

No Fear of a blank interview

By Uwe Häberle And Claudia Richter, Photos/Layout: Claudia Richter

During the „Fear of a blank planet“ autumn tour 2007 Steven Wilson was ready to answer the questions of the editors from www.Voyage-PT.de on 13th November 2007 at the „LKA“ in Stuttgart, despite the fact that there is no massive promotion effect for the band to be expected from a fan website as e.g. from respective music magazines or radio stations. Mr. Wilson presented himself as a deeply grateful conversational partner. And if he enjoyed the questions than the coverage of his answers exceeded the questions many times over. Steven allowed fascinating insights into his intellectual world, which significantly influences his creativity. And en passant he proved that he still is a down-to-earth person.

There is probably nothing better for a diehard Porcupine Tree fan (beside the live events of course) as to ask Steven Wilson exactly those questions that you always wanted to ask. During the Blackfield tour in February 2007 we already got the offer to interview Steven in Bochum, but due to the circumstances of the time we couldn't realize it. During the „Fear of

a blank planet“ tour in autumn 2007 we retried our miss out chance again and started a new inquiry at the record label „Roadrunner“. „Roadrunner“ arranged an interview appointment on the 13th of November 2007 at the „LKA“ in Stuttgart where the band should perform at the same evening. We obtained a 30 minutes time frame to dispose our questions and to

take several pictures. Our main goal was to conduct an interview that steps beyond the usual questions and that addresses aspects on which Steven, in our humble opinion, never commented on. We didn't want a boring, cookie-cutter interview; we wanted to engage Steven into an inspiring talk. We wanted that he also has fun with the interview.

Well prepared we came on the dot to the „LKA“ to fire our questions at Steven. Not an easy undertaking, as it all causes a great excitement on ourselves that we had to keep under control during the interview. But Steven with his open minded and friendly nature made it very easy for us right from the start. Our worries had vanished and we could focus on the

interview. And Steven was very talkative. Finally we handed over a Voyage PT T-shirt to him which was specially designed for this occasion and which he accepted joyfully.

And our most important experience on this afternoon was: if Steven has to have a say than in all detailedness and at full length. Fortunately we were allowed to record the whole thing on a MP3 device because we were not be able to write everything down fast enough as the answers bluster out of Steven. And we gained a lot of thrilling answers. Answers that we didn't expected in such a way. Answers that revealed us further facets of the person Steven Wilson. Answers those were worth to be read ...

V-PT: You can choose your first question: envelope 1 or envelope 2?

SW: Oh, wow, all the questions are in that envelopes, aren't they? Are these your questions? Where are these questions from? From fans?

We both developed this interview together.

SW: Ah, okay, so these are all surprises!

No, only the first question. You can choose only the first one.

SW opens an envelope and reads the question loud:
What is your favourite animal?

Well, that's a very hard question to answer because I'm vegetarian, I love all animals really and I'm an animal lover. I grew up with cats and with dogs.



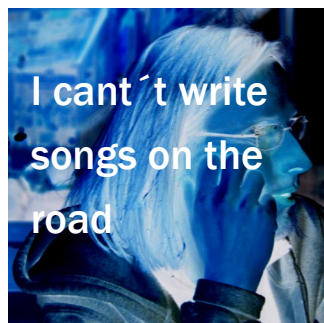
I love both. And it's like trying to pick one of your favourite children. In a way you can't. I guess I love all animals. But I have a particular fondness for dogs because I grew up with dogs.

We heard some rumours in the fan community about a new Porcupine Tree live album from the "Fear of a blank planet"-Tour.

SW: We are recording various shows across the tour and we are hoping to put together quite a nice package next year as a basic representation, as a document of this tour. It might even still yet end up being a DVD, but if not a DVD than at the very least an audio album. We haven't filmed any shows. It was still talking about filming maybe on one of the shows on this tour. So, some kind of live document of this tour, yes.

And the other projects from you, e.g. Bass Communion? The new album was delayed to January?

