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by [John Parks](#)

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Michael Sweet and Oz Fox by Rokken Randy,
Aug. 11 2012

Stryper have always been one of my favorite bands but have always fit outside the box of the normal rock and roll landscape. I've often wondered why but the answer was *always* right there for anyone who cared to notice. There are so many great bands that have sung about the underbelly of society or evil that you tend to forget that Stryper's message of faith and love was and is basically, shocking. It was shocking in the greedy 80s and it's shocking in the "numb to it all" internet age. The band can hold their own with any national touring act in a live setting and their albums have sold millions but the *most* shocking thing is that in this day and age people *still* underestimate Stryper. The band is doing better than ever, going strong with the same lineup intact from their MTV days and they still hold strong to the same beliefs they always have and are willing to back it up. I can now check off another dream interview after talking to Michael Sweet, read on...

Legendary Rock Interviews: Hi Michael, this show you have coming up in Madison, Wisconsin this Sunday is a free show and it's for Harvest Ministries. This type of thing is something the band used to do a lot of back in the early days isn't it?

Michael: We'd like to do a lot of these shows but a lot of times it just doesn't work out. So often we're either a day late and a dollar short of the Christian festivals like Winterfest or whatnot or we're busy doing other tours whether they're in Europe or South America or places like that. Sometimes we're making a record or it's something else that prevents our schedules from lining up. Our friend Grant asked us if we would be a part of this and we just kind of made the time and said, "Yeah, absolutely". He's done a tremendous amount for us over the years so it was a chance for us to spread our message and the word of God but also pay Grant back for everything he's done for us. It's all about reaching people who might not typically set foot in a church but might want to come down and hear some music. We perform and then there's also a message from Greg Laurie who is speaking via broadcast from Anaheim and then we perform an encore to close things out.

LRI: Speaking of the old days, what crosses your mind or how do you react when you listen to the very early recordings of Stryper or think back to those days prior to the MTV success?

Michael: I'm such an extreme perfectionist so when I listen to the old, old Stryper material recorded the old school way I tend to cringe. I mean, there's a lot of stuff I like about it and think "Oh, that was cool that we were trying to do this or that" but just sonically speaking, it's hard for me to listen to. I love those songs but I'm just being honest. I look back on those days fondly though and now I think "Wow, how blessed were we to be able to walk through those doors and have those opportunities that we had that not a lot of other bands had". We really had a lot of amazing opportunities that other bands didn't have, especially other Christian rock bands. I say this humbly, I don't think there were any other bands from our genre that had the opportunities that we had. For whatever reason, some incredibly magical things happened for us and doors opened for us and when I say magical I don't mean that in the non-biblical sense of the word. It seemed like true magic, miraculous and unheard of events. For example, four longhairs in yellow and black from Orange County who play Christian music being in People or Time Magazine, or having gold and platinum records or going to Japan and having a platinum video filmed in a primarily non-Christian, Buddhist country. Things like that, things that seemed impossible or unheard of but we were somehow able to be a part of. It was really cool.



(Pre- Stryper) Roxx-Regime-flyer-from-an-82-show-with-some-little-band-Metallica-



Stryper live in Japan art

LRI: I always found it amazing how fans in countries like Indonesia or Japan or places like that embraced you guys and I thought that the first time I saw the Live In Japan VHS. Is it a case of music being the international language or is there more to it than that?

Michael: It does surprise me, although music is the universal language and that's very true, there's still no grey area in

terms of what Stryper stands for. Everyone knows what we're about and that we're a Christian band and we take a bold stand for God and his message and that we throw bibles out at the audience. Everybody knows this, so to go to a country like Indonesia which is primarily Muslim and stand up there, throwing out bibles and singing lyrics like "God, I will follow you because you died for me" or "Jesus is the way" or any of our songs for that matter is pretty crazy. By the grace and protection of God it always seems to work. We're able to go to these countries and so far we've never had any issues to speak of.

LRI: When I look back on your early MTV videos for instance, "Soldiers Under Command" it dawns on me that just the idea of a religious band even getting on MTV was such a big deal. Was it ever a challenge making or financing those videos? Was it difficult in any way?

Michael: It wasn't really that difficult actually. We didn't really stress that long or hard over how we were doing things, we just did them. We didn't care or think about all the "What ifs" like "What if they don't play us?" or "What if they don't agree with us" or whatever. We just did the videos the same way we did everything and somehow some way it all turned out. I know *exactly why* we were able to cross those barriers and break down those walls but as to why it was us, we still to this day have no clue. It could have been any other band. There were so many talented Christian bands at the time and why he chose us and why we were so successful we really don't know.



