

TONY LEVIN MARCH 3, 2002 PART II

Welcome back. Rather than go into the usual preamble, I will refer those checking this out for the first time back to part I of this interview and pick up where that left off.

JR: Let's talk about the Discipline album. As a Stick album and as an album in general it seems to be landmark both for the four players on it but also for a lot of King Crimson fans and Stick players.

TL: I think Discipline was a breakthrough album in a number of ways, certainly with my era in King Crimson. That was our first album, in ways it was the best and in ways it has influenced us ever since. Even though we're too progressive a band to go back and do more of that style, at least intentionally, we still want to have that kind of breakthrough on every album. And that's something you really can't even do, let alone every time. That's partly why King Crimson is such an intense band and being in it is such an intense experience.

Having started out in '81 with Discipline, we wanted to match that with a breakthrough album each time and that creates a lot of pressure within the band. It was also for me, the first chance to really bring, well not the first chance, I had brought The Stick to the fore with Peter Gabriel, but it was featured a little bit more. There were some instrumentals and in King Crimson people pay more attention to the members of the band than they did with the Peter Gabriel band. So, it was a good chance to bring The Stick to the front of people who were listening to progressive music's attention, and it's a really great instrument for that, of course. Especially on Elephant Talk, where the piece started out on Stick and then the Stick figure, which could have been somewhere in the background, became the main feature of the piece. It helped The Stick to become known and it was an interesting breakthrough in a few ways.

JR: What did The Stick bring to that album that the bass didn't? Why did that end up becoming a Stick album rather than more of a bass album?

TL: It's hard to say. It's usual that with King Crimson I'm always looking for something new, something that I haven't done before, some breakthrough in my little niche of the Crimson world, which is the bass end of things. The Stick was it at that time.

Not just The Stick but I started playing much busier than I had before. Generally, I think of myself as a simple player. I play the roots of things and hold things together. I did do that some with King Crimson. That was my first year playing with Bill Bruford, who is a very creative player who plays very busy. He also plays a lot of cross-rhythms. Instead of trying to hold things down, literally and figuratively, with a big fat bass sound and a few notes, as I would have (actually that was my first inclination with all the new Crimson material for that album) I gradually, in rehearsal, thought I would experiment with things I had never done, like going with Bill and maybe playing his part that's in 15/8, playing that with him with one hand and doing occasional 4/4 things with the other hand on the low notes.

Things like that are just the kind of stuff that you do in that band. I've never stopped appreciating how lucky I've been to be a band that creative that you can try out things like that.

JR: Any favorite players you've played with over the years? Anybody stand out?

TL: Too many to list. I've been very lucky. We're talking King Crimson! Each of those guys has been an inspiration to me. And Peter Gabriel also, there has been so many. Just on the drums there's been 6, 8, 10 great drummers that I've been lucky to play with and who have influenced my playing. I not only learn from each guy that I play with who's a great player but I've been inspired to advance in my playing.

I also really enjoy it. I have this knack for being able to enjoy it when the music is good. Some musicians who play very well don't seem to have that knack. It's possible to let the difficulties of the music business and the things that happen on the road that are less than perfect make you forget how lucky you are just to be making good music.

JR: That obviously leads to the next question. Is there anybody that you would like to work with that you haven't yet?

TL: Of course, yes, plenty, both famous and not famous.

I used to answer that, until now, David Bowie. But I had the chance to work him just recently, so I'm very pleased to say that I have worked with David Bowie. It was a great pleasure.

All-time, my first choice clearly would be Jimi Hendrix. But it's too late for that.

Barring that clear first choice, I would say anyone who is making good music of any kind. I'm that greedy a bass player. I don't imagine for a minute that I could play it all but I just love being in good musical situations. Sometimes I hear new things on the radio that are really hip and part of me wishes I could be a part of that.

JR: What are you listening to these days?

TL: The thing I've been inspired by lately is a surprising choice. And it's a kind of music that I frankly can't play. But I'm really, really impressed by the D'Angelo album called Voodoo. Pino Paladino's playing on it is not the kind of playing that I do. It's not the kind of playing that anybody is doing. I think that it's truly wonderful and radical and I'm surprised that it hasn't turned around a whole way of thinking of a lot of rhythm players. Maybe some day it will. That's my favorite bass playing in a longtime. I just admire Pino so much for being able to do something so radical.

