

NI ROCKS Interview with BOBBY BARTH from AXE

Written by NI ROCKS

Thursday, 22 August 2019 08:29 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 March 2021 01:07

On 20th September American band Axe release their first studio album in almost twenty years, after being talked into coming out of retirement by Escape Music Ltd. At the heart of Axe is of course guitarist Bobby Barth, who was also the band's lead vocalist on their earlier albums from 1979 to 1983. He was also the frontman and guitarist for Blackfoot for several years. I was fortunate enough to get an opportunity to chat with Bobby on the phone for almost 40 minutes on 19th August and we talked about the new Axe album, the history of the band, working with Blackfoot and much more.

You can hear that interview on the Friday NI Rocks Show on 23rd August – available now from our MixCloud page - <https://www.mixcloud.com/NIrocks/interview-with-bobby-barth-from-axe-and-formerly-blackfoot/>



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The new Axe album "Final Offering" can be ordered here on blue vinyl or CD - <http://www.escape-music.com/>

Check out Bobby's website - <https://bobbybarth.com/bb/>

The interview will be typed up and posted here at a later date.

Playlist for the Friday NI Rocks Show 23rd Aug

THIN LIZZY – Rocker

SINNER – Last Exit Hell

CORELEONI – Queen of Hearts

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GASOLINE OUTLAWS – Nothing On Me

BLACKFOOT – Train, Train (Live)

Interview with BOBBY BARTH Part 1 (8min)

AXE – Fire and Stone

Interview with BOBBY BARTH Part 2 (8min)

AXE – Heroes and Legends

Interview with BOBBY BARTH Part 3 (7min)

AXE – Bad Romance

Interview with BOBBY BARTH Part 4 (8min)

BLACKFOOT – Fly Away (Live)

Interview with BOBBY BARTH Part 5 (6min)

AXE – Years Slip Away

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BLACKFOOT – Highway Song (Live)

STORMZONE – Zero to Rage

LIV SIN – Chapter of the Witch

PANTERA – Cemetery Gates

TARCHON FIST – Clash of the Gods

TUNGSTEN – The Fairies Dance

TWILIGHT FORCE – Queen of Eternity

THIN LIZZY – Black Rose



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NI ROCKS – Hi Bobby, thanks for taking some time to talk to Rock Radio NI.

BOBBY – Nice to talk to you.

NI ROCKS - I wanted to chat to you first about the new Axe album called "Final Offering" which is being released by Escape Music on 20th September. I suppose the first question should be to ask what the band line-up is for the new album?

BOBBY – Really the band consists of Bob Harris, myself and Gerald Berger. The three people who have been together since the 90's basically. And the new drummer as well, Scott Misner. Basically all the work was done by the four or five of us.

NI ROCKS – And who did you work with in terms of recording, production, mixing etc?

BOBBY – Well, I did all the production. I've been producing all the Axe albums since "Five". Actually, I had left the road to be a producer and bought a studio in Los Angeles, but you know Axe keeps kinda coming back (laughs); you can't keep it down!

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NI ROCKS – I noticed that your old Blackfoot bandmate Greg T Walker is listed as a contributor to the album. What was his input?

BOBBY – He came in and sang some stuff on some of the gang vocals. Greg and I are very good friends. We live way out in the country and he lives two miles from me. I bought the property from a member of his family, so we see each other and talk all the time.

NI ROCKS – It's been close to twenty years since the last studio album from Axe – "The Crown" in 2000. What made the time right to get back together now for a new album?

BOBBY – I didn't plan it actually. Khalil Turk from Escape called me and said would I be interested in doing one and I thought I'd put it forward to the guys to see what they think; Bob Harris especially. Everybody came back with a 'yeah', let's do it, we haven't done anything for a long time and let's have some fun. We actually did a live thing at Sweden Rock in 2012 – Gerald, Bob and I, but it was never really released by a label, so not many people saw it or heard it.

NI ROCKS – So Escape contacted you. That's how connection made with there?

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BOBBY – Yeah, he's the one that really brought it up. And, like I said, I put it to the guys and asked if they wanted to do it and they said yeah, it'll be a lot of fun. So we made a lot of arrangements and everybody moved their schedules around so that we could all be here at a given time. Then my wife died; my wife of 31 years, so I was pretty beat up and it got cancelled. I had already made the commitment to Khalil so we slowly worked on it, as I pulled my head out of my butt. I had to take time to get back to being a human being again. The record was almost a year late. It was supposed to be done last year, but I couldn't get it done in time. Once we'd missed everyone's schedules, it was very hard to get it back.

