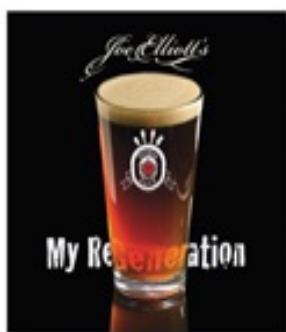


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Don't stop BELIEVIN'...

The return of AOR

Melodic rock, AOR, corporate rock... whatever you want to call it, with acts like Foreigner and FM on Radio 2, Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'* the biggest-selling download of all time, and a wave of reunions and new artists, the genre that seemed terminally out of fashion is back. *Classic Rock* talks to the bands and the people behind the new generation of soft rock.

Words: **Dave Ling**

It's a Wednesday night at the 500-capacity Underworld club in London's Camden, but a mere 100-odd souls mill at the bar as Melodica, featuring former Danger Danger/Bone Machine frontman Ted Poley, perform. Two thin lines of diehards separate the stage from a virtually deserted dance floor. Get close enough – you don't exactly require a Sherpa – and a sheet of A4 paper is Gaffa-taped to the bass drum. It reads: 'Please help us, Def Leppard.' Welcome to the UK melodic rock scene, circa 2002...

With those words *Classic Rock* issue 38 began a post-mortem of melodic rock from a British perspective. Almost a decade later, with the strains of Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'* known in just about every household around the nation, Bon Jovi playing a whopping 12-date residency at the O2 Arena, Foreigner and FM having become Radio 2 favourites, and the likes of Cinderella, Y&T and Tyketto having been embraced by the Download Festival – not to mention a spate of reunions from such home-grown favourites as Skin, Airstace, Romeo's Daughter and the aforementioned FM – you could be forgiven for thinking that this much-derided genre is undergoing a renaissance.

A shark-infested divide still separates the haves and the have-nots, of course, but Firefest, an indoor all-dayer run by a devoted group of fans that's now into its seventh year, has played a crucial role in preserving the scene's grassroots.

Having recruited a new singer, Arnel Pineda, from a melodic rock tribute band, the past few years have been especially kind to Journey, who last year played alongside Def Leppard and Whitesnake at Download and have seen *Don't Stop Believin'* embraced by a whole new generation. Incredibly, the band owe some of this to the fact that it was re-recorded as part of a US TV

programme called *Glee*. Back in January, the original and *Glee*'s cover version of the power ballad from Journey's 1981's album *Escape* were both in the UK's Top 10. Until that point, to all but the band's original fans, *Don't Stop Believin'* was known for having been sung by *X Factor* winner Joe McElderry and, two years earlier featuring in the closing scene of the final episode of *The Sopranos*.

Having spent time in London as his band and *Glee* battled it out, Journey guitarist Neal Schon is convinced that things have changed for the better for his own band and the entire genre.

"It's brilliant for us and bands like us," he says, speaking from the studio as Journey record a follow-up to 2008's *Revelation*. "If people think it's

of the possibilities now that *Glee* have turned their attention to the REO Speedwagon track *Can't Fight This Feeling*.

"If *Glee* is helping people to connect the dots, that can only be a good thing," Jones theorises.

"Foreigner's songs are used all the time on *American Idol* but the exposure is useful – there are no record stores in the US any more. This is a revolution: we're taking the music business back."

In such a vastly different climate, endorsement from *Glee* is priceless. "If they wanted to cover a Foreigner song I'd definitely smile," admits Jones.

Only given the show's pre-pubescent viewers, something other than *Feels Like The First Time*?

"Yes," he deadpans, "that one could be misconstrued."

If we are to reevaluate the music in question, maybe it's a good time to find something else to call it other than AOR, a dated acronym for Album – or Adult – Oriented Rock.

Mick Jones, for one, cringes when people term Foreigner an AOR group. "We've even been called corporate rock, which is crap," he sighs. "Foreigner are just a rock band, pure and simple. We

rock hard but we're also very melodic."

