

Interview

HIGHWAY CHILE

(Questionnaire by STEFAN)

A talk with



ERNST VAN EE (Drums)



STAN VERBRAAK (Vocals)

METAL TO INFINITY

A while ago, Alfie Falckenbach of Mausoleum Records sent me the new album of a Dutch, legendary Heavy Metal band Highway Chile. Yeah, I know that some of you out there never heard of this formation because of your age. The younger generation of Metal maniacs probably never heard of Highway Chile but that's no problem - check out the following interview and find out more

about these guys past and present... be sure, we also bring on a few words about their plans for the future. Highway Chile - a band to remember...

Q: Hi guys, Stefan from Metal To Infinity here - a pleasure to meet you after so many years, how things going at the moment?

Ernst: Things are going very well, thanks. The new album Keeper Of The Earth is getting very good reviews (yours was one of them, thanks very much) and feedback. The current line-up of the band works out great and we are planning loads of gigs for later this year and 2009.

Stan: We find ourselves in a very exciting situation, now that we have the new album out. Just like the old days!

Q: Let's start this interview by going back to Highway Chile's early days of existence. Tell us how the band has arisen those days.

Ernst: Well, you mentioned Martin Mens in your review as being the former guitarist of Ear Danger in the 80's, but, this was a small mistake. In fact Martin was Highway Chile's original founder and guitar player in the early 80s. He was a big Jimi Hendrix fan, so that explains the band name. The first few years the band operated as a three piece. Next I got involved with the band, and later on Ben Blaauw joined. Then there were 4 of us. At that time we didn't have a real vocalist; we did the vocals ourselves (Martin and even me). We thought it would be nice to have a real vocalist and after some auditions we found Armand van der Stigchel.

From that moment on things started to go very well for the band. It became too time-consuming for Martin in view of his other activities, so he decided to leave the band. We found a replacement in Peter Barnouw and with him we recorded the album Storybook Heroes. We did extensive touring and played with big bands like MSG, Motorhead, Accept, Twisted Sister, and many more. Due to management and record company problems, after two years the band split up. Ben Blaauw and myself formed Helloise, and Highway Chile moved on for another year with a different line-up, but then stopped for good. Until 2002, when Martin and I decided to start again.....

Q: I've experienced the late seventies / early Hard Rock and Metal scene myself - while looking back to it, we have to admit that all is totally different right now. I have a lot of respect and dignity to show to the nowadays HR / HM scene but my heart says: The music scene will become never more like it was back then. Agree or not?

Ernst: Of course I agree, times change, that's a fact!! Metal and hardrock as we played it in the eighties isn't as big anymore as in it was back then. At that time it was easier to play many gigs and to get airplay on radio and even television. The heavy rock music has evolved as well; there's more styles in heavy rock these days. Some of them do very well, like Gothic, Death Metal and Black Metal. In the nineties heavy rock got pushed aside by Grunge music.

In the last few years however you see a change in heavy rock again... older bands are coming back and do well again, there's a heavy rock revival going on. And that's a good thing!! Also THE chance for younger heavy rock lovers to get in touch with this music again.... and I'm sure they will love it!

Stan: It is just great to be on stage and to see an audience existing out of almost three generations, all banging their heads and enjoying our show. I am always amazed to hear from today's young kids how much they know about the eighties heavy rock & metal scene. When I was their age I was never even remotely interested in my dad's music... Things have changed quite dramatically indeed.

Q: I still remember your first album entitled "Storybook Heroes" - released in 1983 (I guess), it's still one of my favourite works loaded with memorable songs like 'Highway Chile', 'Jesse James' and 'Headbangers'. Can you guys remember the first days after the release of this album? How was the response to this output?

Ernst: The response was great. The album was produced by Alfred Lagarde, who was also a popular radio DJ. We got loads of radio airplay, did some TV shows, and played the clubs like crazy. The album since then is being looked upon as a historic heavy rock album. People still talk about it nowadays.....

Stan: In those days, I was the singer in a band called "Zebra". I remember very well how the "Storybook Heroes" release was the talk of the town.

Q: Any idea how many times "Storybook Heroes" has been sold?

Ernst: Don't really know, but very many, that's for sure.... You didn't have the phenomena of downloading and copying in those days, so, everybody who wanted to listen to our music had to buy our album.

