

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away



Ok.... So this is a rehash of a review/rebuttal that I wrote for ProgArchives.Com (<http://www.progarchives.com/album-reviews.asp?id=8301>) a few years ago (2011 and with some updates in 2017) for the 1976 Albatross album.

Albatross was a prog rock group out of Rockford, Illinois that formed in the late 60's and disbanded somewhere around 1978. Most of the members reformed as Blitzen then eventually moving on to other musical ventures before I lost track of everyone except for Joe Guarino, bass player.

Albatross was the first full album that we had produced in the then new Audio-Trak Recording Studios. Two partners and I built the first professional level recording studio in Rockford Illinois in 1975. It was a thing of beauty!! (to us anyway!!)



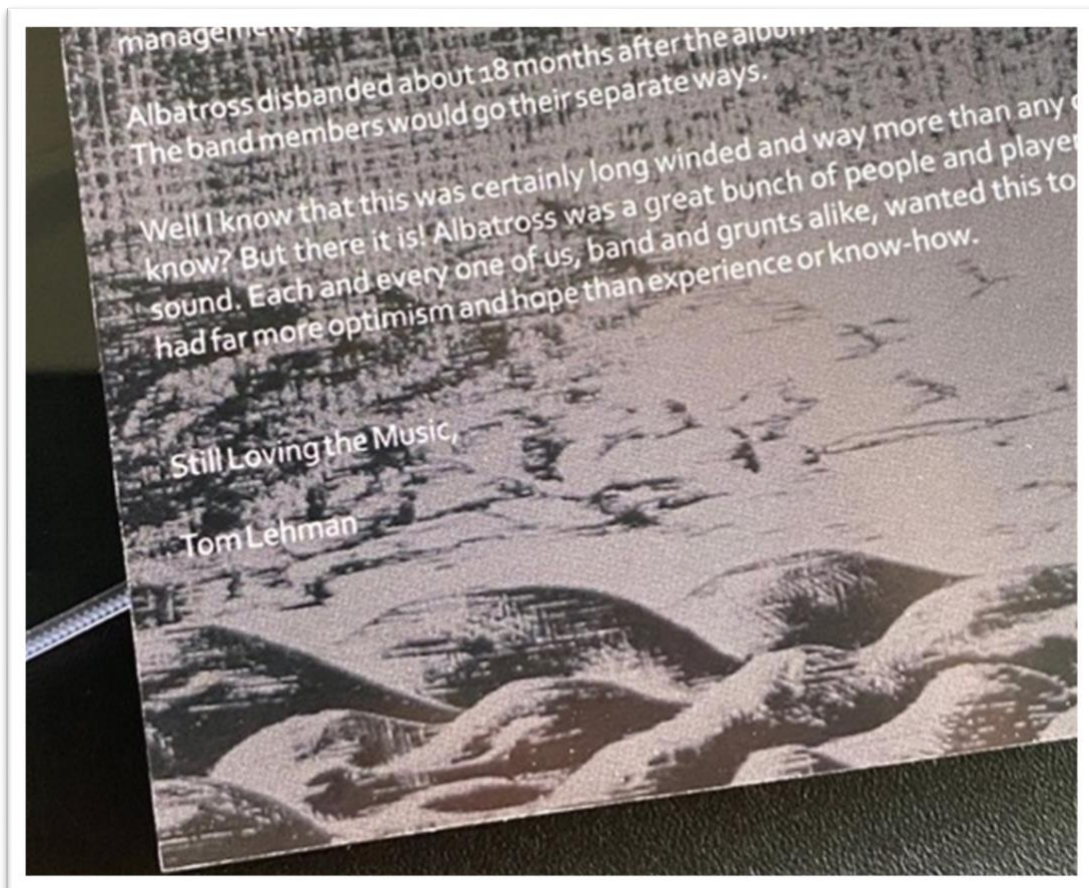
Joe Guarino at the MCI console AudioTrak V 2.0

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

I was one of the credited engineers (and the "Voice" of Mr. Natural) for this 1976 album. I wrote this review/rebuttal after I stumbled across several reviews written on ProgArchives.com in 2011! I was frankly flabbergasted that there were still people listening to, and writing about, the Albatross LP thirty, thirty-five, and now, forty plus years after the band dis-banded and faded into, what I thought, was obscurity! I have since found several other Prog sites (and others) where comments and reviews continue to be posted even today!

