

# Music Review: Foreigner - *Can't Slow Down*

For most rock and roll bands, taking one step forward and two steps back wouldn't be a recipe for success. But if you are Mick Jones, the lead guitarist and the sole remaining founding member in the legendary 1970s classic rock band, Foreigner, the formula works like a charm. It's readily apparent on their first CD of new material in fifteen years (*Can't Slow Down*) released last week on Rhino/Atlantic and distributed by Wal-Mart.

Relying on the tried and true formula that combines pulsating electric guitars, layers of lush keyboards; a splash of saxophone; and soaring, powerful, lead vocals; producers Mick Jones, Marti Fredericksen ("Aerosmith," "Buckcherry"), and Mark Ronson have managed to retain the signature instrumental sound of Foreigner's first three albums from the 1970s (*Foreigner*, *Double Vision*, and *Head Games*). No need to change what has worked for the last 33 years. This new disc has a little bit of everything the band is known for. There are high energy full blown rock songs, some mid-tempo tunes, and a few power ballads. The step forward comes in the songwriting, most notably, the lyrics.

Lyricaly, the subject matter of Foreigner's classic songs typically addressed adolescent lust and relationships gone awry ("Hot Blooded," "Urgent," "Dirty White Boy," "Blue Morning, Blue Day," "Feels Like the First Time," and "Head Games"). On this new record, Jones and his songwriting partners (Kelly Hansen, Fredericksen, Steve McEwan, Russ Irwin, and Oliver Lieber) are still discussing relationships, but their messages come from the perspective of much more mature and much wiser men. The recurring themes are regret, responsibility, sorrow, hope, and acceptance. We're also reminded that hindsight is always 20/20.

While the band's lineup has changed a lot over the years, the new guys in the group (Kelly Hansen, lead vocals; Jeff Pilson, bass and vocals; Tom Gimbel, sax, guitars, vocals; Michael Bluestein, keyboards and vocals; and Brian Tichy, drums) have been touring consistently over the last five years playing the band's back catalog. Along the way, they have brought an infusion of renewed energy and enthusiasm to the old classic songs on tour. Some of that excitement is present on this new studio collection as well.

Of course, the voice of Foreigner will always be Lou Gramm. Gramm and Jones worked in the trenches together to spearhead the artistic direction of the band during their glory years. In no way am I minimizing Gramm's talent as a singer or the songwriting skills he brought to the band, but for those who are skeptical about the viability of bands who replace their original established singers (i.e., Journey replacing Steve Perry), don't be concerned about Hansen. Hansen has taken the baton from Gramm and is holding his own and then some. I'm convinced that Jones would not have tried to reform Foreigner without the right singer. Hansen is that guy. His voice is eerily similar to Gramm's and he has about the same range. He knows his way around a stage and can work a crowd, too, so the band hasn't missed a beat in concert with him out front.

The title track ("Can't Slow Down") leads off the disc as a fast-paced energetic rocker that serves as a tribute to NASCAR. It was inspired by Foreigner's performance at the 2009 Samsung 500 at the Texas Motor Speedway. You will probably hear it being played during telecasts of NASCAR races this year. It is followed by "In Pieces," a ballad that examines a romance shattered in pieces by mistrust. The song expresses the hope that somehow the pieces of the romantic puzzle can be put back together. It starts off softly and builds momentum to a flourishing chorus, with Tichy's drum fills and the prominent sound of what appears to be an analog Moog synthesizer from the 1970s.

"When it Comes to Love" finds Hansen hitting his stride with his passionate and emotional vocals. This song is already garnering airplay on adult contemporary radio stations. Hansen sings it with a more understated tone. It conveys acceptance of the blame for a past relationship that ended badly. Moving ahead in time, the narrator reflects on the relationship that was lost and wishes he had it back. Bluestein's piano and Gimbel's saxophone are well placed in the mix and make this track a real highlight of the album.

Other high energy rock tunes such as "Lonely," "Ready," "Angel Tonight," and "Living in a Dream" will be certain crowd pleasers in the live show. All of them sound as if they could have been taken from any of

Foreigner's first three or four albums. "Angel Tonight" is notable for a funky recurring guitar riff that is reminiscent of the primary riff found in the old Foreigner hit ("Urgent").

Two of my favorite songs on the disc are "I'll Be Home Tonight" and "Too Late." "I'll Be Home Tonight" is a power ballad that is driven throughout by Bluestein's keyboard playing. It also has an occasional burst of electric guitar and background vocals at the chorus. There are no wasted words here — the song is very succinct and gets right to the point. It's very well written. The choice and mix of the instruments is perfect and the melody is beautiful. "Too Late" is a mid-tempo rocker that has a chorus that will stick in your head for days. Once again, Bluestein's keyboards stand out, along with the harmony vocals at the chorus. Jones also provides a really clean, efficient, and nifty guitar solo that is worth repeating.

Foreigner elected to re-record "Fool For You Anyway," a song that appears on their debut album. In listening to the new version, it seems a bit faster and has more of an old Atlantic Records (Spinners/Average White Band) R&B groove. Hansen shows he has the ability to tone things down and sing with some old fashioned R&B flavored soul.

*Can't Slow Down* also has a concert DVD from a recent show in Europe with behind the scenes footage and interviews with the band members. In one segment, Mick Jones serves as a tour guide. He takes the viewer to sites in Paris that are important to him for various reasons. The other members of the band talk about their love of the band's songs and the respect they have for the Foreigner brand name. The producers also decided to include a disc that features remastered versions of ten of the band's old hits. If you are like me and already have these songs, the main reason to purchase this collection is for the new music.

It's a shame that bands such as Foreigner can be a staple on Classic Rock Radio stations, yet those same stations refuse to play their new material. I think there is enough interest to warrant radio airplay of these new songs. These classic rock bands shouldn't have to work so hard to be heard, especially when they produce songs of the quality put forth on *Can't Slow Down*. Alas, that's a column for another day. In the meantime, *Can't Slow Down* is a pleasant surprise and worth the long wait. Grade: B+.