

chapter 19
**BACK IN
BLACK**

*m*alcolm wasted no time introducing Brian to AC/DC's number one philosophy: we do what we do, we play what we play and what critics think doesn't matter a fuck. No discussions. End of story.

It took a few days for the situation to fully register with Brian. He had big shoes to fill.

'I'm going to be nervous at first, no doubt,' he told *Sounds*' Dave Lewis on 19 April 1980, 'but I'll give it my best shot, you know . . . I just hope they give us a chance.'

Brian's last gig with Geordie had been on the weekend of 21 and 22 March at the Heaton Buffs in Newcastle. They were delighted for him, although typically he felt guilty that he was effectively putting them out of work for a few weeks until they got another singer. But when he was able, he made sure that things weren't too bleak for them financially, as did his new employers.

'AC/DC said, "Yeah, we understand,"' Brian told *The Interview*

in November 1980, ‘and made a lovely little gift to the boys in Geordie . . . and some money, until they got a new singer.’

When the March issue of French magazine *Best* hit the stands, its readers’ poll results must have been dizzying for Brian. They read as if it had been completed exclusively by AC/DC fans, with best singer going to Bon, best band to AC/DC, best live band, AC/DC, and best musician, Angus.

That year, The Angels did two European tours with Cheap Trick, and through their gigs in France were able to confirm the poll results first-hand.

Angels guitarist John Brewster recalls:

‘We did Nice and went down a storm, but it was a very aggro, very male-dominated audience — they go berserk in France. Cheap Trick came on and they got pelted with cans and things. It was heavy stuff, and it was looking really dangerous.

‘They didn’t know whether they were going back on stage or not, and then one of them turned around and said, “Would you guys come back on with us?” So we all went back on stage and we did Highway To Hell. And fucking hell! We tore it up! The crowd went bananas. There was like 10 of us on stage — four guitarists, two bass players, we just plugged in to whatever we could find. Robin Zander could sing Bon Scott type of stuff brilliantly.’

Rehearsals, which began in April at London’s E-Zee Hire Studios, were originally to run for three weeks but were cut to just one when an opening came up at Compass Point Studios in Nassau, in the Bahamas. The Bahamas move was partially tax related and partially due to a lack of studio availability in the UK, their preferred working environment. Polar Studios in Sweden — owned by Abba and once used by Led Zeppelin — was an option at one point, but Abba were using it and AC/DC didn’t have the time to sit around and wait until it was available.

Work began in the Bahamas in the middle of April and ran until May, with the *Highway To Hell* team of producer Mutt Lange and engineer Tony Platt.

The band had never been to a place even remotely like the

Bahamas, where many of the locals were lizards and frogs and a decent beer was something in a travel brochure. The locals, meanwhile, probably wondered what these five pale, slightly built, little guys had to do with the sun and sand.

But the weather wasn't exactly tailor-made for the beach when the band arrived. The area was being lashed by tropical storms, so the most basic of necessities — like a regular, ongoing supply of electricity — was a problem for much of their first week. And of course, with no power, they couldn't make any noise; at least not the level of noise they came intending to blast out in the serene environment.

Being unable to work lessened the frustration of their guitars being impounded at Customs for several days and having to wait for their other equipment to be freighted over from the UK. But it wasn't just officialdom and the elements that had the band in their sights.

There was the large, intimidating woman who ran the less than five-star accommodation where AC/DC were staying. There were also her warnings about thieving by locals and she provided spears that were used for fishing just in case things got a little rough with the natives.

Brian had fears all his own. All the band knew of him was from a rehearsal room, and working in a high-tech studio he wouldn't have the same racket to hide behind — everyone would be able to hear his every breath.

The song titles were all pretty much in place. What Do You Do For Money Honey, for example, was a title George Young had come up with during the *Powerage* sessions. Apart from that, all the band had were riffs; there were few songs as such, just ideas that Malcolm and Angus had been working on before and since Bon's passing.

Apart from the week's rehearsal in London, the band hadn't had a chance to work on the material as a unit: there simply hadn't been time. Now there was even less, and any lyrics that were written while they rehearsed in London and on the way to the Bahamas had to be completed in the studio.

To his amazement, Brian was given first crack at them, although he knew full well that they would be subject to input from Malcolm

and Angus. He was honoured, but it was just one more additional pressure.

Angus couldn't think of anything worse than attempting to gain mileage from the death of their friend by looking to the lyrics Bon had been forging for the new album. It was a simple matter of respect to Bon and courtesy to Brian.

Phil Carson: 'Bon didn't write any of it. Malcolm and Angus did what they always did, and write the riffs and the basis of the music, and they would generally leave it to Bon to write the lyrics and come up with the melodies. And that's what they did with Brian. Brian came up with every single melody and every single lyric.

'If you look at the lyrical content of Brian Johnson-AC/DC, it's maintained the direction of where Bon was, but takes it to a new level. Brian has got an incredible sense of humour, and he's able to use double-entendre lyrics — little bit tongue-in-cheek with some of his stuff, even the song titles are a little tongue-in-cheek — but he's able to do that without coming off being at all cheesy.

'Please don't listen to anybody who says anyone else wrote those songs — Brian Johnson wrote those songs. I was the A&R man, I know who wrote the songs. So, that's it.'

Brian's nerves were calmed the night before they were due to start work, but not initially with the most pleasant of sensations. He woke in a cold sweat and sensed Bon was standing looking down at him. Something reassuring passed through him: maybe it was just a dream.

Once they settled into the studio, there was a quiet excitement and optimism. The rough songs had everyone pumped up and the general mood was that a truly great album was within reach. And absolutely nothing less than a landmark recording was what was needed.