NI ROCKS – Have all the tracks on the album been written over the past couple of years, or do some trace their roots back further?

BOBBY – Three or four of them are very old, re-written of course. They're not in the same form as they would have been back then. A couple of them are from the 80's. A lot of the stuff is new and some of it is old. It's an interesting album. When you're doing what you consider to be your final album as a band you want to do all the stuff you never got to do. These songs are a lot of songs that we always wanted to put on an album, but there just never seemed to be time. Something always seemed to come up and they didn't make it onto an album. So when I started putting material together for this one, we knew what we wanted to write about and we had some old songs that we re-wrote the lyrics. It is interesting. It's a different album than most AOR people are used to. It's got plenty of heavy on it. It's got plenty of hard on it. It's just a bunch of guys who have been doing it for a long, long time wanting to say good-bye.

NI ROCKS – We'll play a track from the new album now. Can you pick a track to play and tell us something about it?

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BOBBY – “Fire and Stone”. It is not actually written by me, but by my friend Steve Johnstad who was here for our writing sessions – Bob Harris, Steve Johnstad and I. Steve Johnstad is a writer who wrote songs on the first House of Lords album and he was the singer in Mayday and also in Driver (*note – probably actually the band NRG* - <https://sleazeroxx.com/interviews/steve-johnstad-interview/>)

) which really got off the ground for some reason, but was a wonderful band – Rudy Sarzo on bass, Tommy Aldridge on drums – a good band. He wrote that song and it is something that I heard, probably in the late 80’s, and I thought I absolutely have to record that song some day. We were down here writing for the album and I asked him what about that old song “Fire and Stone”. He said I don’t know; it’d have to be messed with and re-written a little bit. So we messed with it and just put it down. The song is actually my favourite song to play on the record. It’s difficult to play and it’s got several movements in it; I think there are six altogether, instead of just being verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus-verse you know. It’s not like that at all, it’s a different sort of direction entirely.



NI ROCKS - Going back now to the early days of Axe and what many would call the classic line-up of the band, which came to an end with the untimely death of guitarist Michael Osborne in 1984. The band released four studio albums in that period, of which “Offering” is probably the most successful. Which of those four albums do you consider to be the band’s strongest and why?

BOBBY- It’s tough, because I don’t think Axe ever got a fair shake on albums until “Axe Five” – that’s very self-serving, but it’s when I started to produce. Record companies have a way of putting you in the studio they want, with the producer they want. And although some of the songs on the first Axe album were, in my opinion, really good songs – “Battles”, “Hang On”, “Forever” – some of those tunes, but the producer (*Michael Lloyd*) didn’t know how to work us and didn’t know what we were. He was the guy that had just produced “You Light Up My Life” for Debby Boone, so it was the wrong place for us to be. But, I think probably “Offering” because it came at a pretty magical time in our career. We had been signed to Arnakata Management, which at the time was Judas Priest’s management, and Thom Allom their producer was producing us. That ended up changing, once again due to record labels, but a lot of the production was done for “Rock and Roll Party..”, “Now or Never”, “Burn The City Down” – those were all songs that we’d done with Thom Allom. We re-recorded them, but we recorded them the same way that he had

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produced them. So I think it is probably the strongest, but there are some awfully good songs on the first Axe album.

NI ROCKS – During that period the band toured with a number of big name bands. What are your own memories or highlights from that period?

BOBBY – Just being able to live the dream. We weren't a big band; we were a medium sized band, popularity wise at the time. Because we were a little older and a little wiser than a lot of bands; we had played clubs for many years and played rough clubs, tough clubs. I remember Sharon Osbourne coming to our people when we were going on tour with Ozzy and the first night was in the Seattle Superdome or whatever that thing is – sold out, big crowd. She came to our people and said the band is going to get booed off stage; tell them that it's not any reflection on them, it's just that everybody gets booed off stage. UFO got booed off stage, everybody gets booed off stage because the crowd is here to see Ozzy. We knew how to fix that and we went on and got an encore that night. She was amazed that we ended up getting an encore when everybody else usually got booed off stage. It's a trick that we learned in the clubs away back in the early 70's. Having that experience under our belts made the band kind of unique in that respect. A lot of people loved to have us on the road; we were easy to get along with, we did our job, did the best we could, sold tickets and made the shows better. I think we toured with Judas Priest three or four different times.

