

NICK RHODES

THE GUTS AND GEAR BEHIND DURAN DURAN'S *PAPER GODS*

BY JON REGEN | PHOTOGRAPH BY WENDY LAISTER

"LAST NIGHT WAS THE FIRST TIME WE ACTUALLY PHYSICALLY PLAYED ANY OF the songs from the new album live," Nick Rhodes says via phone from the U.K. "It's always fun to have new songs in the set. It freshens everyone up and keeps us all on our toes!"

As Duran Duran's chief technologist, Rhodes has kept the musical world on its toes for the better part of four decades, crafting legendary sounds and songs on more than a dozen acclaimed albums. On the band's latest offering, *Paper Gods*, Rhodes melds analog synths with infectious dance grooves and surprising soundscapes.

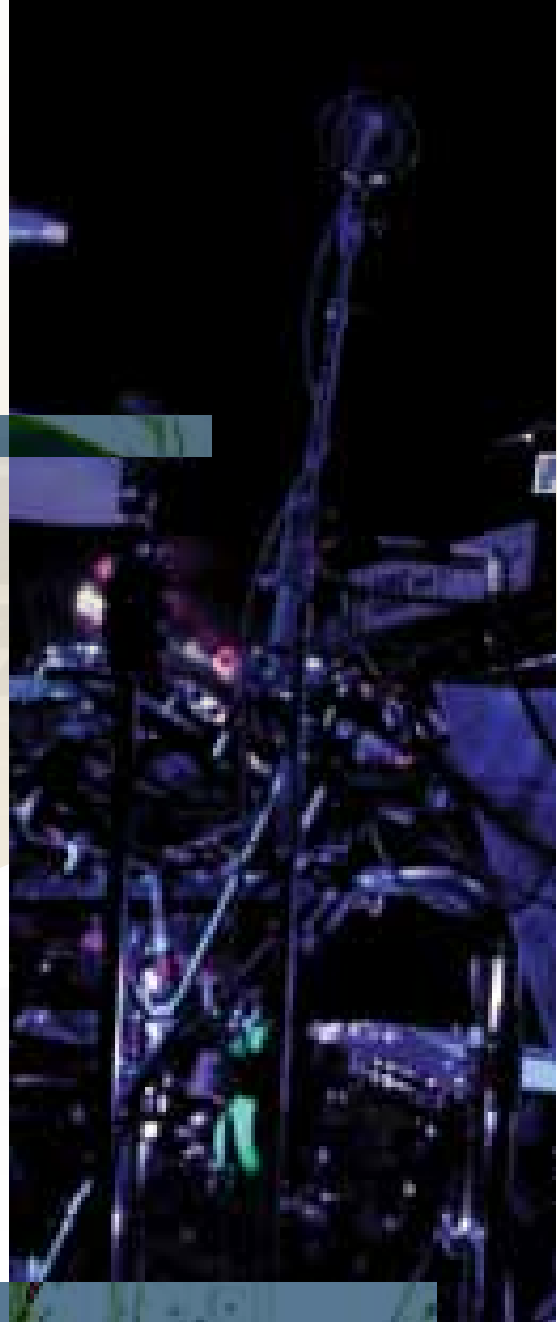
In 2011 you told us, "I realized many years ago that the longer an act is around, the rarer it is that they make a seminal album late in their career." But even after 14 albums,

you're still as motivated as ever.

Yeah. I think that's at the very heart of what we do, on every record we make, even on the one before the last one, *Red Carpet Massacre*—where

we were really trying to do something entirely different by working with Timbaland and Justin Timberlake. But the DNA of that one will lead you right through to *Paper Gods*.

In a way, the new album is a combination of the things we learned on *Red Carpet Massacre*, plus the things we learned working with [producer] Mark Ronson on *All You Need Is Now*, as well as the reinvention we were looking for on this album. But it took quite awhile. We actually spent the best part of a year sort of "down in the mines," chipping away at things looking for gems. And we found a couple of things in the way of melodies and song titles, but it wasn't until we





started working with [producer Ben] Mr. Hudson about a year ago that we were able to focus on what the vision for this project really was.

He brought a really fresh attitude toward what we already had, helping us to isolate the good pieces and forget about the others. And we worked on new material with him as well. He initially came in for a day or two, but we ended up kidnapping him for about six months! And that was quite uplifting.

