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An Interview with Dream Theater's Mike Portnoy

January 11th, 2002

Interviewed by John "Koggie" Kotzian

2001 was a very busy year for you guys...it started out with the DVD, the G3 Tour, James had Mullmuzzler, you had Transatlantic, the "Live Scenes from New York" release and Jordan had his solo cd...

And all the while made a Dream Theater record. (laughs) Yeah, all work and no play makes Dream Theater dull kids.

Was it one of your more busy years or is that about normal for you guys?

Well, I don't know about the other guys, the other guys years kinda fluctuate, but my life has been pretty consistently busy for about five years straight without a break...and all the while I pumped out two kids as well. (laughs) So it's been pretty chaotic. Even on an off year, I mean, it's usually like y'know I tell my wife, "OK, I'm not touring in 2001 so I'm gonna be home all year." and it makes it sound like it's gonna be time off, but it's totally not. Y'know, we're in the studio every day. Between the side projects and clinics and videos...y'know it's just a whirlwind of constant work...and even when those things aren't happening, I'm constantly overseeing the websites, the fan clubs, the Christmas CD's, artwork for all of the albums, merchandise...y'know it's a never ending whirlwind of decisions that I always have to be making.

Y'know they invent this thing called delegation...it's kinda helps...

(laughs) No, I've learned through the years that I don't trust anybody but myself. Any time i've passed a responsibility into somebody else's lap it never goes the way that I want it to go. My control freak and obsessive-compulsive nature is definitely a character defect in some respects, in other regards it's also, probably, y'know what makes everything I do so, um, y'know...

Great.

(both laugh) Well, I'm not gonna say that, but I feel a satisfaction in that I have control over everything I do.

Let's move on up to September 11th....what a day, huh?

Yeah, it's still incredible. 5 months later, or four months later however long it's been, it's still an incredible thing. Y'know you see footage of what happened that day, it's just shocking, it doesn't seem real.

Where were you at the time?

Well, I was sleeping...um, I'm never up at 9 a.m., but we were supposed to be in the studio in Manhattan that day... we were mixing the Dream Theater album at The Hit Factory and.... but I hadn't woken up yet, y'know I would have been heading in a few hours later and my wife came running in and telling me, "You're not going to the studio today" and I was like "Oh yeah, sure.", y'know? There's nothing that's going to stop me from going to the studio. Then she flipped on the T.V. and at that point the second plane had just crashed and that was it... i was glued to the T.V. for the next twelve hours.

James was actually in the city, because he doesn't live in New York..so whenever he needs to come down to work with us.. y'know, he's put up in a hotel... The four of us had all gone home after Monday night's session but James was still in the city to be there for Tuesday's work., So he was actually trapped there for a couple days while the city was shut down.

That was the same day that "Live: Scenes From New York" was released...

It came out that morning...yeah...

...You got a little bit of press on that.

Yeah, not the kind of press that we wanted. It would be nice if Rolling Stone, MTV and Entertainment Weekly had paid attention to what was inside the package... but I guess we'll take whatever exposure we can get at this point. Yeah, it was just an incredible, unbelievable coincidence. Y'know, we had had that "Flaming Apple" logo for a while... something that we had created for the Roseland show, for the T-shirts and we ended up using it on the DVD and the video. So the fact that that album was released that morning was incredibly bizarre and strange.

Let's move on up to December now. The... I don't know how to put it... The unofficial release of your new album...

(laughs) I suppose in 2001-2002 it's, y'know... once we deliver the record it's out of our control. We can control it the whole time we are working on it but as soon as we deliver it to the record company, they inevitably want to send it out to press and media to the buzz going and to get the reviews and the articles going... as soon as you start sending them out to the public... y'know in this day and age you're completely susceptible to the spread of MP3's. There's nothing you can really do about it.

In the past it's always been about Napster, but Napster wasn't in operation this time and the album still leaked...

