaptin.

of Prism, performing at a place called "The Rainbow Club," which seems really appropriate with Prism, because a prism will create a rainbow.

Al: Good. (Smiling)

Karl: So how do you feel about it tonight?

Al: Well, you know, we've been playing big ones and little ones all our lives. This is certainly no different. Actually playing a smaller room, with the audience that close, is like playing in someone's rec room. I use different brush strokes, on lead guitar lines and that kind of stuff. When you're in the big outdoor concerts or the big arenas, to reach the back row you have to use a simpler language, bigger gestures. So I actually play more intricately in a smaller room, because that's the scale you're on. And the stage is a lot smaller too. Whatever kind of dynamics you're going to do visually, you must scale it.

Karl: You can't dance as much. **Al:** Yes, true.

Karl: I assume there's maybe a little more connection in a different way.

Al: Indeed yes. The front row is five feet away instead of twenty-five.

Karl: I understand that Jerry Sienfeld said he had to get back to doing stand up. He said he liked doing TV, but he needed that connection with the audience to know what was working as it happened.

Al: That's the dynamic, yeah. That's how the Marx brothers timed the lines for laughs in their movies.

They'd leave space on the film for the laughs, because they knew in live Vaudeville how long the laugh was.

Karl: Oh, that's great.

Al: Yeah they test-drove their material.

Karl: Your recent CD Big Black Sky, I thought I'd talk about that briefly. The song title track "Big Black Sky," did you think of that as a sequel to "Armageddon" or something in a similar vein?"

Al: Yes, Big Black Sky is lyrically apocalyptic, deliberately so. I was describing it to someone during the writing, namely the chorus, "Up in a big black sky, there's an open eye." The guy I was talking to brought up an image on a computer, a Hubble telescope photo of the Helix Nebula, which looks like an open eye in deep space. I was awe-struck; this was the very picture I had in my head, but I'd never seen the Helix Nebula before that moment!

Anyway, the idea of the song is a future-shock, end-times theme.



Karl Johanson and Al Harlow.

Biblical and/or sci-fi, I wanted to leave it open-ended enough that the listener can interpret, make some room in there, fill in some blanks. I didn't want it to be preachy or over-obvious, apart from being evident that it's set in the future. The survivors of the prophecy and all that. The repeating "only you know it", a prayer perhaps? I like to think the song achieved its intention. And it's a very short lyric, not much time to get the whole thing across, and not enough rope for me to hang myself by overdoing it! (laughs).

Also, I employed a device in the first line, a trick I'd wanted to do for a long time; set up an image and then destroy it in the next line. The first line sets a scene, "City architecture..." Glass and steel towers, right? Musical pause, then next line, "burning in ruin..." My little joke. That line was inspired by Albert Speer, Hitler's architect, and armaments minister, ironically. Hitler ordered up scale models of the future city, but then he wanted the same models in ruin.

There is another song on the album that I was thinking as the size and scope of "Armageddon" and that's the last track called "Hundred Years." But the title track came to me as a narrative, and the chords — for the musicians out there — are very unusual. There's not a straight chord change in it. I wanted it to have kind of a spiralling circular effect, an uneasiness of never sitting down at the root chord, you know. I wanted that kind of continuous movement. So that's what I had in mind. And I wrote a lot of it on an acoustic guitar, so

"Big Black Sky" by Al Harlow

Only you know it, only you know it Only you know it Only you City architecture Burning in ruins We're the survivors Of a wind-swept prophecy Two lovers dance Dreaming of a future Through a doorway Under a big black sky There's an open eve Under a big black sky Mystical goon squad They push the buttons now Regiment tattoos For the Brain Police From east to west Lovers waiting for a Passing whisper Up in a big black sky There's an open eve Up in a big black sky Only you know it, only you know it Only you know it Only you, oooh

there's one version in my head that's folky, unplugged.

Usually I hear the construction... is this going to be a ballad? Is it going to be a hard hitting heavy rock song or a mid tempo softer thing? For me usually that comes in early in the process. But with "Big Black Sky" it was actually the *last* element. I really heard the melody, lyrics and chord changes in isolation. Maybe I should go do an acoustic version and we'll see what happens.

Karl: See how it sounds. Well that's an interesting thing in the

creative level of writing music, compared to the text writing we publish in Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine.

Al: Right.

