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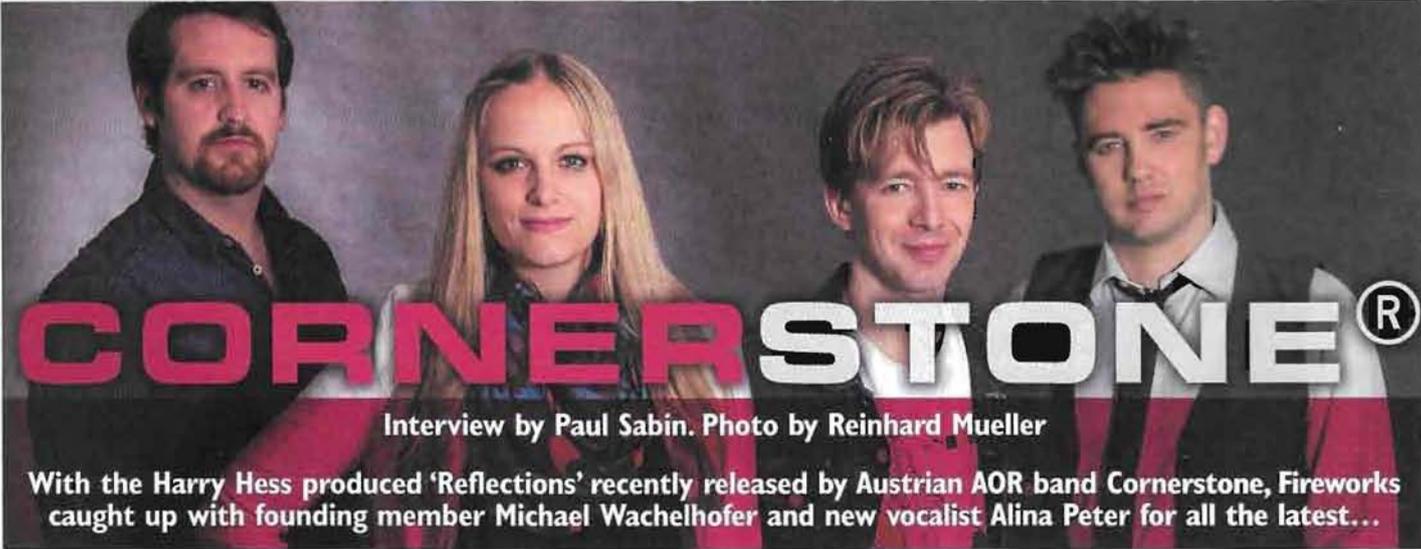
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Interview by Paul Sabin. Photo by Reinhard Mueller

With the Harry Hess produced 'Reflections' recently released by Austrian AOR band Cornerstone, Fireworks caught up with founding member Michael Wachelhofer and new vocalist Alina Peter for all the latest...

**Austria is not well known for its musical exports, apart from a classical composer and Falco that is! Has that made it difficult for you to get noticed?**

**Michael:** Honestly, it's more difficult for an Austrian band in Austria than abroad. People here tend to bully their own bands, so we have decided to concentrate on the markets that are more open-minded, musically. Especially in the UK music is part of the culture and our tunes were always well received. As an Austrian artist you have to become successful abroad first before you'll get any acceptance or respect in your own country.

**Your music's billed as "Unhip, Uncool and Unsexy" to quote your promotional blurb. What led you to make that statement?**

**Michael:** [laughs] I'm afraid, this was my intention. We were in a German Rock magazine and all of the bands inside were looking identical; you could take a picture from one band and changed it with a pic of another and it wouldn't have made any difference. We looked different and this was very cool in my opinion. Journey were also pretty "unhip and uncool" in their heyday so I thought everyone will wonder why a band will tag themselves as "uncool, unhip and un-sexy", and will immediately check us out!

