

In the second half of the 1970s, a Dutch band started to write and play progressive music. They called themselves Plackband (a pun in Dutch). Although they got quite popular in the Dutch progressive rock scene, played many gigs, and even got some airplay on national radio, they never managed to get a record contract or release an album. They disbanded in 1983. Then they re-united in 1999, and actually released their first ever album (an album of a professionally recorded concert in 1981) and their first ever studio album (After The Battle), consisting of songs written in the 1970s and 1980s. But more importantly, they got serious enough to start thinking of writing new material as well.

With the new material being recorded and almost ready for release, I learnt the band were planning a gig as a CD Presentation party, with a rather new way to spread the music: everyone attending the gig will get the CD for free! Time for a chat, I'd say... I visited Ronald Brautigam (guitar), Tom van der Meulen (drums), and Harry den Hartog (bass) in the Holland Spoor Studio, where their engineer is working on the final mixes of that new album. If you want to know how to get their new CD for free, read on!

Plackband? PBII!

First of all, there's this new name: PBII. After a few line-up changes (new bass player Harry den Hartog, keyboard player Michel van Wassen and guitarist Ronald Brautigam sharing lead vocals) they also wanted another change. Times had changed, the prog world had changed, instruments and sounds had changed... The band name had to change. PBII. PBII? Plackband 2?

"Ah, what's in a name?", Ronald says, making it sound not too important. Harry adds, "But we're not going to change it, it's written on all what we've been doing for the past year." Ronald continues, "It could have been a whole new name as well." But also an old name? "Plackband you mean? We have thought of that, but the main reason is that when Harry joined, the band started to sound a bit different, and we actually wanted to sound a bit different. We wanted to make a new start. So we made a decision to get a new name, with a nod to the past. We still like to play some of the old songs. But it's a new band, a new start." Harry makes sure we don't make a mistake: "You shouldn't say Plackband 2, it's really PBII [pronounced Pee Bee Two]."

Ronald explains further. "We've got all these new songs. There's not a lot of Plackband left there. When you hear the CD, I think you will agree. Of course there will be moments when you will hear the old Plackband, maybe 20%." And what does the new guy think of this? Harry: "I was quite objective towards Plackband, because although I had heard the name, I didn't know their music before I joined. It's hard to say, maybe you hear 30% of the music sounds like Plackband. Someone else might hear no Plackband at all, it's a personal thing, I think. Personally, I think it's less - there are things you recognize, but it's mostly all new stuff."

There's of course a lot of time between when the Plackband songs were written and this new album. Ronald: "Indeed, a lot has changed. We developed our playing, but there's also a wealth of new possibilities. There are so many ways to create new sounds. PBII is doing that a lot. Modern sounds." Harry joins in: "yes, there are sounds that were very hard to do ten years ago, and unheard of twenty years ago." Did you make conscious decisions during composing? Did you change some things because they sounded too much like Plackband? Ronald: "Not during composing, or at least mostly not. It happened more in here, the studio. Especially the final mix, we were very conscious of how we wanted to sound. Not like a 1980s band, but a modern band."

"And that's why", Ronald continues, "we gave our producer, Chris, the freedom to give us all the input he wanted. We were looking for a good studio to record the new songs. When we came here he said he wanted to do the production, but wanted us to sound like a modern band. So that's exactly the direction we were looking for. We mentioned Frost and Porcupine Tree, Chris is also into Linkin Park. So he requested and we gave him the freedom. Up to a certain point of course, we as the band should still be completely satisfied with the results. We're now in the process of him mixing everything a song we have a listen." And did he go too far on some things, that you didn't like? "Well, actually... no!" Tom gives a little more detail: "Well, a few times we were expressing our feelings about the mix, like this shouldn't be too loud in the mix, or that should be a little louder. But not the overall sound."

Ronald: "When my 14 year old son heard Arms Of The Gemini for the first time, he said 'hey dad, that sounds like Linkin Park!'. So we knew we were on the right way for a modern sound! It's great to hear that from the new generation. Not bad eh, for the old generation?!"

Plastic Soup

Who's going to release the CD? Ronald: "We're doing it all by ourselves, really. We're going to look for distribution deals, of course. We're working on some alternatives as well, not just the record shops. That has to do with the album's theme: Plastic Soup. Plastic Soup is a name for what is also known as the Great Garbage Patch, the world's largest dump, floating in the Pacific Ocean, although it's becoming apparent there are more places like this. It's plastic garbage that has been collected since the 1950s. The plastic is non-degradeable, although by water erosion and the ultraviolet in sunlight, it's getting smaller and smaller. It floats just below the surface, making it look like a plastic soup. It's in the water, so finds its way in the food chain, and really should get a lot more attention that it does now."