Yeah, knowing that that was gonna happen, before we delivered it to the label, I actually created some decoys and posted them up on the file trading sites. I labeled them as the new songs that were actually old unreleased Dream Theater songs... so this way I could possibly prevent some people from getting the real thing...

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Y'know my concern with the MP3's being spread has nothing to do with the financial... I'm not at all concerned that it's gonna hurt sales, I don't think that's gonna matter for a band like ours... My only concern with it was, y'know you kinda want to unleash the surprise at once... you want everybody to feel that excitement simultaneously. Now it's like, when the album finally comes out there's going to be people who have been sitting with the album for six weeks already and are bored with it and have moved on to the next thing...

I doubt they're going to get bored with it.

I kinda want... Myself as an artist would want the reaction to happen together. It's like when a filmmaker, they release their film on a certain day you want everybody to kinda experience it without too much pre-conceived opinions flying around. There's too much time now with the MP3's that people start posting their opinions... for better or for worse... I would prefer that people would hear something with open ears and open mind for the first time.

I don't think you have to worry about people not liking the album, because it's a very good album.

Well, thank you.

I want to go through the songs on the disc now and get some of your thoughts... So we'll start with disc one and *The Glass Prison*, it's just a balls to the wall metal song, isn't it?

Yeah it's pretty relentless for fourteen minutes straight.. y'know start to finish gung ho heaviness... we've always had heavy stuff in our songs whether it be *Pull Me Under* or *Fortune in Lies* or *The Mirror*, but in all those songs they kind of take detours and go off into different places and with this song, once it gets going it doesn't let you go... y'know for the entire ride, it stays with it pretty heavy from start to finish. It was a conscious decision to do that, y'know, to create something powerful and energetic for the entire duration.

Who came up with the initial idea or was this a "Dream Theater" effort?

Well everything is a "Dream Theater" effort in terms of writing the parts... this is the first thing we started writing at the beginning of the sessions and I think it's been documented in other interviews, but John Petrucci and I went to see Pantera the night before and so obviously we came into the first day of the sessions with that full-on adrenaline pent up from the night before... so we immediately started going in this direction and wanted to write something heavy.

There's one riff, the main riff that kicks in, y'know maybe a minute into the song once the whole tempo picks up, is a riff that John Myung and I had been jamming on since "Falling Into Infinity". I had tape of him and I jamming on that riff and we never made it into a song for "Falling Into Infinity". Then once we were writing "Scenes [From a Memory]", I busted out the tape of old ideas and that was still lying around and we hadn't used it and we never incorporated it then so... when we came into this session I brought the tape back in again and said, "Look, we gotta use this." and from there we stepped off into a million other heavy directions.

This song also features you on backing vocals. Singing backing vocals has been a lot more prominent in the last few years, are you getting more comfortable with it?

Um, yeah... I mean I guess I get more comfortable with it because I do it constantly on tour and now with Transatlantic we share a lot of the vocals equally in that band so.... Yeah, and you know the reality of it is, it stems from when we write a lot of these songs... when the melodies and lyrics are being written, in a lot of cases it's myself or John Petrucci writing the melodies and lyrics and then making, like four-track demos of us singing the parts to give to James, so he can learn them. In a lot of these cases in songs of the past, whether it be *New Millennium* or *Strange Deja Vu* or *Home* or in this case *The Glass Prison* I'm giving James demos of me singing the parts.

Some of the parts obviously are way out of my range and written more for his range, but then there are other part where there's two-part harmonies or call-and-answer kind of things, like the beginning of *The Glass Prison*... being that they are written for two voices, I've started to take on the role of singing some of these parts, whether they be two-part harmonies or call-and-response kinda lead parts.

IN the live setting, that works out really well, because one of the things that I've noticed from when I saw you guys in the early 90's... and other people have commented on was that you weren't doing the harmonies live...

Yeah...

... Now that you are doing them live it sounds more full, more mature.

