

Paul Thies: With a body of work that includes 25 solo records over three decades as front man for the seminal rock group, King Crimson, and a resume of working with the who's who of rock royalty, including David Bowie, Frank Zappa, Paul Simon, and Talking Heads. Our guest place in the Pantheon of popular music is [00:00:30] as truly unique as the inventive sounds and songs he produces with his guitar. We're speaking of the one and only Adrian Belew.

I'm your host, Paul Thies. On this episode of If/When, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Adrian to learn his keys to successful collaborations, how he cultivates new ideas and his thoughts on the proper balance of imagination, technology and technique. Well, Adrian, thank you so much for joining me and sharing your thoughts on creativity and applied technology. And [00:01:00] to start us off, I wanted to ask you, when should we expect to see your new album Elevator come out?

Adrian Belew: It's been slowed down time and time again by just happenstance. All of a sudden, "Oh, it's time to rehearse for the Remain In Light tour," or, "Oh, the engineer can't work for the next two weeks," or blah, blah, blah. I'm hoping to get it out in September because I hope to do some solo touring near the end of the year. And the [00:01:30] one reason that I wouldn't bring the record out is if

Paul Thies: So, in your own body of work, you really set yourself apart from other guitarists, I must say, by the imaginative way that you handle the instrument and you approach it. And one way I would sum it up, it'd be how is he doing that with a guitar? So, following your career over the decades, it was always fascinating to me that the predominant feature was your technique and your ingenuity much [00:03:30] more so than just specifically technology itself. So, this first question is how do you strike a balance between technology versus imagination and technique?

Adrian Belew: I would say that as important as technology and techniques that you may develop along with it are, they're both completely in service to my imagination. So, that's how I avoid letting them get in the way [00:04:00] or drag me off course. They're only there as tools. And thankfully, during my career, the music technology industry has grown enormously. And it's to the point now where you can't really... you can't keep track of it all, it's changing so fast.

So, you pick and choose the tools that you like, and you go with those. The techniques usually are things like what am I doing with my hands? Well, I've figured out a lot of interesting [00:04:30] little things you're probably not supposed to do with the guitar, like pressing a string between the pickups and making it squeal that way or bending the neck or abusive things to do to your guitar. But they were, once again, they were all kind of in service of well, I want to make my guitar do things and sound like things.

Sound has always been my motivating force, even more so than just music. Early on in my career, I was trying to make my guitar sound like things, [00:05:00] like can I make it sound like a bird? Or can I make it sound like a train or a whale? Or whatever. That was, for some reason, that was important to me because I liked the idea of that. That you weren't just playing notes anymore or chords or writing songs. That was all very important too. And I kept at that, continually, but there was also this desire, well, what else can I do that no one else is doing? Because in the world [00:05:30] of guitar playing, there's a lot of great guitar players and a lot of guitar players at home who probably are never going to be heard and maybe they're better than I am. So, it's very hard to find your own little corner of real estate where you can do something that sets you apart. And once I realized it, people liked it if I threw in a car horn into one of my guitar solos. Then I said, "Okay, well, that's great, because [00:06:00] I can do that." I have a mind for understanding sounds.

Paul Thies: Well, and it's just that kind of tapestry. It's like it's something about it. It's almost like impressionist painting, right? I mean, it's like... And then on the converse, especially a lot of the work that you do with King Crimson, it's very rigorous and it's very muscular guitar playing, but it's just that ability to paint a musical picture, if I may, with those [00:06:30] sounds and the way that you can really bring that out is just fascinating.

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Adrian Belew: Well, it imparts a bit of personality, I think too, because I like to have fun with things. I can be serious and I can play very serious music, but I also like to do it with a smile. So, you can play with things and have fun with it. You don't have to just be all scales and shredding.

Paul Thies: Yeah, yeah, no, for sure. I understand [00:07:00] from a previous interview, you said that you really don't listen to new music very much. And the reason for that is to avoid it being unduly influential on your own music. It reminded me of that Harold Bloom's Anxiety of Influence where it theorizes that poe

In terms of inspiration though, it's just life to me, it's everything. I do a lot of book reading. When cinemas were available, I saw a lot of movies. I'm thrilled with nature. I go out and look at birds and I just love what nature says [00:10:30] to me. It's like a spiritual thing, I suppose. And those things add up to some... While I'm doing that, I'm thinking, "Well, what do I want to say about this? Do I have anything I can talk about?" So, that's where you get songs like the Lone Rhino or something like the song Birds or any of those things. They come from real life and my imagination, both being put together.