**The album contains a mix of keyboard based ballads right through to out and out rockers. Were all the songs written at the same time?**

**Michael:** We started back in 2013. I wrote 'Last Night', 'Brother', 'Heart On Fire' and an unreleased track, 'Closer', that year. Because of the changes within the band we then continued songwriting in 2015. Alina and my relationship with our

partners ended up in an unfair and very hurtful way, pretty much the same time, and we also had more or less the same experiences. It was kinda natural that we wrote about those things. This is what 'Reflections' is about: looking back, expressing your feelings and experiences - "reflect", in one word. We've recorded 'Reflections' in Canada in collaboration with Harry Hess, the singer of Harem Scarem, who produced the likes of Billy Talent, Muse and Simple Plan. It was a five-month production period, very exhausting, but we are really proud of our latest effort.

**Who writes the songs?**

**Alina:** Hey, I'm also here [laughs]. The songs are mainly written by Michael (bass) and Steve (guitar). Michael is very good at writing lyrics and Steve at finding the perfect guitar parts. The drummer and I are coming into the song-writing process when they have a rough idea of the song and a rough arrangement, and from that point on we're working at the songs as a collective and bringing in our own ideas.

**Michael:** With 'Whatever' it was the very first time I didn't write with Steve. Alina and I created it; we both had half of a song finished and couldn't get it to go anywhere, so we combined them - perfect fit! I wanted to create something different, something with a classical orchestra and big piano. We tried to get it into the Eurovision Song contest and although we were #4 in the Pre-Voting, the organiser chose another artist - it's very political.

**Alina's voice is haunting whilst retaining a rocky edge to it and compliments the rest of the band perfectly. What brought you together?**

**Michael:** Steve and I founded the band, and it seems like we'll

play together 'til our own funeral party, haha. Alina is a great and energetic singer, she sent a tape, and I thought, 'This isn't that bad.' Steve and I auditioned some interesting singers. We rehearsed with an RnB singer, great voice but it didn't work. We had an actor who starred in an ABC series on American TV who is great as a person, but it didn't click musically. I was kind of frustrated and went into a Karaoke bar to audition singers, but all of them were really bad. I went home - it was 1:00 am in the morning - and went through Alina's tape a second time. It sounded fantastic, and the next day I called Steve and told him, 'That's the singer'. I dropped her an E-mail, starting with "I want to cut a long story short: we want you in the band," and so it happened finally.

**With the video for 'Last Night' having just been released, how did you find the video creation process?**

**Alina:** It was a lot of fun but also pretty exhausting because we didn't had much time to shoot it, so we decided to film it all at once. That was not a good idea because we had trouble with the lights, therefore we had to redo a few scenes. Thankfully we had wonderful people to support us during the entire project. We filmed the videos in three days, fourteen hours a day...very exhausting, but big fun in general! We are going to release another video for the second single called 'Northern Light'.

**The band's style and writing has continued to develop since your debut. Is the AOR sound where you're happiest?**

**Michael:** Looking back into the history of the band, we developed from an Indie/Alternative band into an AOR band. 'Head Over Heels' was an Alternative album with a

bit of AOR in it. 'Somewhere In America' turned that combination around, and now we've done a pure AOR album. It wasn't a planned thing. I guess this is quite natural... you're getting older and it isn't that interesting anymore to play four chords with a kind of "Fuck You!" attitude, like we did on tunes like 'Changed' or 'Leave' on our first album. We've always tried out things on our albums. For example, 'Whatever' is an orchestra-piano-laden ballad which could be played on every love song show on BBC Radio 2, same with 'Sooner Or Later' which has some 60s influence. It was fun, but with Harry's production the spectrum of the whole album was more focused.

**Who are your musical influences and heroes?**

**Alina:** Our idols are Fleetwood Mac, Journey and Quarterflash. Any similarities on our albums are purely accidental [laughs]. They influence our music greatly and we get compared to them very often.

**Are there any more albums in the pipeline or are you concentrating on touring and promotion of 'Reflections' for the foreseeable future?**

**Michael:** First of all, we'll end up the tour and then I need a break for a few weeks. The whole year was a nightmare, work-wise, and all of us need a break to have our private lives, families, friends, etc. From April on we're starting playing gigs again, and slowly starting to write new tunes, but no stress.

**Any plans for UK dates?**

**Michael:** We had planned to come over for a weekend but I've heard some rumours that a promoter is interested in organising a bigger tour, maybe even with a bigger artist. So let's see!

album is very 'West Coast' - did you not fancy putting any more upbeat tracks on, maybe in the style of 'Can't Stop Love'?

