

Q&A



John Myung, John Petrucci, James LaBrie, Mike Mangini, Jordan Rudess

DREAM THEATER

Taking changes in stride, the prog metal icons return in epic form

FOUR YEARS AGO PROG METAL giants Dream Theater were forced to navigate stormy seas when drummer and founding member Mike Portnoy left the band. Through the period of transition, the remaining members—singer James LaBrie, guitarist John Petrucci, keyboardist Jordan Rudess, bassist John Myung, and new drummer Mike Mangini—emerged stronger.

"That whole transformation makes you take a step back and look at what matters," says LaBrie. "It allowed us to understand who we were as artists, and what we wanted to create."

After 25 years, a dozen studio albums, more than 12 million albums sold worldwide, and a singular reputation for superior

musicianship, Dream Theater is ready to move forward. Their latest self-titled studio record—produced by Petrucci—reflects a group that has weathered the storm to produce one of the most powerful albums of their career. "We're all in a beautiful place now," LaBrie says. "We know how to feel comfortable with each other. I think the writing on the new album reflects that new environment."

"There's more patience in the studio, and not necessarily any kind of anxiousness," LaBrie continues. "The way we used to work was more rat-a-tat-tat and get things done quickly and efficiently. Now there's more of a sense of, 'Let things stew. We're not in a rush here.' I think that really lends itself to the way the new album sounds." LaBrie

discusses the band's new record, new lineup and new attitude.

Where did song ideas come from?

There were a couple of ideas that were used from soundcheck when we were out on tour for [2011's] *A Dramatic Turn of Events*. Some of the grandiose section at the end of "Illumination Theory" was taken from a soundcheck, and the other one may have been "Surrender to Reason." When we come into the studio, we all have these seeds of ideas on our iPhones, and we literally document them on a big easel. We'll give them a name like "Cock-a-doodle-doo" or whatever it reminds us of. But the real magic comes from the five of us sitting on

the floor and influencing or being inspired by whatever someone else is doing.

Was there a lot of spontaneity?

Yes, where we'd be sitting there and somebody would start grooving, whether it was Mike on a beat or John or Rudess coming in with a riff. That would set things in motion.

What's Mike brought to the music?

Mike is very intuitive, and that's the way he responds to things—he's very spontaneous. There's a lot of drum parts right off the floor. It presented a different dynamic for the entire band. He's a phenomenal musician, and his drumming speaks for itself. But to have him in the same room when the music was beginning to take shape made a big difference. It gave it a different feel, a different perspective to approach any song we were working on, because of his rhythmic intuition.

Were you happy with John producing?

Absolutely, and I think that stands true with everyone in the band. John and I have always been extremely respectful of one another. He listens and knows the strengths and weaknesses of everybody in the band, whether it's musically or our character. If he were obstinate, self-absorbed or egotistical—his-way-or-the-highway thinking—this absolutely would not work.

Can you share any tales from the studio?

I remember in "Illumination Theory" I was singing my head off—what John kept referring to as a Chris Cornell approach. Rich [Chycki, engineer] and I kind of goof around a lot, and I was telling him, "Bring me in here. I'm going to get myself pumped up." And I started doing jumping jacks and really psyching myself up. He altered my voice so I sounded like Darth Vader, and then like a chipmunk. We were laughing so hysterically I literally had to walk out and return to do that section.

How have you evolved as a vocalist?

If I think back for example to [1992's] *Images and Words*, I was a young guy, and it was more of an approach of pure energy and pure excitement. Over the years it has been really trying to understand what it is I do, and what I can bring to each and every album. My voice has matured, and it's no news to anyone out there that I went through a serious vocal injury, which set me back for quite some years.

That was a tough situation.

I was in a coma, and I hemorrhaged my voice through food poisoning on December 30,

1994. Two weeks later I'm singing in Tokyo, and I had EMTs telling me I shouldn't have been singing for six months. But Dream Theater was there with the *Awake* album and we didn't have that luxury of missing the show. I went through a dark period there but came through it. It was around 2003 that everything started to come back online. Through a lot of dedication, I was able to bring it back around.

How's your voice today?

I'm in a better spot than I've ever been in vocally. I love the sound of the voice, and the power is there again. The brightness and tonality is where it used to be, as is the confidence. I think all of this really lends itself to helping me grow not only as a vocalist but as an artist. I know what I'm capable of doing, I know my limits, and I'm not trying to escape that. That was my immaturity years ago. That inexperience showed itself when I would try to push myself to the limits. You have to realize and embrace your limitations.

coming through your microphone into the headphones. I always used an AKG C12 when I was doing the sensual and soft-sung sections and then flipped to an AKG 414 for when I was belting out. The thing with the *Blueberry* is I can sing soft and quiet, and then in the next verse be screaming my head off, and it's still there.

Is *Dream Theater* the heaviest album the band has made?

It's one of our most powerful albums, for sure. The heaviest I would say is *Train of Thought*, and that was for that purpose alone. We wanted to make a heavy, in-your-face, bombastic album, and I think we achieved that. This is a classic Dream Theater album in the sense that it epitomizes this band—all the influences, all the styles. We've always been very eclectic, and this album shows that in a balanced fashion musically. That's a lot of the reason why we felt this album would be a big, bold statement—*Dream Theater*. It says who we are today and how and why



James LaBrie onstage in Austin, 2012

Do you have a favorite mic?

Since 2003, I've been using a model called the *Blueberry* from Blue Microphones. I personally feel it captures the true acoustics of your voice. I sing into a microphone and then take my headphones off and sing in the room. That's the way you can really A-B the true acoustics of your voice in a room and the acoustics

'This is a classic Dream Theater album in the sense that it epitomizes this band!'

we arrived at this point. This is a true telling of where the band is and the transitional period we went through in the last three years—and the fact that we haven't missed a step.

—Steve Rosen



'There's more patience in the studio, and not necessarily any kind of anxiousness.'