When you work with people you trust, and you allow them to become part of your process, you get things that *are* different—people like Mark Ronson, Nile Rodgers, our engineer and

co-producer on many of the album's tracks Josh Blair, as well as all of the musicians we worked with. It takes you to another place.

How did your work on the last two Duran Duran albums lead you to the discoveries made on the new one?

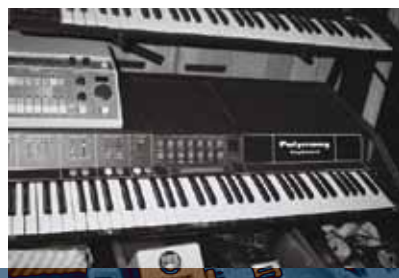
I think on *Red Carpet Massacre*, we learned how people like Justin and Nate “Danja” Hills program things. I’ll never forget arriving in the studio in New York with a truckload of gear to work with Timbaland on the album. We had everything from drums and guitars to old analog keyboards in the elevator, and he was just

looking at it like, “Why do they need all of this stuff?” Because they were doing everything in the box with a laptop and an Akai MPC3000. That made us realize there was a gaping hole between where we came from musically, and where they did. There was a lot of crossover with regards to strong melodies and rhythmic touchstones like Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel. But while we were working on the album, I realized how they constructed songs in the studio, which was definitely different from how we constructed them. And so we took that with us from that point on.

With *All You Need Is Now*, Mark Ronson wanted to make the follow-up to *Rio*. He’s a per-



Above: Nick Rhodes with MicroKorg, V-Synth GT, and Andromeda. Below, left to right: a few of Nick's favorite things: well-loved Roland Jupiter-8, ARP Quadra above Roland CR-5000 atop Poly-moog, Crumar Performer, and Teenage Engineering OP-1.



RETRO-FUTURISM

Nick Rhodes' Keyboard Rig

When we last caught up with him in 2011, Nick Rhodes' live rig included a Roland V-Synth GT, the Alesis Andromeda, a Kurzweil K2000, an Akai S6000, a MicroKorg, a MOTU MIDI Timepiece, and various effects pedals. But he was planning moving to Apple MainStage. Here's an update.

"We've actually half-migrated to MainStage, using it on the early rehearsals for the new album," Rhodes says. "But there are a few reasons why I'm not all the way there yet. One is that my keyboard tech is still sampling all of my original keyboards to get the dynamic range and the depth of those sounds absolutely right. Originally, he had sampled the *samples* we were using live, but they weren't up to par. I always think that every time you chip away at something and reduce the quality a little bit, you're not giving people what they deserve. So I got all my original keyboards out, like the Jupiter-8 I used on *Rio* and the Crumar Performer string synth, and we sampled them. We actually sampled the Crumar in three different ways, because I sometimes use it in more 'stabby' ways, and sometimes with a bit more sustain. I'm also having an issue with changing sounds super-quickly on MainStage. On some songs I need to change things instantly—like going from a verse to a chorus on 'Rio.' The way I play live, I like using the Roland V-Synth on some songs because I can use the Korg Kaoss pad on it, along with the modulation and pitch-bend.

"I'm always looking for more control of the sounds as a live performer, so I'm ultimately planning to use three of the new Roland JD-XA hybrid synths as controllers because they're very well integrated with MainStage, along with a Roland V-Synth so I have room to maneuver things live."

fectionist, and we went to a lot of extremes—like recording the bass and drums onto 24-track analog tape, and using the exact synths I used on the original album. Mark creates a really good template and gives things a *direction*. For instance, one day he asked me "Can we do something like your song 'The Chauffeur'?" And I said, "Well let me have a think about it." I went off to the studio on my own with Josh Blair and thought to myself, "Where did I start with that?" And I remembered I started that song with a rhythm I programmed on a Roland TR-808. So I started

layering things with the same thought process I did on "The Chauffeur." And that became the song, "The Man Who Stole a Leopard." So with Mark we learned to recognize the things we are really good at together, and to not be afraid to use things we've used before and re-create our own language. When you've been trying different things for three-and-a-half decades, you actually can afford to take some influences back from your own material. So if you put together the dance and bass-and-drum influences from *Red Carpet Massacre*, the self-referential side of *All You Need*

is Now, and the continuing use of analog synths and computers on *Paper Gods*, there's a genetic code that runs all the way through.

What kinds of keyboards did you use this time around?