Karl: While it's very complicated to write just the text, there's the unique complications with the music. You've got to write lyrics that are interesting. You've got to write music to those lyrics.

Al: Yes. One should suggest the mood of the other.

Karl: You got to then assume, 'can my singer hit those notes... like in "Take Me Away"? When you weren't quite sure if some of the high notes could actually be reached.

Al: That's right.

Karl: Ron Tabak did manage to hit them well. And hearing you sing it live, you seem to hit it as well. I was looking for a tank of helium, but you didn't seem to be using one.

Al: Well thanks. Yes, and I actually wrote that song before I joined Prism. I think in Bruce Fairburn's mind, that song was one of the reasons he wanted me along. So I can't expressly say that I wrote "Take Me Away" for Ron, but with all the high notes, it was serendipitous that it worked out well. I was writing it for myself, because when Prism came along — although we were already good friends and played together in Seeds of Time — I was busy recording what I thought was going to be my own album, but we just moved that project over and blended it with Prism.

Karl: Yeah, it worked out very

well. Changes over the years of course. You don't have Rocket playing drums, but the Montreal Canadians don't have the Rocket playing for them either.

Al: That's right; Rocket Richard is gone, too.

Karl: We accept that things change. But it's not something I personally lament. When I hear Prism I don't think, "that takes me back," I hear "I'm glad it's right now and I'm glad I'm here."

Al: Well thank you. That's my hope also; tonight's performance is real, the state of Prism right now. I understand varying points of view; nostalgia is often more important in people's minds than the living legacy. We're all fans of something; we date our lives by the music of our youth. If the Beatles reformed, we wouldn't want to see their great-grandchildren on bass. But with other bands, Alan Parsons Project for example, memberships were perhaps not so crucial. The concept of such a band's music is more important than a celebrity or star personality. Ironically, the same applies to solo stars. Does anyone really care if Elton John or David Bowie performs with the original studio players? Hardly.



Gary Grace, Karl Johanson and Tad Goddard.

"Take Me Away" by Al Harlow

Is this love I'm feelin' now?
Or just my mind that tumbles down.
Is it the stars that tell us what to
know?
Is it the mainline to the puppet
show?

Oh Take me, take me, take me away! Take me, take me, take me away! (repeat chorus)

Deep in a moments overflow...

I hear a voice from long ago.

Splash in the water... echo's time.

Flash in the pan is a pantomime.

Oh Take me, take me, take me away! Take me, take me away! (repeat chorus)

Is this love I'm feelin' now?

But most bands are at a disadvantage in the "original lineup" sweepstakes. Even the Rolling Stones haven't retained total original membership. Life goes on, it has a way of doing that. You can say, "Well, what is the thread that makes this vital, why continue?" My answer is I was in Prism before the start, and the songs still speak to me. Heaven knows I toured them all the way through those years and so feel a certain stewardship. It's odd being on the inside; we saw Prism conceptually, where it might grow. We used to have a whole horn section on stage.

Karl: I heard it sounded amazing. (This was according to Neo-opsis

reviewer John Herbert, who saw Prism play with the horn section at the Pacific Coliseum in Vancouver in the summer of 1980.)

Al: Yeah, and people have come and gone. I'm really happy with the current edition of Prism. Plus we've been together for a number of years (*gesturing at Gary Grace, on drums*). This is a continuation, a continuum, alive and well today. But someone who hasn't tracked our changes over the years could look at it and say, "Well, it's not the original five." Well, no. Tell me which baseball teams have the original nine. Not many.

Karl: Plus I've noticed, and other people who've been to your concerts have noticed, you do pay respectful mind to the shoulders of the giants that the name Prism rests on, which includes your own. You aren't up there being a big ego, 'This is all about me,' right. You're acknowledging the previous writers, the previous singers.

Al: And you have to, yeah. It was a team effort; some are now gone. I'm the steward, and I know how the machine runs; I helped build it with the others.

Karl: And that's very respectful.
Al: Well thank you. We do take a moment in every show to remember Ron Tabak. Sometimes I mention Bruce Fairburn, Jim Vallance, or as you stated, Rocket Norton. Those of us who are still alive are still in touch.

Karl: That's good. Still friendly. And you want to keep it alive.

Al: Keeping it alive is creating



Former Prism keyboardist John Hall, with his daughter and Al Harlow, visiting Ron Tabak's grave.

