



QUEEN

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On the Spot...

Lenny Zakatek is best known as lead singer of The Alan Parsons Project that sold over 50 million albums globally, but he had already caught the eye of John Deacon when previously performing in R&B and funk band Gonzalez in the mid-1970s. In an exclusive interview with Dave Fordham for the Official International Queen Fan Club, Lenny describes how he came together with John and former Gonzalez guitarist Robert Ahwai as The Immortals to record 'No Turning Back' for the 1986 'Biggles: Adventures in Time' movie, generally considered to be John's only true solo venture outside Queen.



The No Turning Back UK 7" vinyl single.

When you were performing with Robert in Gonzalez, were you aware that John was a big fan?

John came to Gonzalez gigs quite often, every time we played in London or somewhere where he could make it. He was very quiet and sometimes we wouldn't even know he'd been there until afterwards. John would just come, grab a drink, stand in the corner and dig our music.

I only found out recently that John and Robert went to college together; I hadn't known that they were friends prior to respecting each other as musicians.

They kept in touch and I think John thought Robert was a really good writer because he would come up with a lot of rhythm section ideas and John loved his soul. Robert knew John much better than me and was actually signed to a writing partnership with John's publishing company that went on for several years.

My meetings with John were in the studio, during the No Turning Back video and then at the Royal Command Performance of the Biggles film.

Had you seen John perform with Queen prior to the formation of The Immortals?

Like Queen, I was signed to EMI and I got a backstage pass when Queen played at the Orchid Ballroom in Purley in 1979. I was standing right behind Freddie and it was an amazing gig.

I loved the band. Every single one of them were superstars as players and have gone on to prove that.

Freddie had a similar background to me. He was a genius and the way he sung was unbelievable. As a vocalist myself, I hear his stuff and want to cry; he was phenomenal.

Roger is a musical drummer who picks up on the vibe of the song and he laid the foundation to let Freddie sing. That's what a great drummer does and Roger's a great drummer. There could never be another drummer for Queen; to replace him would be impossible.

For me, Brian May is a musical genius too and I love the way he plays. I've played with some great guitarists in my life and I'd put Brian right up there with Jeff Beck, who is the guy that all guitarists admire. There's been a few times I've been close to playing with Brian and I wish I had.

And John was one of the finest bass players in the world. His bass riffs stood out as melodies on their own and were an integral part of Queen.

Did Queen influence your music and performances in any way at that time?

When you are that age, a young man trying to conquer the world and with high self-belief, you often think 'I can write that' or 'I can perform that'... ..but as you get older, you realise you are never going to be Queen! But of course you can still do well with your life...

Following John's reciprocal admiration leading him to approach you and Robert to form The Immortals, what was the story behind the collaboration?

John got commissioned to write the song for the Biggles movie and he asked Robert to help him. He wanted to do something up-tempo and totally different to a Queen song. The song was written by John and Robert (mainly John, I would imagine). They worked on the track together and sent it to me as a rough idea because neither of them sing.



...Lenny Zakatek



Lenny Zakatek was the lead singer with Gonzalez and the 'voice' of the Alan Parsons Project. Image courtesy of Lenny Zakatek.

What was the recording process of No Turning Back and were you able to put your stamp on the song?

The basic demo of the track gave me the space to put my stamp on it. I learned the song, put my own interpretation on it and went in the studio and sang it. The rhythm section was already done and the chorus was pretty much established, but I came up with little bits of melody here and there. In those days you were kind of expected to lay your personality on the track. And John liked what I did.

The way I sing is just to do takes and quite often I don't do the same takes twice; I'm more of a live performer. So I went in and did a whole bunch of takes and we all sat together choosing the best lines and the best verses. Then the two young ladies came in to do the backing vocals after I'd finished.

Considering John's vast experience in the studio by that time, what direction did he offer during the session?

John was in charge in the studio with Robert beside him and the engineer... ..but I am my own boss in the studio. I take direction if it's given but usually because of my experience I am confident with my style of singing, just as Freddie would've been.

The recording happened very fast. John was so professional and it was like "it's done". It wasn't like a usual band situation where you often sit back and listen to 15 takes and argue whether the bass is loud enough...

What did you make of John's bass on the track?

I think the bassline is great. I love the way the bass blows along.

Were the three of you pleased with your individual contributions and the finished track itself?

John was pleased with it and we all loved what we'd done. If it hadn't been up to standard, I imagine the first person that would've said 'no' would've been John.

We were proud of it and thought it had as good a chance as anything else in the charts at the time.

When I hear it back, it was the sort of funk that Phil Collins was doing. It was from a group of songs in that 80s style.

I still like it. And American rappers have sampled my voice a lot so it could be very interesting to do a remix of No Turning Back.

How would you summarise John's persona in the studio and the experience of working with him?

It was a good job I had so much experience by then because the first time I met John was in the studio. But I had seen him on TV over the years and he had seen me on stage many times.

It was the best experience—there were no egos or 'I'm a star' from John. If I'd walked in and hadn't recognised him, he'd have just been the bass player.

He was a very humble and beautiful man.

What do you remember about recording the No Turning Back video with you, John and Robert in your flying gear (also featuring a guest appearance from Peter Cushing whose final onscreen credit was in Biggles: Adventures in Time)?



John and Lenny recording the No Turning Back video.

John got changed into his gear, which I was a bit surprised about... ..and we had a brilliant time! But John was just into playing—he'd done a lot more videos than I ever had and he just did his bit and left. He was smiling and having fun.

Queen's road manager Chris 'Crystal' Taylor was there and he was a lovely guy (I since heard he became a gardener in Australia after having enough of sex, drugs and rock and roll).