Things like the Elka Synthex. I also had two of my Roland Jupiter-8 synths there, a Jupiter-4, a Crumar Performer string synth that I've used on virtually every Duran Duran album, and a Prophet-5 that I used more heavily this time. I also got out an ARP Quadra that I ended up not using on

the album, but I did play with it and intend to find a home for it on some of the tracks. I also used the Alesis Andromeda more than I have on any previous album.

Have you gotten anything that's currently in production that has intrigued you?

I got a [Teenage Engineering] OP-1 portable synthesizer toward the end of our process, and it's the first small digital synth that I've fallen in love with. There's something about it that's so intuitive and, at the same time, allows you to experiment in different ways. I was never into workstations like the Korg M1 and others. But the OP-1 is like a workstation in that it's a small, portable digital instrument that you can record things into. It's got cool drum sounds and you can put samples in it. I had fun with it and used a little of it on the record. Towards the end of the recording process, Roland brought me their new JD-XA. It's got a great vocoder, and I'm actually making some sounds for them for it. I didn't use it on *Paper Gods* because we had actually finished recording by that point, but I feel like I'll be using it for quite a long time. I've had a long relationship with Roland, and I've used the V-Synths extensively, but the JD-XA is a real beauty.

You also worked with Mr. Hudson, who is known for his work with Kanye West and Jay-Z.

We love groove and always have. When someone comes up with a completely new language for grooves, it's exciting. Let's face it—early house music and hip-hop changed things a lot. When we did our album *Thank You*, which came out 20 years ago, we covered the classic hip hop song "911 Is a Joke," along with "White Lines" which is still in our live show. We were curious as to how we could make those tracks different, because they were such strong pieces of music already.

What was it like having Nile Rodgers back on board on the new album, especially for the first single, "Pressure Off"? Was this the first time you worked with him since *Notorious*?

We first worked with Nile back around 1983 when he did a remix of "The Reflex" for us. Then we did "The Wild Boys" with him in 1984, the album *Notorious* in 1986, and some work on the *Astronaut* album around 2003. Nile is always a joy to work with, and no one has a résumé like Nile. One of the huge benefits and beauties of having Nile is having him play guitar with you. No one plays rhythm guitar as well. I actually went in and jammed with him and the band and I *never* play in the studio. I always play in the control room because I like to hear things "wide-screen." But

this time I said, "I'm going to go in there and play because we're going to get something different." And we did. We got "Pressure Off."

These songs don't just have intros, melodies, and choruses; they have interconnected sections that are constantly developing.

Simon and I, particularly, have this obsessive thrill with chords that do surprising things. Most of us have heard a lot of the same chord movements many times. But when you hear a song where somebody has used a chord combination in a different way—one that is both surprising and beautiful, that is really where you find gold.

The album opens with the title track "Paper Gods," with its droning vocal intro. But about a minute in, we get signature Duran Duran elements of slap bass, electronic drums, mutating synth pads, and keyboard stabs. Layers build, almost in a classical way.

That track is one of the most ambitious and unusual pieces that we've ever done. It reminds me in some ways of our song "New Religion" off the *Rio* album. And in other ways, I think there's a little bit of Talking Heads in it who, along with Blondie were my favorite American band of the late 1970s and '80s. "Paper Gods" was the second song we did with Mr. Hudson, and I think we dared each other to really explore, saying, "Where can we take this?"

That tune started with a jam we had in the studio one night with Ben, John, Roger and me. Simon wasn't there. John was playing a really funky bass line, and I had come up with a sort of pizzicato part that was very simple but quite repetitive and infectious. So we started with that and then we thought we needed another section. That's where we found the chords for the chorus. And it seemed like a nice musical movement from one piece to the other. When Simon came in the next day, he heard what we had done and said, "I don't really like that." We said, "Okay, well we all feel that there's something quite special about it."

So Simon left the room for ten minutes and then came back. We played it back for him, and he replied, "I want to sing *this*." And then he sang the melody of the chorus over it. Immediately, we all knew we had found a direction for the song. And then Ben said, "Oh, I think I have something that goes quite nicely with that." And then he sang the countermelody that opens up the song. And from there we sort of built the other bits. The revelation was really the middle section, where I had started off with some almost prog-rock, arpeggiated sequences that were different from something I would usually

use. They would've been more at home on a Pink Floyd record than a Duran Duran one!

What keyboard did they come from?

The Alesis Andromeda. But the rhythms were very different from the rest of the tune, so I was changing the filters and using the ribbon to modulate things. We recorded them in with MIDI, and I then did a live performance of everything so I could change and modulate the sounds.

