

Paul Thies: With a body of work that includes 25 solo records over three decades as front man for the seminal rock group, King Crimson, and a resume of working with the who's who of rock royalty, including David Bowie, Frank Zappa, Paul Simon, and Talking Heads. Our guest place in the Pantheon of popular music is [00:00:30] as truly unique as the inventive sounds and songs he produces with his guitar. We're speaking of the one and only Adrian Belew.

I'm your host, Paul Thies. On this episode of If/When, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Adrian to learn his keys to successful collaborations, how he cultivates new ideas and his thoughts on the proper balance of imagination, technology and technique. Well, Adrian, thank you so much for joining me and sharing your thoughts on creativity and applied technology. And [00:01:00] to start us off, I wanted to ask you, when should we expect to see your new album Elevator come out?

Adrian Belew: It's been slowed down time and time again by just happenstance. All of a sudden, "Oh, it's time to rehearse for the Remain In Light tour," or, "Oh, the engineer can't work for the next two weeks," or blah, blah, blah. I'm hoping to get it out in September because I hope to do some solo touring near the end of the year. And the [00:01:30] one reason that I wouldn't bring the record out is if I wasn't touring, because these days, if you bring a new record out, you owe it to yourself to go out and support it by playing live. And that's what strums up a lot of interest. I hope people are waiting for it. My fans are waiting for it because I've talked about it a lot. And I wish I hadn't talked about it so early on, but as it turns out, you've got to wait sometimes. It's there though. I listen to it myself more than I usually [00:02:00] do my own records. Usually I put them away when I'm done, but this one I'm really excited about.

Paul Thies: No, that's great. And I can imagine, I mean, the necessity of touring to support a new album allows you to then... you take it out, you're playing that music and then you are able to explore that space and explore new ideas off of it. Whereas if you just send it out and then you're saying at home, you may not be able to get into that creative space as robustly.

Adrian Belew: Well, sometimes you want to take [00:02:30] the new music out and try it out ahead of time, like trying out a new car. But for me, I like the immediacy of I write it, I go in the studio. I put a lot of thought into it and know what I'm going to do, or if I don't know what I'm going to, then I have some time to experiment and to do that. But I like to just... I like the immediacy. I like to, "Okay, here's this new thing." I want to see it born and wiggling as soon as possible.

Paul Thies: Oh man, [00:03:00] that's awesome. Well, I can't wait to hear it, so I'll be looking forward to it.

Adrian Belew: Thank you.

Paul Thies: So, in your own body of work, you really set yourself apart from other guitarists, I must say, by the imaginative way that you handle the instrument and you approach it. And one way I would sum it up, it'd be how is he doing that with a guitar? So, following your career over the decades, it was always fascinating to me that the predominant feature was your technique and your ingenuity much [00:03:30] more so than just specifically technology itself. So, this first question is how do you strike a balance between technology versus imagination and technique?

Adrian Belew: I would say that as important as technology and techniques that you may develop along with it are, they're both completely in service to my imagination. So, that's how I avoid letting them get in the way [00:04:00] or drag me off course. They're only there as tools. And thankfully, during my career, the music technology industry has grown enormously. And it's to the point now where you can't really... you can't keep track of it all, it's changing so fast.

So, you pick and choose the tools that you like, and you go with those. The techniques usually are things like what am I doing with my hands? Well, I've figured out a lot of interesting [00:04:30] little things you're probably not supposed to do with the guitar, like pressing a string between the pickups and making it squeal that way or bending the neck or abusive things to do to your guitar. But they were, once again, they were all kind of in service of well, I want to make my guitar do things and sound like things.

Sound has always been my motivating force, even more so than just music. Early on in my career, I was trying to make my guitar sound like things, [00:05:00] like can I make it sound like a bird? Or can I make it sound like a train or a whale? Or whatever. That was, for some reason, that was important to me because I liked the idea of that. That you weren't just playing notes anymore or chords or writing songs. That was all very important too. And I kept at that, continually, but there was also this desire, well, what else can I do that no one else is doing? Because in the world [00:05:30] of guitar playing, there's a lot of great guitar players and a lot of guitar players at home who probably are never going to be heard and maybe they're better than I am. So, it's very hard to find your own little corner of real estate where you can do something that sets you apart. And once I realized it, people liked it if I threw in a car horn into one of my guitar solos. Then I said, "Okay, well, that's great, because [00:06:00] I can do that." I have a mind for understanding sounds.

