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One on One Interview – ADRIAN BELEW

By Steven Beck

Few people in the music industry are as busy or accomplished as Adrian Belew. The list of people with whom he's worked is a "Who's Who" of the music world. King Crimson, Talking Heads, Frank Zappa, David Bowie, Trent Reznor and Paul Simon are only just a few. With two releases already this year, *Side One* and *Side Two*, and *Side Three* which will be released early next year, there is no stopping this musical troubadour. I was able to chat with Adrian Belew by phone in the middle of his latest tour which is now heading out West.

It looks like you've been on tour most of the summer. Can you please tell us a little about what you've been up to and who you're touring with?

My touring trio is myself, Mike Hodges on drums and Mike Gallaher the bass player. What we've been up to is traveling around and doing as much dates as we can do and different types of dates. We've done some festivals; we've done some clubs and some theaters. We've been to Japan, been to Venezuela and being doing a little bit of everything. All of it is in support of the three records that I'm releasing this year; *Side One*, *Side Two* and *Side Three*. *Side One* and *Side Two* were already released in January and July and *Side Three* comes out in January of next year.

How did this band come together? Did you hold auditions or know these guys from before?

Originally I tried to put together something here in Nashville. My idea was that if it were here in Nashville I could afford a lot of time to develop the band and, you know, kind of woodshed was what I wanted to do. My thinking was if people lived here and they were already settled in here the cost of it would be affordable enough that they could continue to work the jobs they have here. That didn't

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actually work. So in that first plan, plan A, I did audition musicians from this area and eventually decided on some players and worked them for awhile then realized that it was just never going to be good enough for what I had in mind.

So I fell back to Plan B which was playing with people I knew already who would be great players and would be able to do this music correctly and add a lot to it. At the time Mike Gallaher lived in Florida and Mike Hodges lived in Cincinnati since then Mike Gallaher has moved here to Nashville so that's made it a little simpler in terms of our rehearsing and traveling problems. Mike Hodges still lives in Cincinnati but we were able to do what I wanted without the woodshed aspect of it simply because they are such good musicians.

Do you enjoy touring or do you consider it a necessary evil?

I used to...I've gone up and down over my touring life and I've been touring since 1977. I've done some touring almost every single year. There have been times in my life where I really despised it and saw it as a necessary evil. And there were times when I, for instance, for about 15 or 20 years I had a fear of flying so anything that had to do with airplanes was horrific for me. I've overcome that fear and so that's not an issue for me anymore. The other issue is that it took up so much of my life and time away from my family. I think a third issue was always to me was that creativity comes to a halt when you're touring. When you're at my home, I have my studio and engineer, that's when I can really turn loose and create something really everyday and accumulate a lot of ideas and material.

Those are the aspects of touring that I didn't like over the years but in the last few years' things changed. I don't know, King Crimson started touring by bus and that made the travel aspect of it a lot better for me. Better hotels. You know, just the strategy behind the touring became more livable. We weren't touring constantly. We'd go out for short periods and then come back so you could continue your creative roll; you could still be with your family and have some semblance of home life.

Now where I am currently with touring and with playing live is about the best place I've ever been because I've wanted to do solo touring

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with a trio for about five years so this is a little bit of a dream come true for me. Why a trio and why touring? Because I've wanted to be able to stretch out on guitar like I haven't been able to do for a long time. When you have a trio and you're playing specifically your own music, you can design the music to have those aspects to it. It's not entirely a lot of improvising but there is improvising built into the arrangements of my songs. And since it's a trio, everyone has to work really hard and everyone has to pretty much play their butt off all of the time. And since I'm the only guitar player, it affords me a lot of room to do that. I think it's the same kind of thinking that Robert Fripp had when he put together the Projekts and in particular we had Projekt Two where I was the drummer and he was the guitar player and Trey was the bass player. That's a great format for a guitar player and I developed all of these ideas for looping and things to keep kind of a fourth player invisible in the band so I could take some time and explore new guitar things that I've been wanting to do. Lots of new sounds, lots of new techniques I've been working on and hadn't had any time to put them anywhere yet.

That's a long answer for your touring question but I'm really enjoying it again with the music and the players. We still aren't back to the bus level with my solo touring. I mean obviously we don't make nearly as much money as King Crimson but I'm hoping that if we can continue next season, we can get up to that level and that would kind of make the whole package just perfect.

You've worked with a number of incredible players and personalities in long term projects. King Crimson and the Bears to be specific.

What challenges do you see in keeping a band together and how do you make it work?

