

CULT KING

The unpredictable path of Faith No More's Mike Patton

→ TEXT BY SCOTT MORROW · PHOTOS BY NICK AITKEN · PHOTO ASSISTANCE BY LEANNE COWAN ←





“Sometimes it’s just not worth harboring any bullshit and [instead] trying to move on. And musicians move on by making music together.”

Some musicians achieve broad success, some attain cult status, and some defy all explanation. And then there’s Mike Patton, who somehow has done all three.

Even if you don’t know the Faith No More front-man’s immense, indescribable catalog, chances are that you’ve heard his voice—whether from FNM’s mega-hit “Epic” in the late 1980s or from his voiceover work in the movie *I Am Legend* or in video games such as *Left 4 Dead* and *The Darkness*.

But mainstream work aside, Patton’s pipes have been some of the most called-upon in underground rock and beyond over the past 25 years. Whether shrieking, crooning, chanting, or bellowing, they have been utilized with equal aplomb, from the accessible (Tomahawk, Peeping Tom) to the avant-garde (Fantômas,

Mr. Bungle, John Zorn’s Moonchild). They’ve been guests on dozens of other albums, from Björk to Sepultura, and they retain one of the widest ranges in modern music.

During that time, however, one important part of Patton’s résumé—being a full-blown cinema songsmith—has gotten buried behind his status as vocalist extraordinaire.

In actuality, the iconoclast always has been a skilled songwriter and arranger; much of Faith No More and Mr. Bungle’s catalogs have Patton credited or co-credited for the music. But the past decade has brought his compositional skills into sharper focus, as listeners have come to hear the schizophrenic yet meticulously arranged Fantômas, the densely layered Peeping Tom, and a handful of film scores and orchestra-backed performances (including Mondo Cane, covering Italian oldies).

Listeners, in fact, might be surprised to learn that Patton—who seldom is seen on stage with more than a microphone, a sampler or keyboard, and effects pedals—is a reclusive multi-instrumentalist. In the privacy of his home studio and with a war chest of sounds, he played nearly every instrument on his genre-hopping theme-and-variation scores for *A Perfect Place* and *Crank: High Voltage*. And even though Patton records many parts note by note to cut, arrange, and layer, the results are startling—particularly on records with minimal vocals, complex musical moments, and a glut of timbres.

“To me,” Patton says of the soundtracks, “what I’m trying to do—which is more important than saying, ‘Hey, I did all this myself’—is to create an illusion that it was done by a big band, or a bossa-nova quintet, or a hardcore band. I don’t want it to sound like one guy working on a nerdy-ass keyboard.

“I had friends ask me, ‘So how do you become a film composer?’ And it’s like, ‘I’m not a film composer; I just write music!’ It just so happens that I can make it work for film. I’ve never really felt that distinction.”

“I can hear [the music] in my head, which is something that’s difficult to explain even to more learned musician friends. John Zorn, for example—we’re really good friends, but there’s one thing that he grills me about, like, ‘How the hell do you hear this stuff?’ He knows, because he hears it, but he writes it down. And I say, ‘Well, I hear it, and I’ve got to do it.’ So I’ll leave myself a voice message, or pick up a keytar—anything that I can get my hands on—and it’s like, ‘Okay, that’s documented; I’ll come back to that.’”

A development of the past five years, Patton’s film scores—created without traditional music notation—have expanded an already overflowing credit sheet, and the work continues to roll in. He released a score for *The Solitude of Prime Numbers* in 2011, and one for *The Place Beyond the Pines* (starring Ryan Gosling) was paired with a limited release of the film in spring of 2013.

But if this sounds like Patton is trading his front-man prowess for ProTools, know that he sees the scores as an extension of what he already does. (And it’s not like he turned in his rock-and-roll membership badge. Read about the reincarnated Tomahawk on page 65.) He’s

quick to erase the line between “songwriter” and “composer.”

“It’s funny,” Patton says. “I had friends ask me, ‘So how do you become a film composer?’ And it’s like, ‘I’m not a film composer; I just write music!’ It just so happens that I can make it work for film. I’ve never really felt that distinction. Maybe that’s also to my detriment. With a lot of my bands, people have told me, ‘It sounds like soundtrack music.’ It’s just kind of a matter of where your head is and how you want to implement it.”