It's radical without playing a lot of notes. What's unusual about it is the choice of placement of the notes and the rhythm feel of the time. I'm sure it's not right for

everybody. Some people I've played it for just shrug their shoulders and say they don't get it, they don't hear where the beat is. But I think it's wonderful.

I'm like a kid going to school. I'm listening to this, trying to figure out how I could ever play it, if I were even ever to get a chance to play that style of music.

JR: With all the different hats you wear, from author, to photographer, to bass player, is there a difference in the different creative endeavors? Are they approached differently or are they extensions of the same creative force?

TL: That's a very good question. I'm afraid I'm not a real organized guy. If you could see the desk that I'm sitting at doing this phone call, you would understand why I can't answer that.

I just love doing creative stuff and if I get the chance to, I'll do it and once I start something, I'm pretty good at focusing on it and sticking with it and finishing it.

Next to my desk, I'm looking at an easel with nothing on it and I'm realizing that I haven't had time to even begin a painting in quite a while. But if I were to begin it, I probably would neglect all of the business and the tour and the album release and finish that painting. I'm pretty good at that.

I don't really know about all the different fields because I'm really exclusively just a musician. I just do art for fun, not professionally at all.

JR: But you're releasing stuff and making the album covers, so there is a professional side to it.

TL: Well, as far as the book, I'm the kind of guy who writes stories for himself anyway. So, I had been writing interesting things that had been happening to me on the road since I was a kid. It was a pretty easy job to compile the best of these vignettes and anecdotes. I did that pretty quickly and easily but for me it didn't feel complete as a book. It just was too homogenous, so I decided the book just need something else.

First, I tried to write it as a novelette that took place with a rock band on the road and mix the fiction with the true. I thought that would be nice but after years I gave up on that because I'm just not that devoted a writer.

I collected some essays I had written about music and about bass playing. I tried to have the book be all about the bass and the life of a bass player but actually not have anything specific about teaching, like how to hold your hand on bass or The Stick. It was a collection of essays, anecdotes and stories.

JR: But still there is some great stuff in there. I'm thinking particularly the chapter on listening, actually listening to what you're practicing rather than just practicing. That's brilliant stuff.

TL: It was a while before I would let myself write a chapter about practicing because, as I said, I didn't want to say anything specific about how to play. I wanted it to be more for the advanced player about the whole principle, the overview of being a bass player.

But when I thought about it, I realized that I had a great deal of experience about practicing. I've been doing it since I was a little kid—I was a classical player when I was young. Even though I don't practice much anymore, through those long years I did learn some good practice techniques. Again, not specifically how to hold your hands but what not to do and how to teach your fingers to do the right thing and not inadvertently teaching them to do the wrong thing.

Likewise, it's a valid thing that you're training your ear as you're practicing. I really avoid training my ear to hear the wrong thing and to accept it. To extend that theory, I really think that in some small way, it's harmful to listen to bad music. I'm not too successful at it but I try to avoid situations where I'm stuck listening to rotten music. I know I don't like the music but I think in some way it affects my judgment about good music.

The place where this particularly comes up is in the gym. I like to workout and a very high percentage of gyms have an appallingly bad idea of what music should be playing—LOUD—while people workout. I'm always looking for gyms with no music. I can't expect them to play good music, so at least no music, or at least music with no bass drum pounding for aerobics classes.

JR: What's coming up after the solo tour? What's on the horizon?

TL: A typical thing for guys like me; it's a little hard to look past the current project. Even the current project, you're never sure it's going to happen until you're on your way and doing it.

I'm touring with my band until May 5th, that's for sure. After that we're going to take a little break and both Jerry Marotta and I are going to tour with Vonda Shepard, the singer, in Europe for a couple of months. I'm trying to book more touring for my band when we come home in July, but it's too early at this point to say if it's been booked. It will be on the Web site if it does get booked.

That kind of stuff takes some time and has to go through agents and stuff. My hope is to go back to more touring in the summer and in the fall, who knows. Anything could happen. There's even the chance that Peter Gabriel will finish his album and start touring. In which case, I would think that that would be my first priority. I would love to do that.

JR: I've heard that that's in the works. That's certainly an exciting thing.

TL: I think I probably hope for it more than anybody because it's just my very favorite thing to do. As much as I will love touring with my own band and I will do that after Peter's tour or between the legs of it, in my life I've had the most fun touring with Peter.

