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Jerry Cantrell Unchained

□ Alice In Chains founding member moves forward with *Degradation Trip*

By Frank Correia
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As I sat down to interview Jerry Cantrell a few weeks back, a mischievous yet knowing smile came to his face when I mentioned the future of Alice In Chains. He's used to it; it comes up a lot. "I don't know," he said flatly. "I've been in this place for a long time where Alice In Chains is not in the forefront of my thoughts at all."

After reminiscing a bit about the band (see story, right), Cantrell shrugged and said, "Life is long, so you never know what's going to happen. I would hope that we'd do something in the future. The cool thing is, it's always there. I'd love to do another record and tour with Alice, but nothing's going to happen soon."

Or ever again.

The following night I was enjoying a particularly good block of Alice In Chains songs on KLOS/Los Angeles when Jim Ladd announced the news: Alice In Chains singer Layne Staley, 34, had been found dead in his Seattle apartment. As a longtime fan, I felt pretty damn bad, and as someone who had just spoken with Cantrell earlier in the day, I felt downright horrible. Unbeknownst to Cantrell, he had been talking about a friend who had already left this world.

As a songwriter, guitarist and sometime vocalist for Alice In Chains, Cantrell was a driving force in one of grunge rock's marquee acts. His trademark guitar riffs and harsh harmonies with Staley left an impressive catalog, not to mention a legion of followers and imitators. But rather than dwelling on the personal demons that eventually claimed Staley, there is a bright spot to focus on in the darkness: Cantrell's latest effort and Roadrunner debut, *Degradation Trip*.

Originally intended as a two-disc set, *Degradation Trip* shows Cantrell getting back on the horse that made him famous — solid songs, *Dirty* riffs and a sound that shows the guitarist can refer to the past without living in it. So, before the news that darkened every fan's night, Cantrell stretched out on a lounge chair poolside at a Hollywood hotel to discuss what a long, strange *Trip* it's been.

Man In The Box

Shortly after wrapping up touring for his 1998 solo debut, *Boggy Depot* (Columbia), Cantrell locked himself in his house in Monroe, WA — a small town about 40 miles outside Seattle that Cantrell snickers is best known for its state prison.

A prisoner of his own creativity, he



Jerry Cantrell

experienced something entirely new. "I got on this roll that was just amazing," he explains. "It was something I had never experienced before. I never got into writing as deep as I did then, and I completely committed myself to the time. I just put everything else on hold in my life. Everything. This album is what I've come up with."

But, despite having just penned 25 songs, the real work was ahead of the artist: Columbia pulled funding in the middle of his second album. Cantrell was without management and had to produce the album himself. "All of that stuff was just horrendous and unbelievable at the time. I had to fire [producer] Dave Jerden the first fuckin' day, "I was leaving my record company, and I had to switch studios a few times.

"All the shit that went along with making this record was really tough. But now that it's all over, I'm so glad that I made the decisions that I did. I ended up where I wanted to be, and I did it how I wanted to do it. I did everything and more that I said I was going to do."

About his former label, Cantrell says, "We had just grown apart, and being in the position that I was, everything was more on my shoulders. Maybe I didn't handle it as well as I should have or somebody expected me to, but I'm just taking it as I do everything else — making it up as I go along.

"You make mistakes, and I certainly made mistakes. They did too. It just came time to realize that maybe it was time to move on. It cost me a bit of money to get out of that deal and, subse-

quently, pay for the rest of this record. I ended up selling the house that I wrote the record in just to pay for the fucker."

Cantrell doesn't harbor any resentment toward Columbia, however. He cites his career with Alice In Chains. "We had good people with us from the beginning. Don Jenner was a non-stop entity — he was an ass-kicker for us. It was a real good experience. It was just time to let it go. They were gracious enough to let me go without hurting me too bad, which they certainly could have done. I respect them for that."

Get Born Again

Breaking up is hard to do, but finding another label was surprisingly hard for Cantrell. "Then came a whole other tough trial by fire, or maybe just trial and disappointment," he says. "Nobody wanted to get near this thing. It was too massive — a double fuckin' record. Record companies hate double records, and nobody heard any obvious singles, which I just couldn't get. There's shit all over this record that's fuckin' cool as far as radio play and instantly hitting you. So we had a lot of meetings with a lot of companies.

"This record definitely took more from me and out of me than any record I've done."

