

JUST ASK ALICE

ALICE COOPER NEVER SEEMS TO AGE — AND HIS MUSIC GETS BETTER AND BETTER, TOO.

BY IVOR LEVENE

THEY SAY THAT after a nuclear war, the only things that will remain are the cockroaches (and perhaps Keith Richards), but they fail to correctly estimate the mettle of Alice Cooper. Hell, he looks like he could not only survive the apocalypse, but like he could conduct it, wearing top hat and tails, of course.

Following a crazed and highly successful handful of dates in the U.K. and Paris, Alice Cooper is rolling through a town near you this year, and he shows no signs of stopping any time soon. Quite the contrary, the more he tours, the healthier he gets. While most performers from his generation have pared their tours down to a handful of shows, Cooper continues as though it were still the 1970s, performing at a pace that would easily lay waste to a performer who is staring down his seventies. "Touring keeps me in shape actually," he says, continuing, "I live a very healthy lifestyle and performing is an aerobic workout for me." And while the schedule (45 U.S. and Canadian dates) and intensity of his shows hasn't diminished, Alice has managed to keep it relevant and new over the years.

He released the highly successful *Paranormal* in July of 2017, followed it up with a mini-tour of England and capped it off with a raucous show at The Olympia in Paris. That show was recorded for his upcoming live album, *A Paranormal Evening At The Olympia Paris*, released August 31 (available as a 2-CD digipak and a 2-LP gatefold with white and red LPs).

Alice had a special treat for fans during the U.K. tour, where he “resurrected” Neal Smith, Dennis Dunaway and Michael Bruce from his original band. Just before taking the stage in Milwaukee for his kickoff show, Alice sat down with us to discuss touring, vampires and a host of other topics.

GOLDMINE: *I’d like to talk about getting your original band back together for your last record, Paranormal. Did you feel that the old band was able to sync with what you were doing as effortlessly as they did in the past?*

ALICE COOPER: It felt like 25 or 30 years hadn’t even gone by. When the band broke up, it wasn’t because of drugs, nobody was angry, nobody was yelling. There were no bad feelings, we just kind of split up because it was time to. Neal wanted to do an album, Dennis wanted to do an album, Mike wanted to do an album. We had just finished five years without a stop, we were really on a roll. We had done five or six albums in a row, all platinum albums, and it was time for another one and I think everyone was just exhausted, so we kind of all just went our separate ways.

I was in touch with Dennis and Neal throughout the years. When we finally got in touch with Mike Bruce, he was in Mexico and we could never find him. Glen (Buxton) had passed away, so there was no chance of getting the original band together.

When I called them up I said, “Have you got any songs?” Neal said, “Yeah, I have a couple of songs,” and Dennis was like, “I always write,” and Mike said, “I’m getting back into it.” So, I met them in the studio and said, “I don’t want to do it the way we used to do it, layering everything, I want the Alice Cooper band to play live. Whatever songs we come up with, let’s rehearse them and rehearse them and rehearse them, and then we’re going to turn on the mic and play these three songs live in the studio.”

So, the band plays great! Dennis is playing on “Fireball,” and Neal is playing on “Genuine American Girl,” it really rocks! It sounds dangerous.

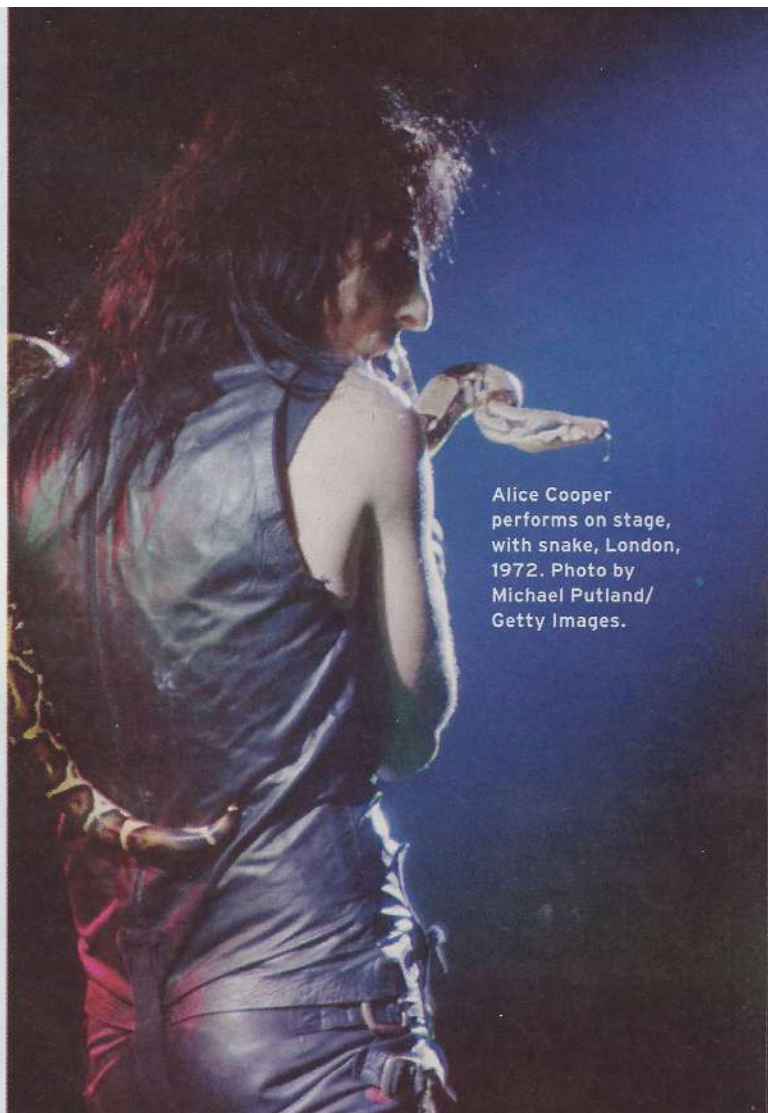
GM: *What was it like performing those songs in concert with the original lineup?*

