

Q&A



Ward Robinson

Paul Doucette, Kyle Cook, Rob Thomas, Brian Yale

MATCHBOX TWENTY

On the pop-rockers' latest release, everyone gets a turn in the spotlight

MATCHBOX TWENTY'S NEW ALBUM, *North*, is the band's first collection of all-new material in a decade. It's also their first release to hit No. 1 on the Billboard 200 albums chart. But what really sets the record apart is the group effort to make it.

Rob Thomas has long been the frontman and songwriting engine driving the pop-rockers, scoring hits like "Push," "Bent" and "If You're Gone." This time, however, the group embraced a different approach with Thomas making room for writing—and lead vocal—contributions from bandmates Kyle Cook and Paul Doucette on more than half the album. During the 10-year hiatus, both Cook and Doucette were busy with other projects while Thomas released two

solo records. Given their mounting outside experience and Thomas' solo profile, it made sense for the three to work closely together on new Matchbox Twenty songs. "We started to get into that territory where it wasn't clear what the difference was between my solo stuff and the band, if I'm writing all the songs for both," Thomas says.

The group holed up in a cabin near Nashville for a few weeks to whittle down 60 potential songs, resulting in a collection that takes chances. There's a slinky '80s power-pop feel to single "She's So Mean" and a glossy groove on "Like Sugar," which Thomas claims piles up keyboards "that sound like Dr. Dre"—not that anyone will confuse *North* for a g-funk record. Thomas

tells us why this effort is a triumph of shared history, collaboration and inspiration.

Does it feel like 10 years have passed?

It really doesn't feel that long. Between solo records and our greatest-hits record, I've either been on the road or in the studio the whole time. And a lot of time went into writing this record. Everybody lives all over the country, so it's not always easy setting aside time to focus on the writing. There was constant work going on, and we were always aware of what our next move was going to be. If you have a lead singer who does a solo record, then everybody decides the band must have broken up, and then when the band makes another record it's

like, "Oh, they got back together"—but we were never really apart.

Describe the writing process.

In the past, it was usually my songs and I would bring them in for the band to arrange. But this was much more collaborative. Kyle, Paul and I started at the very beginning writing everything. Paul and Kyle have become much better writers over the years, so there's nothing on there where I think, "I could have done that better myself."

Had you previously felt that way?

They were always just my songs in the past. The band's job was to arrange them. But this wasn't just a writing collaboration—there's stuff that Kyle wrote, and a song that Paul wrote that Kyle sings. Things were coming from a lot of different sources, which is nice.

How did giving up that role feel?

It took me a second to figure out. Initially the only reason I did this is because I have songs in my head I want to get out. So when I started, the idea of not writing or having others write for me wasn't an option. But now that I have a solo outlet, it's not like I'm stockpiled with songs I need to put out. It's like a to-do list: All these songs build up and when you make a record, it's a chance to move them out of the bullpen so you can make room for more.

What did you learn from going solo?

You become more confident in what you can do because you've done it in a different setting. If you stay in one dynamic with the same people you wonder if it's that specific dynamic that works, or if you have any kind of magic that makes it spark. After everybody went off to work with other people, we came back feeling as though we really knew what we're doing. When I'm in solo world, I'm much more responsible for everything. It's my job to coordinate these great players and to work with the producer to guide them. With a band, they're coming in with their own unique ideas. When Paul writes drum parts, he's thinking like a songwriter, not like a session drummer. So it's going to be more interesting than just a functional drumming part.

Is the band's shared history important?

I've been playing with Paul for nearly 20 years, and there's a certain shorthand that comes into play that you can't just create. Energy gets into the music when you come up with a melody idea, look over at somebody and know they're thinking the exact same thing. There's something comforting about that.

How long did that take to develop?

It started to happen for us on [2002's] *More Than You Think You Are*. During that time our producer, Matt Serletic, was also running Virgin Records, so he wasn't always around while we were in the studio. I'd come in and one guy's laying down guitars and another is on Pro Tools editing, and Kyle's there trying to get a good banjo sound—it was like, "Where's the producer?" Matt has his personality all over everything, and he's like another band member. But we started working together better then. It was good for us to step up and take more control.

How long did the album take?

We spent a week in Nashville, a week in New York, a week in L.A. and another week in Nashville, then returned to Nashville for pre-production because we had these 60 song

easy. A few favorites emerge, like "She's So Mean" and "Overjoyed." After three or four of those the record starts to take on a personality. Then you can say, "OK, we love these songs, but some would sound out of place on this record." By the time we got to the studio some of the songs moved to the wayside and we were writing new ones. There were two that I brought in at the very end of the recording process. I wanted to feel out what kind of record we were making before I started writing. And I didn't want to bring in songs that sounded like they should be on my solo record.

Does Matchbox Twenty fit in the current pop landscape?

For the most part, I don't think we do. It was important for us to make this record and not find the hot beat producer to try and



Onstage in Hollywood, Fla., 2009

John Parra/WireImage

'It was good for us to step up and take more control!'

ideas to work on and decide if they were good enough for the record. That was a three-month process. By the time we got to L.A. early this year to record, we had about 20 songs.

How do you whittle down 60 songs?

The first cut is the hardest, and the easiest. The hardest because you have three different records in that big batch—and you're not sure which record you're making yet. An acoustic record? A rock record? A pop record? We had enough songs to do each. So you start by cutting songs that just aren't that good, and that's pretty

follow the leader with what's on the radio. It would be disingenuous if we walked in and said, "OK, this record's going to be our dance record," or our roots-rock record, or whatever. Our job is to write what we feel should be on the radio but at the same time doesn't sound like anything else on the radio.

—Eric R. Danton



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