

## Interview with Alain Succa at Big Bang Magazine, France - December 2020

A.S - Tony, in addition to your many activities as producer, arranger, composer and session musician for other artists from Roger Daltrey and Julian Lennon, to Simon Townshend and Peter Banks, also Robert Fripp, Toyah Willcox, and even our compatriot Julien Clerc of whom you were the guitarist on an album and on stage, you have found the time in the last 10 years to release ten albums, under your name, alone or associated with a partner, or as the ESP Project, which makes one album per year, and all as beautiful as each other! The ESP Projects' 'Phenomena' has barely been released (August 2020) when you're already planning to release another album with Peter Coyle in early 2021. What's your secret? How do you organise yourself? So you never sleep?

T.L. - Yes I have put out a lot of albums in the last few years and they'll keep coming. After Phenomena was finished and released, I felt like I needed a rest from all the writing, arranging and playing with ESP and I'd already started a project with Peter Coyle '22 Layers' which is much simpler in terms of arrangement, chord structures etc. I'm deep in the writing and recording of that now and we hope to put that out early next year. We worked together on the '22 Layers of Sunlight' ESP Project album and as seen by the name '22 layers' it's a kind of extension of that but hopefully something new and fresh. We've had a great reaction on the singles so far.

A.S - And above all, how do you manage to find so much inspiration, and constantly renewed? What's your creative process, especially when composing for ESP?

T.L. - Inspiration is with me most of the time. I have music in my head constantly and sometimes it's really hard to get away from. I've experienced that for as long as I can remember, but only started to put ideas down around the mid 80s. They were pretty lame at first but with one or two bits that kind of worked and I had the definite feeling that if I worked at it I could get better. It wasn't till about 1993 that I felt like I could put something out and even then there were parts that didn't quite get there. By this time I knew how to get a good sound and my playing abilities were good but the writing took a while to get better. The music of ESP is mostly my personal expression and as such, I have to keep coming up with new material, apart from anything else, it's a kind of therapy that would be hard to live without in these trying times.

A.S - Do you see yourself primarily as a Keyboardist? Guitarist? Bass player? Composer? Lyricist? Producer? Singer? All this at the same time, with the same ease and the same pleasure? How do you live with these multiple artistic identities?

T.L. - I think my main instruments are Guitar and Keyboard. I was playing piano at 5 years old and picked up a guitar when I was ten. I have played live keyboards but playing guitar live is something that really lets me get my feelings out, and I miss playing live a lot, but while this virus is circulating so much I stay in the studio. Composing music can be a wonderful experience but only when the ideas are good. Sometimes I can sit at a keyboard and get quite down as nothing new or inspiring comes. I do get a lot of inspiration around a full moon but I haven't started howling yet though!

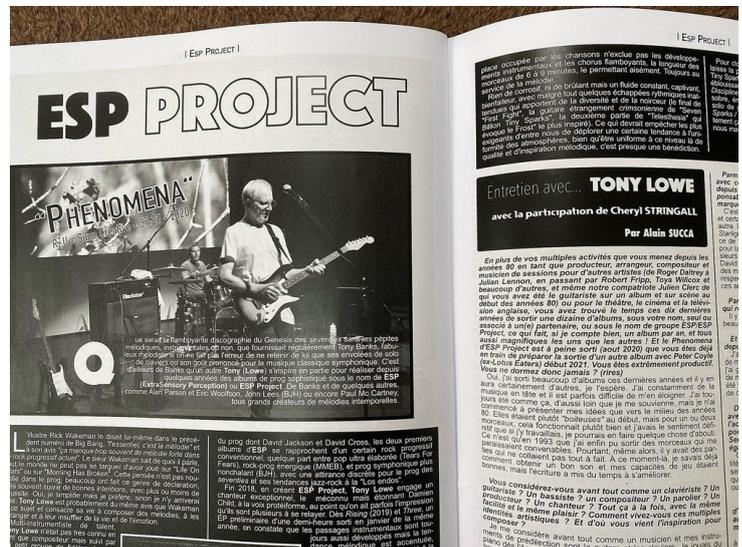
Singing is something I enjoy doing but really don't have a very strong voice and although I've got away with it on some of my recordings, there are a lot of better singers around than me. So I prefer to leave that to someone else. There is a separate ESP project coming out next year with some of my vocals on and it sounds good in the style it's done.