Well there are all kinds of challenges in keeping a band together. The ones that I deal with currently seem to be financial beyond anything else. That's always a challenge, how does everyone make enough money, how do you afford the crew, how do you afford the recording sessions and all of the things people really don't take into account unless they're right in the thick of it like I am. It costs a lot of money to do what we do even if you are semi-famous. Still the money is

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necessary. I think that's one of the hardest things to do. For example with the Bears; the Bears can only do a certain amount of stuff because we are limited. There's just not the money there. There's not the support. There's no record label. The fan base is a certain level where there's a ceiling to how much you can do. And actually that's even true with King Crimson. There is a ceiling as to what we can do. We have about 300,000 people and that's a lot of people but they're spread around the entire world and that's our ceiling. And it doesn't seem to matter what record we make, we're not going to sell more than that. So you have to work it within those things.

The second thing of course is scheduling. Everyone has other things they'd like to do and can do and are offered to do at different times so you have to take all of that into account. And I think the main thing is how well is it working? Are the personalities and musical ideas mixing together to make some fabulous soup or are they making some horrible stew? You know, I keep coming back and working with the same people because those are the people that the ideas flow with. The friendships are there. They are long term so you kind of already know a lot of things. In a musical friendship the longer you play together, the more intuitive you become and the more you understand the other person's attributes and things that they bring so that kind of makes it a little easier to work with each other.

I've also gone back a lot of times and played with these people that I just do one record with or something, Trent Reznor, David Bowie and those kinds of people. I attribute that to the fact that it works. If it works, they're going to call you back. So I did three records with Paul Simon and two tours with David Bowie and two records with Trent Reznor and so on. I just think that means that something here is working. Obviously when you start a musical relationship you don't really know each other but gradually it develops into a real friendship and then as you know people. I think I get along with just about anybody.

You've played with so many different people in the industry is there anyone in particular who you would like to collaborate with if given the opportunity?

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I hate to say names because somehow that seem presumptuous to even say names but I would limit it to this, when you're growing up and you're most influenced in your teens and your early twenties, those are the people that influence you, those are the people that later in your life you say, "gee I wish I could have played with so and so". And so it's the people that I listened to when I was most vulnerable to influence that would still be interesting to me. I'd love to catch up with some of those people now and say "oh gee, now I'm pretty good maybe let's do something". So I won't name names but it would probably be any of the people who were influential and famous in their work or even infamous in their work when I was younger.

In terms of people who are my current peers which might be people like Les Claypool or Danny Carey who I just worked with. Those things are also very exciting to me and they're more reachable because most of those people already know your work and they're fans of it. I think in November I might do something with Amon Tobin who is a non-musician who makes music and it's a really interesting approach. He basically samples a lot of things and puts them together in a musical way. He's not a player at all and that's interesting to me. 'Cause I love his work, I love what he does with it but I think now what would you do if he had a live musician standing there who could really help you with this so that might be an interesting collaboration. Collaborations are something that I don't have enough time for right now so I don't really put a lot of thought into it.

In one of your tours through San Francisco I noticed you were using some equipment from Line 6. Can you tell us about your current guitar and amp set-up?

Right now I'm using a pretty interesting combination of things. In the world of amplifiers I became very reliant on the early modeling amps called Johnson Amps which were made, I believe by the company DigiTech and I wrote so much of my material with things that I discovered in those amps. Unfortunately they closed up that leg of their company. So there are no more Johnson Amps and there is no more support for them and they are very rare and here I am stuck with two of them that I use. And a lot of the material that I wrote can only really happen through those amps so I use them. When I say

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they can only really happen, it's because I wrote specific sounds and types of looping and things that I just can't seem to make other amps do. Eventually, about two years ago I went with Line 6. They are also a great modeling company and they are probably the best one in the world and naturally they are famous for all of their pedals and they put together these packages that are amazing because you can get everything in one package. And what I'm trying to do now is gradually move more to the Line 6 products. What I've got now is the twin Johnson Amps and a twin set of Line 6 Vetta II's.

What I'm currently doing is an interesting approach. I have two pedal boards; one for the Line 6 and one for the Johnson's. And so what I'm able to do is create a sound on one of them and add something over top of it with the other. Since most of my basic sounds were written in the Johnson's a lot of it starts with the Johnson's and then I kind of put the icing on the cake so to speak by introducing something new from the Line 6. So if I'm playing along with some particular sounds and I want to suddenly go to some radically different sound, I pop the Line 6 pedal board in and then I have a pretty unique sound there. To add to that I have one other thing. I've been using a Boomerang looping pedal and running that through a monitor amp that doesn't do anything to change your amplifier sound it just makes it louder. Whenever I create a sound that I like or make a little loop, it will come discreetly through that amp. That way Mike and Mike can hear that discreetly and adjust the level as they want to.