Fortunately, Jeff Smith, Radio 2's Head Of Music and one of the men responsible for adding both Foreigner's *Fool For You Anyway* and FM's *Hollow* to the station's playlist, is not easily swayed by gratuitous terminology. Although FM were serious enough about their self-financed reunion album, *Metropolis*, to employ a radio plugger in a bid to secure airplay for its single, Smith had already identified the potential of *Hollow* even before being approached.

"Somebody – it might have been the band – sent me FM's album and its quality blew me away," he explains. "I thought that *Hollow* was perfect for Radio 2's current multi-generational listenership, the average age of which is 50 years old.

"Radio 2's niche has always been timeless, ➔

"RADIO 2 IS ABOUT TIMELESS, MELODIC MUSIC. FOREIGNER AND FM FIT INTO THAT."

– JEFF SMITH, RADIO 2'S MUSIC HEAD

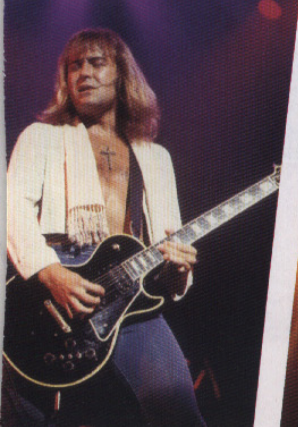
a *Glee* song and not one of ours, I don't mind. Those are all brand new fans – I'm happy they like the song, period."

Objection would be churlish now that *Don't Stop Believin'* has been legally downloaded more than an incredible three million times. "That's mind-boggling," marvels Schon. "It's the most downloaded song of all time – bigger than Led Zeppelin or The Beatles. Crazy."

Asked whether this fact might exert a lasting influence upon the genre's credibility, Schon replies: "I'd like to think so. It makes the [fact that Journey are not in the] Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame look pretty idiotic."

Journey's rivals would love a slice of this particular American pie. An industry veteran like Foreigner guitarist Mick Jones, for instance, knows

AOR through the ages
(clockwise from top):
Journey, Styx, REO
Speedwagon, Foreigner
and FM.



melodic music," he elaborates. "It's no big deal for Chris Evans to play *Gimme All Your Lovin'* straight out of the eight o'clock news. As crossover pop songs go, FM and Foreigner fit right into that."

Consequently, both *Hollow* and Foreigner's *Fool For You Anyway* were played up to 10 times a week – an enormous deal considering that the muscle of CBS records had been unable to secure airtime for

FM's *Frozen Heart* single, despite two attempts, during the band's original tenure.

"*Bad Luck* [a Desmond Child co-write from 1989's *Tough It Out*] got a couple of spins at two in the morning, but it's a great feeling to have Ken Bruce or whoever on in the morning while you're making breakfast for your kids and hear your new single," enthuses FM singer Steve Overland.

Skin, another UK group once signed to a major label, reunited last year for the Download festival at the request of its organiser Andy Copping. The comeback went so well they opted to continue but, despite a run of six Top 40 singles that included *Look But Don't Touch*, *House Of Love* and *Tower Of Strength*, Skin are following FM's example by using the self-financed route.

"Footing the bill for an album is our way of thanking the fans that kept our music alive after we split up," reveals Skin guitarist Myke Gray. "As individuals our careers and families have become priorities, but we owe it to the fans to play some shows and make one last album. Okay, we'll need to sell 2,000 copies to break even, but it's worth it."

One thing cited by all of the reunited British bands that we spoke to is that they enjoy playing music more than ever with the monkey of constant career pressure removed from their backs.