SW: Yes, it all has to do with packaging because that album was finished July of last year. I delivered this the record company but it has taken us so long to get the packaging rights. It's quite a special little package and finally I believe they came back from the factory this week. So, they gonna be released officially in the first part of January 2008.



And I.E.M. Any plans for a new release?

SW: No, I've done anything with that for a long time. No plans for that, but new things.

Can you give us some details?

SW: My first solo album is the main thing I'm gonna work on in the new year. I've got a lot of songs which I've not been able to place with any of the other projects over the last four, five years. Some of which you can hear if you go to my MySpace Page, e.g. Collecting space. And so finally I'm gonna put all those together probably on a double CD and that will be my major project for early next year. Along with a new No-Man record which is about half way written and Tim and myself will finish that off as well over the first part of 2008. It's lots happening, I'm not slackly. Don't worry!

Okay, because we've heard some rumours that you will make a rest, that you want to relax next year?

SW: Well I do. My idea of relaxing is not the same as everyone else's. The main thing is to take a break from touring because touring is kind of the most disruptive thing to a personal life because your not home. I can't write songs on the road. I've tried, it's very hard, it's not a very inspiring context to write songs. In order to write songs, to have a personal life, to do all those things, to make my music and to meet people I have to be home. The main thing next years is pretty much no touring. We probably do a trip to Japan, to Australia in spring because we haven't been there at this tour. But apart

from that you won't see us on the road the next year.

Could you describe a typical Steven Wilson working day when you record an album? Do you have a tight schedule?

SW: No. I'm very relaxed really, I don't, because my working method in terms of writing and recording is now the same. Apart from Porcupine Tree, because it's a band, there is no distinction between the writing and the recording when it's just my own music, like Bass Communion, IEM or my solo project. I'm in the studio, I'm writing and as I'm writing I'm putting the recording down. It's all part of the same process.

I still have a studio at my parents house which is about 30 Miles away from where I live in London. Each day I wake up the late morning usually and I drive to my studio and I start work at 1 or 2 o'clock in the afternoon and I don't work incredibly long hours. I'm not one of these people that works all night and loses track of the time.



I work 6 or 7 hours a day and I work very quickly. I think people are quite astonished when they work with me how quickly this music is recorded. It's quite quick. But sometimes it can take a long time before something will click. I can be going up to studio everyday for two weeks producing nothing as any good.



And then suddenly on day 15 or whatever something will click and a song come and another song come.

That's my typical day probably from about one o'clock till eight o'clock in the evening just working in the little room I've been working in pretty much since I was a teenager. It's the same room I made all my early Porcupine Tree tapes in. The equipment is a bit more advanced now but the environment is the same. I just feel very comfortable, I'm very relaxed and still very inspired.

And to this day I've really only ever written here. Another place I've written songs: I had an apartment in Tel Aviv for a while. I wrote most of „Fear of a blank planet“ there but otherwise everything still is made in that room at my parents place.

On the “Fear of a blank planet” album and the new “Nil Recurring” album we have noticed that you have developed your voice, we think you have further developed your voice.

SW: I hope so.

Was it a normal process or do you have a vocal coach or is it an improved self-confidence?

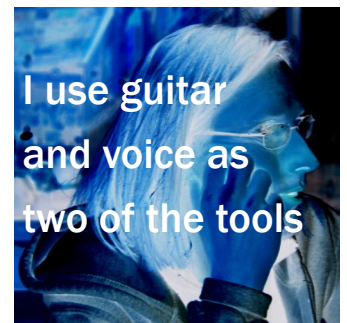
SW: I don't have any coach. I think the whole history of my singing has been a gradual gaining of confidence and gaining of perhaps strength. We toured a lot for “Deadwing” and I think singing a two hours show every night it does make your voice stronger and it does give you more confidence.

When I started singing live, in 1994 or whatever it was, that was a very, very big

step for me. It took me many years really to accept that I was a singer. Somebody said to me: “Oh you're a singer” - I answered “No, I write songs, I'm not a singer” - “But you sing” - “Yeah but I'm not a singer.” The same thing is true with the guitar thing as well. When people talk about me as a guitar player, I'm not a guitar player.