Back in those days... back in *Images* and *Awake* that was something that I thought the band always lacked. All my favorite bands whether it be the Beatles or Pink Floyd or Queen, they were all bands that utilized multiple voices... Yes and King's X... all those type of bands were something that I really loved and Dream Theater never had that. We would do some of that on albums but then they would never be reproduced live. So through the years I've really been trying to get mine and John's [Petrucci] voices more predominant in the songs because I think it's important.

Even if we don't have great voices I think it's character that's most important. If you listen to the old Yes albums, I mean Steve Howe's voice is pretty weak or if you listen to Pink Floyd you have Rick Right or David Gilmour or Roger Waters all singing... none of the were virtuoso singers but it was the character and the blend of the voices which kinda gains personality. I think personality is way more important than technique.

That really shows on the last two albums.

Cool.

Moving on the *Blind Faith*, I hear a little bit of Soundgarden and maybe a little bit of Tool in the end section. What thoughts do you have about this one?

Well if you're looking for comparisons, this song kinda reminds me of *Peruvian Skies*, or *Falling Into Infinity* era type Dream Theater sound, combined with Liquid Tension Experiment kinda... the whole middle instrumental section, all with a touch of King's X in the middle. So if you're looking for comparisons, that's my perception of it.

This was... I don't know, what can I say about this song? I think it started off as something pretty straight ahead... the verse, choruses and bridges are pretty straight ahead and melodic and then once we get into the middle section that's when we start to incorporate the whole LTE style and sounds and some more piano and keyboard driven parts that Jordan worked up with us.

Jordan's playing on the album is a lot different than what we've heard from him on the last record...

I really respect the fact that Jordan understands the need to be a team player within Dream Theater. Like if you listen to his solo albums, it's so keyboard driven, whether it be from the writing or even the mix of the instruments. Sonically, it's really keyboard drive and I really admire the fact that he doesn't push that onto Dream Theater ...and he understands that Dream Theater has an established type of sound and style and he tries to work with it rather than try and change it.

Of course, his sound and his style and writing is a big, big part of what is now Dream Theater's style and sound, but he's very conscious to take a step back when need be.

I think that's pretty indicative of the whole album. Jordan's playing is minimal when it needs to be... as is everybody else's, making for a really mature sounding album.

Thank you. That's something we always try to do... it's funny because we get criticized for doing the exact opposite. Y'know on the surface, somebody who is not really exposed to this type of progressive music, more of the mainstream critics, they trash us thinking that we have no sensibility for writing a song and that we constantly over-play. I think it's quite the opposite, we spend a lot of our energy into where we should be over-playing and where we absolutely should not be over-playing. I think that's always been an important part of writing for us.

Moving on to *Misunderstood*. This open with a Zeppelin-esque guitar part...

Yeah, it's absolutely like *Ten Years Gone* or *The Rain Song*. It's definitely reminiscent of that. Which is funny, because it actually started as a piano thing. Once again I brought in... I guess I'm kind of the archivist, so there's a lot of ideas that sort of float in and out throughout the years and sometimes get forgotten about. I'll go home and listen to my tapes or whatever, and I had a tape of all these different piano parts that Jordan had presented and the intro to *Misunderstood* was actually a piano thing that Jordan wrote. I brought it in and suggested that maybe John [Petrucci] try adapting it on guitar. It ended up going totally into a more Zeppelin mode. It ended up totally inspiring the direction of the songs which to me has a very Soundgarden-esque.... Soundgarden meets Radiohead, y'know Radiohead in terms of production and Soundgarden in terms of the energy and stuff, almost like *Black Hole Sun-ish*

Moving on to *The Great Debate*, and I really hate to compare you guys to other bands... but the first time I heard this I thought, "Tool!"...

Yeah, it's absolutely Tool meets Rush...

Yeah, I hear a little *Natural Science* in there...

Yeah, Totally... the whole thing in seven sounds very *Natural Science-ish*. It's impossible to play a groove like that in Seven and not sound like Rush. And some of the stuff in the middle is very Tool driven in terms of the bass parts and the drums are doing that kinda jungle-groove and even the vocal melodies are very Tool-esque at times...