Thematically this record has a feel that mirrors my story over the year. 'Can't Stop Love' was in 2000, which seems like a lifetime ago. As far as tempo, this record is very slick groove wise and I did not worry about the tempo being anything besides a representation of the mood of the songs.

Another big influence in your life is Jim Peterik of Survivor. Just how much has he done for you in the years you have known him?

He did *everything*! Gave me my start, mentored me, took care of me, taught me...for fifteen years. It's like a degree from the Jim Peterik University of Music! Super talented, and a great guy.

'Mecca 3' seems to me like a pinnacle in your career, a culmination of the last fifteen years work, in which you've interacted with many of the greats. Apart from those mentioned, who would you say has helped to make you the musician and writer you are today?

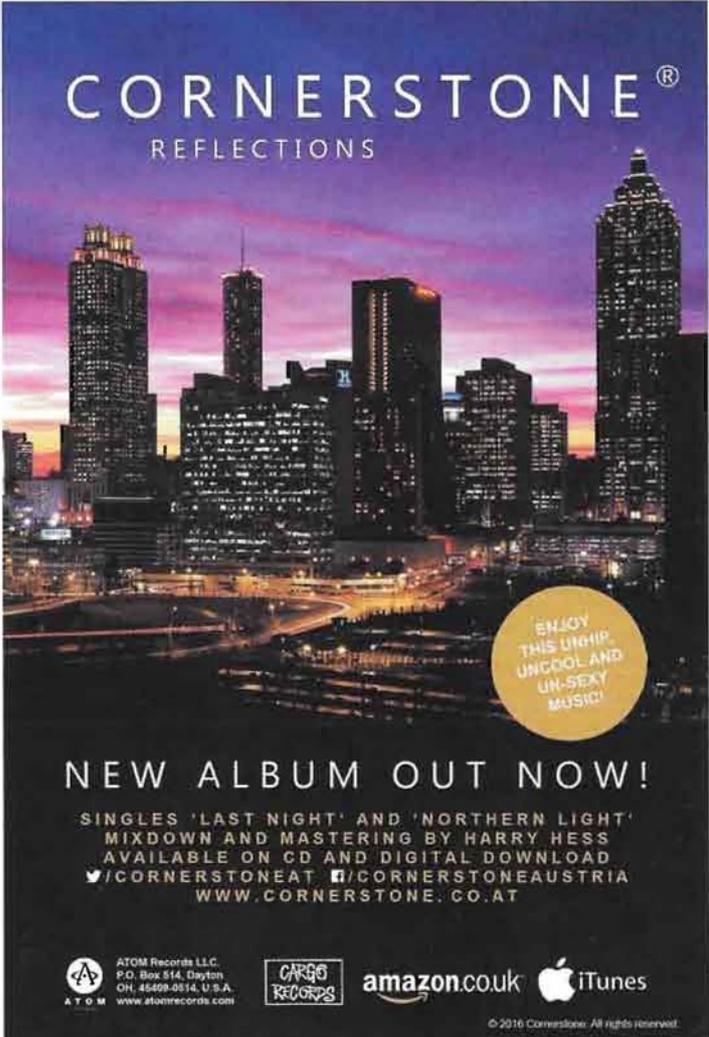
Thank you, I would humbly agree. As far as guys who helped my career, JP for sure. Luke, Shannon, Frankie Sullivan, Bill Syniar, Brian Moritz. Vocally, Richard Page, David Phelps and Warren Wiebe were my idols and still are. Warren has passed, David is still amazing and Richard is the man!

The album has been receiving rave reviews all over, which must be a great relief. Was there ever a point that you were worried people might not like it?

Firstly, thank you to all! Secondly, no, I love it and that's the hardest guy to convince. I make music to fulfil a passion of mine to write and create music to explain my life; if people enjoy it that is a wonderful by product of that work. I do *not* do this for money, that is not the focus.

So what does the future hold for Joe Vana?

Hopefully being a great friend, father and husband, a man of God and to continue my journey in music creation. When it becomes a job I will stop but so far it still provides a lot of enjoyment for me.



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