Paul Thies: Well, and it's just that kind of tapestry. It's like it's something about it. It's almost like impressionist painting, right? I mean, it's like... And then on the converse, especially a lot of the work that you do with King Crimson, it's very rigorous and it's very muscular guitar playing, but it's just that ability to paint a musical picture, if I may, with those [00:06:30] sounds and the way that you can really bring that out is just fascinating.

Adrian Belew: Well, it imparts a bit of personality, I think too, because I like to have fun with things. I can be serious and I can play very serious music, but I also like to do it with a smile. So, you can play with things and have fun with it. You don't have to just be all scales and shredding.

Paul Thies: Yeah, yeah, no, for sure. I understand [00:07:00] from a previous interview, you said that you really don't listen to new music very much. And the reason for that is to avoid it being unduly influential on your own music. It reminded me of that Harold Bloom's Anxiety of Influence where it theorizes that poets avoided, they strove to avoid poets of the past from influencing their creative work. So that said, where do you typically go for [00:07:30] inspiration? How do you cultivate new ideas? And what are some techniques you might share that could be duplicatable by others? Musicians and non-musicians alike.

Adrian Belew: Well, I'm going to share one right off the bat if you're a guitar player. Retune your guitar. You don't have to do an extravagant retuning, but I discovered a tuning a few years ago where I just tuned two strings to a different note, the E string I tuned it down to a D and the G string I turned [00:08:00] it down to an E. So, it's very quick and easy thing to do, but what it does is it breaks every habit you possibly could have had because now when you play a chord on there, you won't know what it is. So, you have to rethink the process. You'll find new chord shapes. You'll find, "Wow, I can't do that, but listen to this." And you'll be able to make chords and things so that you could not otherwise play, except maybe on a piano, [00:08:30] perhaps.

So, that's a free piece of advice and something free to do that's always been helpful me to shake up my writing. But I'm going to go back a little bit to the very first part of your question where you were saying that I have said I don't listen to any other music. I do listen to some, but I'm not a person who keeps in touch with what's going on on the radio or trends, or who's a new artist or anything. If I'm going to listen to someone, I usually listen to someone I [00:09:00] trust. Someone whose music I've been influenced by when I was younger or someone I think what they're doing lately, I know I can depend on. If I tune in to what they're doing, it's going to be fine. My problem is, I'm a great mimic, really. And when I did the Paul Simon records...

Paul Thies: Is that Graceland?

Adrian Belew: Graceland, which had all the African players. And an [00:09:30] African, a brand of really African music done with Paul Simon's context. I went home from that session and I began recording more new songs. And lo and behold, I started listening to them and they sounded just Graceland. And I said to myself, "Wow, I've got to be careful here. I really want keep my own output as pure as it can be." I mean, I have influences. I would never run away from my influences, [00:10:00] the Beatles, because they... I mean, I love what they did. I don't mind if that shows. I'm proud of that. But I don't want to be infected by just anything I hear. So, that's why I do that.

In terms of inspiration though, it's just life to me, it's everything. I do a lot of book reading. When cinemas were available, I saw a lot of movies. I'm thrilled with nature. I go out and look at birds and I just love what nature says [00:10:30] to me. It's like a spiritual thing, I suppose. And those things add up to some... While I'm doing that, I'm thinking, "Well, what do I want to say about this? Do I have anything I can talk about?" So, that's where you get songs like the Lone Rhino or something like the song Birds or any of those things. They come from real life and my imagination, both being put together.

The one thing I would say [00:11:00] to people is to archive things. We were just talking about an iPhone. It's a wonderful tool for archiving. I have a program on there, Record, so if I'm working on something, I press that and I'll play my little guitar part or what it is, whatever it is that I've just invented or the new melody line. And I've got it there. I can work on it further, but even if I don't, it's there and I can return to it a year from now. And the same is true with [00:11:30] lyrics. I write all my ideas down in my notepad, hundreds of things in there. And because that's the one thing that you have now that you didn't have when I was starting out. You didn't have a really easy way to archive what you were doing and not lose something in the picture. That's very important.

Paul Thies: No, that's great. That's great advice. Now this next question is a preface to you're... Right now, you are on tour or you're doing shows with [00:12:00] Turkuaz and of course, Jerry Harrison of the Talking Heads and y'all are commemorating Remain In Light. And of course, especially just starting off your career. I mean, you play with Frank Zappa and David Bowie and the Heads and King Crimson, and you've been on all these albums and stuff. So, beyond just your own solo career of 25 solo records, you've done all these collaborations. And so, can you speak to us a little bit about what you see [00:12:30] as being the keys or the keys to successful creative collaborations?