Incidentally, the front-man follows in a long line of rock musicians who have made the jump to the big screen—a group that includes Danny Elfman, Hans Zimmer, and Trent Reznor. But whereas composers like Elfman and Zimmer frequently perpetuate the standard of the sweeping, orchestral film score, Patton operates in the margins, crafting ambiguous material that can stand alone or enhance a scene.

These blurred boundaries have been a Patton staple from the earliest days of Mr. Bungle, the Naked City-inspired outfit that he started in high school with guitarist Trey Spruance

(Secret Chiefs 3) and bassist Trevor Dunn (now in Tomahawk). Even a band with mainstream success such as Faith No More—which toured with some of the biggest rock bands of the 1980s and ’90s—finds Patton cooing one moment before screeching the next.

In retrospect, it’s remarkable that a band like Faith No More climbed (however briefly) to the top of the pop mountain, nearly cracking the Billboard top 10 with *The Real Thing*. The success proved to be a double-edged sword, thrusting a young Patton and co. into financial gains but also the pressures of touring life and a regular release schedule (not to mention interviews with MTV host Riki Rachtman). In dealing with the stress of sudden fame and gigantic world tours, Patton carried antics off stage—including, most famously, hiding feces in vents and hair dryers in hotel rooms on the road. He has since abandoned the crude pranks, but age has not precluded him from shocking crowds during Faith No More’s recent reunion tours: for a finale in Budapest, he swallowed and regurgitated the two-foot-long shoelace of footwear that was thrown on stage, and in Brisbane, he commandeered a video camera and exposed his manhood to a crowd of thousands.

MORE MIKE

Tomahawk

Hotchet in hand, Duane Denison’s super-group returns with new scars to show

Mike Patton might be the face of the alt-rock super-group Tomahawk, but the man and the muscle behind its weighty songs (and metallic, twangy guitar tones) is Duane Denison, the guitarist for 1990s cult favorite The Jesus Lizard. Assembled in 2000 with Patton and Battles drummer John Stanier (and now with Mr. Bungle’s Trevor Dunn on bass), his resurgent Tomahawk is back in a major way, dropping *Oddfellows* last winter as the band’s first album since 2007.

Denison is a Renaissance man in his own right—he originally studied classical guitar; he led the jazz-rock Denison-Kimball Trio (which began as indie-film music); he has a new neo-chamber project with Alexander Hacke (Einstürzende Neubauten) and Brian Kotzur (ex-Silver Jews) called The Unsemble; and he has played in Th’ Legendary Shack Shakers, USSA, Silver Jews, and Firewater. If that’s not enough, Denison also writes music for film, theater, dance, and TV, and he recently became involved with Empty Mansions, the art-rock side project of Interpol drummer Sam Fogarino.

Tomahawk, however, continues Denison’s rock-’n’-roll legacy, surrounding his punchy guitar work with Patton’s dynamic vocals, Stanier’s kick-driven beats, and now Dunn’s thick grooves.



“For me,” Denison says, “this is a chance to rock out—get up there and play some riffs, make some noise, and crank up those kinds of sounds. And having Trevor aboard really kind of amps things up too.”

Dunn’s influence on *Oddfellows* (released by Ipecac, Patton’s label) is harder to discern, at least partially because the material was begun before he was in the fold. But beyond his chops, Dunn’s ability to nail and contribute to the material within a short period of time really benefitted the album’s recording.

“Trevor can play literally anything,” Denison says. “He’s almost astonishing, and he can get it together so fast. A lot of these songs actually were started before any of us knew whether Trevor would

do this, so that necessarily wasn’t in mind on some of it. But for instance, there’s a song called ‘Rise Up Dirty Waters’ that’s right in his power zone. A lot of rock bass players maybe would have struggled a bit with that song, but with him it was very natural and easy. And then going from that to something riff-heavy like ‘Oddfellows’ was very easy.”

Dunn, known for his jazz abilities, begins “Rise Up Dirty Waters” with a walking bass line. The nimble melody is joined by an organ and an old-school rock-’n’-roll lick before moving into a weirdo gospel-rock part, and it’s one of the most unique tracks on the album.