Q: In Highway Chile's history, several vocalists joined the ranks before they left again after a while. Armand, Sav and Robert were a few names I can remember. Why did these guys break up actually - no longer interested in playing Metal music or what?

Ernst: The ones I've worked with are Armand van der Stigchel and Robert Soeterboek. Armand was still in the band when I left together with Ben in 1984. Later on he was replaced by Sav Pearse, an English vocalist. Armand moved to the USA and became a famous chef cook! Robert Soeterboek was the singer for our reunion tour in 2002, he was with the band until 2004. He also sings on the live album "On the road again" which we recorded in 2002. Robert, of course, is well known from the Ayreon projects and some other bands. He is still active with his own band. In 2004 Stan Verbraak (Helloise) replaced Robert and he still is our singer.

Stan: That's right!

Q: Highway Chile had a brilliant guitar shredder on board those days, his name was Ben Blaauw - only 18 years old then. During a contest, he even won a price - more specifically, a Gibson Birdland from legendary Ted Nugent. Please, tell us some more about that.

Ernst: Well, that's about the story, you told there..... Ben was a young guitarplayer and was one of the guys in this big radio contest. He also was the lucky one who won the signed guitar. It was in the beginning of Highway Chile..... so, playing this guitar was one of the showelements in our shows!

Q: Am I right when I say that Ben is still active in Helloise now?

Ernst: Well, Helloise is not really active any more at the moment but a few years ago we recorded an album called "Fata Morgana" as a three piece (Ben, Stan and myself). We hired Robbie Valentine to add keyboards. Ben played all guitar and bass guitar tracks. 2 years ago we even recorded 5 more songs, again with the three of us. It was planned they would be released together with a compilation of older and rare songs on a farewell album, but then unfortunately our record company got in financial trouble and as a result those plans are still on the shelf.

Stan: We hope that, some day soon, we will find a way to get that final release out. For our fans, because we would like to say "thank you for all those wonderful years and goodbye", and for ourselves, because we think the 5 new songs that Ernst mentioned are wonderful pieces of music that deserve to be heard by many.

Q: The mentioning of Helloise brings me back to some other, awesome bands based somewhere in The Netherlands. Along with them, the Dutch Hard Rock and Metal scene was impressive to me in the eighties era. Troops like Bodine, Picture, Vengeance, Vandenberg, Vortex, Black Widow,... I'll never forget these bands, some of them are still intact - unfortunately a few are disbanded. Can you tell me more about their current situation?

Ernst: To begin with, Vengeance are still going strong; they also reunited some years ago with the original singer Leon Goewie and have released some new albums over the last few years. Another one is planned for October. Picture have also reunited last year, in the original line-up with singer Pete Lovell. The rest I don't know. We are developing plans to do several package shows with Vengeance/Highway Chile and Mennen during 2009.

Q: Highway Chile's second album came out in 1984, entitled "Fever". This album sounds very well but according to myself, not that 'big' like "Storybook Heroes". Can you give an answer to it?

Ernst: FEVER was a mini album,...there was 2 songs on it that we had already recorded during the Storybook Heroes sessions, and some live recordings we did for Dutch radio..... So, it wasn't really the 2nd Highway Chile album, just something in between albums.

Q: Sharing the stage with icons of Metal like Motorhead, Whitesnake, Accept, Michael Schenker, Y and T,... definitely are unforgettable moments to you. What about the feelings inside looking back to those days?

Ernst: It's great to share the stage with your idols of course, who wouldn't want that.... Well,we did. Some of them ,that is. And I remember some of the guys in those bands were really great to us, guys like Lemmy, Udo and Michael Schenker.

Q: Unfortunatley, 1984 was a tragic year for Highway Chile because of the split up. Drummer Ernst Van Ee en guitarist Ben Blaauw steed out of the ranks and the curtain fell down over the existence of Highway Chile. Sad but true, we lost a great band and the future was very uncertain for the band. More clarity about that should be good to know.

Ernst: I allready talked about this situation earlier. I can go a little deeper into the matter. In fact we had a management and record company at a certain moment that had different plans with the band than the ones we had for ourselves. They wanted to go more commercial. You can hear the change on the last HC album "Rockarama" that was released after Ben and I had left. Some of the bandmembers went along with the ideas of the record company, but Ben and I didn't. So we decided to leave and form Helloise. In fact with Helloise we continued on with the ideas that we could no longer realize with Highway Chile.