Adrian Belew: Well, I'll start with Jerry and myself and Turkuaz. The thing I love about it is there's no ego. Everyone is really a team trying to purvey this joy of this music that was made back in 1980, that Jerry and I were both involved in. And that [00:13:00] really makes everything so easy. So, the first thing I would say about collaborations is there's a need to surrender. You have to surrender over to the collaboration. You can't say, "No, this is going to be my way." No, you do that on your solo records or something else. But when you're collaborating, what you're trying to get is a combination between you and the other collaborator or collaborators, where you're exchanging ideas and views, [00:13:30] and you're utilizing each other's abilities to create something that on your own, you wouldn't create.

And going back to technology for a second, one of the things that's really wonderful with the current state of technology is, like I said, a lot of people have studios in their own homes now because it's become affordable enough. And just recently, Todd Rundgren called me and said, "Hey, I want to collaborate with you. And here's what I want to do. Do you have any unfinished [00:14:00]

pieces or songs you're working on?" I said, "Yeah, I always do." And he said, "Well, would you send me some of those? And I'll finish one."

So, I sent him four songs and he chose one of them. And the song he chose, I had already recorded the basic track and my vocals for the verses. And he wrote the choruses and did the vocals for the choruses, add some keyboards, did some other things, sent it back to me. I add a little bit more of guitar to it. And there you go. [00:14:30] That's a great collaboration. I really thought that what he added to it made it perfectly what I wanted and it wasn't something I would've done. So, that's a great collaboration to me.

I enjoy collaborating. I love being in bands. I love doing different things. I feel like making my own solo records is my baby. That's the most fun I get to do because no one can tell me, "No." [00:15:00] But I... No seriously though. I think it's a diet though. I need a diet of other things. Playing with other musicians and exchanging ideas and being in bands like King Crimson, where you really are put on the spot to excel and to come forward and move something forward there. That's the challenges of all of that is what keeps me so young [00:15:30] and happy and stupid.

Paul Thies: Well, I imagine that that creative tension between the somewhat, the constraints that you have to face in a collaborative space, because you're having to share. You're having to kind of [inaudible 00:15:47] the self a bit for the greater good of the work. And then being able to move back to your solo space where you have a lot more freedom to do what you want to do, it's like that give and take and being [00:16:00] able to vacillate between the two keeps both of them fresh.

Adrian Belew: Yeah, exactly. One feeds the other. Like when I was in King Crimson for all, I was in King Crimson on and off for 33 years. And it wasn't continual, but when we were doing the band for years at a time, it was very intense. And boy, once we were... Our writing sessions could go on for months and it might take us two and a half years [00:16:30] to make a record or something like that. I would go home and do my own things. And the pressure would be off of me because I could say whatever was personal for me or make a funny comment that I wouldn't make in for the band King Crimson. And so, yeah, it's a sort of freedom in both things, and they both kind of, I think, propel the other.

Paul Thies: Now you've, and we've touched on it a little bit, but you've [00:17:00] appeared on so many iconic albums and have played with some of the greatest artists in the modern era, but is there a specific artist you wish you'd played with or an album you had played on?

Adrian Belew: First of all, why am I not in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame? Sorry, [crosstalk 00:17:16].

Paul Thies: That's a question I want to know. We're starting a petition.

Adrian Belew: I'm only joking. But if you guys are going to think about it, please do it before I'm on to the next planet. Would you please? I'm just kidding here. No, I have [00:17:30] been able to be a part of some albums I had no records... I had no, yeah, I can't believe it myself sometimes.

Who would set out and say, "I'm going to play with David Bowie and Nine Inch Nails and then I'm going to go work on Paul Simon's record and do a movie with Laurie Anderson." And so on and so forth. I don't know how that stuff happens. All I know is each one of them, I tried to do my best. And that's what I love about it, was that people keep giving me the chance.

[00:18:00] When it comes to people I'd like to work with, I can't really say much because the people I would like to work with, if I say things, it would sound pretentious. I would feel pretentious to say those things. But the people that would really throw me are the people that I grew up listening to, and they're big stars. Bigger stars that I'll ever be. So, it [00:18:30] sounds funny to even mention it. That would be the biggest thrill for me is just to rub elbows with someone like Ray Davies or Jeff Beck, or either Paul or Ringo, Bo... Just people that meant so much to me.

