



“I OWE PRETTY MUCH
EVERYTHING TO BEING IN
BLACK SABBATH.” TONY MARTIN

THE THORNS THAT BIND

THIRTEEN YEARS IN THE MAKING, VOCAL LEGEND TONY MARTIN'S RECENTLY RELEASED SOLO ALBUM, 'THORNS' FINDS THE FORMER BLACK SABBATH FRONTMAN AT THE TOP OF HIS GAME. DICK PORTER FINDS OUT HOW HE PUT IT ALL TOGETHER.

BY anybody's reckoning, seventeen years is a hefty chunk of time. For Tony Martin, those years span the period between solo albums. Released in January, 'Thorns' was billed as something of a 'return' for the man who fronted Black Sabbath for two spells during the eighties and nineties. However, while the richly textured and sonically adventurous new album ends the interregnum that has maintained since he issued 'Scream' in 2005, it's hardly as if he has recently emerged from some sort of creative hermitage. "I work in the studio, so work would come in and then the solo album gets put to one side, and then when that's finished the solo album comes back out and we do a bit more," he explains. "Then some more work comes in – It just took a long time.

"My career's been in the studio; working, writing, and recording stuff, and now my voice appears on eighty different projects. There's a point where people come to you; if they know you, then people come to me and ask me to sing on their material because they know my voice, or they like what I do. I don't do everything, I only sing on the songs that suit my voice – It's got to be in the right key. The lyrics have got to be

something or I'd right my own and they've got to allow me to cut the thing up and move it where I want it to suit my voice."

Having initially started work on a follow up to 'Scream' in 2009, Martin's necessarily piecemeal progress was hastened by guitarist and songwriter Scott McClellan, who co-wrote eight of the album's eleven tracks. "The first track that we did together was 'As The World Burns', because I'd already written 'Book Of Shadows', 'Crying Wolf', and 'This Is Your Damnation'," recalls Tony. "I didn't even know who he was; we met on Facebook. He kept sending me stuff and I was going, 'Who the fuck is this dude who keeps sending me songs? I'd better get in touch with him and see what the fuck he wants!' So, I asked him, 'Do you want me to sing on these, or what?' and he said 'Yeah man, whatever!' So I said I'd do one and see how it turned out, and that was 'As The World Burns'. Fucking hell, it was good – So I said to him, 'Don't tell anybody about this; not your mother – nobody!' So we tried another one and that turned out good. And another one.

"So then I had to work out what to do, and as the collection of songs came together, I told him that I was working on a solo album and asked him if he wanted to be part of that; 'Yeah man, whatever!'

There wasn't any pressure there because I didn't tell anybody that I was doing it and Scott kept it quiet for all that time. He's a really nice guy; very humble and willing. Most people won't have heard of Scott McClellan – he's pretty new to the scene. He's very prolific. The only other person I know who writes the way that Scott writes is Tony Iommi – Iommi's prolific. He jams all day long and all of it's good. Last week, Scott sent me forty-nine new tracks; I can't keep up with him!

"I'm very considered when I'm writing stuff, so it's not like throwing a load of riffs into a bag and shaking them up," Martin continues. "When it comes to lyrics and stuff, I have to work it out. For me, there has to be a story of some kind – There has to be a beginning, a middle and an end, and that end is what I have to work out, to find out where the fuck the thing's going. One of the great things about Scott is that most guitarists just write riffs and then record them onto something with the most basic of titles. Iommi used to do this – We used to go round to his house and he'd have a mass of boxes, all full of cassettes. He'd get the cassettes out and go, 'Let's go through these!' So you'd take out a cassette and it would say 'Riff In E' – that could mean anything, 'Riff In A', 'Fast Riff In E' – you've

got no idea what it is. But with Scott, he actually gives 'em a name! Every single riff that he writes, he gives a name – and sometimes I can use that as a starting point. 'As The World Burns', for example, was just what he'd called that riff. It doesn't always work like that; 'Black Widow Angel' and some of the others weren't like that. For me, getting the lyrics together is considered, so I'm not as swift in my writing process because I can't be."

Aside from Scott McClellan, Tony also enlisted former HammerFall bassist Magnus Rosén, erstwhile Alice Cooper and Rainbow collaborator Greg Smith, and ex-Venom drummer Danny Needham to provide 'Thorns' with its versatile, powerful rhythms, while longtime cohorts Dario Mollo and Tony's son, Joe Harford supplied guitars alongside McClellan. Despite being scattered around the globe, the collective assembled by Martin gelled to produce an album that has exceeded expectations. "You like to think that you're writing a hit, but if we all knew that we were, then we'd all be doing it. So you do the best that you can do and hope everybody else likes it," reflects Tony. "Facebook is a big thing for me; the fans hook up to that and we have a bit of a banter. I've always had a pretty good connection with people, I just talk so it's not hard for me to communicate, and they like that. I haven't had many bad comments, there's been two that I can think of who just didn't like the genre."