I have since found that the LP developed both fans, and anti-fans, all those years after the fact, both here in the U.S. and internationally! The LP's have sold for as much as \$850 bucks on eBay..... WTF!

Producers and writers have contacted me, and others associated with the band, for interviews, reviews, Master Tapes (long gone I'm afraid), and even permission to reissue the music on CD. At least two companies have reissued the LP on CD without the permission of the Band.... A Japanese group and more recently Great Barrier Records (from who knows where!). One might assume great Barrier Records would be Australian by the name, but the origins of the company are very hard to trace and may even be headquartered in Italy! I purchased the Great Barrier release on Amazon only last year! And, when I opened the CD and looked at the liner notes I was totally surprised, and blown away, to see *MY* Prog Archives review staring back at me!!



Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away



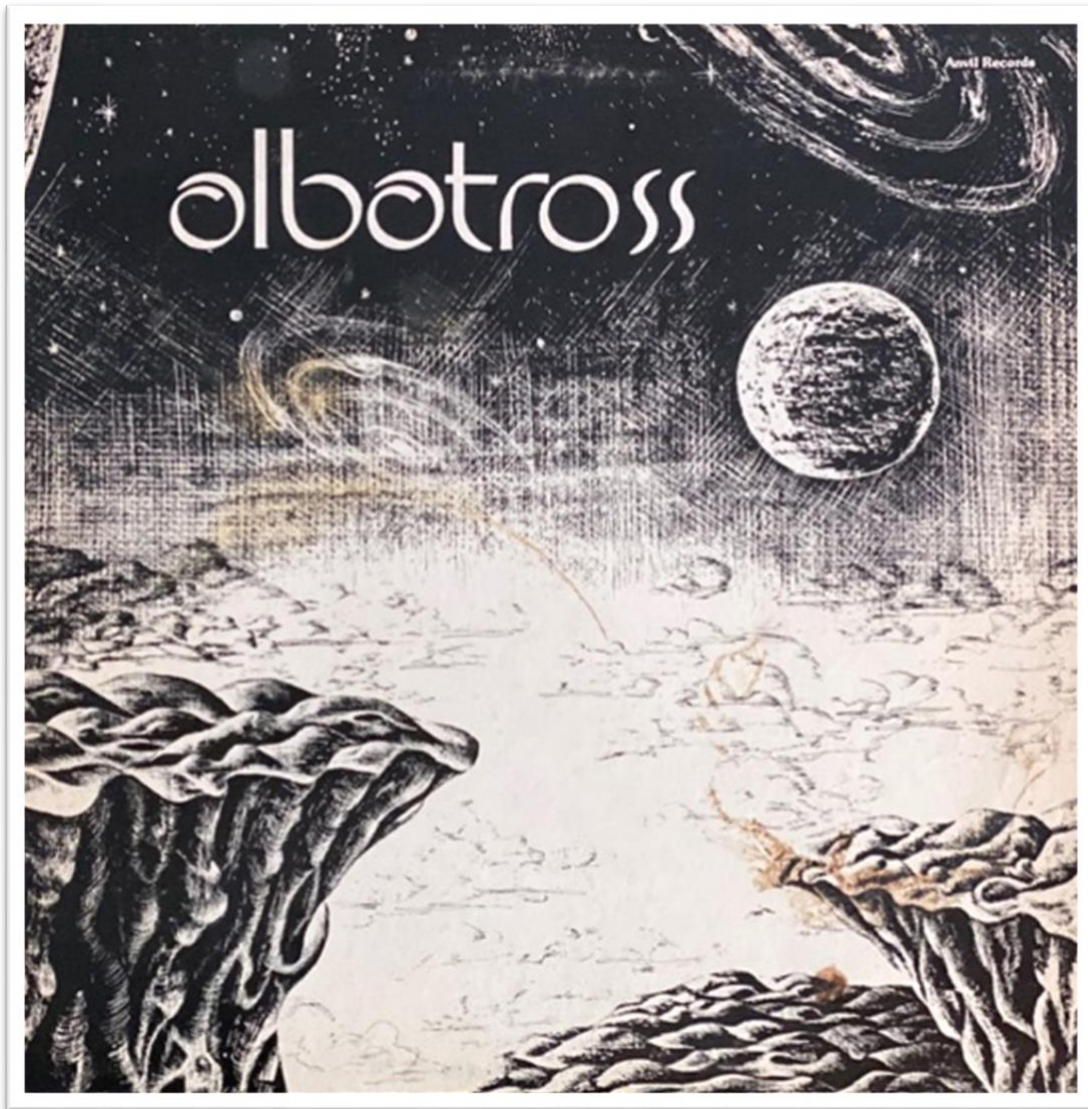
If you are curious.... someone has actually posted the various songs and even the album in its entirety on YouTube!

