

Striking a chord

Andy Powell of Wishbone Ash talks shop as the band prepares for the annual spring American tour.



Andy Powell Photo courtesy www.wishboneash.com

In 1970, Wishbone Ash debuted on the heady London music scene with a style of rock 'n' roll that blended folk, blues and jazz driven by melodic twin-lead guitar. Original guitarists Andy Powell and Ted Turner pioneered a style that inspired bands such as Thin Lizzy and Iron Maiden. More than four decades and 30-some albums later, Powell continues to deliver the goods with guitarist Muddy Manninen, bassist Bob Skeat and drummer Joe Crabtree. The group tours extensively each year in Europe and the United Kingdom along with annual forays to the United States.

As the Ash prepares to embark on a three-week tour of the States this spring, we had a chance to chat with Powell via e-mail recently about the band's latest projects and other items of interest.

Does the new album have a title yet?

Not really, although we are using the working title of "Searching for Satellites," which is one of the songs featured on the upcoming disc. You can watch us routining this one on the newly released DVD rockumentary, "This Is Wishbone Ash," in which we decided to record the whole process so fans can see how the ideas came about for songs. You can especially see this with the UK single already on release called "Reason to Believe." There's a lot of jamming and you can hear how the riff in this song comes about, together with the vocal.

When will the new CD be available in the States?

We are hoping for the spring / summer.

Describe the recording of the new album: the setting, the actual recording process, any memorable moments, etc.

Well, the whole process kicked off in Normandy, France, where we convened in 2009 to rehearse and write. The location was a beautiful old Norman *manoir* owned by a friend of ours. We took over his private cinema for the writing and videoing. It was a lot of fun with a 3-camera French crew under the direction of Christian Guyonnet. The French are known for their documentary tradition, and this is an excellently produced hour-long movie—a kind of "fly on the wall" glimpse, warts and all, of the creative process. There is some live concert footage, as well, since we played a show while we were there.

Take us through how a song idea is developed into a signature Wishbone Ash tune with its trademark twin-lead guitars.

On the song "Searching for Satellites," for example, it felt like a ballad; so we started this vibe in waltz time and I would mumble words (supplied in this case by our sometime lyricist, Ian Harris) over the chords we were coming up with, until certain phrases became solid. Muddy (Manninen) and I usually agree where guitar parts might fall; and on this one, we started with a sort of descending twin-lead thing.

It's strange how a song or piece of music immediately dictates to us the sounds or tonal colors we might use. It's like a painter with a palette of paints at his disposal. We both at this point, usually think as one; it's uncanny. I suppose we are subconsciously mining joint musical references.

On the song "Reason to Believe," on the other hand, we were jamming and Muddy developed the basics for a guitar line which I harmonized with and then this inspired the lyric for the chorus, which came from (bassist) Bob Skeat. I filled in with the lyrics and melody on the verse and bridge. This song was so strong we decided to release it before the CD and produced a dedicated video, which promoted it in the UK as a single release. It's already received a lot of airplay and has been an excellent promotional tool.

Wishbone Ash's fan base in the States has grown over the 40-some years the band has been together. You tour fairly regularly in the States: Do you see a lot of familiar faces at gigs?

Yes, of course. Our fan base is a real community, and we nurture that. There is a hardcore following, and some of these folks from one country have become friends with others overseas, particularly some British and American fans. I sometimes think I really should be in the travel agency business! We have THE most loyal fans, and I consider some of these folks great friends. It's truly wonderful to have friends and contacts like these all over the world. I never need to feel lonely when I'm

in a foreign country; and some of them also act like a 'street team' for us, fixing things ahead of time and letting to know what's happening where, or perhaps helping out with airport rides and so on.

Wishbone Ash travels extensively each year, and no doubt you guys see a lot on the road. What are the major differences between touring in America and touring in the UK and Europe?

Distance, primarily. Due to population density, Europeans sometimes think that a town that is 50 miles from where they live is on another planet. The people there could, in fact, have different accents or even different languages. There are so many small countries, whereas in the States some of our fans would think nothing of traveling 500 miles to a show. Take this current tour of Germany we are on: No journey has been more than 3 hours a day for the band.

"Reason to Believe," the new album's "single," is available on iTunes and other sites to purchase. How is online music purchasing working for the band?

