

Q&A



13th Witness

Abe Cunningham, Frank Delgado, Chino Moreno, Sergio Vega, Stephen Carpenter

DEFTONES

A brutal accident threatened their future, but brought them closer

ON NOV. 4, 2008, DEFTONES BASS player Chi Cheng was involved in a car crash that left him comatose. The group shelved its just-completed album, *Eros*, and pondered its future. "We took some time off to figure out what we were going to do," says drummer Abe Cunningham. "What should we do? Should we end it? Everybody had all these different thoughts. After a couple of months away we just said, 'You know what? Let's do what we do.'"

What Deftones do, and what they have done since the group's formation 22 years ago in Sacramento, Calif., is rock. So they contacted former Quicksand bass player Sergio Vega, a longtime friend of the band, to fill in for Cheng. They shelved the *Eros*

album in deference to Cheng, and started from scratch with producer Nick Raskulinecz at Los Angeles studio The Pass. The result is *Diamond Eyes*, a hard-hitting and surprisingly positive new album. "Chi's accident brought things into focus and made us evaluate what was important," Cunningham says. "We looked around and saw the four of us still here as dear friends."

Cheng remains in a minimally conscious state (his condition is updated at oneloveforchi.com), but his bandmates remain optimistic that he may one day be able to rejoin the band. In the meantime, Cunningham, frontman Chino Moreno, guitarist Stephen Carpenter and keyboardist Frank Delgado have found fresh inspiration

in Vega's presence, and a renewed sense of purpose in their own determination to survive. We spoke with Cunningham during tour rehearsals in Burbank about his band's tragic recent past and increasingly bright future.

As the drummer, was it particularly important you work well with Sergio?

I've been playing with Chi for 22 years, but really I always played off Stephen, our guitarist. I always had Stephen cranked in my monitor. Normally you'd think of the bass locking with the drums, but Stephen was just always so consistent. Sergio is a very different player. For the first time I feel like we really have a traditional rhythm section.



'We just use what sounds good. Who cares what it looks like?'

Nothing against Chi—we had our thing too, which was great, and hopefully we will again. But it's cool playing with a different person. I look into Sergio's eyes and we just lock in. It feels great, man. I've never had that, and now I do.

How does the band's songwriting usually work?

There's rarely any complete material brought in. It's all pretty much done on the spot—just a jam, hashing it out the old-fashioned way. Sometimes things come quick, sometimes they don't. We'd set those things aside, and maybe they come to life later on, or maybe never.

Do all the band members have much input into the lyrics?

That's pretty much Chino's thing. He's definitely got a unique style with what he brings and how he does it. There's times when he's frustrated, and he's certainly open to ideas. I think we all influence what he does, just because we all spend so much time together. But that's his department.

How was the recording process?

It was a joy to do this time around. I think everyone's perspective has changed, primarily due to Chi's accident. We rented a small rehearsal place and had a great schedule going on. We have a studio up in Sacramento, where we're from, and [in the past] startup would be around 7 p.m.—but in reality it would creep from 7:30 to 8 to 9, and by the time everyone got there we'd go until 4 in the morning. The next day you're shot. We repeated that cycle for the last 15 years, and it was broken. So we came down here and got together with Nick, rented a spot and went from 1 to 8 every day, so we could still have the mornings and the evenings. We had some very productive time. We got everything written in about two months, went into the studio and whipped it out. It was the first time we've had everything written before going into the studio since our first record. Every record since then has been predominantly written in the studio—which can be great, but if you're not gelling or things aren't working it can be a tedious and expensive process.

What kind of drum setup did you bring into the studio?

I put together kind of a Frankenstein kit from all these different things that sounded good. There was my trusty Tama kit. I've been with Tama for over 10 years, and

they're just great people. And Nick had done a Rush record a couple of years back [*Snakes & Arrows*, 2007], and when that was done [Rush drummer] Neil Peart had a DW kit sent to his house as a gift. We used a kick, a rack and a floor tom from the Neil kit—whatever sounded great. We just use what sounds good. Who cares what it looks like?

How is Chi doing?

Chino and I went and visited him a couple of weeks ago, actually. He's at home now in Stockton, Calif. His mom and sister are

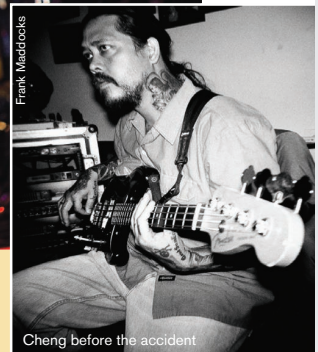
How has the band stayed together for so long?

I have not a clue. I don't know what the hell we've done. I know we've done some good things, and we've done a lot of damage. We've taken a step forward and immediately taken 29 steps back. It's just part of the process. We certainly don't know everything, but we're learning every day and everything we know we've learned together. We've seen the world many times over—and been able to do it as a band of brothers. Just like brothers we fight and bicker, but that's just shit that happens to anyone in life. We started out

Moreno and Cunningham at a Hollywood benefit concert for Cheng in November



Tiffany Rose/Getty Images



Frank Maddocks

Cheng before the accident

'Chi's accident made us evaluate what was important'

taking care of him. He has a feeding tube that goes into his stomach, and that's sustaining him. He's just there. It's a really puzzling, fucked-up situation. It's been about a year and a half and it's still just ... I have no words. It's insane, man. But he's making slow progress, and who knows? We just keep sending all our love and good energy his way.

It must suck to have to talk about such a painful topic so often.

It's fine. It needs to be brought up, and people need to be aware of him. Chi had a traumatic brain injury, and it's pretty heavy stuff. But it's good to talk about it.

on our friendship. We were buddies, and we figured out how to write a song, for whatever it was worth.

What are your hopes for the future?

Given the things that we've gone through, I think that right now is a great, great time. We're really appreciating each other. It sounds corny, but we're firing on all pistons and it feels great. It's taken a long time. We've had a pretty brutal past few years, and from this point on we're just taking it as it comes. We're still able to do it, and I think we're doing it better than we ever have. It's a great feeling.

—Chris Neal