How about your recording studio? What are you using in there?

We have, for a few years now been using the Nuendo system which is very similar to a ProTools system. Some producers think that it's more friendly. I like it very well. My Engineer, Ken Latchney has gotten so good with it. It's been interesting for me to watch the growth that he's made. Suddenly having this new technology. He was born for it. It really is great and I love it. We still have a 48 channel NeoTech board and I don't think I'm going to pull that out of my studio. First of all because I like it and it looks impressive and we still do use it for certain things. I have a foot, as I always have in each camp. I've always been kind of pro analog and pro digital and believe that the best is the combination of both. And there is no reason to go particularly one way or the other. I know there are some people who

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hate all things digital and there are people who would not touch anything analog. I believe you should utilize all of the tools available. I often make the painter analogy because I am a painter; you can paint with an airbrush or a 3D computer program or you can draw something with a pencil. It's all the same, it's just tools and you can combine them in every way possible to get the result you're looking for.

So right now my studio is comfortably out of date in the regards that I could go out and spend tons of money updating to whatever the latest and greatest thing is but Ken and I like where we are, we love the sound that we're able to get now and so what we've turned our sites on is really more to do with live shows and the live gear that you need. We bought some boards and things for that kind of stuff, in ear monitor system and let the studio stay where it is for the moment. Sometimes you have to stop and say OK, I've got something here, I don't need to keep changing. I mean, there will be a time of course when you move forward, that's just the way the music business is. You can't really stick with anything too long. There are so many options and I think that's the great thing about having been an artist through this period of time. The last twenty year is just unbelievable with the amount of possibilities that have happened.

You've had two releases so far this year, *Side One* and *Side Two*. *Side Three* is coming out at the beginning of next year. Can you tell us about the recording process and the producing of these?

Since they are solo albums I try to do everything myself. Everything from designing the artwork to producing and writing and playing as much of the instrumentation and doing the singing. Basically everything happens with me and Ken Latchney in my studio. Now there have been sometimes when I've said, I can't do this well enough, I need to import someone else to do this. And when I make that realization then I look around and if I need a violinist and a cello player I find someone to come and do that. With the power trio stuff that was on *Side One* there were a few pieces that I did by myself and then realized, you know I really need a better bass player and drummer than I am. Most of the time I can challenge myself and do what I want to do on those instruments but for a power trio you really

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need players that are specifically a great drummer and specifically a great bass player and so I went after people like Les Claypool and Danny Carey.

So the answer of how do I record it? Most of the time it's me and Ken Latchney sitting here in my studio. My studio takes up the entire bottom of my house and it has a fair size room for recording and a fair size room for the mixing. It's all been sonically corrected by looking at computer wave forms and putting up baffles and things to the point where the rooms are correct. Most of the time Ken and I work everyday. There is kind of an everyday accumulation of ideas. He comes everyday at 11:00 o'clock and we start. For *Side One*, *Side Two* and *Side Three*, those were done in between the cracks of touring with King Crimson and the Bears. King Crimson had made a decision that we would do a lot of touring for several years and so as it has worked out for the last four or five years, I've had little bits and pieces of time. You know come home and be here for two weeks before going out to tour again. And during those periods, that's when I put down all of my new ideas, any new sounds I was working with, any new thoughts I had on lyrics all were put down during those in between the cracks periods and that's why there is so many different kinds of music in this package of three records. And people ask why didn't you just make it one record and I'll tell you why, because to service the music properly I found that it really fit better when you focused on one particular thing. *Side One* is mainly focused on power trio material and my ideas of how to deal with that. If you combine it with *Side Two* which is a totally different type of material, it kind of waters down both of them. So I would rather have the listener get a shorter package and a more focused one and that's why I did three separate records. *Side One* is power trio. *Side Two* is, I don't know how you define that music. I'll leave that to someone else and *Side Three* is really all of the variation of things that didn't work in the other two ideas. *Side Three* is more like most of my solo records. People tend to say they are eclectic. They move from one style to another and I think that's what *Side Three* is. It has a variety of different kinds of material none of which really fit into *Side One* or *Side Two*.

Speaking of producing, are there any up-and-coming bands that you are working with either as a producer or a mentor?

No, not at this point. I get a lot of offers from unknown bands and I sort through them. There are a few people that I find interesting right now but there is nothing that I go on to say this is what I'm going to do.

A lot of it has to be funded for one thing and that's a difficulty that I don't want to take on. I'm not a record label and I'm not a bank.

