

Brian Island Liner Notes

Back in 1989 a self-released album slipped out in Canada from a gentleman by the name of Brian Island that certainly attracted the interest of a number of melodic rock aficionados quick to pick up on such things. Very much in a hi-tech AOR vein akin to the likes of Keven Jordan, Prototype, St. Paul and perhaps Glen Burtnick too, it's one of those records that's been talked about in excited whispers ever since it first surfaced. Songs like 'No Surrender', 'Draw The Line', 'Treat Me Like A Lover', 'Night After Night' and 'I'm Your Hero' are just unbelievably brilliant. It's just one of those albums that grown men have been known to openly weep with joy over if ever they've been lucky enough to stumble upon a copy.

Indeed, it's a travesty that the record has never been as widely available as it should have been (we'll get to the reasons as to just why in due course). Fortunately, this debut solo release from the intriguingly monikered Mr. Island has now been reissued with the addition of the previously unreleased bonus track 'One Wish', and is certain to be popular with those out there who have found locating a copy of the original a frustrating and very expensive business.

Yet who exactly is Brian Island? Well, the man behind the album you now hold lovingly in your hands is actually former Prototype bassist Brian Cowieson. Born in West Lothian, Scotland, Brian moved to Canada with his family at the tender age of seven. The Cowieson's settled in Winnipeg, Manitoba and by his late teens, Brian found himself playing his first gigs, writing songs and wanting to connect with fellow musicians.

"My earliest influences were the Beatles, Donovan and Bob Dylan," the man himself responds when discussing his initial move into the world of music. "Later in my career my tastes in music changed depending on the era I was living through; Neil Young, Crosby Stills and Nash, Joni Mitchell and The Eagles etc. When I switched to playing bass guitar my tastes started to lean more towards the rhythm section in the bands I listened to; more towards pop rock, funk and rhythm and blues.

"My early folk music performances focussed mainly on playing local folk clubs and coffee houses. I was still in school at the time and would also perform at various high school events. Prior to my stint with the band Bootleg I was starting to write my own material, but I didn't record anything at this point in time."

Bootleg, a country rock outfit, was formed in 1973 by Brian, Graham Jones and Robert Bartlett, eventually becoming a six-piece group and gaining a solid reputation on the live circuit for themselves throughout Western Canada over the next few years (including, interestingly enough, gigs on the same bill as the Mercury Records signed Hammersmith, led by a certain Dan Lowe). By 1977 the band had released a 7" single, 'Queen Of Hearts', on their own Heart label.

"Graham Jones, one of the original guitar playing members and writers in Bootleg, and Paul Kelly – Bootleg's bass player at the time - wrote the song and presented it to the band for consideration. We all thought the song had merit and collaborated, as we did with all of our original material, to make it our first single. I played slide guitar and wrote harmonies for the song and Graham and Robert played the other guitar parts. Graham sang the lead vocal and the rest of us sang the harmonies."

As noted, one of the bands that Bootleg had previously played with was Hammersmith, and the aforementioned Dan Lowe (who had also been the guitarist of another great Canadian rock band in Painter prior to forming Hammersmith) became a key acquaintance.

"I met Dan Lowe just before we recorded 'Queen of Hearts'. Our manager at the time was in the midst of deciding between Dan and another producer in Vancouver. Dan came out to see our band playing in a club in Calgary. Robert and I wanted to go with Dan, but the manager went with the producer from Vancouver (Guy Sobell, formerly the guitarist with the mid 60's Canadian outfit The Chessmen). At some point later, Bootleg had run its course as a band, so I got in contact with Dan to present some of my songs to him. From that time on I started to work with him on some of his projects."

We're now into the early '80's....

"Dan had moved more into the production side of music by that point. He was working with a lot of local artists, engineering and producing their songs for release or presentations to the labels. It's a little hard for me to remember all the projects we worked on together. There were so many, but they included artists such as Tara Wilder, Lewis Heart, White Wolf, Pretty Rough and Robert Burton."

However, Dan Lowe wasn't quite ready to give up on his own musical endeavours and put together a hugely interesting, extremely innovative for the time, hi-tech AOR project that he named Prototype. Brian quickly jumped aboard....

"Dan asked me if I would be interested in working with him on a project that he was writing with guitarist Brad Steckel for (Lowe and Steckel had worked and recorded together in the post Hammersmith outfit 451° by this point and would also join White Wolf). I'd also worked with Brad on some of the projects I mentioned. I was initially just hired to write background vocal arrangements for the project, but as it progressed I became more involved. Dan asked me if I would officially join with him, Brad and some of our other studio musicians to form the band Prototype. We all had a great time working on the project. It was one of the most enjoyable studio experiences I've had in my career. Having fun making good music; it doesn't get much better than that."