There's a little part in there after the second chorus that reminds me of something off of *Rage For Order* by Queensryche.

Yeah, that was a favorite.... I can't say Queensryche is much of an influence these days, but back in the mid 80's, when the band formed... Back in the early *When Dream and Day Unite* days we were seriously into the *Rage For Order* album. It was a favorite of ours back then.

So whose idea was it to talk about Stem Cell Research?

John wrote those lyrics, John Petrucci. Over the summertime, when we were all writing the lyrics to the album, that was what was on the news.... this is obviously before Sept. 11th... so over the Summertime the Stem Cell Research was on the news all the time while we were in the studio. So I guess he was inspired to write about it and I think it's really cool the way that he writes from both sides of the coin. At no point in those lyrics does he ever give an opinion or take the side of either, he basically just presenting the different sides.

We even produced it in a way where the Left-wing and Right-wing opinions are panned accordingly, in both the samples and vocals.

***Disappear*, In this one I hear some Pink Floyd, a little Marillion and if I didn't know better, I'd swear Kevin Moore (Ex-Dream Theater Keyboardist) was still in the band...**

(laughs) Yeah, this is our post-Kevin Moore *Space Dye Vest*. I definitely see the comparisons to *Space Dye Vest* because it's very experimental, very dark and very depressing and it's influence for me is obviously coming from Radiohead. I'm a huge Radiohead fan, they're one of my favorite bands from the past few years. When we were creating this song we made a conscious decision, on both this and *Misunderstood*, to make sure that they didn't sound like traditional ballads. They very

easily could have sounded like *Another Day* or *The Silent Man*. We consciously steered them in a more experimental direction to get away from the power ballad and turn it more into the Radiohead-trippy-psychedelic approach. Both this and *Misunderstood* had that approach. And for me, the production was definitely inspired by *Exit Music For a Film* and *Karma Police* by Radiohead off of the *O.K. Computer* album.

Which brings us to Disc 2. You have a forty-some minute track here called *Six Degrees of Inner Turbulence*. Track 1: Overture...

For starters, I don't even consider them "tracks", it really is one piece. The only reason that I decided to put ID's on the CD itself... and this was something I was debating on for a long time... it was a big decision for me whether to make it one 42 minute track or to give it separate ID's, and ultimately I decided it would have been a real pain-in-the-ass for people to be sitting there holding the fast-forward button on their CD players to hear something twenty-five minutes into the song.

So it would have been cool to see the number on the CD reach the 42 minute mark, but after the novelty wore off after two or three listens, it would be a pain-in-the-ass to be scanning through 42 minutes of music to find something. So I don't want to call them eight different tracks, because it really is just one track.

We'll call them "movements" then...

Yeah.

So *Overture* reminds me of Broadway...

Oh totally. It's totally Dream Theater's first foray into Film Scoring or Broadway show writing. It's definitely a cross between Star Wars and West Side Story. An overture, if you've ever studied the way overture's are written, whether it be for a film or a Broadway show you're basically taking all of the basic themes that are to come and incorporating them and orchestrating them in many different ways.

That's what we did with the overture from *Scenes From a Memory* and that's what's going on here. The difference is the overture from *Scenes From a Memory* was definitely a rock or metal band kind of arrangement. With this we consciously wanted to try a different approach... as if it was an overture for a movie, as if you hearing something that John Williams had orchestrated or arranged. We started from the keyboards up and Jordan orchestrated all these symphonic parts and we did the drums, guitars and bass around him after the fact. Kind of added as embellishments as opposed to a rock band approach.

There are two songs on this entire album that remind me of *Scenes From a Memory*, and *About To Crash* is one of them...

Very *Finally Free*.

Yes.

It's kinda like *Finally Free* meets *Blaxident* off of the Liquid Tension Experiment. Which is obviously Jordan's input, in fact I think that the Title track has more of Jordan's sound more-so than the first disc actually. I think with this entire big piece we were able to tap into the traditional Dream Theater approach.