NI ROCKS – Did you tour the UK with Iron Maiden?

BOBBY – No, we never made it to the UK. We were scheduled to, but some business bullshit with managers... you know....kept us from doing it. We were scheduled to do the whole Iron Maiden tour actually; their first world tour. We were on stage and they came out on stage in the middle of "Rock and Roll Party In The Street" and asked us to stop playing. We stopped playing and their manager came out and said we wanted to let you guys know and let the crowd know that Axe will be doing the entire world tour for Iron Maiden. That would have probably put Axe over the top, but we ended up not being able to do it because our manager was an idiot. That's the way the cookie crumbles!

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NI ROCKS – There was an attempt to reform Axe in 1989 which didn't materialise. Why was that and do you think the changes in the rock scene would have resulted in any reunion being short lived anyway? Obviously the 90's saw a big change in the music scene.

BOBBY – Certainly the rock scene changing made a huge difference. It was a little really before 1989. It was probably '87 and Andy Parker from UFO was with me and a couple of other friends who were great players. We did some incredible demos and had record labels coming. We were living in Los Angeles and had a lot of labels come in; even Mo Ostin came by himself to see us. We had a lot of people interested and then suddenly everything shut off in about '89 and there wasn't much we could do. We knew at that point that it was over. That kind of AOR music for mainstream record companies was over with. Nobody can name me a band that has made a major impact on a major label that does AOR since 1990. You can't name one – it doesn't exist. We've been relegated to doing albums on less money and doing tours on less money; which is fine, I can't complain about that, but it did change an awful lot. Just like it changed in 1980 or '81 – there was a big change in the record labels over here when all the creative people were fired and the accountants took over. The accountants didn't know anything about music at all – all they knew was did you sell enough to make them money on that album! If you didn't, you were gone. That was in '80/81. I'm still friends with some of those guys who were presidents of record labels back then and we still talk about how the business changed so dramatically and so drastically.

{youtube}GFZI4uTDNz8{/youtube}

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NI ROCKS – Axe finally did reform in 1997 with Edgar and Teddy from the classic line-up, but with the addition of Bob Harris on vocals. How was the connection with Bob made?

BOBBY – Actually through Mark Pinske, the head engineer for Frank Zappa. He actually built Zappa's studio; the famous studio at his house; that was built by Pinske. Mark and I had been friends for a lot of years and a couple of guys from down here. Mark was from around the area that I'm living in now. He's in Los Angeles now. I wanted to do production on an Axe album. I hadn't done "Five" yet. I can't remember what year "Five" came out, I thought it was a little earlier than that, but it might not have been. I said I wanted to do production, but I hate producing my own vocals. I like to be in the booth listening to the music in a totally different way. I put it together in a different manner than I do when I'm singing. I said I want a singer, and I thought very much about Steve Johnstad, but Steve was off doing something else and Mark said I think I know somebody from Frank Zappa's band. He said the guy that used to do all the high part singing in Zappa's band was a guy named Bob Harris and he said 'I think I can get Bob out here to meet you and see if you guys hit it off'. One day Bob Harris and Pinske show up at my door, and we're talking and laughing and joking like musicians do. I had a studio in my home so I said I have a song called "Sting of the Rain" and I'd like to hear you sing it. He said sure and we went down and worked on the lyrics and stuff for an hour or two before he said I'm ready to tape one. When I got up off the floor I said you're it, you're hired! He was absolutely brilliant. And because he was from Zappa's band and Zappa is very strong about having his ideas expressed, not just a bunch of free form guys running around; Zappa wrote everything. Because he was from that environment I could easily talk to him about making changes and he didn't get mad. Singers and guitar players have a tendency to say 'screw you', I'm a guitar player and I know what I'm doing – the whole bullshit thing that young players do, and probably old players do to! I don't do it anymore! He was so good at all those things that we ended up becoming very fast friends. He is probably my best friend in the world now and has been since then.

NI ROCKS – You're right actually, "Five" was released in 1996, I think I said '97! Do you see those studio albums released at that time as a natural evolution from the earlier albums or something quite different?