After an ultimately ill-fated spell guiding the band Roadstar (now known as Heaven's Basement) to an opening spot at the Monsters Of Rock festival

in 2003, guitarist Laurie Mansworth is relishing being a performer again after his group Airrace reconvened to celebrate the 25th anniversary of their one and only album, *Shaft Of Light*. Although Jason Bonham upped and left after a handful of shows, Airrace played at last year's Firefest and have supported Tesla, Thunder and Winger. They are currently recording a second album.

audiences," agrees Steve Overland. "Manufactured music is all well and good but standing up and playing a song you wrote in your living room, before an audience that knows the words better than you, is the best feeling in the world. As long as people want to listen to FM, we'll keep doing it."

As frequent visitors to www.melodicrock.com will know, a host of younger acts are queuing up to succeed the old guard.

Foremost among them are H.E.A.T., a young Swedish six-piece. Just like Joey Tempest and company, H.E.A.T. hail from the Stockholm suburb of Upplands Väsby and their strong visual image affords them a sizeable female following. Conversely, as the only act to have played at three successive Firefests they also have their fair share of jealous haters.

"This genre almost died not long ago, but thankfully

I was only six years old at the time," smiles bassist Jimmy Jay, making light of the fact that H.E.A.T.'s average age is 24. "Had we wanted to make money there are more fashionable genres that we could have played, but melodic rock is in our blood."

As confirmed by the reviews of H.E.A.T.'s second album, *Freedom Rock*, the band's music would appeal to many of the thousands of fans attending Bon Jovi's O2 residency. The problem they face has less to do with wooing that audience, and more with letting them know they even exist. Jay, who says that H.E.A.T. "will do anything it takes" to achieve their goals, admits the subject causes him to lose sleep at night. "Bon Jovi are immensely popular, but back in the

80s they had pop fans as well as rock ones. That sort of hype is pretty hard to replicate."

Though undoubtedly tough, the situation is not impossible. Last year Chris Daughtry, the former *American Idol* contestant who went on to notch twenty No.1 hits around the world, received girle screams and a rapturous reception on a support

The 'Wagon still rolls: REO today.



The 21st century incarnations of Foreigner (above) and Journey.



FIVE NEW MELODIC ROCK BANDS YOU MUST HEAR



H.E.A.T.

At their Firefest debut in 2008 the Swedes covered songs by Europe, Bon Jovi, Journey and Whitesnake. No surprise, then, that they sound like a mutation of all four bands.

TRY DOWNLOADING:

We're Gonna Make It (2010)



EDEN'S CURSE

Multinational group Eden's Curse combine all the best elements of melodic rock and heavy metal at its most tuneful. The band's studio album, *Trinity*, has just been completed.

TRY DOWNLOADING:

Masquerade Ball (2008)



WORK OF ART

Bearing a striking and distinctly flattering similarity to Toto, Journey and Giant, Stockholm's Work Of Art received rave reviews for *Artwork*, their debut album. Quite rightly so.

TRY DOWNLOADING:

Why Do I? (2008)



ECLIPSE

Yet another excellent bunch of Scandos, Eclipse fuse classic melodic rock elements with a mildly contemporary edge. Their debut album, *Are You Ready To Rock*, is highly recommended.

TRY DOWNLOADING:

Breaking My Heart Again (2008)



W.E.T.

Pooling members of Work Of Art, Eclipse and Talisman – hence the abbreviated name – last year's self-titled *W.E.T.* is one of the best debut albums of pure AOR in living memory.

TRY DOWNLOADING:

If I Fall (2009)

“BOTH FOREIGNER AND JOURNEY ARE AMONG THE TOP 10 BANDS PLAYED ON AMERICAN RADIO.”

— FOREIGNER'S MICK JONES

tour with Nickelback after *What About Now* reached No.11 in the UK's singles chart. What had helped it get there was, inevitably, a crucial plug on *Britain's Got Talent*. It seems that British music fans are open to embracing melodic rock on the condition that it carries a reality TV endorsement. Makes you kinda sick, huh?