Q: A deadly silence descends over Highway Chile but every band with a lot of courage, energy and the will to survive comes back with a vengeance one day. Also Highway Chile fought back - in 2002, they reformed and toured across Holland to promote their "On The Road Again" live album. What about that guys?

Ernst: Due to reunions of bands all over (we also did a Helloise reunion in the nineties) Martin and me (we always stayed in touch....) got the idea to revitalize the band because we had the urge to play all those great songs one more time on stage.... We invited guitar player Atilla Szabo and bass player Edwin den Haag, with whom I had played in Blind Justice, and singer Robert Soeterboek, a friend of mine, and whom I had recently worked with on my solo album "Dance With An Angel". It was easy to book an extensive reunion tour in Holland and at the end of the tour we recorded the live album On the road again.



From L to R: MARTIN MENS (Guitars/Keyboards) - ERNST VAN EE (Drums) - EDWIN DEN HAAG (Bass) - STAN VERBRAAK (Vocals) - GERT NIJBOER (Guitars)

Q: After an absence of so many years, I'm sure the rush was back while standing on stage to play your favourite style of music so called Heavy Metal.

Ernst: Of course myself and some of the other members never stopped playing music. However it was great to play the old songs again after so many years. It was different because we had developed as musicians over the years, but, you can still hear the strength of the songs, even though they were written in the eighties.

Q: Fans were glad to see you guys back on the trax - we all were looking for news regarding a brand new album to release. Feedback optimal, Highway Chile in good condition - new songs were made and we were served according to our requirements. The new Highway Chile is out now via Mausoleum Records entitled "Keeper Of The Earth", this output is a very welcome present

for all those into old school inspired Heavy Metal music. Congrats from the heart guys... please introduce this new masterpiece yourself.

Stan: With "Keeper Of The Earth" we wanted to capture the energy that we experienced from playing the new songs on stage. This energy comes from playing music that you really like, which 'in my case' also means the music that I grew up with. So the album has a very strong eighties feel; trying to sound 'modern' wouldn't have been so much fun. The production does sound modern, though, so we expect the album to appeal to multiple generations. The new songs are very powerful, yet subtle in their harmonic arrangements. I think we succeeded in making it clear the Highway Chile is definitely back, and here to stay for a while.

Q: Legendary drummer Ernst Van EE returned to the Highway Chile ranks and that's great - from where his decision and who are the other guys active on the album?

Stan: To summarize: On the album you can hear Ernst van Ee on drums, Edwin den Haag on bass guitar, Gert Nijboer on lead and rhythm guitars, Martin Mens on lead and rhythm guitars, as well as backing vocals, and Yours Truly on lead and backing vocals. There are guest appearances by original band members Ben Blaauw and Peter Barnouw. The intro to the album was composed, played and recorded by Cees Kieboom (Cloudmachine; arrangements for After Forever).

Q: In my review, I've mentioned the fact this album is awesome - I even mentioned Highway Chile sounds more powerful than ever before. Agree with that or not?

Stan: Absolutely! The songs are powerful, but also the (positive!) energy level within the band, so between band members, is probably higher than it has ever been. Again, we noticed this when playing live, and I think we succeeded in capturing that live energy and power on our album recordings.

Q: "Keeper Of The Earth", a product delivered by Mausoleum Records - how did you get involved with CEO Alfie and this label?

Ernst: Alfie also released my solo album "Dance With An Angel" in 2000. He has been, and still is, a pioneer in Heavy Rock music over several decades with Mausoleum. We needed a label that understood and could promote our new album, so, he was the first one I thought of to send a promo of the new album . He was immediately very enthusiastic about it, so, the deal was closed very rapidly....

Q: 12 songs on the album, one by one well inspected by myself - I'm pleased with the final result and damn good to hear a

reworked version of 'Headbangers'. Highway Chile won't be Highway Chile without playing this song, right? This must be a very special track for the band I suppose.

Ernst: It was an anthem for many fans in the eighties and I guess the yell still works these days. Of course it's still on the playlist for our live shows....

