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ELECTRIC PRUNES INTERVIEW



NEVER HAD IT BETTER: In the past year and a half, **Electric Prunes** co-founder and front man, James Lowe (pictured above, earlier this year) has weathered the passing of bandmate and bassist Mark Tulin, as well as his own quadruple bypass surgery, and is now preparing for the next phase of the legendary first generation garage band's career with the release of a new Electric Prunes live CD, recorded in Stockholm. Lowe discusses this and more with Blitz Editor/Publisher Michael McDowell below. (Click on above image to enlarge).

REWIRED: THE ELECTRIC PRUNES' JAMES LOWE DISCUSSES HIS JOURNEY FROM TRAGEDY TO TRIUMPH

"Since the death of our bass player and co-founder of the band, Mark Tulin last year, we have been in a shambles. I guess you don't expect anyone to die. But Mark was so full of life and such an important part of the band, it was as if one of the legs had been sawed off a three legged stool. We miss Mark daily. The band must go on, and we know that is what Mark would have wanted."

So said Electric Prunes front man, James Lowe in a statement on the fourteenth of May. The passing of the beloved and respected Tulin on 26 February 2011 while assisting with the Underwater Cleanup Project in Avalon, California was indeed an enormous loss for Lowe, the band and their numerous devotees.

To compound matters, Lowe himself underwent quadruple bypass surgery earlier this year, which was documented extensively in Blitz at the time. Thankfully, he is expected to make a full recovery.

"I am getting better", said the San Fernando Valley native, who, together with his family, presently divides his recuperation time between California and his second home in the tropics.

"Sun and warm sand makes me feel crazy. Throw in a palm tree and I am really crazy!"

With Lowe on the mend, plans are already well underway for the next phase of the Electric Prunes' legacy. To that effect, the band has released *Return To Stockholm* on their Prune Twang Music label. Recorded live at the Debaser Club on 10 October 2004 in the Swedish province of Södermanland, *Return To Stockholm* represents the first generation garage rock pioneers' coming full circle, as the Electric Prunes' first live album, *Stockholm 67* was likewise recorded in the Swedish capital, on 14 December

about me

Blitz Magazine
United States

Blitz Magazine was founded in 1975. Editor/Publisher Michael McDowell moved operations to Los Angeles, California in 1980. Please check the How To Reach Us link for current contact information.

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1967. Both albums not only succinctly represent the power, originality and ambition that has kept them in the upper echelons of the genre from the onset, but thankfully, *Return To Stockholm* in turn show cases yet another unexpected blessing.

"The topper of this discovery was Mark's bass playing that night; down deep and sweet", said Lowe.

"They are coming out with a new vinyl version of *Stockholm 67*. Timely!"

In the following July 2012 exchange with Blitz Editor/Publisher Michael McDowell, James Lowe discusses the new live CD, as well as his miraculous recovery and the Electric Prunes' plans to continue and expand upon their vaunted legacy.

BLITZ: By the time that *Return To Stockholm* was recorded in October 2004, the Electric Prunes were already well into the second phase of their vaunted legacy. Although he had been an early participant, band co-founder Ken Williams seemed to have faded out of the picture by the time that this album was recorded. Nonetheless, the transition seemed effortless, as the lineup for this project was able to approach all phases of the band's work with equal aplomb. What challenges (if any) were involved in getting the band up to such optimum level in light of the various personnel changes?

LOWE: At that time, Ken had some neck/shoulder issues that made playing and traveling almost impossible. He underwent surgery to correct this, but I think he still has pain playing. Ken can walk onto the stage whenever he feels ready.

Steve Kara is just a monster musician and player with a sense that coordinated with our style. He showed up with 25 pedals and knew how to use them. You could play him something and he got it!

A lot of guys try to shoe-horn their style into your music. Steve was willing to explore the '60s and make our old stuff shine. Jay Dean is also an excellent lead guitar player and reminded Mark and I of Mike Gannon. We always wanted to have double leads and these guys gave us our wish in spades. Joe Dooley played drums for us in 1968 after Quint left, so he was a natural choice for drums on that tour. It is a challenge with new players. You have to keep changing the photos. Ha ha!

BLITZ: *Return To Stockholm* includes a great cross section of Electric Prunes classics and newer material. Not surprisingly, the newer material was well received right from the onset. What was the band's strategy in terms of set list order, presentation, etc. in terms of introducing the newer material?

LOWE: Right from the start, we were told the audiences would not accept new material from an old band. This is a joke! If you play well, people will dig it as long as it is really you and not a copy of something else. We had just put out California when we did the *REWired* tour. So on the way from Denmark, we decided to play a set with those songs in it. We are obscure enough that people don't know what to expect. So we just play. A lot of times, the audience thinks the new is old and old is new. This is the blessing of not being famous! No one expects much.

BLITZ: To that effect, the Electric Prunes opened that night with *48 Songs*, a prototype of the track *49 Songs* on the 2004 *California* album. That track in particular seems to be among the most captivating from that chapter of the band's career, in that it reflects an ongoing undercurrent of optimism that has defined the band from the onset. Was that a part of the reasoning behind its inclusion as the opening number?

LOWE: As we drove across Sweden, we made up the set list and wanted to play something for Peter Lewis from Moby Grape. He wrote this song with Mark and I. The title comes from a night some guy came up to Peter when we played in San Francisco and asked, "How many songs do you need to go on the road?"

Peter didn't miss a beat. "Forty-nine", he said. The guy dashed off as if he were going home to learn a few more songs. We laughed all night about that! Fitting title. We kept shifting where the song would be and finally decided to play it first as if it were one of our hits! I don't think we have played it since.