BOBBY – Yeah, I think Axe "Five" was very much a studio album. It was thought out in a very thoughtful way because it was my first production of an Axe album. I owned a studio so I said we're going to do this album and I'm not going to let anything go. If I want to change it, I'm going to change it and try it. We did that on Axe "Five" and I think it's a wonderful album; I think the drums may be a little loud (laughs). We did that album and then we had to do "20 Years From Home I" and "II". With "The Crown" we thought lets go back to live playing, everybody playing together and just seeing what happens. That's a little more like the old Axe. "Five" was a little more studio oriented. "The Crown" was more live, have a good time, rock n roll.

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NI ROCKS – We'll play another track from "Final Offering" now. Again, can you pick a track and tell us something about it?

BOBBY – Do you like any of the tracks?

NI ROCKS – I do, "Bad Romance" I quite like.

BOBBY – "Bad Romance" was an idea that I had...fuck...I mean a long time ago! I had been dating a girl before I got married, and she was a mess. And she made me a mess. I was thinking one day, this is really good love, really good loving, really good sex, but a terrible romance. Either we were fighting or we were screwing; one of the two. So I had the idea of the chorus, 'good loving, bad romance, some day you're going to want me back but no chance' way back then. We finished and wrote it here in Florida as we were doing the pre-production for this record. It's interesting because it has got a lot of counter melodies in it that usually you don't find in this type of rock n roll – in AOR rock n roll. There's a lot of little string lines happening, counter melodies happening. We wanted to make it a little something different so it is a bit different. People say it sounds a little like ELO, but I'd don't know! It doesn't sound like ELO to me, but I can understand why they would say that because of some of the string-lines.

{youtube}WWKUShgAS7A{/youtube}

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NI ROCKS – The title of the new album is “Final Offering”. This will be the last album then?

BOBBY – Yeah it will be the last, although I learnt a long time ago to never say never. Every time that I do, I end up doing something that I swore I wouldn't do. But it is the final planned Axe album. Not all of us, but most of us, are getting to an age where we don't have quite the interest in it that we used to. We're getting to the point where it's harder for us to break away and all get together. We live all across America – California, Colorado, Florida – you can't get any further. I think this will be the last one. That was certainly the idea in putting the material together and making the type of album that we made. We wanted it to be a final statement about Axe and we hope that's what we achieved.

NI ROCKS – Will there be any live shows at all to accompany the release?

BOBBY – Somebody asked me that yesterday or the day before. I wouldn't go on tour now. If Kiss called me up tomorrow and Gene said Bobby we want you to be our new guitar player, I would have to say no! I couldn't do it and I don't want to do it. I was on the road for forty-eight years and I don't have anything else to prove. I would go and do a few....I would like to come to England and bring the band, I'd like to play Ireland. I played Ireland in '85 with Blackfoot and loved it – really had a good time there. I would do 5, 10, 12 dates during the summer festival season, but that would be about all that I could take. So maybe a little bit of playing, but it depends if anyone wants us to come and play!

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NI ROCKS – I hope so. It would be great to see you back here. The new album is being released on a limited edition, blue vinyl. I have mine ordered. Was that something you had specifically wanted and were you involved in the design at all?

BOBBY – No, I wasn't actually. That's all on Khalil. I was certainly happy that he wanted to do some vinyl. Doing vinyl presents an entirely different problem. Since we have CDs now the art of mastering for vinyl is almost a lost art. There are a few people who are really good. Alan (Douches) who did ours was wonderful. I used to work with Bernie Drummond and there are a few more mastering labs in Los Angeles. Bob Ludwig, in New York used to do all the old Axe albums; I think they were all done by him. That art is almost lost. You have to do one set of mastering for CDs and another for vinyl. It's quite an involved process, but I'm really happy that they decided to do a few vinyl on it.

NI ROCKS – It looks good. I ordered mine.

BOBBY – I had to order mine too (laughs).

NI ROCKS – You mentioned Blackfoot there. Do you regret that you never got to record a studio album with the guys? You did a live album but not a studio album.

BOBBY – Well, that's not exactly true. I was in the studio with them for both "Siogo" and "Vertical Smiles" which was done with Eddy Offord, the guy that produced for Yes. I was in the studio with them most of the time during both of those albums. If Axe wasn't on the road, I was in Atlanta in the studio with Blackfoot. Originally, I had played all those songs but for monetary reasons, after I had laid everything down that I wanted, Rickey came back and changed it and did it his way. So, although I'm physically not on them, I'm spiritually certainly on them because I was involved in putting them all together. In fact I even wrote one song apiece on both those albums . ("Crossfire" on "Siogo" and "Ride With You" on "Vertical Smiles").