Q: Also a cover song from Rainbow - 'Long Live Rock N' Roll', legendary to the bone... many people say: "never touch the original" - I say: "no one can reach the quality of an original song but if it's played very well, my heart says yes in full dignity". Highway Chile's version is a real good one, believe me on my word. Are you guys Rainbow worshippers?

Stan: I have always been a huge Dio fan. In one of the first reviews that were written about my vocal qualities it was said that I sounded like the younger and light-footed brother of Ronnie James Dio. In those days they couldn't have given me a bigger compliment. Besides that, 'Long Live Rock 'n Roll' is a rock anthem that is so much fun to play.... and so we did many times, and then decided to record it because we felt it added to the value of the album concept.

Q: Favourite songs on the album are! Why these?

Ernst: I like all songs but these are my favourites: Keeper of the earth, Run away, Dreaming of Heaven, Stealing with pride. All because of the raw power, good playing and singing and you will like them the first time you hear them !

Stan: same list, however in Ernst's comments replace 'singing' with 'drumming'....

Q: How much time have you spent to complete the album?

Stan: I lost count. Years to reform the band, and transform from a reunion concept into a contemporary rock act; months to create momentum for making the decision to go into the studio, and create the album concept; weeks to record.... It only took days to get a record deal, once the album was ready to go.

Q: Is this the ultimate comeback for Highway Chile? How the near future looks like - more albums planned to be released the next couple of years?

Stan: If we manage to keep the momentum that we have at this moment I would not be surprised if we found inspiration for

another album very quickly. It all depends on everything. Today, our first priority is to support the current release, and to enjoy the interaction with our fans during our promotional shows.

Q: How will you take care of all the facts that has to do with the promotion of "Keeper Of The Earth"? By the way, where is the title based on?

Ernst: The promotion is done by Mausoleum, ourselves and our agency MAM agency,....also we have a Highway Chile Streetteam that is doing a lot (you can find them on Myspace <http://www.myspace.com/highwaychilestreetteam>)

Stan: The title of the album is obviously taken from the title track. When we wrote that particular song, the lyrics that I wrote were inspired by the mood that I was in at that time, and very strongly influenced by the atmosphere that was created by the guitar riffs. So there was never a predetermined idea or message that I wanted to get across. It was a completely intuitive process.

I prefer to work that way, rather than trying to force-fit an existing piece of text into a song. In those days there were many bad things happening all around the world. The "Keeper Of The Earth" lyrics are based on my hope - and belief - that there is a greater power somewhere that will ultimately put all things right. I am a strong optimist in that respect.

Q: Fans can catch the album in Europe via Mausoleum Records - what about the rest of the world?

Ernst: Mausoleum has very good distribution channels in the whole world, so the album will be available everywhere. Just type Highway Chile - Keeper Of The Earth into Google, or any other search engine, and it will return many sites where you can order the album. Of course you can also order through our band site at: www.highwaychile.nl, and from the Mausoleum shop on the internet. And off course also in the recordstores everywhere.....

Q: I've seen a lot of bands in my life - damn pity I never saw Highway Chile on stage. Any opportunity to see you guys on Belgian ground one day?

Ernst: Yepp, very soon already. We have a CD release party planned at "De Rots" in Antwerpen on November 15th (www.de-rots.be). In the afternoon we will do a small in-store presentation (in the CD shop at the same place) and in the evening we will play a full Highway Chile concert (supported by "Lost Insanity").

More Belgium shows will follow in the near future....

Q: A couple of decades of existence brings on loads of good, and also bad memories. Let's forget the bad ones and focus on the most remarkable, memorable moments... a few you'll never forget are...

Ernst: Loads of great shows, recordings, meeting fans everywhere, playing on big festivals with other great bands.....and, of courseGIRLS !!!!!

Stan: Where? Where?

Q: That's the way we reach the end of this interview guys. I'd like to thank Alfie (Mausoleum) and the entire Highway Chile crew for the collaboration. It was a real honour to have this talk - all the very best with everything on the list to work out... if you want to leave a final message, go for it guys - check it out: "We are headbangers - we'll never let you down", Thanx again!

Ernst: And that's a fact !! Meet you somewhere on tour and don't forget to regularly check our website at: www.highwaychile.nl or www.myspace.com/highwaychileofficial

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