

The Black Dog Orchestra bring Led Zeppelin to The Usher Hall



On 23 April The Black Dog Orchestra will play at The Usher Hall. Their concert will feature the music of Led Zeppelin complete with full orchestra.

Vince Contarino, lead singer with The Black Dog Orchestra, spoke with us ahead of the debut UK tour for 'Stairway To Heaven: Led Zeppelin Masters'

1) **Looking forward to your UK tour with the Black Dog Orchestra. How did the collaboration come about?**

To answer that question, we must go back to 2004 when we first decided to play the music of Led Zeppelin with an Orchestra. We had been playing as the "Zep Boys" for almost 20 years in pubs, clubs, theatres and some outdoor festivals, so we were looking to do something different. It wasn't as much as we wanted to make the gigs bigger but as much as we wanted grandeur.

With an orchestra, we could play all the dubbed tracks on a Zeppelin studio track and, at the same time, bring together two different musical performance cultures.

We played our first orchestral show in Adelaide, Australia, with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra in 2005 and it was a resounding success with the public.

The rest as they say is history. We have gone on to perform many more of these shows across Australia and now here we are getting ready for the UK. The most exciting phase without doubt so far.

2) You've performed as a 'Zeppelin' tribute act for over 30 years. You must have been one of the first tribute acts in the world?

This could be true. I had never heard the term "Tribute Act" until a few years later when suddenly there was deluge of tribute bands flooding the scene. I can only speak for scene in Australia, but I think it has become unsavoury and in many cases just done for easy attention and monetary gain. Having said that, only acts that entertain and give audiences what they come to gigs to receive will survive the long haul.

3) You recent played three sold out shows at the Sydney Opera House, which is a testament to the reputation you've built in Australia. Did you ever imagine that was possible when you first started out all those years ago?

Never dreamed or dare to dream that. All we wanted to do was a couple of shows at the local pub and have some fun playing the music we loved of what we believe to be the greatest rock band ever.

4) Understandably, 'Zeppelin fans are very protective about the music. With you also being fans, how important is it for the band to show respect and honesty to both the music and the performance?

The performance must be true to the Led Zeppelin catalogue and how those songs were recorded. Even though Zeppelin is blues based – and blues is all about the moment and how one expresses themselves individually – we believe we must stick to the script, so to speak. We may express and interpret certain themes a little different from the original, but overall we need to play the compositions as recorded on the albums so the audience is satisfied. We are strict on this and yet we still have room to move within the confines of the recorded material.

5) Unlike many other tribute bands, you don't

impersonate the band but allow your own personalities to come through. Was this always part of the plan?

It was never even a consideration. We are musicians not actors. The music is what is important to us not the clothes or fashion of a bygone era. The performance can only be honest if we are real and celebrate and communicate with the audience using the composition, not the alter egos of Led Zeppelin themselves.

6) Does that mean that there is more emphasis on the music and your musicianship, rather than trying to play a role?

Absolutely, the music is everything unless of course we want to take the piss – and I would rather take the piss out of myself than say Robert Plant or Jimmy Page. I have way too much respect for them.

7) The addition of the 35-piece orchestra adds a new depth to the music and makes for an amazing spectacle. How did you approach the project and arrangements with the orchestra?

The arrangements are the brain child of Nicholas Buc. He was the man that sweated over those and he has done a wonderful job – superb, in my opinion. The band and Nicholas discussed dynamics and different versions of the Led Zeppelin songs so we could find a good custom fit. Compositions like ‘Song Remains the Same’ and ‘Rain Song’ for instance are different on the live album as compared to the studio versions. We wanted to keep elements that we love from both. And of course there are endings that need to be written especially for the fade out songs. In places Nic has added some subtle orchestrations and some that just smack you in the face. The obvious one is ‘Kashmir’. However, there is ‘Achilles Last Stand’ that just keeps on building. The beauty of having an orchestra!

8) Are there, therefore, some new interpretations on the old classics?

Yes, indeed, but as I mentioned, some of the changes are subtle and then there are moments that come out of nowhere that simply take your breath away. That's the wonder of music and introducing unexpected elements that enhance and lift and take you by surprise.

8) How much are you looking forward to bringing the show to the UK?

Are you kidding me?!!! We are super excited. We have a crew here in Australia that for logistic reasons we cannot take with us. They are offering the blood of their first born to come – hahaha! We the band are beside ourselves. Some of these concert halls like the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester and The Bristol Colston Hall and Newcastle City Hall were gigs that Led Zeppelin did themselves. I'm sure they would have done the London Palladium, too. We are nervous, too, because we want to put on a show that honours and reflects Led Zeppelin with integrity, passion and honesty. We want to be fighting fit and in good form. We are very much looking forward to the UK. In fact, it can't come soon enough.