Prototype's self-titled album was released on the Mercury label in 1983. Besides Brian, Dan Lowe and Brad Steckel, the project also included future Chilliwack drummer Jerry Adolphe, synth player Amin Bahtia, keyboardist Ted Alexander and lead vocalist Doug Riley.

"The plan was always to tour and support the album," continues Brian. "I'm not sure what happened. There was supposed to be a second album. We had already started working on the next album when it all came apart. Management or label issues may have got in the way. As players, we weren't privy to the back room dealings. We were all really disappointed that it never came to pass."

Interestingly, during the period that Brian had become involved with Prototype, he also had links to another Canadian melodic rock band of note in the form of Boulevard (with whom Jerry Adolphe would also work with). This was thanks to Mark Holden, who would be involved in mixing the Prototype album, who has been the saxophone player and one of the main song writers within Boulevard from that particular band's inception.

"I did some work with Mark Holden on the Boulevard project," Brian reveals. "I had to make a choice though, Prototype or Boulevard, as both projects were created at the same point in time. I chose Prototype. I loved working with all the musicians that were involved in the Prototype project. I felt bad because I really liked working with Mark as well, but I was a better fit with the type of music in the Prototype project."

So how had the idea for the solo album first arisen?

"I wrote some songs for the theoretical second album for Prototype. As the project seemed to be dead in the water, everybody in the band went back to doing sessions as they did prior to the Prototype project. I didn't want the songs I'd written to fall by the wayside, so I decided to write more songs in a similar vein and see if I could put an album together. This was the start of my solo project. I now had other talented guys I was comfortable working with and I didn't want that to go away. I raised some money and spent all my savings producing the album. I got a lot of the Prototype guys and some others to play and sing on my album. Dan had recorded some of the songs as they were possible choices for the second Prototype album. I recorded the rest of my songs and mixed the album."

How did Brian Cowieson become Brian Island, a pseudonym he was first credited under on the Prototype album but had continued to use as he embarked on a solo career?

"Prior to my involvement in the Prototype project I was planning and writing songs for my future solo album," he explains. "I had contact with labels and other industry people at that time to get a feel for which songs I had written at that point they may be interested in. During this time period Dan approached me regarding Prototype. I was beginning to get responses from some labels about possible direction and marketing ideas for my project. I changed my focus from my future project to Prototype. I didn't have the finances and support for my project at that point in time. During the Prototype project I still had my album in the back of my mind. With the input from labels and my other contacts in the industry I opted to use the Brian Island name on the Prototype album credits as a choice that may help with marketing on future projects. I just grabbed the name out of the air. There wasn't much thought put into it. I was a songwriter, not a marketing genius."

"When Prototype got signed, my project got pushed well into the future. Brad and Dan were the writers on the first album. I had the opportunity to contribute on the second album should it occur. The songs I had written prior to, during and after the Prototype project ended up on my future solo album."

However, once he had eventually completed his solo album the labels were crazily no longer supportive!

"Unfortunately, the interest faded as the labels claimed their Canadian budgets were blown for the year on other artists they'd signed," sighs Brian. "Whether this was true or not, I wasn't going to wait around. I decided to go ahead using the Brian Island pseudonym, and with the help of my then wife (Diane Kashton), we would do an independent release. She had a lot of on air (radio) contacts, as she was a music director at a major radio station chain. We used whatever savings we had left to produce CDs and ship them to radio stations across the country as well as place product in whatever stores would take them."

Where did Brian feel he had been going musically with the album?

"I wanted the record to show where I was as a musician and songwriter at that point in time. Most of my career was a featured artist on someone else's project. I wanted to see if my songs could stand on their own two feet."

How long did the 'Brian Island' album take to complete?

"I had to work around other projects as the studio time I got was usually down time. This dragged the project out over roughly three months. Even when it came to mixing the album, I could only get 4 or 5 hours to set up and mix a song before I had to break it down for other projects. It would have been nice to have had more time, but without a substantial budget to

work with, I had to make do. Once again I'm thankful for Dan Lowe's intervention to allow me to get the studio time I did. Without him, the project would never have been completed."

Once the album was completed it was clear that Brian had put together a rather special set of songs. In speaking with him for the reissue, Brian was only too pleased to offer an insight into each of the nine songs that comprise the album.