Michael Sweet by Rokken Randy Aug 11 2012

LRI: I've heard people say that about The Beatles, like why *that* band at *that* time, instead of a host of other bands. I'm not saying your music or even career arc is directly similar to The Beatles but more the idea of how you managed to break your band at all. Like you said, there were other acts that just didn't get over like Stryper did.

Michael: Well, you know what *is* similar to The Beatles is the pattern or theme of how we broke through. Kids were

looking for something different and something new and The Beatles provided that. When they came to the U.S. for the first time, the kids went nuts and even though I can't speak for every Beatles fan, I'd like to think that they all internalizing that freshness they were seeing and hearing as something unique and something new. I think that's where there are some similarities in the way Stryper came on the scene 20 some years later. We were an alternative to what was going on for both the Christian kids and the non-Christian kids. The Christian kids could only listen to Sweet Comfort Band or Rez Band and maybe Petra or whatever other Christian bands were around at that time until we came around. These Christian kids were really, in private, wanting to listen to or *actually* already listening to Motley Crue or Van Halen and they liked the whole sound and the makeup and spandex look of that. Then when we came on the scene and offered a lot of that and I think they were really like "Wow!! This is amazing and new and different in terms of all those bands". I think that freshness is similar to The Beatles although I certainly wouldn't put us on the same level ever but I think there are similarities in terms of excitement and impressions from that group of kids. On the other side of the fence, I think that with our positive message and the music being presented in such a different way we were also an alternative to all of the dark imagery and decadence that was really running rampant among all the secular metal bands of that day. We were an alternative for both sides.

LRI: My wife told me a great story of how her grandma who was very religious *buried* her Stryper albums in the backyard because she was convinced they were somehow evil or that your look or sound was somehow evil or worldly. Now I admit, when I heard that, I really laughed hard but then I wondered, Is that kind of misunderstanding even from within the religious community something you've had to battle all these years?

Michael: Absolutely. All the time. People fear what they don't understand. That's been the case since the very beginning, ever since this band was first created. That was certainly the case when Christ was crucified. They didn't understand him so they feared him and because of that fear, they crucified him. That kind of fear has been going on with Stryper from the very beginning. People fear us and don't understand us so they tend to want to do something to speak out against us rather than support us because they just don't understand what we're trying to do. There really aren't a lot of bands they can point to who are doing what we do or have done. Now, there are great bands like Switchfoot and P.O.D. that would be considered Christian bands but Stryper's just always been a little different going back to the beginning. We go out and we play secular festivals and play with secular bands in places like bars and whatnot but at the same time we do the same type of show with the same message whether we're playing with Slayer or Cinderella. We go up there and throw out bibles and speak to people about God (laughs). We just played with Queensryche not long ago and we didn't say, "Okay, we're playing with Queensryche now so no throwing out the bibles or prayer on stage, let's tone it down so as not to offend anybody with our message and get hit with beer bottles". We go up there and it's the same message everytime no matter where we're playing and no matter who we're playing with.





Stryper, all glammed up

LRI: When we interviewed Richard Christy who's been a celebrity on Howard Stern and also a very famous drummer (Iced Earth, Death and Charred Walls of the Damned) and he told us that he considers Stryper among the most rebellious bands ever and he loves you. Does that surprise you or make you smile to be considered rebellious?

Michael: (laughs). I know Richard very well. I don't know if it surprises me but it does make me smile because what we do and have done *is* rebellious. We've been rebelling against the norm and against the standard. If you look at the footage of us playing at GMA (Christian Music Awards) back in 1985 there were people like Michael W. Smith and Sandi Patti and Pat Boone and all these people who were there performing who are great people and staples in the Christian music scene and then there was *us*. We came out with big hair, dressed in yellow and black and played loud heavy metal music. Even though you might look at it now and look at our outfits and say "Oh my, is that cheesy", I know I do (laughs), it *was* unheard of and certainly rebellious in every sense of the word. Even though we were all dolled up and even looked like girls some of the time we were still rebels and definitely going against the system or breaking the mold. It's cool to hear stories like what Richard said. I just did an interview with John 5 and he's seen the band multiple times and still has his Stryper bible! That stuff amazes me. I don't know if everyone is ready to shout from the rooftops that they're fans of Stryper but I think there's a lot more fans out there than you might expect.