The music business has changed so much in the last few years. It hardly resembles what I grew up with, at all. Certainly downloading is here to stay. I'm not sure if it promotes the old feeling and love for music. In the '70s, there was great anticipation and excitement for a new record by a band like us. Nowadays, everything is accessible with downloading, and then there's YouTube, Facebook, Spotify, so a lot of that wonder has gone from around the music process and rock & roll. Tom Waits coined the phrase "an absence of wonder," and I think he's on the money there. Society has, in a way, become rock & roll due to 1960s and '70s baby boomer music culture. There's less mystery. I don't think any CDs or albums with the staying power of say, "Argus" or the Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon" will come along in the foreseeable future.

"Our fan base is a real community, and we nurture that."

Andy Powell

Speaking of "Argus," in 1972 that album brought Wishbone Ash great recognition, and it continues to be a fan favorite. In your opinion, what makes it such a perennial winner?

A feeling, an attitude, an honesty; four musicians working together for a common cause and mining a musical seam. The lyrical themes are deep while being flexible and universal in nature, and the music reflects this. I have parents of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq tell me how they've listened to this album or given it to their sons or daughters on duty over there, with its songs like "Warrior" and "Throw Down the Sword." That's really serious affirmation right there. There is, somehow, an incredible ebullience or feeling of hope in our music and at the same time, there can sometimes be a kind of reflective wistfulness that people tune into. You only have to hear the joy in the melody and guitar playing in a song like "Blowin' Free" to get what it's all about. Love of life. Innocence.

Can you comment on what each of the band members brings to the table?

Well I hope the guys will forgive me if I call it as I see it subjectively. They are all rootsy players with similar musical influences.

Muddy Manninen: Shy, intense, sensitive and sometimes imperious. I've never met anyone who listens to so much diverse music, all the time. He simply lives for it. It's his world and it sustains him on a daily basis. He simply could never resist picking up an instrument in a room if there happens to be one there, be it an out-of-tune piano or bass guitar—anything. If he weren't in a band I could see Muddy as a professor of music in some academic establish-



From left: Powell, drummer Joe Crabtree, guitarist Muddy Manninen, bassist Bob Skeat. Photo courtesy www.wishboneash.com

ment, lofty and remote but much sought out by his students. He has that wonder and passion about music I talked about earlier. A soulful guitar player and a hell of a songwriter.

Bob Skeat: We share the same East End Cockney roots. He's loyal, solid as a rock with a strong female side—as a lot of male musicians are, and vice versa. A sweet, sensitive guy and a great musician; a natural. On the other hand, you would not want to cross path of righteousness with Bob. You'd lose. He has and understands groove completely, and I'm not just talking musically—Bob grooves through life. Some of this is an illusion he nurtures, though.

Joe Crabtree: A man child. Very positive attitude and opinionated, without being combative. A strong character with linear intellect with flashes of wackiness. He's a physics graduate but he could have turned his mind to anything, particularly the technical. The fact that he learned his drumming skills on the side while pursuing academia and does the job faultlessly, tells you a lot. He has to be busy all the time, programming, structuring, consuming. He's a kind of product of this age. Technical, whimsical, nerdy, hyperactive. If he finally settles down, his partner would have to be an exceptional person, too. He travels constantly and is constantly wanting to discover new music, new cultural stuff, new sports, new foods. He will organize pilgrimages to some esoteric gelateria, be it in Soho or Milan, if he believes it to be the ultimate ice cream experience.

Will (son) Aynsley be performing with Wishbone Ash on the US gigs? What has his recent presence brought to the band?

I haven't asked him yet. It would be great, though. I would never pressure him. He's a brilliant musician and I know the guys like what he has brought to the table. With his abilities on percussion, it's enhanced the groove element in Wishbone big time, and he and Joe get on real well. God forbid he gets behind a drum set, too. We'd have two of the best in the business. However, with the current addition of his guitar playing, mandolin and keys he's also opened up our sound big time.

On the other hand, I know he is bursting with ideas and has a serious agenda to fulfill for his own musical reality. Production is in his sights. He's definitely open to throwing the odd song our way, though. There's a new one of his that I particularly like, called "Take it Back."

Visit www.wishboneash.com for complete tour schedule and more information.