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NI ROCKS – Would you have liked to have done a whole album yourself?

BOBBY – I had the opportunity to, right after my solo album came out (*"Two Hearts" in 1986*). One of the reasons that there was a big falling out with Blackfoot and I was a manager, but I'm not going to get into that! The bottom line was that you don't do a solo album and then just ignore it. I wanted to put a band together and go out and do the stuff that I'd done on the solo album. He didn't want me to, so the record came out and it was actually doing very well the first few weeks. He said if you decide to leave, I'm going to bury this album! I said I'm leaving, bury it....and he did! That's why a lot of people don't even know that album exists. I had the opportunity to go into the studio with them, but I didn't really feel it was fair to go into the studio and then quit. So I let them know and that's how the fact that I was leaving came out; me asking not to be on the record. But I did rehearsals for that one too. It ended up being called 'Rickey Medlocke and Blackfoot' I think. I did pre-production on that record too. I'm one of those guys that people used to like to hire to come in and give fresh ideas. There were a few bands where I went in and played guitar or wrote songs or changed a word here and there, or suggested a change. That was kind of my function with Blackfoot, which is why when they needed a guitar player when Ken Hensley left, they wanted a guitar player who could reach over and play a little bit of keyboards, I had been there for several years off and on doing records with them and I was the obvious choice.

{youtube}p6SwDjXgyBM{/youtube}

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NI ROCKS – In the past you've been involved with other bands such as Caught In The Act and Red Rock Roosters. Are you involved with anything else at the moment?

BOBBY – No. Actually, I thought I was retired until Khalil called me up. I live out in the country, in a swamp actually, in what is called the Suwannee Valley, surrounded by the Suwannee River, on eleven acres all by myself, with an old oak forest, a very magical little forest, and I have my own lake. I thought yeah this is what I want, it's where I want to spend the rest of my time until my ticket is up. Then Khalil called and talked me into doing this record. I may do one more record of some type, only because the equipment is here and the rooms have been built. It seems a waste not to use them. I'm a little too old frankly to be producing young bands. I did Jaded Heart and quite a few bands actually. I don't want to fight anymore; I'm tired fighting musicians.

NI ROCKS – It had been a long time since your solo album that you mentioned earlier. Would you ever think of doing another solo album?

BOBBY – There is talk about it, but the problem is that all the songs that I had that would go on a solo album are depressing as shit!! I use them as a cathartic act when I write them. I don't get sad; I write a sad song about it and then it's gone and I don't have to worry about it anymore. But when people hear them it's depressing. If you put twelve depressing songs on an album I can't imagine that a lot of people would want to buy it. I suggested that we give out a prescription for Prozac with each album sold because people are going to get so depressed! I may, I have the songs ready to go. In fact an acoustic song that we put on "Final Offering" is me and a couple of my friends playing one of those songs. One that I had set aside to do for my last solo album, but I wanted to do something like that on this album, so I just pulled one from that list and put it on this record. If people end up liking that, maybe I'll do one. If they go 'oh my god it's so depressing' I probably won't!

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NI ROCKS – I'm sure they won't! That's all the questions that I have for you. Thanks very much for taking the time to talk to me. It has been great chatting with you. We'll finish with another track from the new album. Again, can you pick one and tell us something about it?

BOBBY – Let's do "Years Slip Away". It was the acoustic song that I pulled from my list of solo tracks. It is just me reminiscing over my life. I did my first gig in 1963 and I was playing drums. I think it was even before The Beatles came out; they might have been out in England, but not America. Over time, everything changes. The music business has changed, the world has changed, everything has changed. And I got to watch it as a spectator and a performer through all those years. Then one day you wake up and think my God I'm an old man now! Or close to it! Depending on where you I guess, whether you're considered old or not! Nobody warned me about that. Nobody warns you that at some point your heart, your drive and your mind and your musical ability is all there – I'm still 25 years old in my mind!

NI ROCKS – Yeah, me too!

BOBBY – Then all of a sudden your body goes 'No, not gonna do it!' That's really what the song is about. To me it's probably the most touching song on the record, because it's the most honest. A very, very honest song.

NI ROCKS – We'll play that one. Thanks again for taking the time to talk to me.

BOBBY – My pleasure. You take care of yourself.