

Derek Sherinian Finding The Keys of Life

JAM Magazine Interviews Progressive Keyboardist

By Craig Hunter Ross

Live Concert Photos by Craig Hunter Ross

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Music fans may know more of the work of keyboardist Derek Sherinian than they realize. While many recognize Sherinian as the former keyboard wizard with progressive mainstays Dream Theater, Derek has also toured with Planet X, Alice Cooper, KISS and is a founding member of the supergroup Black Country Communion alongside Glen Hughes, Jason Bonham and Joe Bonamassa.

Derek Sherinian is recognized as one of, if not the premier keyboard player within both the progressive and metal circles. He's also carved out quite a niche for himself through his ability to attract and assemble a who's who of guitar superstars to take part in his solo efforts; players like Al DiMeola, Steve Lukather, Yngwie Malmsteen, Slash, John Petrucci, John Sykes and Zakk Wylde just to name a few.

In early October of this year (2011), Sherinian released his latest solo work, *Oceana*. Recently, JAM Magazine was fortunate enough to catch up with Derek to discuss *Oceana* as well as several other topics.

JAM: First of all, Congratulations on your release of *Oceana*. I'm sure you are excited about it. Do you have any immediate plans in conjunction with its release?

Derek Sherinian – Thanks! Right now I am promoting it and there is talk of putting together a European tour with Simon Phillips on drums and Tony MacAlpine on guitar. We'll see if we can all make that happen. Of course everyone can be checking at my website www.dereksherinian.com for updates on that. In the meanwhile, it's trying to get as much press as possible.

JAM: The art work on the cd is fantastic. Who was the artist and did you have any role in selecting the concept?

Yes, thanks. The whole thing is my concept. There was this artist that kept sending me samples of his work on line and I felt that he was really good. Everything you see

is the concept I had for *Oceana* as I described it to him. We went back and forth, about ten different versions, and finally on the tenth try I said "that's it, that's perfect" and turned it into the record company. I think he did a fantastic job. It's a guy named Nello from Italy and I have never met him in person, only on-line.

JAM: Now on the nine tracks of *Oceana*, it seems as though you came up with some really enigmatic titles, to both these songs, and actually as well as on some of your other albums. Do you necessarily come up with a concept or a title and write to it, or do you write the piece and come up with the title upon completion?

I definitely write the piece and come up with the title after. Someone asked me in an interview what the hardest part of making records was and I answered "naming the songs and naming the record". You know it usually comes at the very end of the process and we're always struggling with "What do we name this thing; there's no words to it".

JAM: So on *Oceana*, you've got Simon Phillips on Drums, Steve Lukather and Joe Bonamassa on guitar, just to name a few of the players. How did you decide on who you wanted to assemble for this project?

Well it really started off with Simon. We laid the foundation and decided then on the direction we wanted to go. We wanted to be less heavy metal. We made the decision that it would be heavy on melodies and grooves and less metal and less progressive and really just very much in the tradition of the Jeff Beck instrumental records of the 70s; and that's what we did. As far as all of the songs that Simon and I wrote, we used Steve Lukather on guitar, and then all of the other guys that are playing on the record are songs that I co-wrote with them.

JAM: On the first track, "Five Elements", it starts out very hard rock, but your organ I think has a bit of a Billy Preston feel to it. Then midway through the track, you switch to a jazz piano style reminiscent of say Ramsey Lewis, how did that develop? It almost seems as though it possibly was two separate tracks originally that came together, or did it just flow like that?

No, we wanted to take it in that total left turn and make the solo something completely different, then bring it back in and I think it turned out great.

JAM: Several of the tracks on *Oceana* have quite a "soundtrack" feel to them. Has

anyone ever approached you in doing soundtrack work, much like say the way Trevor Rabin or Stewart Copeland have moved into? Is that something you've ever considered?

I've never been approached, but I would sure love to be! So if there's anyone in the film industry who may be a fan of mine PLEASE APPROACH ME! (laughs) I'd really love that opportunity and think I'd do a great job.

JAM: Do you consider your playing style to be almost that of a guitar player? I have to tell you I was at your Black Country Communion show here in Washington, DC earlier this summer and if I remember correctly, you had a bit of "Spanish Fly" (Van Halen) in your solo and...

Yeah! Good ear! I'm very influenced when it comes to taking a solo. I'm a big fan of the great guitar players. It's deep in my blood. Even though I'm playing keyboards, it comes off with the aggression of a guitar player. I think that's what separates me from the rest of the keyboardists that are out there right now; that I have that different approach.

JAM: And since you so often associate yourself and your recording with such high caliber guitarists, Zakk Wylde, Lukather, Bonamassa, and so many others, do you tend to write with a particular player in mind from the start, or do you write and think "Gee, I think so and so would be perfect for this"?

Yeah, it depends, I know if say Zakk is playing on three songs on a record and we have worked out the scheduling and all that I'll try to write with him in mind. Same thing when I knew Yngwie was gonna be on the record, I would write with him in mind for sure. But at the same time, keeping my sound and trying to create that back-drop for these different guys so they shine, I want them to shine in a different way than the way they'd shine on their own records.

JAM: With your Black Country Communion tour having wrapped up from this past summer, I see that you all have a live DVD coming out in October, correct?

Yes, it's called *Black Country Communion – Live Over Europe*. It's coming out before the end of the year chronicling our European tour, I believe recorded over three German shows. I haven't seen it yet, I heard they just finished the editing and it's supposedly great. Definitely check it out!

JAM: I have to tell you I was really impressed leaving that show since so often the concept of the "supergroup" doesn't always come off that well, but you all (BCC) had such the form and feel of a real band, like you really enjoy playing together.

After that show you saw, we had only done six shows in the U.S. and then did like two months in Europe, so the band was really starting to gel at that point.

JAM: I'd be remiss knowing your background and history with Dream Theater not to ask you what your thoughts are on the departure of Mike Portnoy.

You know I think it was best for both parties, kind of like a marriage when after awhile you get tired of being with your wife (laughs). They need to move on. I think that Dream Theater is thriving with their new drummer and Portnoy is able to do everything that he wants to do. I think it's better for both of them and over time any animosity that may be there will heal. I really wish the best for both parties.

JAM: Before we have to wrap up I'd like to ask you a few quick one word "either/or" comparisons. You willing to try that?

Sure!

JAM: OK, number one...Wakeman or Emerson?

I can go either way. Both are great in their own way, I can't really choose.

JAM: Stadium or Club?

Stadium.

JAM: Electric or acoustic?

Can't choose, I love both.

JAM: Studio or touring?

Same thing, I can't choose. I need both of them to survive.

JAM: If you had to be deaf or blind?

Deaf. I think so. I don't need to hear what I'm playing. I can feel it on the inside and don't want to be robbed of seeing everything. I'd still be able to write and compose

music without my ears.

JAM: Thanks Derek, I so appreciate your time today.

Hey thank you so much. My website is www.dereksherinian.com and you can follow me on twitter @dereksherinian. Thanks again!

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