

Q&A



MEAT LOAF

Telling big stories, going for broke and having a hell of a time

"I THINK DRAMATICALLY," DECLARES Meat Loaf. "My albums are big, complicated stories." Indeed, nearly every project Meat Loaf undertakes is bigger than life, starting with 1977's smash rock opera *Bat Out of Hell*. Produced by Todd Rundgren and composed by classically trained songwriter Jim Steinman, the album has sold more than 14 million copies in the U.S. alone.

Meat Loaf's career has at times sputtered since that rip-roaring early success, but lately he's been on a creative tear. For his latest album, *Hell in a Handbasket*, the Dallas native born Marvin Lee Aday (although he changed his first name to Michael in the

1980s) worked with a variety of songwriters and covered favorites like the Mamas & the Papas' "California Dreamin'." Guests include Sugar Ray frontman Mark McGrath, country star John Rich and hip-hop luminary Lil Jon, all of whom he worked with on the NBC-TV reality show *The Celebrity Apprentice 4*. Public Enemy's Chuck D also adds a rap to the mid-album medley "Blue Sky/Mad Mad World/The Good God Is a Woman and She Don't Like Ugly." Now 64, Meat Loaf first caught the public's imagination with his appearance in the 1975 movie classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. He continues to balance music with acting,

having recently wrapped next year's *A White Trash Christmas*. Meat Loaf spoke with us from his home in L.A. about the new album, the madness of today's world and a nagging problem he still has with *Bat Out of Hell*.

Did any one song dictate the new album's direction?

"Mad Mad World." I've wanted to do that song ever since Tom Cochrane wrote it 20 years ago. I played our version for Tom and he liked it, so I decided I would build an album around that. I watch a lot of cable news—MSNBC and Fox News and CNN—and the things people say on those channels

make me want to reach out and strangle them. The commentators twist everything out of context. The story I wanted to tell kept shifting around, but everything had to do with the world going to hell in a handbasket.

How does "California Dreamin'" fit?

People think it's a nice little pop ditty, but it's not. That first line—"All the leaves are brown and the sky is gray"—should be enough to make you say, "Wait a second, this is not a happy song." I knew [co-writer] John Phillips, and he wasn't necessarily a happy guy. In the video for "California Dreamin'," the Mamas & the Papas are all snapping their fingers, smiling. I feel certain John must have hated that. If he were alive today I believe he would say to me, "You got it right." It's not really about California dreaming. John was approaching things metaphorically, writing about people who are afraid to follow their dreams.

Have you ever had that fear?

I went out to California in 1967 and put my money where my mouth was. I was willing to live in a car. And when I no longer had a car, I lived in people's garages. I knew a lot of guys in the '60s and '70s who were in bar bands who were terrific songwriters. I would ask them, "Why don't you do your own songs instead of Bachman-Turner Overdrive and Blood, Sweat & Tears covers?" They would say, "Well, the band is taking home \$2,500 a week doing covers. I can't see risking that." You could tell they wanted more, but they weren't willing to do what it took.

Does acting affect your music?

I started out as an actor and I still think like an actor. I don't think like a musician. I think theatrically, in terms of scenes and pictures. I do things on a grand scale. I also try to be metaphorical, although there's obviously a lot of political stuff on the new album. I'm not like Midnight Oil. I don't hit you over the head with a hammer.

Do you write much?

People think I don't write, and that's partly true. Songwriters often ask me to write with them. My response is, "You don't want me in the room with you when you start writing. If I am, the song will never make the album." I can cite several examples of that. In most instances a song is about three-quarters finished before I get involved. Take "All of Me," from the new album [penned by Dave Berg]—I changed the lyrics on that one here and there, but I'm not interested in getting a writer's credit for something I had little to do with. I don't play that game.

What drew you to rap?

It wasn't a matter of trying to be hip or cool. Meeting Lil Jon on *Celebrity Apprentice* caused me to examine that art form. When I found that song, "Stand in the Storm," I knew immediately that I wanted him to do it. In the case of "Mad Mad World," my original intent was to mash it with a song by Johnny Cash. The guitar and piano players were trying to find the right key for my voice, and it suddenly occurred to me that someone else should sing it. I said, "Guys, we need a rap artist to make this moment happen."

How did Chuck D get involved?

Turns out my son-in-law, Scott Ian of Anthrax, is one of Chuck D's best friends. I rang up Scott and 10 minutes later he sent an email

When I'm out on the road, I warm up and cool down. I try not to talk much. As long as I'm properly rested, my vocals feel great. Early last year we were going out on weekends, and that was perfect. Then I went to Australia and made the mistake of doing 90 interviews in eight days before we started the tour. That's really stupid when you're my age. Sometimes I start to think I'm like Justin Bieber, that I can do what I did 30 years ago. But I can't. I developed a swollen vocal cord and it started bleeding when we were in New Zealand. It was a mess.

Is *Bat Out of Hell* ever an albatross?

I could never say that about an album that's the third-best-selling album in the



Onstage at New York's Madison Square Garden, 2007

UPI Photo/Eric Peterson/Landov

to both of us, saying, "Chuck, meet Meat. Meat, meet Chuck." I phoned Chuck and sent him the "Mad Mad World" track, along with the Johnny Cash song "God's Gonna Cut You Down." But instead of doing the Cash song, he sent back "The Good God Is a Woman and She Don't Like Ugly." It was so perfect, I wasn't about to change a thing. It was as if Chuck had read my mind and seen what I wanted the album to be.

How do you maintain your voice?

I do a multitude of voice exercises at my house two or three times a week.

'I started out as an actor and I still think like an actor. I think theatrically.'

world. The only problem I ever had with *Bat Out of Hell* was that it was sped up so that it would fit onto vinyl. It was 52 minutes long, and that was too much for two sides. From day one, people have told me that onstage I don't sound like I do on the album. Well of course I don't—I'm not Alvin from the Chipmunks!

—Russell Hall



'The story I wanted to tell had to do with the world going to hell in a handbasket.'