I love your guitar playing!

SW: I appreciate that but I'm not a guitar player, I'm a songwriter, producer that plays the guitar and sings as part of the process. I'm a songwriter, producer that uses guitar and voice as two of the tools in order to achieve that vision of making records. Recently I'm just beginning to come to terms with that I have got something special about my voice and my guitar playing. Maybe I should give myself a little bit more credit and confidence for being a singer.



Before “Signify” it's another kind of music it's more instrumental. At the time of “Signify” the vocal starts to become much more part of the sound. “Signify” is the first album you can really say that's now more vocal orientated than instrumental orientated. In order to achieve that I started to use a lot of harmony voices, multi-tracking vocals, because I didn't have the confidence to just one single voice.



I was using many many techniques, using special effects on the processing on the voice, multilayering voices and all those kind of things. And all of those techniques which people really love about Porcupine Tree, the harmony vocals, and the special, the telephone voice. They are all techniques really developed because I didn't really have much confidence as a singer.

If I had a voice like Jeff Buckley or Thom Yorke I probably would never have developed those techniques.



When I attended my first Porcupine Tree show in 1999 in Munich when

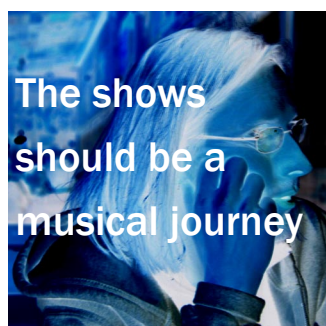
we were only 20 or 30 people and during the "Lightbulb Sun" and "Stupid Dream" tour you did a lot of announcements between the songs. You told some anecdotes that I thought they are really funny and I think you reduced that.

SW: Yes!

Was it intentionally?

SW: There was a point in time around about the end of the "In Absentia" tour or maybe at the beginning of the "Deadwing" tour when we decided we wanted the music to flow more as a continuum and we wanted the idea of the live show. If you listen to the Porcupine Tree albums, they are all conceived as continuous musical journeys. And I think at some point we felt like it will be nice to try to give the same kind of impression in a live context. So rather than we play a song, we kind of tune up, we announce, we play another

song, we tune up, we announce. We play to give the same kind of feeling of a musical journey.

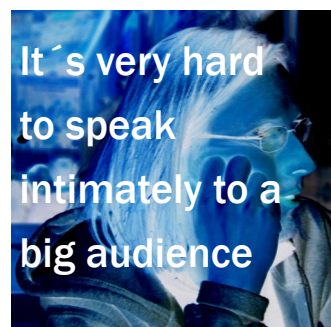


And obviously the film started to come into the show as well and the audience is bigger and the shows were less intimate. And actually it's very hard to speak intimately to a big audience. If you got 30 people it's really easy to speak to them and have a connection. If you got a thousand people it's very hard. You're talking to something quite intangible.

So there are at least two reasons. But the main reason was that really we wanted the show to flow a little bit more like the albums almost like a musical journey, a continuum of music and that's felt good. Particularly when we are going out and doing "Fear of a blank planet" as the whole of the first half of the show, I only spoke once just to explain what we are doing. And apart from that we just played the album. I liked that kind of effect it can be more intense.

You were very successful with Porcupine Tree the last years. How do you manage to keep both feet on the ground? Do you have friends outside the music business? Which role does your family play?

SW: I have my mum, my dad and my brother. I don't have my own family. I have my feet on the ground? I don't do that consciously. I never wanted to make music for any other reason and I love to make music.



A lot of people, not mentioning any nose, but there are some people obvious in the music industry who get into it because they want to be as a star. I wanted to make music and I never felt competitive with other bands. But that's not true sometimes there is a little bit a rivalry. But generally speaking it wasn't like a competition to me. I loved the music and I loved the whole kind of aura.