LRI: The band achieved a lot of MTV success and sales and I was wondering if it ever started to feel like things were moving too fast or that the allure of success was *too* strong. I seem to remember a couple of the White Lion guys making a scene in the press about how you guys were partying which was somehow viewed as a big deal back then. Did that success ever become too seductive?

Michael: Yeah, definitely. I don't know that it necessarily went to our heads but I do think it definitely was overbearing and hard to handle at times. In other words we were not mature and were irresponsible and didn't know how to handle money or fame and fortune and those things. I have to laugh a little about the White Lion guys saying we were partying. Yeah we were (laughs) so what?? I always get a kick out of that when I hear someone say Stryper were partying. Our way of partying is light years away from Motley Crue and far removed from the norm in rock and roll. Our way of partying or celebrating is maybe having a glass of wine or a cold beer and hanging out with our friends and family. It mostly consists of laughing, talking, hanging out and chillin. If that's considered like heavy partying and "Woah, they're going to hell" then I guess we are because we do that on occasion. We did then and we do now but we don't ever get carried away.



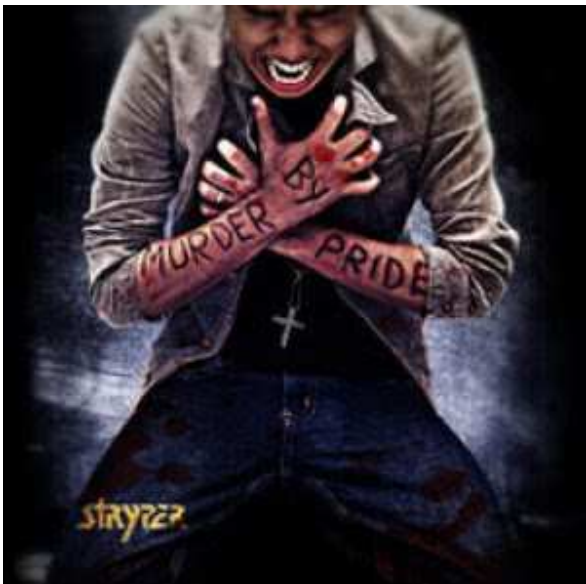
Stryper – Against the Law – Back Cover

LRI: You've mentioned before that the "Against The Law" album was a bit of a misstep in your career, not musically, but in terms of the band's motives overall. To me that album sounds like a band who had grown tired of having a very heavy halo over their collective heads. Was that kind of a reaction to everyone expecting such angelic behavior from a group of young guys?

Michael: Yeah but the difference during the Against The Law era was that I definitely feel that we were crossing the line in terms of the drinking and what we were just talking about. I don't feel like having a glass of wine in the privacy of my dressing room is crossing the line at all, I don't have a problem with it. If thousands of Christians and brothers and sisters in Christ tell me they have a problem with it, that's their problem because I don't have an issue with it at all. Nor does Tim, Oz or Robert.

LRI: Jesus drank wine and there's nothing in the bible about not celebrating.

Michael: Exactly. It does speak about drunkenness and warns of things ruling you in terms of addiction and what not but, you're right exactly. I like the fun of finding the perfect wine and going to find an unusual bottle of wine with my wife and breaking it open and having glass of wine with her. So what? Back in the Against The Law era it was certainly much more out of line because we would get out of hand and have four, five, six glasses of wine or five, six, seven, eight beers or whatever and then we'd be up onstage telling people they didn't need alcohol, they didn't need drugs, they didn't need this or that. Then we'd walk out of the venue and close the bar with them after the show and end up basically falling on our face. That happened *often* and I just felt like we were definitely being very hypocritical during that period in 1990 and 1991. I'm really pleased with the record and a lot of the songs and tones on that record, "All For One" is one of my favorite songs but I just feel that what really killed us at that point was the hypocrisy. People can see through that, they're not stupid and nobody likes a hypocrite. Nobody wants to get behind someone who says one thing and does the complete opposite. That's not cool.



Stryper, Murder by Pride, 2009

LRI: The band's successfully touring and the last album of covers went over very well. I think that a lot of your solo work and the post-Reunion Stryper stuff is some of the best work you've done. Do you think some of it, at times, flew a little under the radar and might have performed differently in a different time and place?