JR: Any plans for more writing or film-making? Is there a Beyond the Bass Clef part II in the works?

TL: Not in the works at the moment. In the works but again there's this desk piled up with 'in the works' things. The most exciting thing that's coming from me, and it's very late, at least two years late, is a book of my journals and photos from 19 years in King Crimson. It's just about done. It's all written and I have all the photos, I just have to compile it.

That little job of compiling it has now been a year-and-a-half sitting on the desk.
(Laughs)

I would say, sometime in the next—I won't even put a time on it—but sometime coming from me will be a really neat book showing a lot of my pictures not only of the band on the road but places we've gone to. Accompanied by some pretty funny journals that I've kept through the years.

The whole band was aware, especially in the '90s, that I was keeping a journal with what I called the "quote of the day" with either a bad review, which we got a lot of (and we really enjoyed saving and savoring our bad reviews in King Crimson; there are a lot of those) and if anything funny would happen during the day, the guys would come to me and tell me about and I would put it in my computer as the quote of the day. I became the archivist of the band.

JR: Yet another hat you're wearing.

TL: Yea, and this is the inevitable book that really has to come out from that.

JR: I read that you want to get on your Harley with your Stick on your back and record with American musicians.

TL: That was going to be my follow up to World Diaries but some other stuff came up. This happens a lot to me. I won't give up on it. Maybe some day I will.

JR: What's left for you to do?

TL: I don't really think in those terms. I'm like most musicians, I really focus on what I'm doing and kind of forget about the past and only think about the next thing when I surface, when there's a little free time and I look up and I think, "Oh, maybe I should finish that book." But I don't really have a plan that goes even six months ahead, let alone years ahead.

JR: So I guess there's no point asking if there's a retirement plan or hobbies that you're saving?

TL: No, I haven't thought about that. The more I tour with my own band, the more impossible it would be for me to ever retire and that's probably a good thing. As anyone knows, you don't make much money playing clubs especially when you have a band of guys like yourself. You're really doing it for the love of the music.

JR: There're few people that can make a living off music in general.

TL: Yea, I really, really appreciate that I've been able to have a career in music. I really understand that the luck and the joy of it is the music. If you make a living from it you're very lucky.

JR: How have things changed during your years in the music industry? Both in music and the role of the bass and Stick. How's the music changed?

TL: In too many ways to explain. Of course, I only see a little corner of it.

JR: How has your role, how has the role of the bass changed?

TL: I'm not far removed from the field that I can look at that objectively.

I think bass sounds have changed a lot. There's a lot more low end on records now than there used to be. I made a change in the late '70s, I changed the kind of bass I played to have more bass. Of course, all this time fidelity on recordings had been improving.

Bass playing has changed in great numbers of ways. There are busier players, people play lower and people play with different attacks. There's a wider variety of ways people play and every time we in the bass community think that it has all been settled and we know what's going on, inevitably someone comes along and plays the bass in a way that no one ever thought of before and everyone goes, "WOW."

Usually the older guys keep doing what they're doing and the younger guys get inspired by this new way and a whole new wave of players comes up playing in a style that didn't exist before. I really treasure that stuff and try not to get locked into any one kind of playing myself. In other words, I try to have to have the mental attitude of a young player: you listen and you get inspired by what's exciting and new that's being done.

JR: Who has influenced you over the years?

TL: I would say a lot of people. Any good bass part I ever heard. When I was a kid I wasn't a fan of jazz but my older brother was playing jazz records and I heard them a lot. There was a bass player playing bebop, a style that I never really played, but with really good taste and really in tune. I would say that that influenced me quite a bit. Not to mention when Paul McCartney started coming out with his woody, Hofner sound.

I would say that Jaco Pastorius, the most famous bass player's bass player, didn't influence me that much because even though I loved his playing, I'm not in the realm where I could begin to play in that style. So, I didn't emulate his playing at all but it sure woke me up and made me realize some great things that could be done on the bass; even if I can't do them.

JR: I think he really brought the bass to the fore.

TL: He absolutely did. In ways that people hadn't done. But if you go back through the history of the bass there were other players who did the same thing in different ways. When Eddie Gomez was playing with Bill Evans and started playing faster and higher than other players around him, all the bass players in the field went, "Wow, I can do that?" I didn't know that."

When Chuck Rainey started doing thumb slaps on the bass it was pretty radical. People heard that and said, "I just didn't think you could do that." Then other guys started doing it faster and more than thumb slaps, finger slaps.

