

Dennis Dunaway **Remembers the Break** **Frank Zappa Gave Alice Cooper**

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"Let me have some coffee and then I'll listen," said a groggy voice-like that of a mother to a child who rises early and eager on a Saturday morning. It was 1968, and the voice was that of Frank Zappa, who was speaking from his bedroom to Dennis Dunaway and his band mates who were outside the door.

Mr. Zappa got his brew, gave them a listen and essentially agreed to sign them to his record label that day. It had been a long dark road to getting there, but the Alice Cooper group had a deal.



::: Alice Cooper :::



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These days, Dunaway, who played bass, sang and co-wrote many of the band's hits, is occasionally spotted performing in Litchfield County and is in the midst of a new album project at a studio in Brookfield.

He survived the rock 'n' roll scene in the 1970s, continuing with Alice Cooper through the band's heyday and has since played in other bands, done sessions in the studio and pursued business ventures with his wife of nearly 30 years, Cindy.

Last week, he took some time during a recording session to explain his new project, which thus far involves about 20 tracks of varying styles, all based on a quirky sort of heavy rock he's played throughout his career.



"You might be able to find a couple songs that you could play back to back and say those are kind of similar, but the whole album has quite a variety," he said.

Laidback and soft-spoken, Dunaway looks back on his experiences fondly, though he loves the stress-free feel of the current sessions compared to the old days.

"I've always worked in very collaborative, almost volatile environments. When you brought an idea to the Alice Cooper Group, it was sort of like tossing your heart into a pool of piranhas," he said. "But the best ideas rose to the top because if it wasn't worth fighting for, it had no chance.

"This is much more spontaneous because we don't have that deadline hanging over our head," he said, noting that he is not under contract and has no deadline for completing the project.

One of the songs, titled "Subway," rumbles like a freight train with Dunaway's patented bass sound, using a pick and complemented by heavy drum tracks. It is an approach taken during the Alice Cooper days, when the band's powerful drummer, Neal Smith, needed little help with the bottom end and Dunaway filled in the gaps, playing partial chords and sneaking solos in between guitar riffs.

He is joined on the project by other veteran rockers, including guitarist Joe Bouchard of Kent, formerly of Blue Oyster Cult and Englishman Ian Hunter of Mott the Hoople fame. Smith, too, may join him on the project that is being engineered by Rick Tedesco in his Brookfield studio.

"That's what's great about this whole experience for me," he said, laughing as he replays a song with a gunshot solo. "This is the first time I've ever had people who have been willing to explore every idea that I suggest."

Originally from Oregon, Dunaway attended high school and college in Phoenix, AZ, which is where the Alice Cooper group originated. As a youngster, his discovery of guitarist Duane Eddy inspired him to be a musician, and bassist Paul Samwell-Smith of The Yardbirds was the first major influence on his instrument of choice, which wasn't really a choice at all.



"Alice and I formed the band in high school, and at our first performance we kind of pretended we were playing instruments," he said, laughing and referring to the band's leader, real name Vincent Furnier.

"Then we decided to really get serious about it and everybody else chose what instrument they wanted to play before me, which I think is fitting because bass players' personalities are more like the followers," Dunaway added.

His original band mates, including Smith, Michael Bruce and the late Glen Buxton, then went on a long and treacherous journey through bars, theaters, gymnasiums and outdoor shows, plying their trade and developing a style. The early material was abstract by comparison to the songs that later made them famous.

"We were too weird for Los Angeles when we lived there," Dunaway said with a wry grin.

They weren't too weird for Frank Zappa, however, and he was already a force in the music business, composing movie scores and albums of his own while producing other bands worthy of his complex tastes.

At the time, Alice Cooper happened to be dating "Miss Christine" from the all-girl group "The GTOs," for whom Zappa had produced an album. She was often at the Zappa home, babysitting for his daughter Moon Unit, and Dunaway and his band mates were occasional visitors. They would always invite Zappa to hear them play and he would never come.

One day, they were desperately trying to convince Miss Christine to let them come over and play for him.

"She said, 'Well he's going to be home really late tonight,' and so we're like, 'Come on, can we come over tomorrow?'" Dunaway remembered.