The one thing I would say [00:11:00] to people is to archive things. We were just talking about an iPhone. It's a wonderful tool for archiving. I have a program on there, Record, so if I'm working on something, I press that and I'll play my little guitar part or what it is, whatever it is that I've just invented or the new melody line. And I've got it there. I can work on it further, but even if I don't, it's there and I can return to it a year from now. And the same is true with [00:11:30] lyrics. I write all my ideas down in my notepad, hundreds of things in there. And because that's the one thing that you have now that you didn't have when I was starting out. You didn't have a really easy way to archive what you were doing and not lose something in the picture. That's very important.

Paul Thies: No, that's great. That's great advice. Now this next question is a preface to you're... Right now, you are on tour or you're doing shows with [00:12:00] Turkuaz and of course, Jerry Harrison of the Talking Heads and y'all are commemorating Remain In Light. And of course, especially just starting off your career. I mean, you play with Frank Zappa and David Bowie and the Heads and King Crimson, and you've been on all these albums and stuff. So, beyond just your own solo career of 25 solo records, you've done all these collaborations. And so, can you speak to us a little bit about what you see [00:12:30] as being the keys or the keys to successful creative collaborations?

Adrian Belew: Well, I'll start with Jerry and myself and Turkuaz. The thing I love about it is there's no ego. Everyone is really a team trying to purvey this joy of this music that was made back in 1980, that Jerry and I were both involved in. And that [00:13:00] really makes everything so easy. So, the first thing I would say about collaborations is there's a need to surrender. You have to surrender over to the collaboration. You can't say, "No, this is going to be my way." No, you do that on your solo records or something else. But when you're collaborating, what you're trying to get is a combination between you and the other collaborator or collaborators, where you're exchanging ideas and views, [00:13:30] and you're utilizing each other's abilities to create something that on your own, you wouldn't create.

And going back to technology for a second, one of the things that's really wonderful with the current state of technology is, like I said, a lot of people have studios in their own homes now because it's become affordable enough. And just recently, Todd Rundgren called me and said, "Hey, I want to collaborate with you. And here's what I want to do. Do you have any unfinished [00:14:00]

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Adrian Belew: I'm only joking. But if you guys are going to think about it, please do it before I'm on to the next planet. Would you please? I'm just kidding here. No, I have [00:17:30] been able to be a part of some albums I had no records... I had no, yeah, I can't believe it myself sometimes.

Who would set out and say, "I'm going to play with David Bowie and Nine Inch Nails and then I'm going to go work on Paul Simon's record and do a movie with Laurie Anderson." And so on and so forth. I don't know how that stuff happens. All I know is each one of them, I tried to do my best. And that's what I love about it, was that people keep giving me the chance.

[00:18:00] When it comes to people I'd like to work with, I can't really say much because the people I would like to work with, if I say things, it would sound pretentious. I would feel pretentious to say those things. But the people that would really throw me are the people that I grew up listening to, and they're big stars. Bigger stars that I'll ever be. So, it [00:18:30] sounds funny to even mention it. That would be the biggest thrill for me is just to rub elbows with someone like Ray Davies or Jeff Beck, or either Paul or Ringo, Bo... Just people that meant so much to me.

In terms of now, though, the honest collaborations that I can do, like what I just did with Todd, for example, I welcome those things. They're just sitting there. They have to come to me. [00:19:00] I'm not go out and try to make them happen because I already have a lot of things I'm doing. But when one presents itself, the first thing I do is I say to myself, "What can I contribute to this? Is it something I really feel I can do something for or with? And do I like what it's going to be?" And that's my criteria. It's never, "How much is the money?" Or anything. It's time. " [00:19:30] Do I have time to do this?" But other than that, I welcome collaborations, but you just have to look at them and imagine what they're going to be, I guess. And I can't sit here right now and say, "What if I got together with so and so? Wouldn't that just be great?" I have no idea.

Paul Thies: Yeah, interesting, yeah. So, at this point in your creative career, what is something you've learned along the way that you wish you had known as a young creative artist just starting out?

Adrian Belew: [00:20:00] There's so many lessons that I could pass on about being in the music business and things like that, but the music business is ever changing anyway. So, I think you'll have to learn those for yourself. Two things that came to my mind, though, when I read this question was I wish that somewhere along the line I had forced myself to take lessons on piano. Now, I'm totally self-taught. And [00:20:30] I love that. And when I work with Frank Zappa, I asked him, "Should I try to learn to read music?" And he said, "No, it's great the way you have it now. You understand it your own way and you break the rules your own way." But I do wish that I had taken up piano lessons because first of all, I would be a good pianist by now. And I'm sure my writing would be increased by 50% at least. And when I hear someone who does write well on the piano, [00:21:00] I

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