So someone else has to get those things in motion first. Usually I will find someone eventually that I think wow this is interesting and special and I'd like to be a part of this. What I try to do in the world of production is a little different than some producers. Someone was mentioning this to me the other day in an interview that my productions don't have a trademark to them like a Jeff Lynne or a Todd Rundgren or someone like that where you listen and you know that's the producer. I approach it differently. My idea is to produce things in a way that I feel is required to realize the music that the artist is attempting to achieve. I never really try to put my signature on it, what I try to do is just accommodate what they need to do that they maybe can't do themselves. You know, I'll put in ideas galore but I won't try to sound like Adrian Belew.

What types of music are you listening to now and who, if anyone is really pushing innovation on the guitar?

Gee, I don't know. That's a loaded question for me because I'm not a person who listens to a lot of other music and I'm sorry to report that. I've had to say this a hundred times in interviews and people may be surprised to find out that I simply don't have time to listen a lot of new music. It filters down to me through people that I know and respect. They'll come to me and say you have to listen to this. For example my bass player, Mike Gallaher played me the new Bill Frisell record the other day, a guitarist that I wasn't really that familiar with. I've heard his name a lot of times. I thought it was great. I loved it. There are a lot of really interesting things especially on the first of the two CDs. But I'm not the right person to say who's up-and-coming, who's next or who's doing something 'cause I'm just not well educated at

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that. I have, in my mind, something that I need to do everyday. When I wake up, I generally have a lot of thoughts on things, musical or otherwise that I have to accomplish. So my recreational listening time is pretty small.

What advice could you give to someone who is looking to really break new ground musically and survive in the music industry today?

Well breaking new ground, the first part of your question, has to do with being true to yourself and being uncompromised. Developing your own view of music comes from a lot of things that influence you at certain points and you take those ideas and you work with them further so new ideas occur and you synthesize all of these different things from different places. You know, records you've heard and artists you've seen and things that have affected you. You're really taking those things and resynthesizing those into your own ideas. Let's face it, no one comes onto this planet and just has a brand new way of doing everything. Everyone learns from other people and then takes that information and rechannels it in their own way. So if you really want to come up with something new, what you need to do is listen to the people that you really enjoy, learn everything you can from them and then kind of turn that spigot off. Then just stop and try to work within yourself, what can you do now with this information? It takes many years to honestly develop something and I think it helps if you can play live because ideas always come out while you're playing. You play things that you didn't even know you can play. That's a way of furthering your abilities and also it's a way of getting people to know who you are and what you're doing.

Surviving in the music industry, that is tough because it's ever changing. It was changing as I came into it in the 80's and it's changing still. I'm not really sure how to survive in it. My own advice is to do a lot of different things. That's what I've done. There are people out there who have done nothing but one thing and they survived on that but for me I've always felt that if you do a little of this and a little of that, first of all your calendar can be filled in a little easier. Therefore you can stay in the game of having the music business be your living and that's a difficult task. Secondly, you increase your networking, you meet a lot of different kinds of people,

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you increase your knowledge so that's why I try to do everything that I can possibly do. Even playing other instruments is helpful because you get a different background and a different sense of music than just playing one instrument all of the time. It is very hard these days in the music business. I don't have any solid advice cause I'm searching myself. I don't think that you ever get to the point unless you're a superstar and you've made so much money that you don't have to ever make anymore money. I don't think you can ever get to the point in the music business that you can feel comfortable and say OK now I'm fine. Everybody has to continually reinvent themselves and reinvent their music and struggle to get to the next spot with it.

If you're starting out and you don't seem like you're getting anywhere with it, don't worry about it. Just keep going because it's the same for everybody except for a handful of people. I mean really there are a very few people out there who are fortunate enough. I remember one time talking to Frank Zappa and he said if he were starting out now he didn't even think he could get a record deal because the climate changes from season to season and from decade to decade and even quicker than that. Whereas in the 60's Frank Zappa was just weird enough that it was great. Who knows, in the 2000's he would just be too weird. No one would get it and want to sign it. The Bears for example are a pretty straight-forward pop band to me. We write three and a half minute pop songs. I don't understand why no one in the record business is interested in putting that music out. I guess that time has just passed us by. That's OK. We find other ways to deal with it. You have to be really smart in the business part of it and if you're not, which most musicians are not including myself, you have to collaborate with someone who is.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Only this one thing, having said all of the things that I've said, some of which might be taken to be sort of depressing. If you're born to make music, you make music and I wouldn't care right now if no one heard what I was doing or liked it. I would still be doing it. I think it's a passion and commitment that you have and you just close your eyes to the rest of it. Don't worry too much about it. Life kind of takes care of itself if you're working hard.

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