In the meantime, you have a lot of female fans that are coming to the concerts ...



SW: More and more, yeah.

... and that are posting in your guestbook. Do you read your guestbook regularly?

SW: I wouldn't say regularly, but occasionally.

And some of the guestbook entries could be described as some love letters to you. Do you feel flattered or are you afraid of it? And do you already have to protect yourself from some obtrusive fans?

SW: Do I feel flattered or do I feel threatened? Both! I've had things which I felt a little bit scary. The problem is it is very flattery obviously that people think that they know you because they like your music. And in a sense they are right because the music is, certainly lyrically, a reflection of who I am.



So in a sense, when people think they know me then in a way they do. But they don't know me, they know a version of me and usually they complete the picture themselves with their imagination and sometimes that's scary. I've had a couple that were a bit scary. I've never had to be protected physically.

But put it this way, I've got to the stage now where I have to be very careful who I respond to directly. And I have various people now between me and the fan base. It sounds very sad



in a way because I used to correspond directly.

A long time ago my email address was on my website. Then there was a period where I used to have questions for the band on the forum. After a while we had to abolish that and then we had to even abolish the forum completely. There is no forum on the Porcupine Tree website. I know there are various fan websites with forums which I don't have anything to do with those. I don't know what goes on them. I don't read them, I don't hear about them. In that sense it's sad, but on the other hand it became essential because as the band became more popular, the kind of obsessive fandom increases and so does some of the resentment of success.

The most unpleasant messages which have come through to me have been from people who believe I'm somehow turning my back on them, because I'm now successful or something. Very twisted. Or people who have met me once backstage, and I've been very courteous and sign stuff from them and talk to them and suddenly they think we have a relationship. A very small minority. I can only imagine what it

must be like if you are U2 or Radiohead to have that whole kind of phenomena magnified a 100 times. All these people that think they have a relationship with you. And stalkers, I don't have things like that.

I have to be very careful who I respond to. If you go to my MySpace page you'll see there are some people on there that write comments as if they're having a conversation with me. I'm not. I'm not responding. They got this imaginary conversation. So I think people read that and think I'm responding, and I'm not. There are some eccentric people out there. But of course at the end of the day, it's flattering to know that people love what you do so much, that they kind of extend their passion to their idea of you as a person, too.

When you listen to music are you only interested in the musical/technical part or is it also important for you that the music and/or artist is political correct? For example we saw in your „Metal Playlist“ an artist called ...

SW: Burzum.

We had some discussion in the Voyage PT mailing list about that because your playlist has a strong influence on the fan base. People buy albums because they appear on your playlist.

SW: There is your answer. Unfortunately or fortunately, I don't believe the power of music is connected to how nice or politically correct or otherwise the person who makes it is. There are plenty of people who've made extraordinary music that were very, very dubious, politically, personally, philosophically.



And Burzum's music is extremely powerful, I think. It's got something. I love



very dark and very twisted music. Burzum's music has got something, either despite or because of the kind of person he is. An extreme nihilistic power which maybe directly connected to the fact that he is an extremely unpleasant individual. Unfortunately I can not deny that because of that his music, in terms of Black Metal, has got a lot more intensity and power and fantisity than most of the Black Metal I've heard which sounds like school kids playing around. His music doesn't. It's got something really sick and evil about it.

