Alice Cooper on the power of persona

July 24, 2017 - Alice Cooper is a musician and songwriter known as one of the early innovators of shock rock. Drawing equally from horror movies, vaudeville, and garage rock, he has spent the past five decades presenting a stage show that features electric chairs, guillotines, fake blood, and boa constrictors. This year he will release his 27th studio album, *Paranormal*, and will play over 100 shows. When asked if he ever grows weary of his public persona, Cooper says, "No, honestly. I designed Alice to be my favorite rock star. He can basically live forever."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2646 words.

Tags: Music, Beginnings, Process, Independence, Inspiration, Success.

You are about to release your 27th album and you are currently five decades deep into your career. At this point you could tour forever on the back of your existing catalog and it would be totally fine. What drives your urge now to write and record new music? Has that urged changed from when you were younger?

Well, I read something really interesting that Paul McCartney said and it really resonated with me. He said that he didn't feel like he'd written his best songs yet or that he'd played his best shows yet. That's also how I feel. I think that's how you need to feel. You should feel that way, always. I know there are people who will hear me say that, at 69 years old, and say "Oh, come on." Do you really think you're gonna write better songs than "Welcome to my Nightmare" or "School's Out" at this point? I get that.

But if you're an artist and you honestly think you've already done your best work, then why would you make another album? Why bother? You make another album in order to say, "I can write a better album," or "I think I've got songs in me that are still better than the other ones." You try to do a better record. I don't think Salvador Dalí, even on his deathbed, ever thought, "I've done my best work, I'm never gonna paint again." Bob Dylan probably thinks he hasn't written his best song yet.

You have a longstanding creative partnership with producer Bob Ezrin. How do the two of you approach songwriting and recording?

Bob and I are a real team. We're the only people at this point who know what Alice Cooper would say and what he wouldn't say. We talk about him in the third person, because I don't write for me. I write for Alice.

Alice is a character I write for and he has a different opinion than I do in a lot of things, but it's more fun to write for a character because he has different boundaries, a different sense of humor, and a totally different point of view. So it's definitely fun to do that. But at the same time, you try to shape an album from the very beginning. This time I said, "Ok, let's *not* write a concept album. Let's write 15 great songs and the only prerequisite is that these songs have really gotta get us off. After I finished the album, I listened back to it about four times and then realized I had accidentally still written a concept album. Every single character had some paranormal problem, or had suffered from some paranormal brain defect. I hadn't named the album yet, but after listening to all these songs the only word that summed it up was "Paranormal." Sometimes you do things without realizing you are doing them, you know? Even after fifty years of doing this, you can still surprise yourself.

You have a ton of amazing guests on this record, including Billy Gibbons and Larry Mullins, Jr. It must be an amazing luxury to just be able to call these people up and ask them to play.

Isn't that great? I mean, that was a luxury I didn't used to have.

What changed?

Well, I think it's because I opened myself up to it. In the early days I felt really exclusive about the band, very protective of it. But it's also a confidence thing. Eventually I felt confident enough about my songs to bring them to other people. You know, you always kind of walk into it going, "Are these songs good enough?" I'd hate to ask someone to play and have them go, "No, that song is crappy." So you always go in with the best song you could possibly write and hope for the best.

It takes just having confidence in what you're doing. Before I didn't have that confidence. Now I do. There were times when I would still get really scared to approach people. I would write a song and go, I wonder if Jeff Beck would play on this? Now I've known Jeff Beck for a long time, but I respect his playing so much that I would hate for him to reject me! So I would be very, very careful about what song I'd share. When we did the Hollywood Vampires project and Paul McCartney walked in and sat down at the piano, I went, "What?" I've known Paul for 40 years, but I'd never been in the studio working on a song with him. That changes everything, because he wasn't just a Beatle, he was *the* Beatle. All of a sudden you realize, he came into *our* session to play on *our* song, which means he respects us enough that he wants to be on the album. And that to me was just the ultimate feather in the cap, you know? It can't get any better than that.

Because Alice Cooper has always been this theatrical over the top thing, did you ever worry that other bands didn't take it seriously?

Yeah, early on I felt that. We got that in the press, we got that in the reviews. But as soon as you made your first number one album, and then you make *another* number one album, suddenly everybody starts respecting you. I'd had other kinds of validation though. John Lennon mentioned that "Elected" was one of his favorite songs, Bob Dylan talked about my lyrics. That helps a lot, when people you respect start recognizing your music—not the stage show, but the actual music. It took us a long time to get that. The stage show overshadowed the music for quite a long time. And then when people started really listening to the albums without the show, and it lived on its own, that's when you start getting respect.

You mentioned Alice Cooper as a character. So many people have cited you as an influence over the years because of your use of persona. What does having a persona allow you to say or do creatively that you wouldn't have been able to say on your own?

I came out of that world of shock rock where I was allowed to say anything I wanted to say. Critics would say, "How dare you!" and I'd just go, "I didn't say that, Alice did. I can't be responsible for what he does. I have no control over him!" It was very freeing. Obviously it's changed a lot over the years. It was easy to shock an audience in the '70s. We didn't have the internet. Everything was communicated by word of mouth, everything you did became an urban legend. People wanted to be shocked by Alice. People couldn't wait to go see Alice because he was the anti-establishment *everything*. Parents hated him, which made him even more appealing.

Theatrics are fine, but you also have to deliver great records. If you're just gonna be a dog and pony show—because you cut your own head off on stage—that's one thing, but it's not sustainable. We would rehearse eight hours a day—seven hours was on the music and one hour on the stage show. People always thought it was the opposite of that. In the '70s we realized we were up against Led Zeppelin, we were up against every great band out of England, so we were smart enough to know that we'd better be just as good as a live band as they were. The idea was that people might come for the stage show, but they'd leave saying "Geez, that band was so good. I wasn't expecting that!"