AC: It had a different sound. It was still my original show with my current band. After my execution by guillotine, the curtain came down and everything went dark. When the curtain and the lights came back up it was the original band, and then it got dangerous. The original band had a much more dangerous sound than the normal touring band. We ended up doing five songs.

GM: *Was that “dangerous” sound consciously done for Paranormal?*

AC: No, I didn’t even realize it until I listened to it. It’s a little slower and it’s a little heavier, and it makes me sing like that, it makes me sing with a little bit more definition, and it really does sound more dangerous.

GM: *Why did “The Sound of A” sit on the shelf for so long until Dennis suggested it for the album?*



Alice Cooper performs on stage, with snake, London, 1972. Photo by Michael Putland/Getty Images.

AC: That song I remember from way back, that’s actually the first song I ever wrote. I always wrote lyrics, and then I would add some melody to it, and then Mike would come in with a great rhythm guitar on it and then Dennis would add bass to it. This was the first time I ever went in a room with a guitar and wrote. When I first brought it out, everyone listened to it and they said, “Yeah, that’s pretty good.” But we just never got around to recording it.

Dennis is a pack rat and he hid it away with all his tapes, and when he came into the studio he said, “I want you to hear something,” and he played it. So, I sat there and I listened and then I said, “You know what, Dennis? I remember when you wrote that; it was a really interesting song.” He said, “Yeah, except YOU wrote it.” That song was written when Pink Floyd was living with us in Venice, California. Pink Floyd lived with us in this house for a couple of weeks, so it’s got a little bit of Pink Floyd in it.

When (producer) Bob Ezrin heard it he said, “What is that?” and I said, “It’s a song I wrote about 50 years ago.” He said, “I love it, let’s record it!” Fifty years have gone by and it hasn’t affected the validity of the song.

GM: *That was going to be my next question, the song does have a Pink Floyd-ish kind of sound to it, it sounds almost reminiscent of “Tear Down The Wall.” I had assumed it was Bob Ezrin’s influence on it, since he had done The Wall.*



Alice Cooper off stage, London, 1972. Photo by Michael Putland/Getty Images.

AC: Maybe it's because Pink Floyd was living with us and a little bit of them rubbed off on us, I guess. So now when we do "School's Out," at the end of the song we go into "The Wall" and it fits perfectly with "School's Out"—it sounds like it's a sister song.

GM: Whose idea was it to have Larry Mullen Jr. play drums on *Paranormal*?

AC: That was Bob Ezrin's idea. He said, "We have a formula that we use that works, and I'd like to break that formula and try something different." We talked about using different drummers and then we said, "How about Mullen from U2?" I've never ever had a drummer come to me and say, "Let me see the lyrics." He says, "I don't just put down a four/four beat, I interpret the lyrics." And I said, "Alright, let's do it that way then." I tell you, we could not have picked a better

drummer; he really fit in perfectly with what we were doing. So it was really great working with a drummer that we've never worked with, and he just doesn't play like anyone else. It really gives the songs a different flavor.

GM: Do you think that helps bring in more listeners?

AC: I think it did, yeah. If I were a U2 fan and I heard that Larry Mullen Jr. was playing on an Alice Cooper album, I would want to go out and get that album. I'd think, "I've got to hear this!" That combination shouldn't work, and yet it does. It would be sort of like if anybody worked with Metallica. When Metallica worked with Lou Reed, I thought that was funny because everybody knows that Metallica can play Metallica, but the idea of those two that didn't belong together, it then just became something completely different. A lot of people

criticized them for that, but I liked that album. I guess there were some people that are really attached to Metallica and don't want anybody else in there, so they immediately don't like it. Without even hearing it they don't like it. Musicians want to experiment all the time—they want to try this, they want to try that. You've got to let musicians be musicians.

