DURAN DURAN – PAPER GODS - June, 2015

*Dan Cairns, London, UK*

How many bands can you think of that, decades into their career, are still capable of springing surprises, of blazing fresh trails, creating new music that is up there with the imperishable songs that first propelled them to fame, fortune and critical acclaim? It’s an interesting exercise, and a brief one – a list you can make on the fingers of one hand. In 2015, Duran Duran will cement their place in that illustrious grouping with a new studio album – their 14th, no less – that burnishes their role in the story of pop, and puts the many young pretenders whose music they have influenced firmly in their place. As part of a major new recording deal with Warner Bros. Records, *Paper Gods* starts the next chapter in the history of the band, with a host of A-list collaborators – including Nile Rodgers, Mark Ronson, Mr Hudson, Janelle Monáe, John Frusciante, Kiesza and Davide Rossi – joining the party. “We found a whole new level of inspiration on this album,” says the band’s keyboardist and aesthetic overlord, Nick Rhodes. “We were talking the other day about artists that have been around for a long time – our contemporaries and some older ones, and there’s only a handful of the latter now, still out there playing shows. And we were saying, ‘What albums did they make this far down the line that we own?’ And that was a difficult one.”

Simon Le Bon has a theory as to why the band are still friends, and still making vital, compelling music, 37 years after Duran Duran first formed in Birmingham. “I think with some artists, as they get into extended careers, it’s like climbing up a rock-face – they start to look down. If you do that, musically, you’re pretty much dead in the water. You can hear it when someone’s thought about it just a little too much, or tried to write something that they think people will like, rather than something that turns them on. We’ve always written music that turns us on; we’ve never tried to tailor it to any kind of taste.” Band politics play a role, too, he says. “I think part of our strength is the tension in our music, which probably comes from the tension within the band. When you’re young, you’re not scared of upsetting people, and actually we can still push that sometimes. But harsh words are forgiven. Ultimately, we know that we will fight for each other, whatever the situation. We stick together. Nick and I can fight tooth and nail, over a lyric, or a musical part. And you would think in those moments that we hate each other’s guts, but really we love each other.”

“We have been through a lot together” John Taylor adds, “and now it’s very much a case of ‘Know thyself.’ At this point in our career, it’s about being really in touch with your identity, and drawing strength from the knowledge that you’ve all been on this incredible journey, a journey that is still going on. I think you can hear that in the new songs; we’re still learning things from and about each other, personally as well as musically.” For John, the most satisfying thing about the new album is that it captures the duality, the sense of conflict, at the heart of the band’s music. “In the original blueprint for the band, there was this dark, slightly progressive side to us, and it tended to get a little bit trampled on by the poptastic aspect. In that desire for pop satisfaction, you can forget what you set out to do. The new record really goes back to that strange early Duran mix: the hard-edged pop, coexisting with this dark, weird, experimental side.” “That’s something that’s essential to all of us,” agrees Nick. “It’s great to be able to lift people’s spirits – and your own – with a strong shot of pure pop, but the world we live in isn’t all just made of that stuff, so it seems natural to me, and has done since the very beginning, that we have kept, and still keep, one foot in the darker, more Gothic side of life.”

Early sessions for the new record began in 2013, with Mark Ronson and engineer Josh Blair once again joining the band in their south London recording studio, as they had for 2011’s *All You Need is Now*. When Mark was called away to begin working on his own album, Josh picked up the reins, ultimately co-producing nine new tracks (six with the band and three alongside the band and Mr Hudson), and engineering the entire record. Nick says of the collaboration “He really was our anchor throughout the project, helping to sculpt the sound of the album and presiding over every detail. He was there from the start, and that gave us a feeling of continuity from the last record.”

In April 2013, having created the backbone of the album, Duran Duran hooked up with the Kanye West/Jay-Z collaborator Ben “Mr” Hudson, and the sessions caught fire once again. “Ben was our manager, Wendy Laister’s suggestion,” recalls Roger Taylor. “We can be strange about working with other people sometimes; we tend to think we can do just fine by ourselves. But then we discovered he came from Birmingham, which was always going to prick our interest. We asked him to come in for a few days, and he ended up staying, that first time, for more than a month. He brought this incredible energy to the sessions. It was an amazing time.” “When Mark had to go off to work on his own project,” says Simon, “it felt a bit like going commando – uncomfortable but quite free as well. And we really got into it, and spent between six months and a year doing it like that. And then along came Ben Hudson, and he really turned things around. His response was incredibly positive, you know, ‘This is great; you’ve got the basis of a record here.’ And that’s when it started to feel like an album, rather than just a collection of songs. What he was really interested in was capturing the spontaneity and freshness.”

Ben Hudson’s involvement would signal a step change in how the band approached the album, which would become one of their most collaborative to date. Mark Ronson returned, with, recalls John with a chuckle, “the stipulation that we had to get Nile in, too, who he hadn’t worked with before, though we, of course, had. That led to a brilliant experience – it was like watching the two of them doing show-and-tell, with the rest of us as the lucky recipients of the musical discourse taking place between them.” Mark, Nile and Mr Hudson co-wrote and produced, the tracks ‘Pressure Off’ and ‘Only in Dreams’. The former, which will be the album’s lead single featuring Nile Rodgers, harks back to the taut funk of Notorious, with a sensational vocal from Janelle Monáe, and a chorus that is audacious in its effortless immediacy. “If only,” laughs Nick. “The one thing it wasn’t was effortless. But the idea was to make it sound like that.” “*Notorious* was a strong touchstone for the band,” says Roger. “*All You Need is Now* definitely reflected our earlier albums, but our starting point here was *Notorious*. We’re fortunate to be able to be inspired by our own back catalogue – not many bands can say that.”