"We'd usually meet with the president and the head of A&R, usually just two guys. When I went into Roadrunner, I met the whole staff the first day. They brought everybody in, which I thought was really cool. They cared enough to tell me what each person does for the company."

Both the vibe and the timing were right for Cantrell to sign with Roadrunner. He says, "I certainly could

Heaven Beside You

On April 19 Layne Staley was found dead in his Seattle apartment, victim of a drug overdose. It was a sad but not entirely unexpected end for one of rock's great frontmen and the voice of Alice In Chains. Here Jerry Cantrell reflects on his years in the multi-Platinum group.

"It was the best time of my life, hands down," he says with a grin. "It was un-fuckin'-believable. Unstoppable. Bands don't last — they just don't last. It's a brief, fleeting thing. And we were real lucky to have it as long as we did. It's that whole argument about having the cup half-empty or the cup half-full. I don't even see it as half-full. What we did was up to the brim and overflowing. I'm really proud of everything we've done. We kicked ass, and we did it the way we wanted to. We didn't go out with some weak-ass records or shit and start trying to be caricatures of ourselves. Everything we did was original and refreshing, in my opinion. To me, as a fan and also making this stuff, we couldn't have done any better."

Cantrell also offers a humorous glimpse of the group's early days as an opening act on the Clash of the Titans tour, which featured the decidedly heavier sounds of Anthrax, Megadeth and Slayer. "The lineup revolved every night, but it was always Slayer's crowd," he remembers. "Most of the time we did pretty well. Other times they hated us. But at Red Rocks in Denver they really hated us. That place was built up instead of back, and if you get a good arc, you can pretty much hit the stage with anything. We had stuff raining down on us for about 35-45 minutes. We were constantly dodging shit, and people were spitting at us.

"Layne got real pissed off, jumped the barricade and went straight into the crowd. He started singing and spitting right back in people's faces and trading blows with them. So we all jumped the barricades and did the same thing. I don't know how the fuck this happened, but someone snuck over a gallon jug of some liquid. I don't even want to guess what it was, but it came flying down and smashed all over Sean [Kinney's] drum set. There were some kids out back at the end of the show saying, 'All right, you guys didn't puss out. Guess you guys are all right.' When we got validation from the Slayer fans, we knew we were into something. Nobody chased us off the stage, ever, except ourselves."

have gone somewhere else with more money and bigger coverage, but I don't know about push. I don't know that any other company would have been as hungry and as behind the album as Roadrunner seems to be, and that's why I'm here.

"That's the one thing you can't buy — hunger. And you can't try to create it; it's just there or it's not. I think we met each other at the right time. I actually got a real good start with this record, and I'll be there for a few more records."

Another bonus for Cantrell is that *Degradation Trip*'s second disc will be released as he intended. He admits it was a good idea to break the planned two-disc set into separate releases. "It's a lot to swallow. I myself have always bitched about bands that have put out double records. 'Why the fuck didn't they condense it? It would have been a much better record.' I had to take that argument into account from my own point of view as a fan. It just seemed to make sense. You're getting a pretty healthy meal with this record, but it's definitely a banquet, the whole deal."

No Excuses

Although Cantrell sold 11 million records with Alice In Chains, *Boggy Depot* wasn't the commercial success many expected. "Everything petered out a little too early on that record," Cantrell says. "It's a strong record, but you can also hear that it's a starting point again.

"I'm really glad I went through that experience because it gave me a lot more confidence this time around, which I think you can hear, especially vocally. I was getting comfortable

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being up there in that position. It's different.

"Singers are a different breed; they have their own little idiosyncrasies and their own little world. I understand it a little more now that I'm on that side of it. I appreciate it more. You're up front, and it's all on your shoulders. You're the quarterback, more so than anything. It takes some getting used to, and *Boggy* was my way of doing that. I was pretty much starting from scratch. This record is a couple of good steps beyond that. I would say that there's a little bit more musical growth between my two records than the growth of Alice from *Facelift* to *Dirt*."

Another thing Cantrell has learned is not to distance himself too much from his past. "I made a conscious effort to step away from Alice with *Boggy Depot*. It made a big difference that I didn't associate my name with Alice. It was just Jerry Cantrell. You'd be surprised how many people don't even know me and what I did with Alice.

"I've found a difference between the shows I did last year and this year.

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