Personas are slippery. They can be liberating, but they can also become a kind of prison. Do you ever grow weary of Alice Cooper?

No, honestly. I designed Alice to be my favorite rock star. He can basically live forever. When I dress Alice for a new show, I ask, "What do I want my favorite rock star to be wearing?" It's fun. It's never boring. For 50 years now I've played that character dead on and the audience loves that character. And I find it very easy to play him. It took a long time to establish him, but once he got established, now he's Vincent Price or Christopher Lee. And I'm never gonna let that audience down by softening him at all.

Did you ever have the experience of writing a song and thinking, "This is a great song, but Alice could never do this." What do you do then?

Oh yeah. I will often write a song that is absolutely *not* Alice. When that happens I just send it to somebody else. I'll send it to, say, Tom Petty for example. You do end up writing songs that don't fit, but they're good songs. I probably have over 300 published songs out there, but for every 300 you've published there are an additional 1,500 that end up in the

wastebasket. I find notebooks that are two inches thick, just full of lyrics from songs that never went anywhere. Maybe they got about three quarters of the way through and I thought, "No. Alice would never do that." Or it just wasn't a good enough idea. But you know, that's great. That keeps you creative, that keeps you going all the time. You have to do a lot of bad things to do a good thing. And then when you do finally hit that song, you feel it. When I play a new song for Bob Ezrin, I can't wait for him to go, "That's really good," or "That just sucks." It's all part of the process.

You've been making rock music for a long time. What advice do you have for young bands?

Well, timing is so important. Right now, I would hate to be a young band, because it does feel like everything pretty much has been done. Still, I am amazed by how boring so many young rock bands are. They've forgotten how to be outlaws. They've forgotten how to strut on stage. There's just no mystery to them at all. When we started, I looked around and I thought, "There's a ton of Peter Pans out here, but no Captain Hook. I'll be that." Sometimes it's about looking around and asking, "What's missing?" We were at the right place at the right time, and it's important to remember that there was a long period of time where people just hated us. They hated the idea that rock was gonna be theatrical. And we knew it was going to be. We just happened to be at the right place at the right time with the right stuff.

You are kind of regarded as a godfather to all of these bands that came after you. How do you feel about that?

The idea that Alice begat KISS, Alice begat Marilyn Manson… all these bands. They took that idea and then created their own version of it. I never had an argument once with David Bowie, I never had cross words with KISS or anyone else who may have borrowed from us. We broke that door down and said that you can be theatrical *and* still have hit records *and* be a great live band. All three of those things can work together. As soon as that worked and the public saw it, all of a sudden we were breaking all kinds of attendance records. Then KISS and all of these other bands could be born. I always used to tell these guys, it's very nice that you think of me as sort of the forefather with that stuff, but you still have to deal with me. I'm still going to blow you off the stage. There's always some young punk kid who thinks he's faster, you know? And I go, no no no.

I still believe that our show is the best show out there and I'm not saying that out of ego. We do it with all humility. I tell the band, when you're on stage I want you to be the biggest egotistical bastards on the planet, but when you're offstage I want you to be the nicest people ever. And they are. I hand pick everybody because I know that's who they are. The audience wants you to be bigger than life on the stage. And then when you're offstage, I think it's nice to sign everything, take every picture, and be absolutely humble about who you are. That combination works for me. That's always been me. I look at Alice sometimes on stage, and I feel like, "Oh my gosh, so overbearing. This guy is just so arrogant!" Offstage, I know that's not me.

Would you ever retire Alice?

I do over 100 shows every year. I find that there's a big difference between touring because you *have* to and touring because you *want* to. In the early days, it was touring because you had to and you never got a break. Then you get to a point where you're financially set and everything is fine, and that's when lots of bands say, "That was it. I'm gonna retire now." I tour now because I want to tour, and I make records now because I want to make records, not because the record company's breathing down my throat. It's a really luxurious place to be in.

You have to finally work your way to that point, and I don't blame people for retiring. I just need to be on that stage. So it's a matter of enjoying being up there, not sitting around complaining about being up there. I keep telling the guys, we're working for two hours a night, playing our music and having fun up there. What can we complain about?

One reason why people love you and your show is because it's still kind of rare. There aren't a lot of rock bands now really giving people a truly theatrical experience. So many musicians seem almost embarrassed by the idea of showmanship.

When Mötley Crüe would walk into a room, you knew it was Mötley Crüe. When Guns N' Roses would walk into a room, you'd go, "Oh wow, that's Guns N' Roses." When the Alice Cooper Band would walk in—"Oh damn, there's Alice!" Nowadays, if 20 bands walked into this room, they'd all look alike. And there's no distinction. And they don't even want to be distinct, they want to be all the same people. I don't get it. Is it just the times? Is it the environment? Is it the internet or something? Because if I were in a young rock band, I'd want to be a little snotty about it. That's what I tell people. Make them remember you. Announce yourself. Show off. People shouldn't be able to mistake you for anyone else but you. Otherwise, what's the point?

Essential Alice Cooper:

"School's Out" from *School's Out*, 1972

"I'm Eighteen" from *Love It to Death*, 1971

"Welcome to My Nightmare" (as performed on *The Muppet Show*, 1978)

"Poison" from *Trash*, 1989

"He's Back (The Man Behind the Mask)" from *Constrictor*, 1986. Also the theme song of *Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives*

"No More Mr. Nice Guy" from *Billion Dollar Babies*, 1973

Name
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Vocation
Musician, Songwriter

Fact

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