There always seems to be room for more jumps ahead on the instrument. It's a good thing.

JR: How has the music industry changed? Is it easier to make a living at it now? More difficult?

TL: Again, I've got to say that I'm only seeing a small niche of it. My personal opinion is that it's a really good time for music. I'm hearing people's music from all over the place and it seems like anybody can make a CD. The trick is getting people to hear it and to get some attention for it. That's harder than ever because there's more out there and the channels for putting it out are so complicated, there are so many channels.

It used to be that you had to get a record deal with a record company, which was pretty wrought with difficulties if the record company didn't like what you were doing.

All in all, I think it's a very cool time, for music, to be a musician. It's a more difficult time then in the past to do the business of selling your music or getting people to hear it, getting it out there. Of course, the Internet is a big help but it's my personal opinion that sales on the Internet are not all that big a thing. It's a way to give people your music or let people have the option of finding you. It's good for that.

It's a complicated answer. I would reiterate that because I think it's a good time for music and I hear a lot of good music being done, you could say that it's a great time because in a way, that's the most important thing. It would be nice if it was a good time for the music business but thank goodness there's good music being done. I'd really be unhappy if a lot of people were making a lot of money but there wasn't a lot of good music being done.

JR: As I glance over my questions, I think that I have just about everything crossed off.

TL: I hope you don't mind that I've given you very long answers for simple questions.

JR: Not at all, that's wonderful. Anything I missed?

TL: No, you covered a lot and I get a little bit tired hearing myself blab. As usual I feel like I talk too much. (Laughs)

JR: How many interviews are you doing these days with the new album and such?

TL: Not so many. I just mean it's usual because over the years I've done interviews and I used to be embarrassed to do them at all. I'd say what I felt about a subject and then I'd think, "Who cares how *I* feel about that?"

In those days, I would be divided about what to say as an interviewee. Now, I take a deep breath and accept that you want to hear what I have to say about things and I say it.

Update April 23

This past weekend I had the pleasure to catch the Tony Levin Band in action at Richard's on Richards in Vancouver. All the questions surrounding whether or not the band would be able to pull off the Pieces of the Sun tunes live were answered with a resounding yes. Not only did the group cover Tony's tunes but they did versions of Sleepless and Elephant Talk that sounded more like King Crimson than King Crimson.

There's a long history of sidemen getting together and jamming after their headline gigs. I had the sense that this group—Tony, Jerry Marotta, Jesse Gress, Larry Fast and soundman/merchandise guy/substitute drummer Doug Stringer—was tapping into that tradition. This was a group of guys who have made their name making other people sound good. Together, they brought bits of all the projects they have been involved with and made an incredibly rich sonic collage.

I managed to talk with everyone except Jesse before the show and the one constant theme was exhaustion. Jerry prefaced just about everything with some sort of comment about how wiped out they all were. These guys are doing it all themselves. They're loading the gear, doing the soundcheck, Tony's changing hotel reservations and making sure they make their connections on time. And they had traveled from Philadelphia to Vancouver in three weeks playing each night in a different city.

But the fun they are having playing was evident from the moment they walked on stage, through the light-hearted way they engaged the audience during the show, to the hour plus they spent after the show greeting satisfied concert-goers and signing everything that was placed in front of them.

Tony has taken his Stick playing to a new level. He explored the melody side of the instrument much more than he has in the past. Larry Fast covered a lot of the bass parts, freeing Tony up to explore more melodic territory on both Stick and bass. Physically, Tony was all over The Stick. He played to the top and bottom of both bass and melody side seemingly without regard for the traditional hand roles. Two-handed bass lines, both hands on the melody side, chords in both hands, melody on the bass side, bass on the melody, it didn't seem to matter.

Once again, Tony's not slowing down. In addition to the Vonda Shepard tour with Jerry Marotta and planned gigs with the Tony Levin Band this summer, Peter Gabriel has confirmed that he will be touring this November and December and Tony has signed on. The 'to do' desk will stay full.

Before the show, I asked Tony if the band had been able to pull off the tunes live as well as he had hoped they would during rehearsals. He smiled and said, "Listen tonight and then you tell me." There was no need to tell him that they nailed it. From the smile on his face, the gleam in his eye and the response from the 400 plus people that packed the small club there was no question that they did.