September, 2011.

new music as well as performing the hits onstage. I think the biggest story surrounding the Big Black Sky album was writing the "Hundred Years" song. It's like seven minutes long or something. I'd never written like this before; I took an old Rod Sterling *Twilight Zone* episode called "The Long Morrow." I think you can look it up on YouTube.

Karl: Yup, I remember it.

Al: I remember seeing it as a kid. The plot was the astronaut sent on an eighty-year mission, needing to be cryonically frozen to return the same



Maritte Hartley and Robert Lansing in Rod Serling's Twilight Zone episode "The Long Morrow"

age as when he left. But his girlfriend would be old back home. Without telling her, he pulls the plug on his cryonics to age with her. Meantime unbeknownst to him, she has herself frozen in time on earth to be young when he returns. Tragic sci-fi love story.

Try writing that as a rock song lyric, one that can stand as a good lyric. I changed the plot a bit to make it work. In "Hundred Years" the lovers knowingly have themselves frozen, but the cryonics in the space capsule fail, so the astronaut changes course on the return voyage, and flies past earth, off into space forever. He'd rather fade away than have his love see him as an old man.

Anyway, I thought this was something Prism can sing about. I shaped the idea to fit where the band might go. Same thought with most of the songs on *Big Black Sky* really; the sitar and tabla-drenched "Tangiers" is a travelogue with ghosts of pirates appearing. I just thought, this is Prismatic, something we could've done all along. Let's do it now.

Some industry people close to the band suggested I've really made the Al Harlow solo album here. That's true to an extent; it's my baby. But there are elements that would be different if I wanted to put it out as Al Harlow. I included Prism trademarks deliberately.

Who knew the very idea of the album as musical unit was facing near-extinction in the download world of singles? Oh well, you do what you do



best; no-one can control world events. The other element I was aware of was the calculated risk that Ron Tabak is not the singer. We've made albums since Ron, with Henry Small and Darcy Deutsche, so I thought the new stuff is an obvious progression, which it is.

But some Prism fans revert back to the golden days of Ron, and I understand that. Back to the power of nostalgia again. Of course the idea occurred to hire a Ron Tabak soundalike, as some bands have done. I deliberately didn't do that. Fir dstly because the only guy who sounds like Ron is Axel Rose, and he doesn't need this gig! But really I'm not interested in scrambling to re-create the past, clone Ron and write songs to imitate our old songs, or worse, re-record our old songs with a clone



singer. Some bands have done that, and it can work for a number of reasons, but I couldn't live with that; for me it would be going backwards.

So I figured this is my band, it's grown to what it is now, so let's record what it honestly is, with new songs. Create a new legacy, a new future.

Artistically I'm happy with *Big Black Sky.* I let the guys have a hand in some processes, but I guided it; it's my vision.

Still, putting a fresh sound to an old name is risky; some folks couldn't accept it.

Karl: Yes, there's always that risk. Henry Small (lead singer on the 1981 Prism album "Small Change") had a great voice, but to me he didn't sound like Prism. I feel the current version of the band sounds like Prism, as does the version on the Big Black Sky album.

Al: I was getting rid of baggage by recording *Big Black Sky*, but for some, the baggage remained in the form of expectations of what the old



The version of Prism on the album Big Black Sky: (left to right) Steve-O, Al Harlow, Gary Grace and Timothy B. Hewitt. Canada Day concert, Sooke BC. 2007.

band was, or should be.

That hinders the music from being heard for exactly what it is. If someone says, "here's a new album by so-and-so" and it's exploring new territory instead of rehashing the old days, what the listener expected isn't there, so he or she can't accept what *is* there, you know?

But many people gave it two thumbs-up; they heard it for what it really is. I find all this psychology interesting, as though perception is everything. I'm very aware that I could've recorded the same album under my own name, and the expectations, the Prism baggage, the need for nostalgia would not be there. But that's the cost of an education. We'll see what form the next one takes. Prism recently recorded a live album, still in the can, waiting to be edited.

Karl: Looking forward to hearing it.

Al: And I'm producing my wife Leah's gospel praise album; there are projects in the making. Plus I'm starting to write again; that same fire keeps burning.

So there is more fresh music yet to emerge from this quarter. Meantime Prism is alive and well onstage. I can immodestly say the band is in the best shape it's ever been right now. I wish I could go back and put this version into some of those long-ago concert situations.

Maybe that's another sci-fi lyric in the making — the time-travelling rock band!