We were on a big site that felt like a big movie set and were using the Queen stage set-up that they used for rehearsals. We didn't know much about how the video would appear; we were just shooting the song in our gear and were told they were cutting sequences from the movie (which we hadn't seen at that point).

I chatted with Peter Cushing in the tea room during his brief time there. He told me he'd done many things in his life but had never done a pop video... ..and he left it at that! He was very well dressed and although I can't remember if I was in my Biggles gear at the time, I might have felt very silly chatting to Peter Cushing in my flying scarf and leather helmet!

I still have the video on my fan site. In the movie sequence, there's a guy jumping out of a helicopter and I've convinced my grandchildren it was me... ..so I'm their hero and that's used on a regular basis!

How was the movie première at the Empire Cinema in Leicester Square where John was presented to Diana, Princess of Wales and [the now] King Charles III?

We all went to see the film on the red carpet. But only one person could meet Charles and Diana and obviously John was a bigger celebrity than the rest of us so he was the chosen guy. That was the only side I saw of John 'the star' as he



Lenny is still proud of his contribution to No Turning Back.

Image courtesy of Lenny Zakatek.

was meeting the Royals... ..but he did talk to us! We were in the wings watching and John gave us the royal wave... ..we gave him another sort of wave back!

I was asked to do some interviews for the single as John didn't seem to want to, which was fair enough as he was as busy as ever at the time. So I did the interviews on behalf of the band as the lead singer.



John meeting Diana, Princess of Wales at the movie premiere of Biggles: Adventures in Time. Image source: Summer 1986 fan club magazine.

And surprisingly you had to wait until the end of the movie to hear your song?

John Anderson had also been commissioned to do some work on the soundtrack and there were some politics going on. I believe No Turning Back was initially to be the opening track but then got relegated to the end... ..which was weird because we were still selected as the single.

Although not really deemed a critical or commercial success, what did you make of the Biggles: Adventures in Time movie?

I loved the movie! It was great and I watched it again recently.

Bearing in mind other Queen members had side projects alongside Queen, was there ever a hope that The Immortals could have a future beyond No Turning Back?

Yes, I thought when I was approached by John that The Immortals was going to be a bigger situation. After No Turning Back, I asked what the next track would be and I thought at least we'd go on to make an album at some point. Looking at the three of us, John was very well known, I had already achieved a certain amount with the Alan Parsons

Project selling 50 – 60 million albums around the world and Robert had played on big things like George Michael's Faith album in addition to Gonzalez... ..so we were at the stage where we could have almost formed a super band. And the name 'The Immortals' would've lent itself to that too.

It would have been very interesting to hear what amazing bass parts John may have come up with on more Immortals tracks, not to mention his ability to write some great songs.

I visualised bringing certain other musicians into the band if John would've been happy to, creating a sort of rock-funk with John holding it all together on bass. I had a mind full of musicians to introduce John to! So I was disappointed because as a singer you always want to progress. But as we found out later, if John didn't really want to be involved with Queen anymore then why would he want to be involved with The Immortals?

We never talked as such about breaking-up and it was sad that it fizzled out before it really got started outside of the Biggles project. It's a shame because the press and radio interest was definitely there and I could have seen myself touring the world singing No Turning Back!

I really think The Immortals could've done something pretty special and I regret that we didn't go on to do more.

Are you and Robert still in contact with John?

No, but not through want of trying... ..I feel John's ducked out of the music industry. I called him a few times but didn't want to bother him after that. We parted as friends and as professionals. Robert was closer to him because of their long history together, but sadly he didn't stay in touch either. I wouldn't put that down to anything except John wanting to sever ties from the music industry.

John and I did chat about music and we would've got to know each other much better if we'd gone on to do other tracks together. I'd still love to do something else with him, a slightly bluesy or jazzy thing.

Moving forward to 1994, how was it to perform at The Great Music Experience concert at the Buddhist temple of Tōdai-ji in Japan where Roger Taylor was also on the bill with Yoshiki to promote their Foreign Sand collaboration alongside Japanese and international musicians?

I was managing Tomoyasu Hotei, a rock star who has sold millions of records in Japan, and he was on the same show as Roger. Sir George Martin was the musical director and



Roger performing on the same bill as Lenny at the Great Music Experience concert in Japan in 1994.

put together a super house band. Joni Mitchell asked me to sing backing vocals when she performed and Roger played drums behind us. I was in awe of the whole band and it was the first and only time I've ever felt nervous! Roger's energy levels were unbelievable and still are.

So considering that energy, it doesn't surprise you that Roger and Brian still have the desire to tour extensively as Queen?

I'm a bit surprised that I didn't get a call to sing lead with the new Queen line-up! But seriously, Adam Lambert can really hit those notes. He is not Freddie but Freddie Mercury was Freddie Mercury and you can't make comparisons. Adam is phenomenal in his own right.

What can you tell us about your recent and planned work?

My voice is still in pretty good shape and I've just formed The Project band with former artists from the Alan Parsons Project. We are hoping to take that on the road in 2023.

I released Love Letters, my first solo album release in 30 years with soulful tracks that I always wanted to sing. I wanted to test my voice as its quite exposed on the album and I got some really lovely reviews.

After Bergamo was really badly affected when Covid hit, I did a charity video for the city after having performed there previously in 2018 with an Italian band called Skeye. I got Bonnie Tyler and George McCrae to sing with me and members of the Alan Parsons band played on it.

I was also recently awarded the Legends of Vinyl Status accolade and was invited to New York to receive the award. I will probably also do a little Legends of Vinyl tour next year.

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Many thanks to Lenny for his time. The No Turning Back video is available on YouTube and for details on Lenny's planned live performances in 2023, follow him at www.facebook.com/lennyzakatek and visit www.lennyzakatek.co.uk.

Love Letters is available from Amazon, iTunes, Spotify, Deezer, Google Play and Tidal.