Michael: I do, I do think so. Interestingly though, the Murder By Pride album (2009) actually performed better sales wise than the covers album, The Covering (2011) has thus far. Although, that is just due to the overall slump in sales that is affecting all bands, not just Stryper, because nobody is buying CDs anymore. You release a new album and most people just download the one or two songs they like and that's it, they don't touch the other songs.

LRI: I'm guilty in the sense that I'm not motivated to buy unless it's vinyl and packaged really cool which isn't always possible because not all bands press them.

Michael: That's awesome though and that's the way it used to be, that's the old school way. You released a record and everyone went and bought *the record*. It would be nice if everyone remembered what that was like.



To Hell With The Devil Original Cover



The front and back cover of 2011's The Covering

LRI: Stryper has drawn some attention, both positive and negative, from album art. I remember looking all over for the original To Hell With The Devil cover art and even on your last album, The Covering, there were a small but vocal minority complaining that the art was "evil". Does that surprise you that even cover art is something of a lightning rod with your band?

Michael: It does surprise me a bit and it was an issue, especially with the last album because it didn't have the Isaiah 53:5 and the guy looked sinister so we got some flack for that and I would always ask people who had a problem with it, "Did you turn the album art over and look at the back?" and they would say "no" (laughs). So that was kind of

surprising but some levels of misunderstanding have always been the case for Stryper. Back when people were picketing our shows or speaking out against our shows locally from town to town during the 80s, we would find out that the people picketing had never even seen our show before. They didn't even know what we were about and had no clue and we would go out and offer them tickets to come see the show. Most of the time it would be their first time seeing us and some of the time their minds and their views about us would change but most of the time they wouldn't. They weren't really basing their opinion on our message but more on our sound and our look.

LRI: It's gotta be tough to find the time for other projects but I know Oz has his band with our friend Frank Dimino (Angel vocalist) and you are busy with all sorts of things. What's the latest on your new solo album and book that we keep hearing about?

Michael: It is tough, you just have to find like a little window of time where nothing is going on with Stryper and just kind of jump on those other projects and that's what I did. I went in the studio and started recording last December, usually that winter period is a down time for the band and there's not so much going on so that's when I recorded this latest solo album. I'm really happy I did and I can't wait for it to come out but unfortunately it's been delayed due to the fact that they want to release the book and the record together and while the record is ready the book's not quite ready. I think when they're both available people are going to really enjoy both the book and the record. The record is very much like putting Michael Sweet 1, the first album, my album "Real" and my album "Truth" into a blender. That's basically what you get with this next album because it's got a real edgy side that's very in your face and even edgier than "Truth" and then there's a completely different side of it which includes things like a song called "Coming Home" which is basically a southern rock song with steel guitars. It's a really cool album in the sense that it's very, very eclectic and diverse but yet, it works.



The Japanese issue of Stryper's debut album

LRI: Is your book going to be quite a bit different from the Stryper book, "By His Strypes"? That book had a lot of great photos but not as much in terms of text.

Michael: It will be much different. This is an autobiography on my life whereas the Stryper book was basically focused solely on documenting the band which, as cool as it was, was still lacking quite a bit in terms of story. This book will be more in the 400 page range and with less pictures and more text. It tells my life story from the days that I was a teenager getting into trouble and getting arrested to joining my brother's band and then seeing that change from not just joining my brother's band to watching it become our band. I became the chief songwriter, and singer as well as guitar player and had a lot more involvement as time went on. The book covers all the things I've been through from bankruptcy to losing my wife Kyle to remarrying or even joining Boston and pulling double duty between the two bands. There's a lot of crazy things that happened along the way and lots of behind the scenes things that people have never heard about. It will be a good read.



The unbelievable staging and light rig for the To Hell With The Devil tour!!!



LRI: Lastly, what is next for Stryper and is it true that the great original song “God” from your last covers album will be the jumping off point or template for the next studio album?

Michael: That is the template. The song “God” is definitely the direction I would like the band to go in. We got really positive feedback about that song and the production, style and arrangement of that track. We've also heard over the years that “To Hell With The Devil” is the most popular Stryper record of all time and have seen the stats to back it up so we want to make a “To Hell With The Devil II”. If we can somehow combine the flow and structure of “To Hell With The Devil” with the vibe and energy of “God” we are really going to have something. I've been writing a lot and I'm going to continue writing until all the songs are written and our goal is to start recording it January or February of this next year.

www.stryper.com

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