A.S - What is the usual basis for the decision to get involved in a particular project, as a producer or musicians? Does it work primarily on notions of friendship? Or rather on your notoriety and in this case, somebody comes to solicit you?

T.L. - Most of the time it's down to the music, the people involved and the time frame. I have a reputation for building atmospheres and emotional depth into heartfelt music so sometimes I get asked to do something on the strength of my work that's already out there.

A.S - Among all the professional relationships you had with this multitude of artists with whom you have worked for nearly 40 years, under your different hats and responsibilities, which ones have particularly marked you?

T.L. - That's a tough one! Many of them have left a mark on me and some have probably influenced me in some way too. It was a real privilege to work on 'Starless Starlight' by David Cross and Robert Fripp and I've been lucky to have worked with David over a long period in one way or another. I first met Robert Fripp in 1970 and our paths have crossed a few times over



the years. Also the Cross and Banks album 'Crossover' where I got a chance to work with members of 'Yes' and 'King Crimson' as they added their guest parts to the album. I also have a huge amount of respect for Julien Clerc who is still sounding amazing after all those years.

A.S - Among the artists with whom you have not collaborated, with whom would you dream of working?

**T.L. - There are a few; Phil Collins, Paul McCartney, Tony Banks ... and many more.**

A.S - And who are the musicians who have influenced you the most since your beginnings, and nowadays?

**T.L. - I grew up with the Beatles records and really did like a lot of different kinds of music as I was growing up. I think my earliest influences were from classical music but I got the pop music bug by about 8 years old. My influences later on were varied; anything from Mahler to Radiohead, Genesis, Yes, and a lot of stuff in-between.**

A.S - According to you, ESP, stands for Extra Sensory Perception, right? But it could also mean Extra-Solar Planet, Effective Sensory Projection, Equally Spaced Polynomial, which could also correspond more or less to your music spirit.

**T.L. - It could stand for many things but really it's meant to be 'Extra Sensory Perception' which seems to sum up the way people work with inspiration, whether it's in visual art, writing stories or music.**

A.S - We have the impression that the albums released under the surname of ESP (ESP 2.0 or ESP Project) since 2016 are more than the others, privileged means to satisfy your love of classic rock, and progressive music.

**T.L. - I'm a big prog fan but mostly the older stuff. There's so much room for expression, emotional stories and statements in Prog. I'm also hugely into good rock like The WHO. I saw them play many times over the years and that's an experience that has stayed with me, especially when Keith Moon and John Entwistle were in the band.**

A.S - ESP's first two albums were done alongside drummer Mark Brzezicki (from Big Country), the second one with Peter Coyle (ex- Lotus Eaters), both being more associated by us with the scene of their debut, that is to say the English new wave music of the 80's. This is a seemingly unexpected collaboration, especially since these two albums are perhaps the most progressive ones in your discography. How was this possible?

**T.L. - Mark Brzezicki is mostly known for his playing with Big Country but he was always a bit of a frustrated prog drummer and we spoke a few times over the years about getting together to do a prog album so when I started 'Invisible Din' it seems like the ideal opportunity to do so.**

**Around the time of writing the second ESP album, I got an email from Peter Coyle, asking if I'd be interested in a collaboration and we wrote the songs together over the internet as Peter lives in France. That album became something different and although it was mostly a prog album, there was an unusual vibe about some of it that I wouldn't have achieved on my own. Peter always strives to be original and though he had a huge following with the Lotus Eaters, a lot of Peter's solo material over the years has been very different. The new project we are working on is born from that ESP collaboration and seems to be taking on a sound and style of its own.**

A.S - "Invisible Din", the first album, brings together many exceptional musicians from the prog scene of yesterday, today and even tomorrow! Was it difficult to bring them all together around this project?

**T.L. - Yes it was! But worth it! Everyone recorded at different times and mostly on their home recording set ups. So I was sent files from everyone and patched them in to my recordings. We recorded Mark's drums at another studio and I went to David Cross's house to record his violin parts. Phil Spalding and Steve Gee both came to my home studio to record their bass parts. The hardest part was getting everyone together for rehearsals. We ended up rehearsing the core band and then adding each musician, till by the last rehearsal we had everyone together in the same room. Logistically, it was a nightmare to do the live show but we managed it and I'm so glad we did as there were some real magic moments.**

A.S -What do you think is special about ESP Project's latest album, *Phenomena*, compared to the previous four? What would you say to someone who doesn't know ESP Project to encourage him to check out this new album?