If ‘Face For Today’, ‘Butterfly Girl’, ‘Danceophobia’ (with a guest appearance from Lindsay Lohan as the voice of the ‘doctor’) and ‘Last Night In the City’ (which features a killer contribution from Kiesza) are among the album’s other big-chorus bankers, and ‘What Are the Chances?’ the song that rolls back the years to the yearning and beauty of ‘Save a Prayer’, elsewhere the new album displays a degree of experimentalism that will thrill all Duran fans who look to the band for darkness and shadow beneath the dazzling bright lights. ‘You Kill Me With Silence’ may boast another huge chorus, but at heart it is a deeply unorthodox and sonically engrossing song, with a disorientating closing sequence that reinforces the band’s art-pop credentials. Simon’s verdict on it sums up the freedom and inquisitiveness that still define the band’s music-making. “What I love most about the track is that it opens like a Snoop Dogg song; you almost expect a rapper to kick off, and instead what you get is Simon Le Bon channelling Nancy Sinatra.”

The title track (which features Mr Hudson’s vocals alongside Simon’s) is similarly daring, its polemical lyrics set to a soundtrack of fierce originality and menace. “It’s a song about our obsession, with money, with material things,” says Simon, “and how we trivialise our lives, and humanity. It’s definitely the angriest song on the album. Usually I tend to be much less specific when it comes to lyrics, because I like it when people hear our songs and create their own stories around them. But in this case, I wanted the anger to be unambiguous: ‘The slaver in a sweatshop, putting trainers on your feet.’ It’s about the price that we pay, that everyone pays, for the world as it is now.” “That song is definitely one of the strangest things we’ve done in a long, long time,” says Nick, “in that it’s a real journey, a strong lyric – we don’t often get into social commentary with songs, but this one felt like it needed that. And I do love the fact that it’s so unpredictable.”

John Frusciante’s playing, on ‘What Are the Chances?’, ‘The Universe Alone’ and ‘Butterfly Girl’, is equally unpredictable, the former Red Hot Chili Pepper twisting the songs into new and unexpected shapes. “We’re all so in awe of what he does with the guitar, his style is completely unique,” says Simon. “As a musician, he’s fearless, and that’s incredibly inspiring.”

On ‘Change the Skyline’, alongside keyboard parts that totally drive the song forward, Jonas Bjerre of Mew adds a different, other-worldly vocal flavour, his voice blending beautifully with Simon’s on the instantly gratifying chorus.

With a headline set at Bestival, in the UK, in September, and a world tour being finalised, Duran Duran will hit the ground running this autumn, and, armed with one of the most visceral and daring albums of their career, they are ready for the challenge. Ask the band where that energy and creative inspiration still come from, and all four come at their answers from slightly different angles – but the message is the same. “It’s down to drive, individually and collectively,” says John. “We’ve never stopped feeling that we’ve got something to prove. There’s always a temptation to sit back on your laurels and feel like you can start relaxing. But that means you’re ready for the deck chair. I’m still running as fast as I can.” “It’s the best thing we do,” says Roger. “We’ve all tried different things, but this unit, making music, is still the most powerful. Come rain or shine, something happens.”

Simon stresses the importance of patience and commitment. “We’ve allowed ourselves the time to make music that we can be proud of. You see some bands having a reunion and then banging a new album out six months later, and you can’t help but think: ‘Is that as good as you can be?’ We knew the new record wasn’t ready for a long time, that it wasn’t good enough. We wanted to make something we could be proud of. I judge what we release by my favourites albums by other artists: Patti Smith’s *Horses*, Neil Young’s *Harvest*, Rolling Stones’ *Let It Bleed*, *Blue* by Joni Mitchell, Lou Reed’s *Transformer, Aladdin Sane*. Those are classic albums. The only rule is, it’s got to be up there, it’s got to be music you can live with for the rest of your life.”

For Nick, it’s about holding on to naivety, to innocence. “When you become too self-conscious about things, that’s when you start to make records that sound like parodies. And that’s the time to stop, for sure. One of my favourite Picasso quotes is when he said that it took him most of his life to learn how to draw like a child again. There’s real truth in that; the purity you have when you’re a young band and you’ve got those blinkers on, and you believe in what you’re doing so much. You don’t question yourself, you just keep moving forward. And that naivety-driven mind-set is what’s created some of the greatest records ever made, the first albums by the Velvet Underground, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Doors. The best first albums tend to have that untarnished finish to them. Ok, you can never really get that back, but you can at least understand what it is and try to utilise elements of it. And that’s how this record felt. We sat down and went: ‘Let’s wipe the slate clean here; what shall we do now?’

“I know that artists always like to say this,” Nick continues, “but truly, without a doubt, I think this is our best record since *The Wedding Album*. Being in this band is like being married to three other people. We take care of each other, but we also argue all the time, too, particularly about music. But that’s essential. If you don’t argue, don’t have strong opinions, that’s when you end up producing junk. We fight for every note – literally. But it doesn’t feel like a battle. It feels like a victory.”