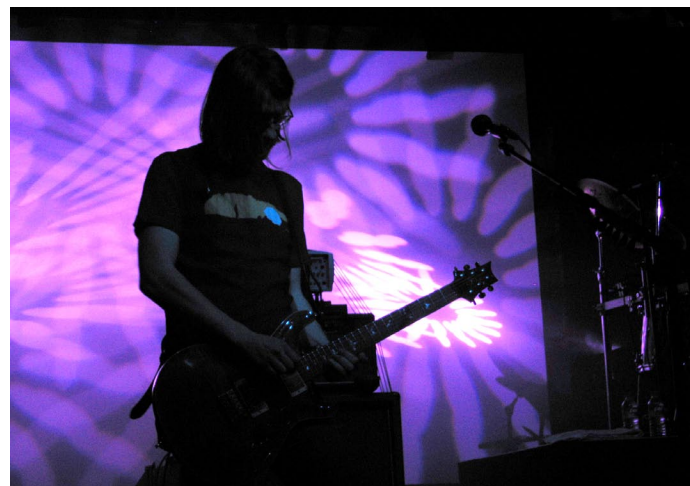


Unfortunately ever since I heard the first Black Sabbath album, when I was a teenager, I've loved sick and evil music. I also love these guys called „Sta-

lag“ who apparently one of the guys killed his own parents. When you hear music that it's made by genuine disturbed individuals very often you can hear there is got an extra level of intensity. There's been great art made by artists who're in mental hospitals, because they're extremely twisted.

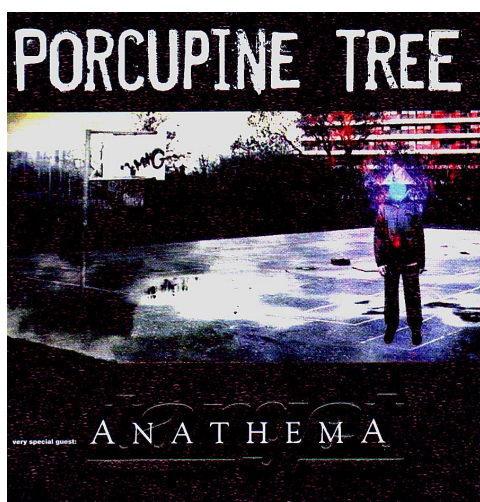
I also believe the whole Charlie Manson kind of thing. There's a very thin line between an artist and a serial killer. Now let me explain that because that's a very, very disturbing thing to say. Most well adjusted human beings are not inclined to create extraordinary art and neither are they inclined to kill people. There's something slightly disturbing about people who create extraordinary music. It's almost like were you tapping into part of their mind which other people don't tap into. This is my theory.

So there is a very thin line, if you look at the great artists, someone like Picaso or Mozart. They are on



the verge of insanity, on the verge of being extremely disturbed, psychopathic people. But in a way they've chosen to channel those impulses into crea-

tivity. I guess that there is a very thin line between channelling them in creativity and destruction. Does that make any sense at all?

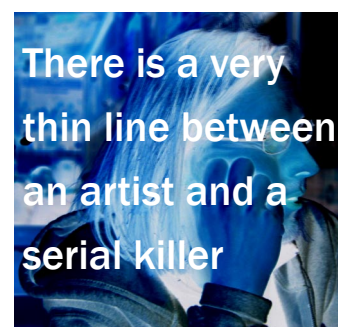
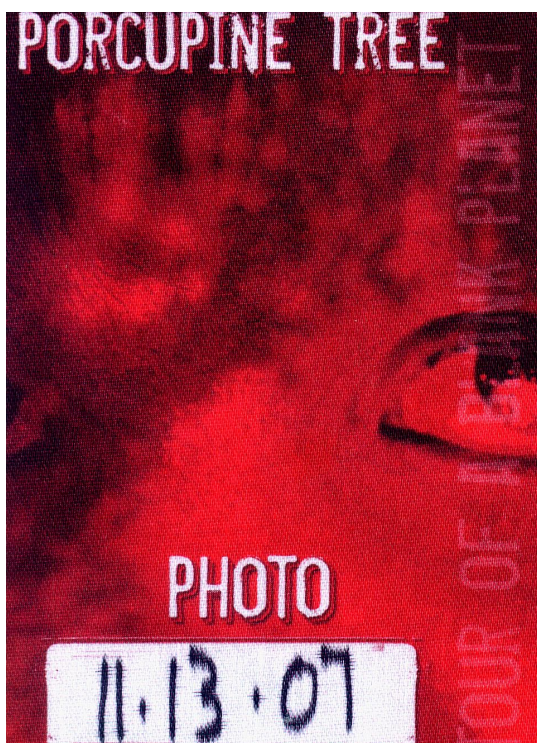


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There are many, many, many serial killers, Charlie Manson being the most famous example, who were also artists. Or would be artist, wanted to be artist. Charles Manson wanted to be a musician. What he have done with Wilson of the Beach Boys. He wrote songs for the Beach Boys. This is a guy that could

have gone either way, and something in his mind was twisted that could have been used in a positive way or negative way. Now for whatever reason he used it in a negative way.