"I did a solo album called 'Back Where I Belong', which was straight off the back of being fired from Sabbath for the first time, and I wanted nothing to do with them; 'that's it with this heavy metal shit, I've had enough!' I wanted to do something else, and so at the time that eighties/nineties commercial rock stuff was floating about so, 'right, I'm going to do that'. To be honest, it didn't really fly – I did try; there were some great people on there – Brian May and all sorts of people. But I realised that I wasn't really going to make that work, so I got back into the heavy metal thing because that's where I think I work best."

"While I was doing 'Back Where I Belong', Tony Iommi called me two or three times and said, 'Can you come back?' and I said 'Noooo!' They were working on 'Dehumanizer' and they were having an issue with Ronnie (James Dio), and I don't know what it was, but Iommi said 'It's not going very well, do you think you could come down and try a few tracks?' In the end I said, 'Okay, I'll come along and try but I'm doing this solo album'. So I went down to this studio, they'd had some kind of break with Ronnie at the time, and I had a go at some of the tracks. Unfortunately, that meant me rewriting everything to make it work for my voice, and they couldn't really

do that. I really needed to take it away and sit with it and do what I do, I couldn't just step into Ronnie's shoes, because Ronnie wouldn't allow it for a start, so that kind of quelled that idea. So it wasn't like the link with Sabbath was completely broken; we were still talking about stuff, and then when they'd done 'Dehumanizer' and I'd done 'Back Where I Belong' we got back together for the 'Cross Purposes' thing."

Within the long and twisted history of Black Sabbath, it sometimes seems that Tony Martin's two tours of duty with the band have been relegated to footnotes by those seeking to present a singular depiction of the metal pioneers. "I'd start by saying that I owe pretty much everything to being in Black Sabbath," he declares. "That's the reason why people know my voice. That's not much to complain about, but behind the scenes there was, it was constant hard going. The other thing is, I'm twelve years younger than they are, and I could never keep up with them; they'd already had twelve years more experience than me, their circle of friends was different to mine – they'd hung out with Jimi Hendrix and Brian May, and I'd hung out with Steve from down the road!"

"I could never catch them up, I was always on the back foot and I felt a bit like the much younger brother that had tagged along. The age and experience thing was hard work, the management thing was hard work – getting anything agreed was hard work. They would have this weird thing where if ever there was a problem, they wouldn't speak to you direct; it would go up to their manager, across to my manager, and then down to me – even though they were ten feet away from me on the stage. It only got to face-to-face when something drastic really needed to get done immediately, apart from that it was all done through management. I really wish I'd had the chance to enjoy it more, but I can't complain too much as Sabbath is the only reason that I was known at all, because before that I was just a nobody from Birmingham. It was an honour to be part of it, and I'm really pleased that I was part of the story of Black Sabbath; not that it tends to get talked about or written about, because people tend to miss that era out completely."

"If you're Sharon or Ozzy, they honestly believe – as a lot of fans do – that the whole Ozzy era was the only way that Sabbath should sound. Sabbath did change over the years, not because of me, because that's where Iommi took it – he was the one hiring and firing through his management. He was the only one going forward with the band, so he took it the way he wanted to take it. But then creates different Black Sabbaths: For Sharon and Ozzy, they want to protect the original mark. I understand that, but to me it's ten years of Sabbath's history and ten years of my life and my history

that's just cut out. So you do need to keep plugging away at your thing – I've been doing my thing, writing and recording with all sorts of various other artists and keeping my face out there, 'cos that's the most important thing really. People will forget you if you don't keep your face out there. Even if you just change your profile photo on Facebook which goes across the newsfeeds."

Despite the early success of 'Thorns', logistical considerations have compelled Tony to seek alternatives to taking the album on the road. "I'm not really in a touring mode, for me the past twenty five years has been spent in the studio, he explains. "So I don't have a band, if I go out on the road I have to hire the musicians – if they're available – and then start from scratch; I have to rehearse the whole thing, make the whole show, and then advertise it. So it's a long preamble for me, it really is starting at the beginning every time. It makes a difference with the new album, because of course, the label wants me to get out there and tour. Covid is messing that up slightly, because if our country says, 'yeah you can go' and their country says 'don't come' then you can't plan anything. I just can't see it happening this year, but we've already started writing 'Thorns II', so what if we record another album first and then when we get to tour it, we go out and tour both albums at the same time? It's all up in the air, really."

"I've got to get something visual out there; it's not going to be a tour – for obvious reasons, it's just going to be complicated for me to set that up, so at the moment I'm working on videos. The problem that I've got is that because all the musicians live in different countries, we can't get together very easily to actually do stuff, so we're going to try and assemble a couple of things – do a stream and a couple of things like that. The technology is there these days for you to be able to do stuff like that. The other thing is that there's two labels on 'Thorns'; there's Battlegod, who took up the album in the first place, and then Dark Star, who leased it from Battlegod and released it in the Americas. They said, 'We should do vinyl', but they also said that I've got to take some tracks off of the album. I didn't want to take any tracks off the album, so they said, 'OK, the other option is to write more tracks and do a double album'. So we're in the process of putting a few more tracks together to do a vinyl album later in the year. There's another four or five tracks to go on it to make it a double album. Also writing the next one, 'Thorns II' or whatever it's going to be called. My year is already full!"

'Thorns' is out now on Battlegod Productions



TONY MARTIN

“MY YEAR IS
ALREADY FULL!”