

Making Of 'The Hand' - Hedgy

Paz and I had just done two Stronghold albums based on large scale warfare between two 'would be' kings so we thought that we'd done enough songs about battles and medieval artillery. There are only so many songs you can write about a Ballista. Ok I take that back, you could do a whole album just called 'Ballista' but you get the point.

So, I had a think about what to do next, how to veer away from the large scale storytelling of armies fighting and make it a little more personal. Strangely the idea came whilst driving down the motorway, a story of betrayal and revenge, you may argue that I should have been thinking about driving but scarily I do my best thinking whilst driving. The bare bones of the entire story came together very quickly and I rang Paz up and said "I've had an idea"

The next thing I did was fire up Word (Well I went home first, there are limits to what I will do whilst driving, but this isn't a novel) and wrote down song titles with a paragraph under each telling the story, real bare bones stuff like "Power struggle – Two houses fighting for power". The song titles would change later but for now they were descriptive and allowed us to see the scope of the thing. Paz and I threw some of the ideas away, I reworked bits of it and expanded the ideas, fleshed them out. Bear in mind that we don't do anything in complete isolation so it's all collaboration, but the lyrics and story were my responsibility. Frankly I got the easy bit; Paz had a thousand hours of music to come up with.

Pretty soon it became apparent that to do it justice we were going to need quite a few songs and as Stronghold don't do two-minute thrashes we quickly overshot the running time of a CD, Paz had musical ideas flying out of him and he produced all sorts of stuff which he'll tell you all about in his writings elsewhere.

For the first time I was going to play the drums on the album, previously we had used a drum program. Anyone who knows anything about recording will tell you that recording drums is a complete nightmare and takes almost a day of studio time just to set the damn things up so the traditional route was out. The answer came from Roland (The company, not the rat (English joke)) and I purchased a TD-9KX electronic drum kit.

I think it is the SX in the USA but same kit. I added a second crash cymbal and an extra tom pad to max out the kit expansions. This is a fantastic instrument; the KX has amazing mesh skins so there are no rubber pads wearing my hands out. I can have this set up in my house connected to a laptop running Sonar Producer and play as loud as I want but to the outside world beyond my headphones it sounds like I'm just tapping. On the inside though it sounds like anything I want it to.

I spent a long, long time playing with different kit set ups trying to find the sound I wanted but it always eluded me until I happened upon V-Expressions

Ltd (<http://www.vexpressionsltd.com>) these guys model famous drum kits from all over the world onto Roland kits, bundle them up and sell them as downloadable sets at very reasonable prices. I grabbed a couple of sets and found a whole new world of sound. The kit I use for the recording of 'The Hand' is a mish mash of several different bits from famous kits. I cannot recommend these folks enough so if you have a Roland kit then go and visit them at the website.

Ok, so, once we had a working version of the music Paz made up a vocal melody and sent it over to me, we work independently for some of the time and pass songs and musical tracks back and forth using 'Dropbox'. Paz is a master of the melody and the vocal melodies you hear in the songs are 90% the melodies Paz makes up, he has no words to work with, he just sings any old crap that comes into his head so I can hear how and where it goes.

I then sit down with my headphones on and write the lyrics, replaying the song bit by bit to make sure that what I'm writing fits the melody Paz has laid down. I have a very clear idea of what I'm writing by this point and some of the songs wrote themselves in 30 minutes, unfortunately one or two of them are stubborn and take nights of furrowed brows and frustration but they get there. I only write a song once, I've not rewritten any of the songs again from scratch, at the most I've changed a word here and there because it didn't fit, or was too difficult to sing. By difficult I mean you'd be coming off a syllable and having to contort your mouth to fit the next one and it sounded crap, so out it goes. You can write anything but you definitely can't sing anything.

Then it's over to Paz's house to record a demo version of the lyrics, I assume his neighbours hate me by now, a demo version of the music is done by then and we can see for the first time the shape of the song in its entirety, Paz mixes it and it goes onto the iPods to be 'learnt' so we can re-record it properly, a song you know is far easier to record than one you're doing for the first time. It can be months to go through these stages which may seem a long time but we have lives and jobs and computer games to play.

A new twist this time was the addition of a female voice, we've not had that before and at some points it's been like writing a musical, trying to come up with counterpoints between the characters. When Paz does the vocal melody he doesn't do it with 'who sings what, where' in his mind so it comes as a surprise to him when the words land on his desktop. Writing for someone else has been surprisingly fun, I imagine them singing it as I'm trying to make the words fit.

I decided to write a short story to tell the tale (elsewhere on this site) so that if anyone wants to know exactly what is going on instead of deciphering the lyrics they can, it's not necessary, the meaning of life is not contained therein but it's there if you want it. I'm not comfortable with ambiguity; I don't like films that leave you guessing; I like to know exactly how the story ends, so if you're like me have a read.

Another thing we don't like are fade outs with the song unfinished, we like our

songs to end properly, we'd have to have a very compelling reason to fade out a song, it always sounds to me like the band couldn't come up with a proper ending so took the easy way out. Bah!

Writing this down separates out a lot of the work but in reality we both have a hand (No pun intended) in every aspect of the thing, Paz is far more musical than I will ever be but I still have an opinion and make suggestions and Paz will do likewise, with the lyrics or direction the narrative should take, I don't pick up a guitar and suggest a different riff, mostly because I have no idea how to play one, but I will say if something is too quiet, heavy, long, short or crap. Paz does it with my drumming and after all that's how music is made isn't it?

My personal influences that may have had an input into this album are the collected works of Arjen Lucassen, Opeth, Yes, Genesis, Judas Priest, Porcupine tree, Riverside, early Iron Maiden, Dream Theater and probably lots of others that I don't realise are there. I'm not saying 'The Hand' is as good as those afore mentioned bands or even 'in the style of' but these bands almost certainly had an influence on what I was doing. Paz will have a completely different list as I went a bit prog rock.

Just a quick addendum to point out that my music collection goes from Norwegian Black metal with the likes of Trelldom all the way over to Coheed and Cambria whilst passing through most genres in the rock/metal stable with the exception of AOR which I wouldn't sully my ipod with. However these more extreme bands aren't conducive to a Stronghold album so stayed locked in my head.

I hope you enjoy the music and give it away to your heart's content, we did!