But that’s not all that’s different about *Oddfellows*. Patton channels 1950s pop and

oldies influences in different spots—what Denison has called “really heavy Beach Boys” and “almost Greek choruses”—and coos on tracks such as “Stone Letter” and “White Hats / Black Hats.” Denison has the usual dose of Western twang to go with his fuzzy and wailing effects, but “I Can Almost See Them” plays up the drama with bells, timpani, and echoing vocals. It’s quintessential Tomahawk—in a way that you haven’t heard.

“We didn’t want to make an album that’s just more of the same,” Denison says. “At this point, that would have been ridiculous, taking five, seven years off. I’m all for continuity—I think that this album kind of starts where the others left off. But it went to a couple places that we hadn’t been yet, and that’s good.”

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Yet even more startling might be the fact that he did the reunion at all. For years after Faith No More’s breakup, the anomalous vocalist practically disowned the band’s material, noting that if a reunion occurred, it wouldn’t be with him on the mic. Eventually, though, the members got back in contact with each other, and a series of concert offers in 2009 proved too tempting to pass up—particularly when it meant reconnecting on a personal level. And, in the process, Patton has come to find a new perspective on the band that propelled him to stardom.

“I think,” he says, “that this Faith No More reunion taught me a pretty good lesson: ‘Hey, these things that you’ve done in the past aren’t your enemies.’ They’re not something to run away from but rather something to just understand. If I’m going to write a piece of music tomorrow, I’m not really going to understand it for another 10 years—maybe, if I’m lucky! The reunion with Faith No More was a really eye-opening experience because it taught me how to appreciate the music that I’ve done from a distance. When you’re in it, you’re too close. When you’re writing it, it’s still like a part of you.”

Time, distance, age, maturity—whatever the difference, hardcore Patton fans were just psyched to have Faith No More back on stage, even if an emphasis on global tours left just a handful of shows, mostly on the coasts, for the United States. And the better news, if you

heard about the band performing its 1995 album *King for a Day, Fool for a Lifetime* in its entirety in Chile in late 2011, is that Patton hadn’t just reconciled with the material. After reconnecting at a few John Zorn concerts, he and Bungle co-founder Trey Spruance—who played guitar on *King for a Day*—were back in good graces after a lengthy falling-out.

“We hadn’t spoken in years,” Patton says. “You know, something that seems really important to you maybe one day at one certain snapshot in your life loses significance after a certain number of years, and you kind of forget why you’re mad at somebody, or you forget what happened. And you realize there’s only a certain number of true compatriots and friends and family that you have in this life. Sometimes it’s just not worth harboring any bullshit and [instead] trying to move on. And musicians move on by making music together.”

That, of course, begs the Bungle question. Most of the genre-demolishing quintet is spread out, including Dunn in New York and Danny Heifetz and Clinton “Bär” McKinnon each in different Australian cities. (Interestingly, Patton and Spruance are the nearest geographically, respectively in San Francisco and Santa Cruz, California.) The two old high-school friends already have recorded together again—a Secret Chiefs 3 cover of Scott Walker’s “Jackie” (itself a cover of Jacques Brel’s “La Chanson de Jacky”) with Patton on vocals. So is a continent-crossing reunion possible?

“Who knows?” Patton asks. “It certainly doesn’t seem like it’s on the tip of anyone’s lips, but I could have said the same thing—and, in fact, I did say the same thing—about Faith No More, and that happened. And I think it happened for the better.”

Whether or not fans get that reunion to end all reunions, Patton (still just 45) continues his unrelenting workload. He might be enjoying more time at home—constructing film scores helps with that—but he’s certainly not slowing down or mellowing with age. In just the next year or so, there are plans for the long-awaited Nevermen release (with Adam “Doseone” Drucker from Themselves and Tunde Adebimpe from TV on the Radio), a second Mondo Cane installment with a live DVD, and a load of performances with Zorn. There might potentially be more Fantômas too—and not even the all-electronic, MIDI-based concept that has been brewing for years.

No, Patton may be no more likely to do another Fantômas album (or Peeping Tom, another volume of which is planned) than he is to reinvent himself as a country crooner. His tastes and musical proclivities are as varied as anyone in the industry—who else can sing for The Dillinger Escape Plan, reverently cover The Bee Gees, and perform with chamber ensembles? Patton has built a career out of keeping his audience guessing, and being surprised seldom is so fun. Just be ready if he ever plays the Academy Awards.