With Bon, the band had been on the brink of something huge, but if this didn't work, if whatever they came up with wasn't readily accepted as the next step in the band's career, they were facing extinction. You're only as good as your last album, and that last album had involved a man who was not only irreplaceable but had been on his way to becoming a legend globally.

If this was to be the last thing they did as a band, it had to be the strongest possible statement: there could be no excuses and no second chances. But rather than be a negative, the situation made for the perfect team-building formula.

Tony Platt (engineer): ‘These are not people that get tense in the way that normally people get tense. They kind of focus it towards getting the job done. It really was like a load of mates going to make an album and everybody [in the band] was in roughly the same situation — of course, they’d not made a whole mess of money out of *Highway To Hell*, because at that point in time it really hadn’t sold a lot of albums.

‘Everybody was on the same per diem and we all kind of just tried to eke it [the budget for the album] out and make it last and so on. So there was a real sense of camaraderie about it and it was very close.’

Platt had to deal with the fact that Compass Point, like the Roundhouse Studios back in London where *Highway To Hell* had been recorded, was sonically ‘dead’ and so employed the same techniques to rectify it as he had for that album.

‘The thing about AC/DC — or the thing about Mal’s approach to the sound of the band — was that he really didn’t like big echoes and stuff like that. I think possibly because they wanted to put some kind of clear blue water between them and bands like Zeppelin. They wanted it really dry and in your face. So this technique of using a roomy kind of ambience really worked very well on their music.

‘Having kind of debuted that on *Highway To Hell*, when we went in to do *Back In Black* I’d got a clear idea of how I wanted to go about recording things, and I made a point of recording quite a few ambience tracks.

‘When we were putting the tracks down, I made sure there were a couple of room microphones out there so that when you listened to the album, you felt like you were in the same space as the band were when they played it.’

Malcolm had been a student of sound, song and rhythm for a lifetime himself, and the tutoring of George, along with the

confidence he had gained by doing *Highway To Hell* without his older brother's direct input, was all coming to the fore. Although he respected Lange and Platt, Malcolm stamped that authority on the sessions right from the recording of the first song, *You Shook Me All Night Long*. He was not at all impressed with the changes to the rhythmic accents in the song.

Tony Platt: 'We recorded the choruses of *You Shook Me All Night Long* and I can't remember exactly how the emphasis was, but we hadn't recorded it as "You" — bomp — "shook me all night..." It wasn't quite like that. There was a slightly different accent that we put onto it, and then Malcolm heard it and said, "No, the way I'd heard it was that there was that space in there." So we had to go back and do those again.'

On *Let Me Put My Love Into You*, the band were concerned that the original last line in the chorus lent itself too much to a pre- or post-sex cigarette. It was simply too explicit — the result, no doubt, of the magic rum and coconut milk elixir, the fuel of choice for the album sessions — and had to be changed.

On the other hand, there was nothing lighthearted or ribald about *Hells Bells*, with its Old Testament doom and destruction imagery. It first surfaced during the rehearsal sessions in London, partly courtesy of the title of Bob Dylan's 1975 *Rolling Thunder Revue* and then sealed by the storms in Nassau.

The tumbling phrasing and timing of Brian's vocal on *Back In Black* was styled on jazz singing and the riff was something Malcolm came up with during the *Highway To Hell* tour. Using an acoustic guitar, he had recorded it onto a cassette and, unsure if the song was any good, gave it to Angus to see what he thought. Unsurprisingly, his younger brother gave it the thumbs-up.

Rock And Roll Ain't Noise Pollution was the last song to be recorded. The title was believed to have been based either on a line that Bon threw at a furious landlord during an argument over the volume of his stereo, or came from an expression Angus used back in 1976 in London during the band's days at the Marquee amid environmental concerns about the noise. In any event, Malcolm

casually threw the song together sparked by a riff Angus came up with when they found they needed an extra track.

Tony Platt: ‘Mal stayed behind at the studio when we all went out to dinner that night, and the assistant engineer — a big black guy called Benji — played drums while Mal was knocking out a few ideas. When we came back again they played us this thing that they’d put together and everybody just went, “Whoa! That’s it!”’

Brian’s opening vocal on Noise Pollution also captured a loose jazz feel out of him searching for a groove and quickly finding one. He sounds like a man of the cloth giving a sermon. What’s that sound right at the start? It’s Brian having one last drag on his cigarette before he begins.

Throughout the entire sessions, Brian sang like a man possessed; someone who, like legendary 1930s blues artist Robert Johnson, had traded his soul for a supernatural lung capacity and octave range. But he found, just as Bon had, that when it came to vocals, Lange was an absolute perfectionist.

Tony Platt: ‘Mutt is very, very particular about getting every line of a vocal to be absolutely spot on. And quite rightly so, because when you’ve got something which really just consists of two guitars, bass, drums and a vocal, every single thing that happens has got to count 110 per cent.

‘And it was very important to get these vocals to just sit absolutely right. When you’re singing in a band that’s got Angus playing guitar, you’ve got to make your vocals as exciting as his guitar playing, and that’s a real mountain to climb for anybody! So it was as much a matter of Mutt being very exacting about virtually every syllable that got sung — and making sure it was exactly the way it should be — and at the same time making sure that it was exactly the way that Malcolm had it in his head.

‘By the same token, from Jonna’s [Brian’s] point of view, every single note of that is right at the edge of anybody’s range. And it isn’t just that it’s sung up high, it’s sung up high with all of that power and excitement at the same time. And I think that’s what set it apart — every line is just absolutely there!