Eventually, she gave in and made tentative plans. "Okay, come over tomorrow at nine o'clock and I'll ask him if it's okay, and if it's not okay I'll call you," was her reply, according to Dunaway.

"We were knocking on his door at nine o'clock in the morning; the whole band and all of our equipment," he recalled. "She didn't say anything about equipment [to Zappa] and she certainly didn't say nine *A.M.*," he said, laughing. "As soon as she opened the door, we marched in and set up all of our equipment in the hallway outside of Frank Zappa's bedroom and we started playing. The song's like halfway through and the door opens and a hand comes out and goes like this," he said, motioning to quiet down.

The notorious night owl begged them to wait.

"So, he got his big mug of black steaming coffee and he's sitting at a card table all miserable and we're playing and jumping around and everything, and after four songs he says, 'You guys play stuff I couldn't get the Mothers [of Invention] to do,' which I don't think was true but that was quite the compliment," he remembered. Zappa agreed to sign them to a contract provided they get themselves a manager, which they did.

"That's called making your own break," Dunaway said. "But everybody in L.A. still hated us."

The band had gone by names such as the Earwigs, the Spiders and almost settled on Lizzie Borden until they went with Alice Cooper.



Their popularity grew following a stint in Detroit with upcoming acts such as the MC5, the Stooges and Ted Nugent. Their on-stage wardrobes of glitter, leather, makeup and theatrics started to catch on, while their songwriting became more focused, absorbing some of the energy from the other bands they met. Their stage show and wardrobe rubbed off on others, such as Iggy Pop and David Bowie, both of whom were still trying to make it.

The first single to hit the charts was "I'm Eighteen" in 1970, written by the entire band and launched at a radio station in Canada when one of the jocks began playing the song followed by a flood of requests to hear it again.

Still, it took a while for the music business to acquire a taste for the band.

"For everybody that liked us there were 10 people that wanted to kill us," Dunaway joked. The band found that the vitriol was real when it began a nationwide tour and concert goers would greet Alice Cooper by throwing hammers, M80s and other surprises. One group the band always had on its side, however, was the bikers, who didn't want to get too close to the band, Dunaway joked - referring to the mixed messages the makeup and costumes may have transmitted - but liked the music.

"We played the Fillmore West and [promoter] Bill Graham hated us," he said. "He thought we ended everything that was good about music. Finally we got so big that he had to bring us in."

Other hits followed, including "School's Out," "No More Mr. Nice Guy," "Desperado" and more. The band had a cult following, particularly with rebellious teenagers who yearned for the straightforward lyrics and heavy rock sound. A guy band with a girl's name was confusing yet ultimately memorable.

"It almost closed every possible door. Then we spent years with people coming to our show thinking they were coming to see Al Kooper," Dunaway said of the keyboardist who formed Blood, Sweat & Tears. He came up to me once and said 'You don't know what you've done to my audience.'"

The original band broke up in the mid-70s, when the members decided they were ready to make another album but Alice decided not to participate. The rest of the band recorded the album titled "Billion Dollar Babies" and that was the end of the road for the original Alice Cooper group, although more albums came out with a different lineup and a more commercial sound. Dunaway does not speak of the breakup with remorse.

"We were on the road constantly, putting out two albums per year, and we had done an extended tour and everybody was kind of road-weary and decided to take a break," he said. "I had gotten rather disenchanted with the music business and decided to just write music for the fun of it and that's what this recording session has been."



In recent years, Dunaway has performed and recorded with Joe Bouchard and Neal Smith going by the name of BDS. They recorded a studio album, "Back from Hell" and a live album from a performance in Paris.

"Dennis is a really unique person," Tedesco said. "Just his outlook on life in general, he brings this totally different viewpoint that I've never experienced. It's a lot of fun. It's just so cool to have somebody present something with the enthusiasm that comes through."

Dunaway and his wife have two grown daughters, and the couple spends considerable time at their Wilton store, *Moon Hollow*, selling an array of antiques, gifts and other items. The Fairfield County resident credits a sense of humor for getting him through the rock 'n' roll lifestyle and cherishes the memories that return time and again with the touch of a radio dial.