

PARADISE ROCK

Music that leaves scars

It was 1991. I had left high school already and had just started an apprenticeship at what was then British Rail. The world was still new and fresh and I was unburdened of any real responsibilities. The only reason I got a job is to pay for nights out with my mates, new guitar accessories and my main vice, CD's.



I had long been a fan of Bon Jovi ever since my best friend Stephen had got New Jersey and we had sat for hours playing battle games on his 'Amiga' (Ye olde day equivalent of a playstation) whilst banging our heads along to the great guitar riffs of Bad Medicine, Stick To Your Guns and Born To Be My Baby.

But there had been a rift in the Bon Jovi camp and it appeared they may have split! Jon was clearly not suffering. He had already released the great 'young guns' soundtrack album, and was apparently working on the follow up.

In these days before widespread world-wide webs, music downloads and you tube, I'd had no choice but to wait with baited breathe to see what the remaining 'Jovi guys were up to.

In September it came. The album that would change my life, and remain as one of my most adored albums ever, 'Stranger In This Town' by Richie Sambora.

The mere sight of the cover had me trembling with anticipation, the silhouetted figure of the lonely cowboy under a dull streetlight with the guitar case sat at his feet. God I wanted to be this guy. Richie had always been the coolest one in the band and no one could look this good in a cowboy hat.

Surely the album I'd been waiting to get my grubby mitts on couldn't possibly live up to the pre-conceived expectations I had adorned heavily onto it? I had read the CD booklet 4 times already before I even got home and I loyally followed the instructions Richie had put on the inside cover and dimmed my bedroom lights, lit a single candle and put the cd in the player.

The first chord of 'Rest in peace' faded in, the butterflies started in the pit of my stomach. Where Richie was taking me I wasn't sure at this point. The smooth deep vocal line started to speak of the voodoo woman that was haunting his visions and dreams, the creamy bluesy strat tones flowed sparingly, just enough to fill the gaps between his words, within a minute or so it was starting to fade out, leaving like an unanswered question. Then the sumptuous warm chords began, joined by a bass pedal note building to a crescendo...

'Church Of Desire'. Possibly the most religious way to refer to a bedroom but such a perfect song, the driving rhythm, the pounding single note bass line, the clean jangly electric rhythm guitar holding the thought while the voice and the lead guitar become one, telling the story, and performing their tasks separately but seemingly in unison.

And that is how the album feels, great stories being narrated by mouth and strings, never showy or overstated; always giving you just the information you need to piece together to find the answers.

This showed a change in Richie's overall style, he shifted from big-haired widdly-diddly playing to the mature bluesman he had seemingly always wanted to be.

The title track is pure American blues, with some great lead licks that even Richie's hero the great Eric Clapton would be happy with. Much to my delight, EC lays down the lead in 'Mr Bluesman' actually written about Clapton, and recorded just after the sad loss of Eric's son Connor. Ever the professional, he refused to let Richie change the lyrics "a graveyard full of scars, his life will paint his songs". But then I suppose to have removed the words would have been almost hypocritical.

There is one real Jovi-esque track on 'Stranger', 'Rosie' being a similar sounding to 'I'd die for you' from slippery when wet, but this is in no way derogatory to the album, it's a great rock song with the lady in question being a childhood sweetheart that he has discovered to have been 'dancing' for money, and I don't mean as a professional ballroom coach. This is the one and only track which displays any 'guitar Olympics' but I suppose you have to allow him this slight diversion on the journey. Almost like we've gone a few hours into a drive and he's demanding we speed up otherwise he won't manage to hold his bladder 'til the next services.

'Ballad of youth' had been released as a single. It had not done too well in the UK, but in my ears it was pure poetry. Simple four chord songs always seem to work and this was no exception, although not a chord for chord copy, it was a respectful nod to Behind the Mask (Eric to thank again).

Then there's the strangely rude-but-cheesy 'River Of Love', which as an innocent teenage boy was not blaringly obvious as being anything but a bluesy, upbeat offering and in no way a metaphor for paying extra attention to a ladies' special area. "I wanna drown in your river, take you down real slow. And then your body will quiver and the river will flow" are just a few of the carefully coded lines Mr Sambora left me puzzled by.

Men aren't supposed to cry, so we're told, but I defy any teenage boy who thinks he's found the love of his life, and then cruelly had his heart ripped out and stamped on by the girl, to keep a dry eye while listening to the beautiful ballad, 'Father Time'. From the get go, you know what he's saying, you've been there yourself, he's praying to turn back the clock so he can keep the girl, prevent her leaving, put his wrongs right, just one more day that's all he wants for God's sake, give him another chance please. This is perfection! Even

now if I hear this after a stupid argument with the missus it wells me up, and regardless of my mood the guitar solo always makes the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

Richie, however, doesn't want to leave you feeling all sad and dejected at the end of this odyssey so he gives you a sombre but positive outro just so you know you're not the only one out there who doesn't have 'The Answer' to all life's questions. A soft acoustic song that it turns out he wrote when he was a kid.

My journey with Richie was over, or actually it had just started? For months to come I would dedicate my evenings to learning the songs, playing and singing along like I was sharing the stage with the great man himself. Yet even though I was in a band and we all ended up loving the album, we never tried to play any of the 'Stranger...' tracks together, like this was sacrilege.

While reminiscing over this I have had the album playing and I am pleased to say it still means as much to me now as it did 20 years ago when I first heard it. 20 years and I can remember it like I'm sat there now in the candlelight in my bedroom at my parents' house, in fact I think I can hear my dad telling me to turn the bloody music down. With all due respect Dad, I think we both know I wanted Richie to be my father, and he would tell me to turn it up, so tough sh!t.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'C. H.', written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.