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaBZNBUOPdk>)

As I said somewhere in that review on ProgArchives.com, I am truly gratified, and amazed, that anyone is still talking about this LP, either good or bad, or the least bit interested in this album after all of these years!!!!

What follows is my ProgArchives.com review in its entirety with a few corrections as my memory allows.

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away



This is a rehash of a review I did in 2011 on ProgArchives.com <http://www.progarchives.com/album-reviews.asp?id=8301> with a few corrections and updates for you completion-ists out there.

This is a bit of personal insight to the Albatross LP. I am Tom Lehman, one of the credited engineers (and the voice of Mr. Natural :-)) on the album. I also ran the boards for Albatross' live gigs from 1974 to 1977.

This album is certainly a rarity as there were only approximately 4000 albums pressed. Given that the bulk of the albums were never distributed, or were trashed, makes it even more of a rarity! Add that to the fact that we never really expected it to find its way out of the Rockford area it is truly astounding that the LP has shown up in even international locations! I am truly amazed and gratified that there is still talk (good or bad!) of the album after all these years.

I have read the reviews here and on some of the other Prog websites and do not intend to challenge any of the reviewers or defend any part of the album. I would only like to

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

offer a possibly different perspective on the music and the challenge of making an album of this type at that point in time.

Over the years I have lost contact with all of the band members except Joe Guarino (Bass)... Joe and I remain the best of friends.

Ah.... Before it fades into the mysts (sic) of memory here is what and how I remember it....



Albatross - The Band

Mark Dahlgren - Keys-Classically trained musician.

Mark was a classically, college trained, musician (Master of Music Degree) and a monster talent. He composed all of the band's tunes. That, of course, is not to say that all of the other band members didn't contribute, they did! Mark's biggest fault (if it can be considered a fault) was a lack of consistency. When I first joined the band as the sound guy I was amazed at the technical prowess of Mark's playing. But what I also discovered was that he had the nasty habit, at least to me, of rearranging on the fly! No two performances were the same! The rest of the band did an admirable job of adapting but things tended to occasionally go wrong. As soon as we had a PA that allowed talk-

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

back through the monitors from the boards I would admonish Dahlgren with the words: "Consistency, Dahlgren, Consistency!" To Mark's credit he saw the value of a consistent group effort to the performance and reigned himself in (somewhat anyway :-).

Equipment included: **two** Mellotrons, **two** Mini-Moog Synthesizers, Arp Odyssey Synthesizer (note: I could have sworn he used two of these as well!), Hammond B-3 (note: I was talking to Joe recently and he remembers that he cut the organ down and put it into a road case for portability), **two** modified Leslies, Fender Rhodes Piano that was later replaced with a Yamaha CP-70 Portable Grand Piano. Two Tapco Mixers dedicated to the keyboards and to sub-mix to his stage amp, monitors and the main mix position (through parallel feeds). Mark later even picked up a guitar! I have no idea what the equipment was other than I believe the guitar was a Fender Stratocaster.

Joe Guarino - Self-taught Bassist and Guitarist

I saw Joe's bass playing described as "plodding" in another review. I always thought of it as "Solid". Joe was a technically proficient and a **very solid** player. His bass lines drove the band and provided the stabilizing foundation the band needed. And, although not utilized as a lead vocalist he had a pleasant enough voice and harmonized well when called upon to do so. As a bassist myself I was in awe of Joe's technical precision.