**T.L. - If there's anything about this one that's different, it's possibly down to the fact that it was just me and Damien on it. I've got pretty good at programming drums with a human vibe and it is different in sound to live kit, but it was due to the Pandemic that we had to do it that way this time. Apart from that, I did try and make it very mysterious to go with the title of 'phenomena' it could be 'strange phenomena'.**

A.S - What was the main source of its musical inspiration?

**T.L. - I never know how music is going to turn out and it's a matter of building something from the imagination, and in a way the music then tells me what it needs. I follow where it leads me.**

A.S - Present on your last two albums, Damien Child is as extraordinary on vocals as he is a lyricist, he is a rare gem. I humbly admit that for me this is a discovery. How did you know him? Do you plan to continue collaborating with him, within ESP Project or elsewhere?

**T.L. - Damien is a great singer and has also written some fantastic lyrics for those albums. I had advertised for a singer on the project and Damien appeared. He has done a lot of impressive work in musical theatre and acting but wasn't well known in the rock field at that time. I have no plans for any line up on the next one as it will be a while till I start it. It's all up in the air at the moment due to no one really knowing how things are going to pan out with the Covid virus. I've talked to Mark Brzezicki recently and it's just possible we'll do some live gigs sometime in the future.**

A.S - Damien Child is a huge singer, but when the album comes to an end with the track "Seven Billion Tiny Sparks" on which Alison Fleming starts singing, the emotion is at its height. It is stunningly beautiful. When will we see an entire album with her like the ones you did in the mid-2000s and 2014?

**T.L. - I'm working with Alison over the ocean on a couple of projects (She now lives in the USA), one to be announced for next year that we've worked on for a while and we'll also be releasing something together under the ESP featuring series.**

A.S - Global warming, environmental crisis, international instability, economic crisis, health crisis, humanitarian crisis, record market crisis.... We are living more than ever in a period full of upheaval which, negative for the most part, can be very anxiety-provoking? What do you think of the world nowadays? How do you live and feel it? Does it affect your music?

**T.L. - It's certainly a very unusual time. There's such a lot of background stress where people are generally feeling stressed, tired and irritable. I have good days and I have times when everything seems to be getting out of control but I still have a deep feeling that things will change for the better. It's grim right now but there is some light at the end of the tunnel. Writing and performing music is my lifeline. I don't know how I'd feel if I didn't have something to express my feelings through.**

A.S - You are involved in the defence of human rights and the protection of the environment. How do you find the courage and the will to do this, faced to so many negative signs? You once said that "music can be a force for positive change". But if this is of course the case on a small scale (an individual or a group of individuals), do you really think that it has already had or can have a beneficial influence, however weak, on the march of the world?

**T.L. - Music and Art can be a force for positive change! Some of the huge gigs and festivals generate such strong collective emotions and can reignite our hopes and dreams. Especially if you're standing in a field with 10,000 other people all feeling it at the same time. It can move mountains! These days it's not happening so much but any heartfelt music or art can change the way we feel so even hearing or seeing something on the internet can be uplifting. It works both ways of course.**

A.S - Finally. What can you tell us about the album you are preparing with Peter Coyle? Which path have you explored this time? And what else can we expect in the future?

**T.L. - One of the joys of working with Peter Coyle is that we don't plan anything. I work up a few chords and a beat then send it over to him. Usually it comes back with a vocal line I would never have expected, which can send me off down another road and we build it from there. It's all very experimental.**

Question to Cheryl Stringall: A.S - Cheryl: was it you who created the art work of the new album as you did for the first two of ESP? I like them all.

**C.S. - Hello Alain, thank you for asking, I was the graphic designer for all five albums, creating art for some and using art for others, such as 'The Rising' - where the cover art is done by Pete Linforth and the landscape picture on the inside of 'Invisible Din' is by Mark Brzezicki. My most involvement in the art is with '22 Layers of Sunlight' and 'phenomena' as the cover/disc of 'phenomena' is my picture. In essence it is about obtaining the right image for the music and Tony is the one who decides what he feels will work with the product. I then get to work obtaining the right images, changing or creating them.**