

Q&A



Carlos Ramos

CHRIS CORNELL

Going solo means going acoustic for the Soundgarden frontman

WHEN HE PLAYS WITH SOUNDGARDEN, the seminal Seattle alt-rock outfit he formed in 1984, Chris Cornell knows pretty much where things stand. The band makes genre-pushing hard rock revered by punk fans and metalheads alike, and with albums like the 1994 blockbuster *Superunknown*, the quartet has pushed its big, artsy sound into the mainstream.

As a solo artist, Cornell has always taken a more varied approach. His fourth studio album, *Higher Truth*, is a stripped-down singer-songwriter set inspired by his 2011 Songbook Tour, when he roamed the world with an acoustic guitar playing solo songs and Soundgarden classics—as well as tunes he wrote for the supergroups Temple

of the Dog and Audioslave. The live album *Songbook*, featuring songs recorded during the tour, was released later that year.

"I started to realize this was something that really works for me," says Cornell about the no-frills format he chose for the new record. "It's a new home. It's the summer home to my winter Soundgarden."

Handling all the writing and arranging and much of the instrumentation, Cornell made *Higher Truth* with producer Brendan O'Brien, best known for his work with Pearl Jam. It's a significant changeup from Cornell's last solo studio effort, 2009's *Scream*, a collection of R&B jams helmed by hip-hop innovator Timbaland. That record alienated many longtime fans, so

this time Cornell decided to give listeners something less experimental. "*Higher Truth* was written to make the Songbook tours a living, breathing thing," he says, "instead of a nostalgic look back at my history."

Safe to say the record was inspired by the *Songbook* project?

It's the closest to an overall concept I've ever had making a record. In a sense, Soundgarden records are conceptual, in that everything I write is my interpretation of what the band should sound like. It's a band that has become its own monster. We're all writing the soundtrack to what that is. I know what Soundgarden should sound like, and I'm always trying to push the boundaries of



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that. But with the solo records, that never has been the case. Anything I do that doesn't sound like it should be part of the image and the identity of the Soundgarden monster, we call that "solo records." As a solo artist, I don't think I had an identity until I started doing the Songbook touring.

How has that informed the new album?

Being able to get up with just an acoustic guitar and pare down 28 years of songwriting in various bands and solo projects to this distilled acoustic-guitar-and-singer thing started to become something that made sense to me as who I am. It's the whole ball of wax, from the time I started being a songwriter until now. A song I wrote for Soundgarden, and a song I wrote for Audioslave, and a song I wrote for Temple of the Dog and a solo song—and my interpretation of a John Lennon song or a Michael Jackson song—they're all now kind of making sense together. I'm actually able to see this character and this identity outside of myself. I have somewhat of a dreamed-up image of who this guy is. Some of it really is me, and some of it is a character I've created, like one might create a character for a novel.

Could any work for Soundgarden?

I don't see any of them necessarily being songs that would make sense as Soundgarden songs. If Soundgarden did a cover of one of them, it's possible, but not probable. I don't feel like there's a whole lot of confusion between projects.

The last song "Our Time in the Universe" seems like it would work.

The melody was very Eastern. On the original demos, I found a keyboard patch that sounded like Middle Eastern horns. The drum loops were all kind of synthetic, electronic-sounding. That was really the only song that wasn't written to work acoustically first. The basic arrangement was chord-based, but overall I never tried to make that work as an acoustic song. I don't know if I'll even perform it that way. There are a few songs I pressed to vinyl, and I actually play the records onstage and sing to that—I'm performing to a vinyl album instead of a laptop. That's probably going to be one of them.

It's an uplifting message to end with.

We're living in this world where things are changing, and we're being lifted almost hourly by new technology, which opens new possibility. Everyone has to be thinking in the context of new possibility to live in this world, because things are moving so fast.

Even the rate of change is speeding up. But there's also this contrasting dark cloud of global warming, climate change, irrevocable disaster—careening off course toward the end of the world. Grandparents talk about how we're in our last days—it's the end of the world. I'm sick of hearing about it. That's the message of that song. It's a better message to leave the listener with.

What was your approach to production?

Other than Brendan, the only other idea I had in terms of production would be to keep it pared-down and acoustic, but make a Nashville record. The reason I didn't want to do that is the other musicians and the

been metalheads. None of us came from the school of hard rock. That's not who we are. It's funny: The type of fans we get are often people whose other favorite bands include Slayer, or some uber-aggressive band that lives in this world of dark metal. When we're doing a Devo cover, they would imagine it should be a joke. But it isn't a joke. We're not making fun of it.

Is it scary to share your feelings on stripped-down solo records like this?

I'm not sure, really. It's such a different situation to write for a solo record. The first time I did it was pretty scary. That was sort of the last time. It's always a little scary to write



Onstage in Berlin, Germany, 2012

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producer are going to color what the songs are. That's going to take it out of what I believe is my personal world. With something like the Timbaland record, I went way further away from what is intrinsically "me" as a songwriter and performer than I ever have before. I wanted this one to be as far back into that "me" corner as I could get.

What about fans' expectations?

One of the strange things about Soundgarden as it pertains to me as a singer is we have an audience that embraces pretty aggressive hard rock. We are that, but that's what the four of us collectively ended up producing. We've done a lot within that and pushed the boundaries of what that can be in a lot of directions. But none of us have ever

lyrics for a band, even if those lyrics seem less autobiographical or less personal, just because those lyrics have to represent all four people on some level. It makes it difficult to write songs that are about personal thoughts, ideas, relationships and stories.

And the next Soundgarden album?

We've started working on songs and getting the ball rolling. It doesn't take long to actually get it rolling. To let it gather enough moss to actually have an album's worth of material—you never know how long that's going to take.

—Kenneth Partridge