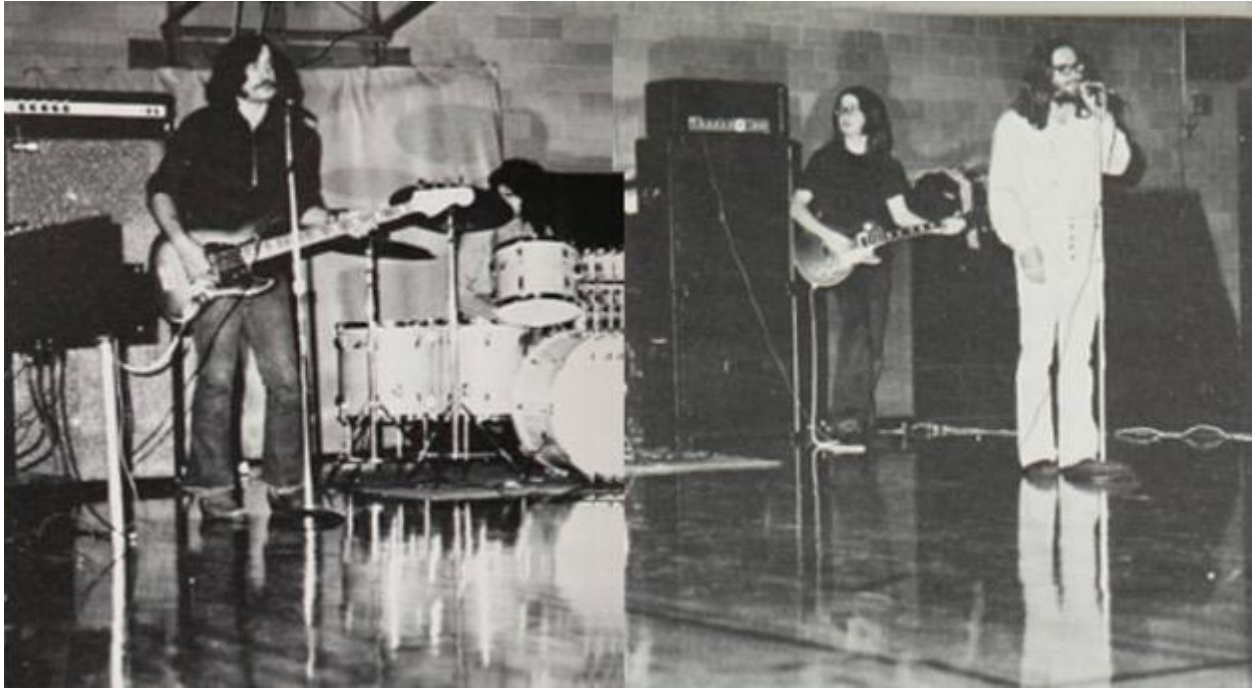
Joe is a very detail driven sort of person with a great ear for what is right. This attribute would serve him well in the studio and later in his sound company business ventures. Without doubt Joe was the most sensible and practical member of Albatross.

Equipment: Fender Precision Bass, Ampeg SVT head, 2 - Ampeg 8x10 cabinets (mic'ed), and a direct box to the PA. Earlier on he had used Sun amps and multiple Sun cabinets.

Mike Novak - Vocals-professional vocal coaching

Mike's singing was usually spot-on as far as pitch (after some voice lessons). He also wrote the lyrics for the tunes. The timbre of his voice was however... unusual. He always sang in an open voice and I can't remember him ever singing in a falsetto or anything but his own natural voice. Equipment: Shure Mics... **for live sound equipment see below**. Mike had a great out-going personality and was great fun to be around.

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away



Joe and Mike from an earlier version of Albatross (Not sure who the guitarist is)

Dana Williams - Percussion - High School Band - Self-Taught

MORNING STAR, ROCKFORD Tuesday, Dec. 30, 1975 A3



500 skate as rock combo plays

A rock concert drummer, above, starts the music as skaters prepare to hit the ice Monday night at the Riverview Ice House, 324 N. Madison St. The Rockford Park District sponsored the event which drew an estimated 500 people who skated to the sounds of the live concert on ice. A local band, "Albatross," provided the entertainment.