GM: I always like to say that music is not sacred; it's meant to be messed with.

AC: Absolutely! You know, I read once that somebody said, "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture." So it's really hard to talk about why one thing works and another thing doesn't.

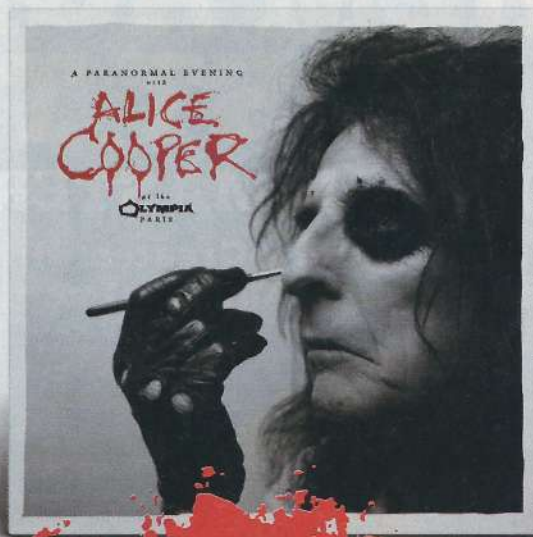
GM: Yes, and it was Frank Zappa who said, "Rock journalism is people who can't write, interviewing people who can't speak, for people who can't read!"

AC: I remember that! The great thing about Frank is that nobody was out of bounds with him. Frank criticized the establishment, he criticized the cops, he criticized parents, religion, even other musicians. Frank criticized everyone and everything. Nobody was safe around him, nobody got a free pass with Zappa.

GM: On the new live album *A Paranormal Evening At The Olympia In Paris*, do you think a live album can successfully capture the unique energy you put out in your concerts? How do you go about capturing that kind of a show?

AC: I tell you what: I think it all has to do with how good the band is. I surround myself with all the best players. Our drummer Glen Sobel got rated "Best Drummer in Hard Rock" by *Drum Magazine* in 2016. Nita Strauss just got voted "Best Female Guitar Player," Ryan Roxie, Chuck Garric, Tommy Henriksen are all fantastic.

I am extremely critical of live albums. When I heard this album, my mouth was open—I just could not believe how good it was. It was everything I wanted it to be, it sounded exactly like the live show. Everything was completely in tune, the lead guitar was right on the money. It's one of those things that at the end of it I just said, "Unbelievable!"



“The audience is only as good as the band, it depends on you and what you do. If you go out there with the attitude of, “Gee, I hope you like us tonight,” forget it. You have to go out there and grab them by the throat and shake them for two hours, and then let them go. The band is absolutely in charge, and we never let the audience get bored. We never let them look away from the stage, we keep them there every minute, and then you’ve got them. When you do that, you’ve really got something.”

GM: When I heard the teaser that Ear Music released recently I thought, “Wow, this sounds like something from 40 years ago but it sounds fresh.”

AC: Exactly! When we performed in Paris, the audiences were screaming and yelling, just really getting into it, it was just wonderful. Now, our first live album, I hated it. I did that album and I really wasn’t feeling well, it was the end of the tour and I was exhausted, I could tell the band was very exhausted and we had to do a live album because it was contractual. When I listened to it I thought, “There are great parts in it, but the whole album sounds tired.” This new album is so entirely fresh, it’s just amazing. We did a live album with The Hollywood Vampires with Joe Perry and Johnny Depp and those guys, and THAT album came out great. We did it live in Montreux and it’s just...the band is really tight.

GM: Do you find any differences between the European audiences and the American ones?

AC: I always have to say that the audiences depend on what you’re putting out, what you’re giving them. The audience is only as good as the band, it depends on you and what you do. If you go out there with the attitude of, “Gee, I hope you like us tonight,” forget it. You have to go out there and grab them by the throat and shake them for two hours, and then let them go. The band is absolutely in charge, and we never let the audience get bored. We never let them look away from the stage, we keep them there every minute, and then you’ve got them. When you

do that, you’ve really got something.

The original band did it that way, and every band I’ve ever been in went on the attack. If you go up there humble, it just doesn’t work for the Alice Cooper show. I actually go up there with ego. I always tell the band, “I want you to get up there with egos and be egotistical, I want you to be bigger than life, I want you to be monstrous, and then offstage I want you to be just the opposite, I want you to be just as humble as you can possibly be.”

GM: Did you ever in your wildest dreams think that The Hollywood Vampires would be resurrected? Is resurrection something that comes easily to Alice Cooper?