Burzum is another example. Varg Vikernes, give me his real name, he's someone that obviously had incredible, something was twisted in his mind. And the same impulse that let him to create such intense music was also the impulse that made him into such a fuck-up as a person. And I guess what I'm saying is that I think that there is a very thin line between artistic genius. I'm not including myself in this category, by



the way. I'm talking about the real intense artists, the Picassos and the Mozarts of this world. The geniuses.

There's something about these people that's insane. They could just as easily end up being killers as they could end up being great artists. Controversial, I know, but this is one of my theories.

How many unfinished songs and demos are on your computer? Would it be worthwhile for a PT fan to get his hands on your laptop?

SW: Oh, yeah. I was writing and recording songs even in the mid eighties. In my archive that goes back to like even the mid eighties there are hundreds, hundreds of songs. One day I probably will do a some kind of like Andy Partridge of XTC. He recently did this 8CD series called „Fuzzy Warbles“ where you trawl through all his archived demos, unfinished songs. I'd like to do something like that one day.

Some of these songs I'm actually gonna be doing on this solo projects. Songs that been around probably for about 5 years, that were written during the „In Absentia“ period, that didn't make the album and songs written in the period since then. But there are songs going way back to the mid eighties that for whatever reason didn't. I've always been interested in many, many different kinds of music. At every stage of my ca-

reer I was listening to Disco music, at the same time I was listening to Krautrock, to Country music, to Drone music and to Industrial music. And very few times in my history have I've been able to express all of those interests. Recently it's becoming easier. Now I have so many projects that I'm able to express most of those musical identities.



But in the early years I had No-Man. That was all I had to begin with. At the same time I'm still making ambient music and industrial music and I still writing Progressive and Psychedelic and Space Rock and Krautrock inspired music. And a lot like stuff kind I got left in the archive. Later on I had IEM for the Krautrock and Bass Communion for the Drone. But there's a lot of music still in the



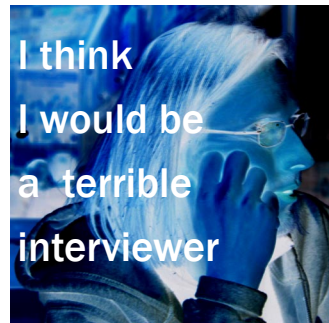


archive. So the answer to the question is hundreds. I couldn't tell you myself. Hundreds.

What question(s) would Steven Wilson ask himself in an interview?

SW: What question would Steven Wilson ask himself in an interview? I think I've been asked most of them right now. I probably think of something in like a week from now, haha. There are so many things you can ask out there. It's funny I got recently invited if I would to do an interview. I'm writing a little bit for the Rolling Stones magazine in Mexico. I've written a review of the new Radiohead album for Rolling Stone and the other day they asked me if I wanted to interview the artist called Murcof. Murcof, it's Electronic, I'm a big fan of the artist Murcof. And you know what a fan is. They rung me up and asked me, if I wanted to interview Murcof. I thought about it and I said 'No' in the end, because I think I would

be a terrible interviewer. I wouldn't know what to ask. It must be hard coming out with questions. And thinking of questions that you imagine that person hasn't been asked a million times before.



When we sat down, we tried to compile questions ...

SW: I can see that. And it must be hard. Because when you interview someone like Bob Dylan, how can you ask Bob Dylan anything that he hasn't been asked before and not be conscious of that fact? So I imagine it must be very hard. I don't know is the answer.

Thank you very much!