BLITZ: Although in some respects it is very much a product of the circumstances behind its creation, *The Great Banana Hoax* nonetheless remains one of the most well arranged and executed staples from the Reprise era of the Electric Prunes' career. The band also includes *I Happen To Love You* and *Wind-Up Toys* from the 1967 *Underground* album in its live set. Is the ongoing inclusion of *The Great Banana Hoax* in the band's live set in part in deference to the purist faction of the band's target demographic? If so, would the band be equally at ease with the inclusion of, for example, *Big City* instead?

LOWE: Absolutely. As anyone knows, some songs come off live and some are harder to make sound good. Steven Van Zandt offered *I Had Too Much To Dream* was a hard song to pull off live. We agreed. You are never sure if anyone has heard a lot of your material, so some of the songs like *Big City*, *Sold To The Highest Bidder*, and *Are You Loving Me More* don't get played much. We do play certain things if we get wind someone wants a particular song. Also, we are not usually playing with a mixer

that knows our stuff and harmonies are hard if you don't have a good mic mix on stage. I guess we go for the loud and easy!

BLITZ: *Rewired* from the *Rite Of Return* and *California* projects is included in this set. That track differs significantly in terms of arrangement and execution from much of the band's repertoire, in that it is a straight ahead 4/4 rocker, with a bit more bravado and a bit less introspection. What was the inspiration behind it?

LOWE: We always like anthem stuff, but never did anything like that. When *Rewired* came out sounding like anthem material, we wanted to try it. I think the message of "don't give up" is a good one. It has always been part of our mantra.

BLITZ: The live CD includes a generous sampling of other material from the *California* album, including *Rosy Made Me Crazy*, *Tidal Wave*, *Running With Scissors* and *I'll Drag You Home*. With its indirectly self-deprecating story line, *Rosy Made Me Crazy* was a wonderful showcase for Mark Tulin's subtle sense of humor. Did Mark plan to assume the spotlight to a greater degree?

LOWE: I planned it! I kept telling him he better learn the songs, as I was not going to be around forever and he was younger than I was. He would have to go on without me. I never thought I should learn to play the bass! The song is even funnier if you realize Mark's mom was named Rose. "You are the pain that breaks me, you are the heat that shapes me, you are the wave that takes me, you are the blade that slays me." I love that song!

Mark was also putting some good vocals on our demos. I think he gained inspiration from working in the studio with Billy Corgan.

BLITZ: Conversely, *Tidal Wave* in some respects seems to be an extension of the band's early fascination with instrumental surf rock, typified by the March 1965 cover of the Gamblers' *Moon Dawg!* that the Electric Prunes recorded as the Sanctions. The timelessness of the metaphors of the genre serve the story line well, as noted in the line, "Seventeen won't come again". The Stockholm audience seemed to discern that and responded accordingly. Was that your intention?

LOWE: Hey, seventeen won't come again! Not that you want it to; but yes, you are correct. You can't take the surf out of the boys, I guess! Problem became there actually was a *Tidal Wave* a few years later and someone chided us for being "insensitive". So we don't play it much. If you don't look around and see there is a tidal wave of sorts coming at us all the time, you ain't lookin'!

BLITZ: Herein, the Electric Prunes close the proceedings with your 1967 monster classic first generation garage rock masterpiece, *Get Me To The World On Time*. Curiously, the band has generally presented its most recognizable track, the 1967 *I Had Too Much To Dream* single at midpoint during the live set, rather than as the set closer. Why so?

LOWE: We used to play it first. This is a holdover from the '60s. Mark and I always thought most had come to hear that song. So we got it over with quickly. Mark used to say, "If that's what you came for, you got it. Now you can go home early!"

Bands usually make them wait till the end for the hit. The subway don't run all night! I don't think we have ever played it last. If we did play it last, where the heck would we play *Get Me To The World On Time*? The stage is usually in shambles by then.

BLITZ: In recent years, the Electric Prunes have worked occasionally with the Strawberry Alarm Clock. Both bands headlined at your landmark fortieth anniversary celebration at the Knitting Factory in Hollywood, California in December 2007. Both bands continue to record prolifically. And tragically, both bands have lost key founding members since that Hollywood performance, with the passing of Strawberry Alarm Clock guitarist Lee Freeman in February 2010 and of course the tragic loss of Electric Prunes bassist Mark Tulin in February 2011. Nonetheless, both bands thankfully have vowed to persevere. Do you anticipate any future collaborations with the Strawberry Alarm Clock?

LOWE: Mark Weitz of the Strawberry Alarm Clock played some piano on a studio version of *Pushin' Too Hard* we did for Sky Saxon's memorial album and Mark Tulin was playing with the SAC a bit up at Kerry Brown's studio in the months before he left. We were actually planning a vinyl release together with them on one side and the Prunes on the other. I don't know them as well as Mark did. They went to high school together. They seem like cool guys and I like their live show. I am sure we will meet on the trail again.

BLITZ: You are of course recovering from heart surgery. How is everything progressing in that respect?

LOWE: Excellent! I was so lucky to have been stress tested. I advise people to do this after forty. Of course I am not forty yet! But I get to run on the beach every day! Exercise, no salt, no sugar, no fat. Praise God! Thanks for asking.

BLITZ: Are there any new studio projects on the horizon for the Electric Prunes?

LOWE: We will be finishing up an album Mark and I were trying to get in the barn before he danced off. The band is ready to play and I think our hearts are in the right place. We also were going to do a project with Billy Corgan and recorded some songs with him I think those will come out at some point.

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