



SYMPHONY X

Underworld

Release Date: July 24th, 2015

Line up:

Michael Romeo | guitar
Russell Allen | vocals
Michael Pinnella | keyboards
Jason Rullo | drums
Michael Lepond | bass

SYMPHONY X online:

www.SYMPHONYX.com
www.facebook.com/SYMPHONYX
www.twitter.com/SYMPHONYX
www.youtube.com/SYMPHONYX

The factors are conceivably many.

Whether, it's the genius writing and execution of **Michael Romeo** - his thoughts incubating exactly four years since the band's slamming last album ***Iconoclast*** - or the richness of experience gained by **Russell Allen** over a triumphant run with TRANS-SIBERIAN ORCHESTRA, or the heroic health battles of drummer **Jason Rullo** bounding back from heart failure in 2013, or simply the maturity of holding fast a band lineup, essentially rock-solid over 20 years... whatever the factors involved, **SYMPHONY X** have struck an enriched level of maturity with their ninth album, entitled ***Underworld***.

Promotional contacts:

USA: kristin@nuclearblastusa.com | GSA, Italy, Spain, Denmark & ROW: tim.nottorf@nuclearblast.de
France: valerie@jmtconsulting.fr | Sweden: Darren.edwards@warnermusic.com
UK: claire@nuclearblast.co.uk | Australia: john@nuclearblast.de
Latin America: gerard@nuclearblast.de

Having been through the wars, voluntarily made tougher by insisting on playing intellectually and technically challenging music for fans that demand it - and then made harsh again by the evolving contours of the music industry, most notably the shift to singles and single songs – **SYMPHONY X** have triumphed, creating a panoramic old school “album rock” experience in an era cursed with shorter and shorter attention spans. *“This new one is about the song”,* begins axe wizard **Michael Romeo**, chief writer in the band, and possessor of **The Dungeon**, the tricked-out studio in which the album was crafted, newly equipped with the latest in technology required to execute the band’s famous symphonic and orchestrated touches with aplomb. *“Every element added was in service of the song, so the album flows song to song and becomes a total listening experience. Every song is to-the-point and fine-tuned, with us paying a lot of attention to the hooks, voices, riffs, and keeping the interest and the energy high for the whole record, so it can be listened to start to finish. You know, industry people have talked about how we’ll never see a ‘Sgt. Pepper’s’ or ‘Dark Side Of The Moon’ again, and that idea... I wanted to defend the reputation of the album, and really try to make **Underworld** an album worth listening to as a whole album. It’s what I love about ‘Moving Pictures’ - great individual songs, but still an album experience. I don’t want to sound like I’m preaching, but it was a point I wanted to make. It was about the flow of the whole record. It speeds up here and then it dips down here. It all makes sense together, it all works together and it all flows together. And that’s me, dude. - I still listen to whole records (laughs).”*

And it's been the product of thoughtful strategy, the way »Underworld«'s inviting peaks-and-valleys sequencing was achieved, through the establishment of concept, and then a smart pulling back from it, again, in search of defiantly self-contained songs, songs that create their own eco-system, but with synergy, so that the sum is greater than the anthemic parts.

“Underworld's not really a concept album”, agrees **Michael**, *“but like the last couple of records, there's a theme that carries through, without it being storytelling. We try to find something to key in on and get the juices flowing, and here the goal was to find something a little dark but with emotional content. I started looking at Dante, and Orpheus in the underworld, where he's going to go to Hades or hell to save this girl. So there's the theme of going to hell and back for something or someone you care about. So we could inject hellish imagery and at the same time there's an emotional quality to it, where you care about someone, you're going to go through all this, and yet trying to do the right thing. But it's an outline, not storytelling. We had a concept and we pulled back and at the same time made it more personal and less pretentious. We found some kind of parameters to work in, where both musically and lyrically it wouldn't be going overboard.”*

In terms of specific songs from the record, label priorities are '**Nevermore**' and '**Without You**', each adding dimension and hue to the totality of the record from opposite ends of the spectrum.

Immediately with '**Nevermore**', the focus Michael speaks about becomes clear. Russell is right there with the vocal after a brief, non-nonsense thrash intro, and then the clouds part for a chorus of beauty, Russell sliding a melody on top of a feverish prog riff of erudite magic from Michael.