In terms of now, though, the honest collaborations that I can do, like what I just did with Todd, for example, I welcome those things. They're just sitting there. They have to come to me. [00:19:00] I'm not go out and try to make them happen because I already have a lot of things I'm doing. But when one presents itself, the first thing I do is I say to myself, "What can I contribute to this? Is it something I really feel I can do something for or with? And do I like what it's going to be?" And that's my criteria. It's never, "How much is the money?" Or anything. It's time. " [00:19:30] Do I have time to do this?" But other than that, I welcome collaborations, but you just have to look at them and imagine what they're going to be, I guess. And I can't sit here right now and say, "What if I got together with so and so? Wouldn't that just be great?" I have no idea.

Paul Thies: Yeah, interesting, yeah. So, at this point in your creative career, what is something you've learned along the way that you wish you had known as a young creative artist just starting out?

Adrian Belew: [00:20:00] There's so many lessons that I could pass on about being in the music business and things like that, but the music business is ever changing anyway. So, I think you'll have to learn those for yourself. Two things that came to my mind, though, when I read this question was I wish that somewhere along the line I had forced myself to take lessons on piano. Now, I'm totally self-taught. And [00:20:30] I love that. And when I work with Frank Zappa, I asked him, "Should I try to learn to read music?" And he said, "No, it's great the way you have it now. You understand it your own way and you break the rules your own way." But I do wish that I had taken up piano lessons because first of all, I would be a good pianist by now. And I'm sure my writing would be increased by 50% at least. And when I hear someone who does write well on the piano, [00:21:00] I

always think, "Ah, gee, I wish I'd done that." I could have blamed it on my parents. We didn't have the money for lessons, but I could have done it at any point in my life, so it's my fault.

And the other thing that's very similar to me. I wish I had delved more into the bones of computers. I'm not very good, naturally gifted with computers. I'm fine as long as they are doing [00:21:30] what they supposed to do, but once something happens, I'm absolutely useless, so I wish that I had taken lessons and learned more about that. I think I don't really have the aptitude for it, somehow. I'm not a logical, straight logic kind of thinking person. But I suppose I could have learned it better than I have, bit by bit. And so now, whenever [00:22:00] I have problems, I just go get one of my kids.

Paul Thies: Well, I think we all do that now. And they're going to be doing it with their kids. It's just the nature of technology and how fast it's all changing.

Adrian Belew: They say, "It's so easy, a kid can do it." Okay, so I go get one of my kids. But truthfully, I think it's such an important part of our world now and I didn't see that coming. I just sort of... It's just sort of happened to me while I was out there touring [00:22:30] around the world. Suddenly I realize that everything is now done with the computer and I'm not very good with them, But I am... The one thing about technology and me, I always figure out ways to make it do things it's not necessarily supposed to do. And there's a creativity to that. And there's a good part to that. You end up sounding like something that no one else does.

Paul Thies: Yeah. I mean, there's something about the Lone Rhinoceros that if [00:23:00] it had been done with computers, it would've lost something. It would've lost a certain spirit to it. And that song is so tender and there's a love to it and it's obvious it comes through in you're playing, that again, like it's beyond the technology, it's the human. It's the spirit that you bring to it.

Adrian Belew: Well, the organic part of making music is seriously important and it gets overlooked a lot now. I think far too many artists think that they can just do it with buttons. [00:23:30] And you can, but it's not always the best way. Really, a well written song, in my opinion, is worth a lot.

Paul Thies: Yeah.

Adrian Belew: I spend a lot of time trying to do just that.

Paul Thies: Yeah, no, for sure. It reminds me there's a... I think Ridley Scott, and he talks about filmmaking, it's a similar kind of thing. He says, "If you can do it with real models and with real physical things, you should, because trying to replace some with CGI and all [00:24:00] that, you lose something. You lose that texture, you lose that feel and the art suffers as a result."



Adrian Belew: I think the whole creative world is experiencing that same thing, getting adjusted to the amount of computer intelligence and things that's out there, that we can use so easily. I think we're still adjusting to it because the one thing you don't want to forget is the human element because that's what it's all [00:24:30] about. That's why you make art in the first place. You're trying to communicate to another human being.

Paul Thies: Absolutely. Well, Adrian, it has been a real pleasure to have this time to sit down with you and to hear these great stories and get your insight. And so, I really appreciate you. So, thank you so much.

Adrian Belew: Well, thanks. I'm honored to do this by the way. And I really appreciate you guys asking me, so thank you so much, Paul, and look forward to checking it out whenever it's out and about.