



Cinderella Story

ONCE UPON A TIME,
TOM KEIFER STARTED
RECORDING A SOLO ALBUM...

BY MATT BLACKETT

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU GOT 'TIL IT'S GONE. Tom Keifer, the singer/guitarist/songwriter for melodic metal '80s hitmakers Cinderella, wrote those words that became the title to his band's 1988 hit. Unfortunately he also lived those words when he was diagnosed with a partial paralysis of one of his vocal cords—kind of a big deal for a lead singer. Keifer had to learn how to sing again, and managed to once again tour with Cinderella. He also managed to finally complete his debut solo album, *The Way Life Goes* [Merovee Records/ADA], although it wasn't easy. The record was nearly a decade in the making, and it was never a done deal that it would see the light of day. "Obviously you can get full of self-doubt when working on something that long," says Keifer, "so I'm really glad that people are responding to it so positively."

The response probably comes from the fact that the record features such vital, vibrant guitar tones and parts that are immediate and honest. They also have that cool, interlocking, layered quality that made so many classic rock albums so, well, classic. Keifer flat-out knows how to play vibey guitar parts with ungodly tone, and fans of the Stones, Zeppelin, Steve Marriott, and early Aerosmith should definitely take notice. And, although you wouldn't wish hemorrhaging vocal cords on anyone, this guy is singing better than ever to complement his great 6-string parts. Keifer talked tons of guitar-y stuff from his home in Nashville.

What's your philosophy on arranging guitar parts?

Guitar layering, with different colors and the interaction of counterpoint guitars, is a product of the era that I grew up in—the '70s. I was really inspired by Jimmy Page, Keith Richards, Ron Wood, and Mick Taylor. You listen to their records and you feel the presence of two different players left and right who are playing things that complement each other, instead of just a wall of barre chords, which I think is a little more one-dimensional. It certainly has its

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place—I'm not dissing that. I mean, there are times when I do that too. But I like that kind of back and forth between guitars. I grew up on bands like Skynyrd and the Eagles and Zeppelin. That kind of guitar playing is what I've always loved and it's a natural thing for me.

The opener, "Solid Ground," has the cool choppy part on the right side, then the chords that answer it on the left, then there's a slide part, and more. Talk me through all that.

The song is in dropped-D tuning, and I believe I used my 1950 Nocaster through a '72 Marshall Super Lead on the right side, which is that chicken-pickin' sound. I ran it into a really old Marshall cabinet with the brown grill cloth—it almost looks like burlap—with 20-watt Celestions. The left guitar was my sunburst '59 Les Paul through the Super Lead, just straight in. The slide part was also my Les Paul, more than likely through the Super Lead too.

That's not a lot of gear for such varied tones.

I generally use the Super Lead or this blackface Fender Bassman—it's a '65 or something. I'll switch between those two heads into that Marshall cab. The different tones are usually created by all the pickup positions you've got with a Les Paul and a Tele, the volume knob, and how hard it hits the front of the amp. I've got a lot of other oddball amps like a Gibson tweed tremolo and a '59 Fender Twin for more specific tones that will contrast with the Marshall sound.

"In a Different Light" has some very interesting transitions, going into the chorus and also from the chorus chords back into the verse. Plenty of songwriting "rules" would say that you probably can't bring chords like those together and yet, it works really well in that tune. What's the trick to making changes like that work?

I know exactly the parts you're talking about. My wife's also a songwriter and she co-wrote a lot of these songs with me. "A Different Light" wasn't one of those songs

that came together in ten minutes. It was written over a period of time and during that time we went to a club here in Nashville to celebrate my 40th birthday. It was a club that played a bunch of cool old '80s music, like Thomas Dolby's "She Blinded Me with Science," which is a brilliant track with amazing production. We noticed that a lot of those '80s songs had really hard, cold key changes—no setup, no pivot chords, no nothing. That's the thing that we left that club talking about, how that really contributed to the creativity of some of that pop stuff in the '80s. "Different Light" was in a state where it seemed very linear and boring because it was all in one key. When we left there we said, "Let's just try a crazy key change." The verse changes are just E, A, and B, but then the chorus is in B₇. Going into the chorus is a little bit smoother because there's the kind of David Bowie "Space Odyssey" guitar that provides some transition. But coming back down into the

verse is just cold. When we initially tried that we said, "Can we really do that?" But then we thought, "Yeah, it sounds cool—why not?" We tried a couple different keys. I remember experimenting going from D to C for the chorus and E to A for the chorus. We thought that B₇ was the most powerful one. It's dissonant but certainly a unique key change, especially coming back down into the verse. But I like when key changes are abrupt, because I think they're more powerful, or they can be. Sometimes you can set up the perfect pivot chord or two—and you know it's coming because you set it up—and that's effective too, but there's just nothing like a smack in the face. That's how that one came about. It was very much on purpose. Honestly, it kind of saved or at least fixed a song that we were just sitting on.

How did you do that David Bowie-style guitar transition going into the chorus?

That was done with a Transperformance automatic tuning system. I've got one of the prototypes—like one of the first four—and I have it built into a black '69 Les Paul Custom. I wanted the guitar part to ramp up and take the song to a whole different key. So I set a tremolo pedal with a very sharp edge so it was "bam-bam-bam-bam." And then I had to hit the chord, hit the button on the Transperformance that changed the tuning on the guitar in real time, and get the tremolo perfectly in time and overdub that part in there. It took a few tries to get the perfect take that filled that hole in.

Are you going to try to pull that off live?

No! There are probably a couple different ways I can do it. Lately I've been thinking about using a slide for the ramp up and the toggle switch on the Les Paul to get that stuttering sound.

Do you have a favorite guitar solo on this record?

I don't know that I would call it a solo because there are several guitars layered in there, but I like the weird, trippy middle-eight part in "Fool's Paradise." There are Ebow parts that sound like cellos and slide guitar and other stuff. It's like the solo of the song, but it's more of a guitar orchestration. All the parts culminate in this end crescendo. I like that section a lot. "Welcome to My Mind" has a solo that's straight-up blazing. We used an octaver on it and it's a unique sound. For a balls-out guitar solo, that's probably my favorite on the whole record.

The guitars on this album are classic sounding without being too retro or throwback. How can you display those classic rock influences but still sound current and vibrant?

It wasn't easy. I didn't want it too effected, because if you chase current processing or trends, it really time stamps the music to that era. I had a certain sound in mind, which

was just raw and in your face. Hopefully we achieved it. It took so long to mix, sometimes I don't know what it sounds like anymore. I went through about 17 engineers, and remixed it a dozen times. The bottom line is I think you always have to be true to your influences and to who you are, which I really tried to do on this record. ■

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