Steve Overland makes a relevant point. “Younger rock fans don't have loyalties towards artists the way our generation did,” he says. “They download songs without any idea of who recorded them. My middle son said: ‘Dad, I've heard this brilliant song. I don't know who the band is but it's called *The Boys Are Back In Town*.’ Because the Top 40 is no longer rammed down anyone's throat, they're free to make up their own minds.”

Having established melodic rock's relative saleability and safety in the hands with a younger generation, how does the genre push on and guarantee its future? Steve Strange, a booking agent with the company X Ray Touring (which represents both Foreigner and FM) is an unashamed genre disciple of many years standing. Strange is convinced that the answer lies with the musicians themselves.

“In this day and age, bands that want to earn a living by playing in the UK must be realistic,” he maintains. “Share a bus. Forget how many records you've sold in America or Japan. Just make an effort, for Christ's sake. The audiences are still out there.”

“At the end of Winger's last UK tour [in March 2010], Kip said: ‘That's the best European run we've ever done, bar none.’ It took us six months of planning, booking the dates and building awareness, but we filled rooms everywhere.”

With major labels long since having turned their back on the music, as unlikely as it may seem, these days a single Italian-based independent company called Frontiers Records holds the signatures of

Journey, Survivor, Toto, Styx, Winger, Y&T, Tesla, Nelson, Giant, Great White, Extreme, Mr Big, Night Ranger – even Whitesnake. Although these bands may not sell records in anywhere the quantities that they once did, a veritable flood of new records is released each year.

Almost a decade after *Classic Rock's* first investigation, melodic rock no longer requires assistance from Def Leppard (who themselves are out of contract with Universal Records) and is able to stand on its own two feet again – however drunkenly. We may quibble with regard to an accurate

description, and it is extremely unlikely to return in all its big-haired glory, but it's still out there and won't be going away any time soon.

“Both Foreigner and Journey are among the top 10 bands played on American radio, and that's a very exclusive club,” concludes Mick Jones.

“There's a whole new audience out there. Kids aged 10 years and upwards come to our shows having heard songs like *Cold As Ice* played by their parents. They have become timeless.”



Melodic memories: *Classic Rock's* AOR round-up in issue 38.



Tesla: one of the many melodic rock bands signed to Italy's Frontiers label.

FIVE REUNITED MELODIC ROCK BANDS

They rode the crest of the AOR wave back in the 70s and now they're back for another slice of the pie.



FM

Original members Steve Overland, Merv Goldsworthy and Pete Jupp reconvened after a 12-year absence

to play the Firefest in 2007, alongside keyboard player Jem Davis and guitarist Jim Kirkpatrick.

TRY DOWNLOADING: *Hollow* (2010)



SKIN

An 11-year gap separated Skin's break-up in 1998 and a return to the stage at the 2009 Download Festival.

Not only do all four co-founders remain of the band, so does the unofficial fifth member, keyman Colin McLeod.

TRY DOWNLOADING: *Stronger* (2010)



ROMEO'S DAUGHTER

Back in the 80s Romeo's Daughter were managed by Olga Lange, then the wife of famed

record producer Robert John 'Mutt' Lange. Another band persuaded to reunite by Firefest, the original touring line-up of RD, fronted by Leigh Matty, played at last year's event. New recordings and touring activities have been promised.

TRY DOWNLOADING: *Heaven In The Back Seat* (1988)



AIRRACE

Tempted back into life when the UK's Rock Candy records reissued their Beau Hill-produced debut *Shaft Of Light*,

Airrace have survived the departure of Jason Bonham to cement their place in the UK melodic rock scene.

TRY DOWNLOADING: *Promise To Call* (1984)



STRANGEWAYS

In business again thanks to a place at this year's Firefest, the Scottish-US alliance produced two of the finest

melodic rock albums ever in *Native Sons* and *Walk In The Fire* (1987 and '89) and are now, apparently, back in the studio.

TRY DOWNLOADING: *Dance With Somebody* (1987)