But, um... yeah, what is there to say about this... this movement is setting up one of the characters. In case you hadn't read into it, the lyrical concept of the entire title piece is six different characters. It almost like a tour through a mental asylum or a psychiatric ward. Basically you're getting into the minds of six different people who come from six different lives. Lyrically John Petrucci and I split up the characters, I wrote about three characters and he wrote about three characters.

So *About to Crash* is the introduction to the first character who is actually the only character who make two appearances through the song.

***War Inside My Head* and *The Test That Stumped Them All*, we move back into a more metal type of sound and it features more of your backing vocals...**

Once again it was because they were words and melodies which I wrote, so once again as I was saying with *Glass Prison* or *Home* or *Strange Deja Vu* or *New Millennium* any time I write something I write with usually more than one vocal in mind and ultimately ending up grabbing one of them.

***The Test That Stumped Them All*, this one grabbed me right away. It has a very Megadeth feel to me and then it goes into this Echolyn-type vocal thing...**

(laughs)

...which is really cool...

That was a cross between (laughs) my influence from Rock Horror Picture Show meets System of a Down. (laughs) The original demo of me singing that actually had me singing the vocal part for those choruses. Then when we were recording the vocals I suggested to James [LaBrie] to try to break it up into to characters, one being the doctor and the other being a chorus of nurses. Almost as a goof I suggested to James to just try it for the hell of it. We tried it and though it was cool, it was different and I love trying different things with the voices. That's why I'm a big Mike Patton fan and that's why I like System of a Down.

I was glad to see that James was so open-minded to the suggestion of trying these things, because ultimately people that hate that section are gonna criticize him for it. (laughs) I'm glad to see he was willing to put his balls on the chopping board and try it.

I think people are going to like it, so I wouldn't worry about it.

Cool.

Goodnight Kiss, reminds me of Queen...

Yeah, it's definitely Queen-ish or um.....

I hear a little bit of Marillion in there too.

Yeah, definitely Marillion. It reminds me of some of the sections of *A Change Of Seasons* that have that vibe as well. Definitely Marillion influenced.

Solitary Shell, I really think this one could get radio play...

Yeah, in a perfect world this would be the song that would be played on the radio. (laughs) I don't know what the realities of that are for Dream Theater in the year 2002, but realistically I think it's the sort of thing that could totally cross over to a lot of different listeners. We've always had songs like that on all of our albums if you go back. I mean, *The Spirit Carries On* and *Through Her Eyes* had that kind of cross-over accessibility, *Hollow Years* and *Take Away My Pain* had that and *Silent Man*. It's nothing new for us to have that commercial-pop side to us.

This one is definitely, as many people online have already compared it too *Solsbury Hill* by Peter Gabriel. Coincidentally it's in seven and it has a very similar feel. I think it's a great song that in a perfect world would get radio play.

So now we come to About To Crash (Reprise).

Yeah, while we were writing the first *About To Crash* we tried one approach with the piano driving it, a very Elton John type feel, and we tried one approach with the guitar driving it giving it a Van Halen or Steve Vai type of feel. We couldn't decide which one to go with so we decided, "Well, we'll use both.". So for the first *About To Crash* we took the piano driven Elton version and here we reprise it with the more guitar driven version.

Then we have Losing Time (Grand Finale)...

Well this section... well the whole *Losing Time* section is pretty straight ahead melodic, almost a bit of the Marillion feel to it once again and Genesis. The ending of *About To Crash (Reprise)* goes through some incredible counterpart orchestrations which are really very majestic, I think. Then towards the end, when we get to the *Grand Finale* this is the first time you actually get to hear the theme that had been stated over and over throughout the entire song... which is the main theme... this is the first and only time you're actually hearing it sung with vocals and lyrics... which to me is incredibly satisfying, I mean, finally 40 minutes later to come full circle and hear this theme that's been hinted at, played at several times now already with different orchestrations. Now You're finally getting the big pay-off of *The Grand Finale*. It's very satisfying.

