

February 14, 2022

Toby Wright Looks Back at Recording Queensrÿche's *Hear in the Now Frontier*

By Brian Heaton

When Queensrÿche's *Hear in the Now Frontier* was released on March 25, 1997, the reception was decidedly mixed. Some music critics and fans hailed the album as a triumphant foray into alternative rock, while others said Queensrÿche jumped the shark and forgot what made the band's music distinct.

A quarter-century later, not much has changed. Listeners are still largely split on *Hear in the Now Frontier* and its place in Queensrÿche's catalog. But Toby Wright, who engineered and mixed the album, considers it an artistic success, and looks back fondly on the recording sessions.



Wright told AnybodyListening.net that he thought it was a breath of fresh air for Queensrÿche to strip down its sound and deliver more of a live feel on *Hear in the Now Frontier*. Particularly after the band experienced what he called "overdub hell" on its previous records.

"They wanted to come back to the roots basically," Wright said of Queensrÿche's mindset in 1996. "I think it's kind of cool when bands do that. Metallica has done that several times. Alice in Chains did it with going from album to EP to album to EP and kind of changing up their shit. I remember talking about the vision for *Hear in the Now Frontier* and I thought it would be really cool to concentrate on tones that sound great together and go from there."

Speaking to *Guitar* in 1997, Queensrÿche guitarist Chris DeGarmo explained that the band wanted to streamline its creative process for *Hear in the Now Frontier* and be more spontaneous.

"We approached it in a way that was not as elaborate, from a production standpoint, as some of our other projects," DeGarmo said. "We wanted to make it feel more like you're there as we're writing it."

Commercially, *Hear in the Now Frontier* was a disappointment. It was the first album by Queensrÿche that didn't achieve Gold certification by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) for sales of 500,000 units (records, cassettes, compact discs). But that doesn't tell the whole story. The lead singles of "Sign of the Times" and "You" were performing well on the radio and the band seemed poised to make a breakthrough.

But just as momentum was building, the bottom dropped out on the band. Queensrÿche's label at the time, EMI Records, went bankrupt and closed its doors. With no influence on radio stations from the label and no tour support for the band, *Hear in the Now Frontier* stalled, and the songs disappeared from the airwaves. Queensrÿche self-financed a short summer tour of the United States, two more promotional singles ("The Voice Inside" and "spOOL") fell on deaf ears and the *Hear in the Now Frontier* era was over before it really began.

Wright, however, feels the record's story would have been quite different had EMI not gone belly-up. He called the songs on *Hear in the Now Frontier* "powerful" and isn't bothered that some write it off as Queensrÿche's "grunge" album.

"I don't really care what critics' opinions are about the music I put forth into the world," Wright said. "If you don't enjoy it, change the channel. If you do enjoy it, tell other people. It's all creative to me."

Peter Collins, who had produced Queensrÿche's two landmark albums, 1988's *Operation: Mindcrime* and 1990's *Empire*, was back at the helm for *Hear in the Now Frontier*. Wright, fresh off massive success with Alice in Chains, and later with Korn, hadn't worked with Collins before (James "Jimbo" Barton had engineered and mixed the last few Queensrÿche records), but the two had the same manager. When Wright was offered the opportunity to record and mix *Hear in the Frontier*, he jumped at the chance, eager to learn from Collins.

Collins and Wright recorded Queensrÿche at Studio Litho in Seattle and at Sixteenth Avenue Sound in Nashville, Tenn. (Both studios no longer exist.) Wright was not present for pre-production, which Collins handled. When Wright arrived, they had one rehearsal so he could get a feel for the songs and the band's sound before tracking started.

"Peter had a very hands-on approach on *Hear in the Now Frontier* when I was with him, musically-speaking," Wright said. "He left all the sounds stuff up to me. If he didn't like a sound, or didn't like how a sound was blending with other sounds, he would speak up."

Wright said he and the band talked extensively about each instrument having to be its own voice and the importance of making sure guitarists Chris DeGarmo and Michael Wilton brought some variety to the sessions when recording their tracks.

"We talked about how to separate them if you wanted a thicker sound, and that would be using different amps and guitars," Wright said of his conversations with DeGarmo and Wilton. "So then their voices are completely different. We discussed possibly voicing the chords on a different place and the tuning of the guitar, that sort of thing."

Wright added that he was extremely impressed with DeGarmo, who left Queensrÿche in late-1997 after the tour supporting *Hear in the Now Frontier*. The two became close while recording the album and according to Wright, are still friends and keep in touch today. He called DeGarmo "one of those special guitarists" who knows how vital it is to take the time and get a performance correct.

"He's a very technical player and he knows way before anyone else when he's made a mistake and he needs to do it again," Wright said. "I think that stuff is really important. There are players out there who are not as technical as Chris. It doesn't mean they aren't as good, but they aren't as technical. Chris is a perfectionist. And you want to put out the art to the best of your ability. So sometimes that takes a few tries to get that perfect and record it."

Hear in the Now Frontier is very much a guitar-centric album. The solos throughout the record's 14 tracks are extremely diverse, ranging from DeGarmo and Wilton playing in tandem during "You," to DeGarmo using a slide during the lead break on "The Voice Inside" (and through the entire song). A few of the solos are lower in the mix and often go unnoticed. Check out the intense guitar runs in "spOOL." The dreamy outro solo from DeGarmo on "Hero" (listen starting at 3:55) is another gem.

Vocals were approached differently on *Hear in the Now Frontier*. Wright recalled that conversations between Collins and lead singer Geoff Tate centered on simplifying the melodies and experimenting with his delivery. In addition, in a first for Queensrÿche, DeGarmo stepped up to do lead vocals. He appears on the track "All I Want."

"Geoff was totally into it and he said to go for it," DeGarmo told *Guitar*. "Without meaning to, I felt it ended up with a kind of Beatlesy vibe. I wasn't trying to make it a Beatles-style song, but I think it shows something that I've always believed, which is that the things you grow up with eventually show up in some way in your own work."

Wright added that while he knew DeGarmo had a good voice, he was happily surprised at just how good an ear the guitarist had. However, despite Chris' great pitch, Wright said they still did several vocal comps to come up with the performance of "All I Want" that ended up on the record.

With 25 years in the rearview mirror, Wright said he remains happy about the work he and Queensrÿche did on *Hear in the Now Frontier*. He admitted it had been a while since he listened to the record and his memory was a bit fuzzy on the details, but was open to revisiting it in the future, particularly if ever asked to remix the album for an expanded edition.

Mostly, however, Wright recalls being impressed by the band's musicianship and overall ability. While *Hear in the Now Frontier* was certainly a departure for Queensrÿche and there were some disagreements at times in the recording sessions, he said everyone had a good time and any artistic differences they may have had were kept in perspective.

"I remember Chris and I having a lot of fun," Wright said. "They were an interesting bunch of dudes who were kicking ass musically."