"We were working on a song called Oceans. It was a nice idea to make that a theme, to have something visual as well for the CD. Looking for things related to oceans, we came to the pollution. The issue got to us, so we wanted to know more. We got to the beginning of it all: Charles Moore. He discovered it all. In 1997, after participating in a sailing contest in Australia, made an unusual de-tour on his way back home when sailed through a large collection of garbage. Miles and miles away from the nearest land he found garbage obviously from human beings. He sailed on for a week and for all that time, he was sailing through garbage, it was huge. Now we know it's an area that is twice as big as the USA. When Moore got home, he started investigating what had happened there. We have been in contact with Captain Charles Moore and we even recorded a narration for the CD."

It appears that from all over the world, a lot of plastic finds its way into water, for example by wind. Rivers move the garbage to the seas, and due to all the currents in the oceans, it can travel a long long way. There are mainly two places where large ocean currents meet and the garbage stays. The ocean is downhill from everywhere, they say.

Ronald continues: "The Plastic Soup theme is an overture consisting of four parts called The Great Garbage Patch. The main part is Plastic Soup. Before that there is a soundscape with Charles Moore explaining things about the concept. The end is a part called Changing Habits, which of course deals with what we can do about it. In fact there are three things that have to change: the companies producing plastic products, the consumers that have to be more conscious, and governments. Because of the latter, we got in contact with VROM [the ministry of environmental issues in the Netherlands]. The minister, Jacqueline Kramer, is writing a foreword for the booklet of the CD. And the latest news is that we'll be getting some money from the government to make a video! And there's a writer here in Holland, named Jesse Goossens, who wrote a book with the same title. For her book, she did an interview with Charles Moore (which, by the way, is how we got into contact with him). Her publisher, Lemniscaat, came with the idea of selling the CD with the book, as a package deal. So our CD might be available in book shops too!"

Tom adds, "It's not that we're trying to be the environmentally aware prog band. It simply deals with topics that interest us. They are quite happy with a whole new way of attention for this topic. For us it's also a new type of exposure." Ronald: "It really started with what we were finding on the internet that got our interest."

"Mind you, this is not a theme for the whole album", Ronald warns. "It's not a concept album. The title song will be around 12 minutes. We didn't want to make a concept album." Harry explains, "that would also define us in a certain way. And like Tom just said, we were not looking for that. The topic has our interest, that's why we used it, but it's not going to be the only topic we are going to write about." "We do think of the environment when it comes to the packaging of the CD itself, of course", Tom adds.

CD Presentation Concert

What's with the concert? This is going to be something special, I assume? Tom: "Yes! First of all, we're going to have some guest musicians on stage." Thinking whether it's wiser to keep it a secret or not, Ronald continues to give some details: "Heido Jo Hines, from England, is singing a song on the CD. We met her at a Classic Rock Society show, we shared the bill during a Mostly Autumn Christmas show. She's coming over for the gig, and we thought it would be nice to do one of her songs as well. It's something we helped arrange: Weak Turns To Strong. And we're going to do a very old song, a cover by Judy Tzuke: Stay With Me Till Dawn. John Jowitt and John Mitchell will be there, as well. Mitchell expressed an interest in doing a song by Peter Gabriel: Here Comes The Flood, so we're doing that one as well. But that's just for the CD Presentation gig.

The first part of the gig will be a recital of the CD. Then there's a break during which the CD is being presented to the audience. And the rest is an encore party, really. Some old Plackband songs, some covers."

Free CD!

As said before, the band are going to release the CD independently. Besides the rather unusual ways of distribution, the band has also adopted another way of getting the music to the people. As Tom explains, "all people attending the gig will get the CD for free." Ronald: "we could have decided to simply sell the CD. But we wanted to show that the music business is changing. In the world of today, selling CDs is not helping a lot of bands. With gigs and merchandising you can at least make some money." "The most important thing for us," Tom says, "is that people will get the CD. We will never get rich by doing this. We want to be heard."

Change is a magic word in this chapter of the history of Plackband and PBII. Not just the band, but also the ways to get the music to the people. Let's hope it is going to work better than in the 1970s / 1980s, so we can enjoy their music a bit longer!

PBII **Plastic Soup** CD Presentation:
23 January 2010, De Boerderij, Zoetermeer, Netherlands