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*“Up-tempo, good hook, good playing all around”, chuckles **Michael**. “That was designed as an introduction to the album. The first song on any record is to establish the vibe of what the record is about. And 'Nevermore's got the riffs, the hooks, the chorus, and some crazy solo stuff happening.”*

'Without You' on the other hand is a strident ballad but one full of rock events and vaulted arranging, light vs. shade, soaring harmonies, punch, power, and last but not least progressive time signatures. “That one's a bit mellower, with a big chorus and a sweeping feel. I don't know if I would call it a ballad, but it's a little bit softer, not so much about riff, but more the acoustic and electric interplay. Those two are good single choices, if you will, because they represent what the record is: it's heavy, but at the same time, there's some of these soaring melodic parts, as in 'Swansong' with its piano thing. That's an example of keyboards carrying most of the tune - Pinnella brought most of that one in. But those two address both sides of the record.”

*“And Russell, he's just a natural”, notes **Romeo**. “When he first heard the songs, he had mentioned that he really wanted to sing more, even though the material was heavy. So we put a lot of emphasis on his abilities and making the choruses strong vocally. It just felt right. He knew too that it was the right thing to do, as did everybody in the band as soon as they heard the demos.”*

Other highlights include the brisk and exhilarating '**Underworld**' which **Michael** says, *“second song in, we still needed to be pretty heavy. And the lyric, again, not telling a story but kind of tying down what the encompassing topic is, sticking to the fabric of what everything was about. Every song is placed that way, specifically for flow. So yeah, with the second song, we definitely wanted something pretty freakin' heavy.”*

*“It's hard not to look at old Scorpions”, laughs **Michael**, asked about '**Charon**', the album's most “Middle eastern-sounding” composition. “We knew we wanted to have a song that got into those tonalities. Again, it's different than the other ones, but it doesn't sound like it doesn't belong. Another favourite of mine is '**Hell And Back**', which is melodic and a little reminiscent of some of our stuff from years back; it's proggy, with a lot of different things going on in the arrangement of it. We didn't have a 20-minute song, so at nine minutes, it seemed like we needed a song that has some length, goes here, dips down here, a little heavier here, and that song was that. And then it's back to our overarching view of the record, where '**In My Darkest Hour**' is hammering the theme of combining a really cool riff with a solid chorus, but with a twist to the arrangement, with the bass kind of taking over for the verse.”*

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*“There is something else I can fill you in on that’s pretty slick”, offers **Michael**, somewhat conspiratorially. “When the whole Dante thing came about and we were doing some research and looking at the Inferno, you see this number three cropping up all the time. I guess he wrote the verses in sets of three and there’s 33 cantos per part, and there’s all this play on three, six, nine, 33. So we injected some of that, and you probably wouldn’t realize it unless you were looking for it. For example, the first song, ‘**Nevermore**’, it’s three syllables and the melody is a three-note phrase. There’s three references to three of our old songs from our third record. There’s shit like that all over the place. Some more than others - there are some songs on the record that are left the way they were. But sometimes there’s a three-note riff or there’s a six-note riff, or there’s a multiple of three words in a chorus. There’s intentional things here and there. You gotta have fun, dude, and enjoy what you’re doing (laughs) - make it interesting for yourself too.”*

For **Underworld**’s cover art, **SYMPHONY X** went with their established illustrator **Warren Flanagan**, who similarly tapped into the “secret knowledge” vibe Michael and band embedded in the record.

*“Warren went with the masks, similar to the first record”, explains **Romeo**. “But when I discussed with him Dante and the underworld, he did his own research and designed a little symbol for each of the nine circles of hell. So there are these little geometric symbols that mean something. That’s just what he does. He gets in there and finds these things that maybe no one really besides us knows what it means and yet it has meaning.”*

It’s all just additional intellectual and conceptual grist for the discerning music fan to ponder. But ultimately, to reiterate, the band’s goal - and mission accomplished - was to create a record where strength of song was paramount. In that respect, with **Underworld**, **SYMPHONY X** have transcended the stigma with which progressive metal is often saddled. These expertly constructed songs transcend to the point where any appreciator of smart songwriting can be positively provoked.

*“Absolutely”, reflects **Michael** in closing. “We’re not just making records for players or deep, deep prog metal fans. I think when you start out, yes, you want to show your skills and you want to prove what you do. But as time goes on, especially with us, it’s, ‘What is the song about?’ ‘What’s the right thing for the song?’ So it’s more enjoyable for everybody, and you don’t have to necessarily be a musician to get it. And that’s where we’re at now. We’re trying to craft good songs, and yet still have some fun playing - of course, it’s always fun to sprinkle some of the chops thing in. But yeah, with **Underworld**, it’s definitely about the whole album. And that’s what we’re preoccupied with now, and love about this band. Sure, there are lots of different bits still, lots of what **SYMPHONY X** is known for, but there’s so much more to worry about now (laughs).”*

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