AC: With The Vampires, really, we were just going to be a bar band, it was just gonna be Johnny Depp, Joe Perry, myself, and whoever joined us going up on stage in bars, playing songs for my dead-drunk friends. For our first gig, we went to play the Roxy for a hundred and fifty people and then suddenly, we were playing Rock in Rio the next week to a hundred and fifty thousand people. We had to go up and be a band every night man, whoo-hoo!

Everybody in that band is a star. One member is with Guns N’ Roses, one’s with Aerosmith, we really have an all-star band. We had the test of fire; the second show we ever did was Rock In Rio. Now the band is just a bunch of guys who play together, it’s really a band. This band sounds tight, it *should* be together, and it’s really tight because Joe is playing great, Johnny is playing great. I’ve got Glen Sobel in the band playing

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drums now, I’ve got Buck Johnson from Aerosmith on keyboards, Chris Wyse who played with Ace Frehley on bass. It’s just the perfect combination.

GM: *You originally formed The Vampires in the 1970s as a drinking club. What do you think Keith Moon would have to say about this current iteration?*

AC: He would love it! When I say, “My dead-drunk friends,” every one of the guys in The Vampires would have thought that was funny. Harry Nilsson would have thought that was funny, John Lennon would have thought it was funny, certainly Keith Moon thought everything was funny.

GM: *Did anyone ever fail the initiation of having to outdrink all the other members?*

AC: You know, it got to a point where it was “last man standing” in that thing, but at least nobody ever tried to drive home. When I think back on it, there was never a time where everyone wasn’t just falling-down drunk. It was basically a club where a bunch of rockers would get together and talk about everything. You could talk to John Lennon about anything, it didn’t matter, nothing was off limits. We were in that little space up there, in that sort of attic. It was like our little clubhouse. It was just a bunch of guys sitting around talking and getting drunk, yet every single person in it was a superstar. I think it was one place where we could forget the pressure of being that kind of superstar.

GM: *What’s your favorite song to perform live?*

AC: Well, right now there are different ones. I won’t even talk “School’s Out”

or “I’m Eighteen” because they are such anthems, those are songs that just have to be done. I enjoy “Fallen In Love And I Can’t Get Up,” that song is fun to do on stage. “Poison” is always fun to do because of the audience reaction when they hear that first riff. “Halo of Flies” is fun to do because it really shows off the band. Naming a favorite song is like trying to pick your favorite kid, every one of those songs has a little bit of my heart in it.

GM: *Who were you singing about in “Under My Wheels”?*

AC: Dennis originally brought that song in and then we rewrote it. It’s just a purely Detroit kind of rock ‘n’ roll song. Detroit is all about cars, and every good song—I bring this up a lot to young bands—I say, “Guys, I don’t want to hear what you think about oil or Iraq or politics or the environment. Tell me about your girlfriend, that’s what a good rock ‘n’ roll song is about. Is she great? Is she horrible? Is she funny? Is she stupid?” That’s what rock ‘n’ roll is based on, you know, the elusive love affair. “Under My Wheels” is just that. “Under My Wheels” is like “Under My Thumb,” it’s the Detroit version of it. That’s Rick Derringer playing the lead guitar on that track.

GM: *Do you have a preference for the smaller venues such as The Greek Theater?*

AC: Well, I’ve always liked the Alice Cooper show in a theater, in a real theater with around two thousand seats. It’s always going to be more intense with the Alice Cooper show. We gauge the show with the big outdoor arenas and it works very well, but if you take that same show and put it into the Grande

Ballroom in Detroit or The Beacon Theater in New York, it gets intense! Everybody can see every little detail, and our show is based on detail. You actually get the feeling that it is a play, that it’s an evening of screaming guitars and vaudeville.

GM: *I’d like to ask about the character of Steven. He’s a seven-year old child that supposedly keeps us young, but he’s also a murderer and an insane person. During your show, he’s held down and his face is painted to turn him into Alice Cooper. Is Steven your inner child?*

AC: Yes, he’s the kid who wants everything to be exciting; I think the Steven character is what gives our show a spark. I always say to the band, “Remember what it was like when you were 16 and you got on stage for the first time, and you played a song and the audience erupted? I want that every night!” I feel like that every night even after 50 years of performing, and I never want to lose that. That little Steven character was kind of devious, a real troublemaker, and he kind of defies everything. He has no fear of going to jail or the guillotine, he’s fine with all of that. That’s the exact spirit that I don’t ever want to lose.

GM: *When I was a kid, I always saw you as the pied piper of rock, leading us all to salvation and good times.*

AC: When you come to see me, you’re going away for two hours, you’re going to Alice Cooper land for two hours. You’re going to forget about politics and leave all your troubles at home. Come along with me and it’s going to be fun. It may be a little scary but in the end it’s all fun. ●