I thought that when we wrote *Stranger In Your Soul* with Transatlantic, I thought that that was like the ultimate grand finale... and y'know dropping your load (laughs) and it was just so satisfying and chills and tears... I really got off when we put together the ending of *Stranger In Your Soul*. I had a bit of that vibe when we finished this with the grand finale too, it's just the keys and the themes...y'know the orchestration just really came together in a really very musically satisfying way... y'know when it finally comes full-circle. It's such a big, big high.

That brings us to the end of the album, I guess you guys are going to be touring pretty soon. Are you going to do a full Evening with Dream Theater?

We start with a month in Europe at which we'll have Pain of Salvation opening. By the time we get to the U.S. Tour in March, at that point it will be a just and "Evening With" basically two sets with an intermission every night. This entire tour we'll be swapping set-lists every night so every show is going to be completely different.

Are you going to be doing a full version of Six Degrees or are you gonna chop it up?

Well, yeah, for now whenever we perform *Six Degrees* it will be in it's entirety, we're not gonna chop it up. Maybe years down the road we might because we're not gonna want to be stuck to the full 40 minutes, but throughout this tour when we perform it it will be in it's entirety. That probably won't be premiered until the U.S. Tour, this first tour in Europe, I think is going to be too close on the heels of the release for people to be sitting through a 40 minute long song if their not that familiar with it. By the time we get to the U.S. it'll start being in the set-list. I've got a feeling that we'll probably play that every night and then everything else around it will shuffle making it completely different from night-to-night. But I think that we'll play that one every night so that everyone at least gets a chance to experience it live.

As far as the make-up of the crowds that Dream Theater draws, you've got your true progressive rock-heads and then you have your Metal-heads and then the people in between. What are your opinions about Mosh Pits breaking out at Dream Theater concerts?

Different strokes for different folks, y'know? I would say that our audience is made up of one-third progressive rock fans, one-third metal fans and one-third musicians, y'know, drummers, guitar players, keyboard players... Obviously the metal fans like the Mosh Pit and stage diving and stuff and when we were starting out touring in the early to mid-90's that was a very big thing at our shows. Through the years it's kinda mellowed out, I think our audience have become a little bit more attentive and less of that type of mentality. Surely I don't mind it for the heavy songs to a certain degree... I understand wanting to release that energy. I get the same way behind the drums...headbangin', jumpin' around... I understand you want to release that energy. Y'know of course once people start doing that during *Through Her Eyes* it gets ridiculous.

That being said, this tour that were doing we've consciously aimed the venues at Theaters and not clubs because we're going to be playing a very long show. Three hours or three hours plus every night is a lot to sit through. When we did the Roseland Show people were starting to burn out at the end. It's a lot to expect the audience to sit through over three hours of music while standing there. So this time around we're consciously aiming at theaters that people can actually sit down and enjoy the show and be conformable. So they can enjoy the show without having to

worry about their legs falling off or being kicked in the face by a Mosh Pit. So I think the fact that about 90% of the shows are going to be in theaters will probably eliminate that problem anyway.

So what's on your plate besides the tour?

On my plate? I mean, Dream Theater is my focus. Transatlantic wants to do more things but it can only happen when I'm available from Dream Theater. And this year I'm gonna be so busy on the road with the band that when I don't have to be on the road with the band I want to spend time with my family. So Transatlantic is on the back burner for a few years at this point. There will be a live DVD release from Transatlantic which we filmed on the tour of Europe in November, so that will be coming out. But as far as any new activity, that's on the back burner for now.

Like I said, this tour will keep us busy all year round... Y'know, we'll do several legs through Europe and we're going to Asia and we'll probably do a couple legs through America so..there's a lot of ground to cover.

Thanks for doing this interview.

Thank you, man, and thanks for doing a great job at the site over there...I love it over there, there's a lot of great stuff.

Ytsejam.com would like to thank Mike for taking the time to do this interview.

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