'In Spite Of What You Do'

"I really enjoyed playing the funky bass part on this song. I was focussing on getting a groove that I was looking for. I also really like the guitar solo that Brad played in this song."

'Treat Me Like A Lover'

"I liked the hook in 'Treat Me Like A Lover'. It was going to be my second single. It was fun to sing. This was one of my songs that could've been a possible track for the second Prototype album. Since that didn't happen it ended up on my album."

'No Surrender'

"I wrote this song after watching a movie about a possible future for the human race. Unfortunately I don't remember which movie it was now! However, I do remember the movie making me feel angry at the thought of our lives being completely out of our control and under the eye of an overbearing government or religion."

'Walk On Water'

"I loved working with the other background singers on this song. I was going for the sound of a church choir. I think it worked well. I also liked the fretless bass part I played too."

'I'm Your Hero'

"I like the theme of the lyrics. I was writing it from the perspective of a stalker; imagining himself being the one the woman really wants."

'Night After Night'

"This was also one of the songs being considered for the second Prototype album. I'm glad I got to use it on my album. I thought Brad Steckel played great answering guitar parts. Ted Alexander also played some great synth parts."

'Major Motion'

"I like the feel in 'Major Motion'. It's got an interesting groove. I love the bridge. Twice the song goes in a totally different direction lyrically as well as the feel. 'Major Motion' talks of trying to wake up the potential of a person; I think this was a message to myself!"

'When You Lose Your Love'

"I wanted to write a love song that would put a positive spin on a break up. It was a simple fun song to sing and play; nothing tricky, just pretty. It turned out to be the hit on the album."

'Draw The Line'

"'Draw The Line' was about abusive relationships from both partners perspectives. I love the bridge as it takes the song in a totally different direction. I liked singing 'Draw The Line' as it made use of my full vocal range. Once again Brad's guitar solo is exceptional. I like how he plays along with my vocal melody in the choruses. I think this may be my favourite song on the record!"

You would think, given the quality on offer here, that record labels would be running around almost trying to bite Brian's hand off in order to release the album. Sadly, there was a distinct lack of interest from all the labels that you would imagine would want to sign Brian up and push the hell out of the album.

"Of course it was very frustrating not having the support and financing a major label could have provided," offers Brian on the subject. "I could have focused on the music and production. Instead I had to wear a multitude of hats to get the project over the finish line. It also would have helped to have some organizational support to put a tour together. A manager would have been great help as well. Neither was available at that point in time. I thought, with the major airplay I was getting, someone would have come out of the woodwork and make an offer to take it the rest of the way. It didn't happen."

Brian decided to sell directly to record chains in Canada and that proved to be rather successful for a time until one of those chains went under.

"As I mentioned, I produced the CDs and shipped them to major retailers. One in particular, A & A Records were very helpful initially. Just when things were going well with the major airplay the album was getting, A&A went out of business. Any sales or CDs I had in the stores evaporated. I should explain how this affected the overall potential success of the album. Three things in the past that made or broke an albums success in Canada were: radio airplay, record sales and touring. The amount of airplay was based on fitting the format, requests and records sales. Record sales depended on airplay, touring and marketing. Touring helped with airplay and record sales and marketing. I had the hardest part - airplay. I was getting major rotation on my first single. My wife and her contacts got the single on air. After that, the requests kept it on a major rotation for months.

"Initially I had record sales until A&A hit the ditch. This seriously affected my second single release as the stations wanted to see sales numbers before they'd consider playing the next single. I'd blown the budget on the first shipment of CDs to the retailer with no sign of financial returns due to the A&A collapse. There was no money left to resupply the retailers that were left. I didn't have the finances and management to put a proper tour together."

Was there any feedback from Europe at that time? Would that interest have made a difference at that time?

"I didn't try Europe as I didn't have any experience in that market. It's not likely that it would have saved the project in any event."

So what is Brian most proud of now about the album?

"I'm most proud of the fact that I got major rotation airplay on radio against all the odds as an independent artist. The listening public liked the songs enough to request them for months. I'm also most proud of the fact that I wrote the songs, sang the songs, played and recorded and mixed the album with the help of my musical friends. I still think the music is artistically relevant."

Hold on though, as this isn't the end of the story! In 2019 Brian wrote 'You'll Be Free', the first song he'd written in years. It set the wheels in motion for his second solo album, 'Looking Back', that finds him working once more with Brad Steckel and creating a record that encompasses the entire range of influences; from folk rock and country rock through to pop rock. So, if you love what you hear with 'Brian Island', keep an eye out for 'Looking Back'!

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