It almost reminded me of the way a Hammond organist will pull different drawbars during a song.

That's what we did with everything. I love things that *change*. One of the things I rebel against in modern music is how everybody is so used to "cut and paste." Every chorus in a song sounds exactly the same as the previous chorus. Well, I was always used to doing everything by hand, so every chorus would be slightly different. Or I'd add another part, or the natural modulation between the synths beating would give each chorus a different sound. Josh, our engineer, always loves to record two versions of exactly the same part on my analog synths, because then he puts them in sort of true stereo and you get that beautiful width from them.

Many companies are now re-imagining classic analog synths: the Korg MS-20, the ARP Odyssey, the new Prophet-6. A good thing, or has the retro craze gone too far?

When you hear the beauty of big, analog sound, it sort of wipes out everything else. And while the Andromeda had digitally controlled oscillators, it has enough analog beauty that you can really do things you can't do with other synths. The warmth of the oscillators on the Jupiter-8, or the edginess of the filters on the Prophet-5 all have their own character. But the Andromeda is really an "all-rounder." You can get beautiful high pads on it, but you can also get killer bass sounds. The sequencer and arpeggiator are very special, too. The main sequence you hear on "Last Night in the City" is the Andromeda with some Elka Synthex and some Jupiter-8 reverse stabs on the verse.

Somebody said to me the other day, "Why is it that so many things you hear from the 1980s sound dated, but somehow Duran Duran tracks don't?" And I said, "I think that's very kind of you to say, but one thing is that we never used sounds that everybody else used."

On this record, for example, we had a bass sound on the Jupiter-8 that sounded really cool, but our engineer Josh said, "Can we please put it through the filters on the Minimooog?" So we

literally made a hybrid of the two and put the bass synth from the Jupiter-8 through those great filters on the Minimoog Voyager. It's when you start experimenting that things happen. I love effects pedals; we have boxes and boxes of the strangest things. And when I see something I don't have, I usually buy it instantly because if you get something new, you can always get something out of it. I also recently bought an Optigan and layered it with the Jupiter-8 pulses on the song "Face for Today."

The rhythmic, sequenced lines on "You Kill Me With Silence" seem to reference your song "The Chauffeur."

That was deliberate. The original sequence on "The Chauffeur" was done on a Roland SH-2. The beginning of "You Kill Me With Silence" was manually played on the Elka Synthex and I suppose sounds more like an L.A. hip-hop track you'd expect Snoop Dogg to sing on. There's also an Alesis Andromeda in the second verse and the Jupiter-8 in the bridge. Then, the solo at the end that sounds like a guitar is actually the Elka Synthex. It's sort of all of my guitar envy coming out in a solo!

Speaking of guitar, how did your collaboration with [former Red Hot Chili Peppers gui-

tarist] John Frusciante come about?

It came from another planet! Our bass player John Taylor got an email from John saying, "I hear you're making a new album. I'd love to make some guitar contributions if you're interested." And of course, we were thrilled. That ended up being a treasure trove of great material because we would just send him tracks, and he'd fiddle around with them in his own studio and then send them back to us. The first time we listened to his guitar solo on "What Are the Chances," our jaws dropped. It was spectacular. I think that actually opened up Pandora's box in terms of collaborations on the album. Some of them even have three or four guests.

And some of them have seven or eight co-writers!

In a way music has become almost like "pass the parcel" sometimes. Somebody does something and then gives it to someone else who sticks a "top line" on it. Then that person gives it to someone who sticks a middle section on it. And so on. And while that isn't the way we would traditionally have written songs, I have to say that there's something refreshing and exciting about it. It's one of the things that made this album different from anything we've done before.

Few artists today have the time and budget to get into that kind of sonic exploration.

I think that's one thing that we have earned for ourselves at this point: the luxury of time and the budget to do what we want. When we started, we were in a big hurry as all teenagers are. We wanted to get on *Top of the Pops* and we wanted to play Madison Square Garden. All of those things were enormously important and exciting to us, and real landmarks in our careers.

But what hasn't changed at all for anyone in the band is the will to make the most perfect product we can. From the songwriting to the lyrics to the arrangements and sounds—it's all of the same importance to us today, if not more, than it was back then. We've never grown complacent. We like to go to the studio and sort of punish each other all day until we get something and say, "That's good. That's worth it." 🎵



Bonus: 5 Ways to Play
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