Dana manning the Drums 1975

Dana was a percussion gadget freak! If something came along that he thought he could insert tonally into the mix.... he bought it! As I recall he had a full-time job just to support his percussion Jones. He and Joe went to Chicago and bought, literally, a van FULL of drum set, traps and cases. After a day of negotiating a decent price they stopped at restaurant in Chicago to celebrate. They parked in the restaurant parking lot (it was clearly marked) and went inside. After lunch they came out to discover the van was GONE! Panicking they went back into the restaurant and called the police. The police

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

determined the van was towed. When Joe and Dana contacted the towing company, they claimed Joe was parked illegally in the parking lot. Even though Joe had his receipt from the restaurant they would not release the truck without paying a \$250 "fine".

I remember Dana as a quiet, humble sort of guy, always a pleasure to work with and talk to.

Equipment: Dana was a percussion whiz with a passion for unusual drum sounds. I THINK his main kit was made by Pearl, but I can't be sure. What I do know is that his kit consisted of (at a minimum) double-Bass Drums, double toms up top, double Roto-Toms up top, two Timbales, three floor toms, snare, tubular bells, a bell tree, at least three cowbells, and triangle tree, blocks, and an extended range of cymbals.

Paul Roe - Guitar Professionally Trained

I didn't have much interaction with Paul but remember him as a quiet, serious sort. He was a guitarist in search of his sound. Age-wise he was the youngest of the bunch and I think he felt a little behind the rest. Technically he was a good, solid player but still somewhat immature. He just got better and better!

Equipment: As I recall and seeing as that was a long time ago :-). Paul played a Gibson Les Paul and used Orange Amps and Cabinets (Mic'ed). I know he occasionally used a couple of pedals but I am not sure what.

Live Sound

Albatross had a very good live sound. As the complexity of the music increased, the need for a more sophisticated system also increased. When I started with Albatross in 1974 they were equipped with a loud but totally inadequate system that consisted of eight Altec Voice of the Theater Speakers, some sort of six channel powered mixer and no monitoring. We eventually went to an Altec 1220A ten channel mixer (pretty horrible but rugged!) and BGW amps in order to increase the flexibility and clarity of the system. It worked but was far from ideal.

When it started to get serious the band purchased an all JBL speaker system that consisted of (as I remember it):

- 4 - 18" subs
- 6 - dual 12" cabinets
- 4 - Mid-range horns
- 4 - horn tweeters
- 6 - JBL wedge monitors
- 2 - Electronic crossovers (4 way)

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

Amplification - BGW (Monsters!) - At least 10 BGW amps of various sizes to power all of the cabinets and monitors.

Mics - We stuck with all Shure mics for vocals. And, on the Bass/Guitar and Leslie cabinets and drums a variety of mics that included Shure, Electrovoice and Sennheiser.

The console was still the Altec 1220A but with four Tapco mixers added for the additional inputs and for monitors and sub mixes. The Tapco's were actually of a MUCH higher quality than the Altec.... Better sound, lower distortion and higher headroom. That actually worked very well and provided for a wonderful tight and full range sound, plus it was just as loud as we wanted it to be... i.e. terrific dynamic range.

The Back Story...

Ah, the 70's.... Live music was still king with Disco yet to be seen (but hiding in the wings creeping into the mid-70's from the sides, ready to rear its ugly head). Rock and roll was a broad and diverse genre of the musical universe. Relatively new, Prog rock was dominated by, as is mentioned in most of the reviews, by Yes, King Crimson, Pink Floyd and their contemporaries.

Oddly enough when associated with Albatross I never considered them to be a "Yes Clone". I considered the music fresh and new. Mark Dahlgren, the keyboardist, was the primary composer for the group with Mike Novak the principle lyricist with all members contributing heavily both musically and lyrically.

Were there traces and influences of Yes in the music?... CERTAINLY! We were all great fans of Yes, King Crimson, Gentle Giant, the Dixie Dregs, Genesis, et al. Some of the music recorded on the album was written and being performed by Albatross as early as 1971. But, much as musicians throughout history have named certain composers and musicians as their "influences", we did the same with the big names of the genre and the time. As I listen today, I can certainly identify with the critics who labeled Albatross as "*Yes Clones*". But, at the time we thought new ground was being broken. Keep in mind that the Albatross album preceded the Starcastle release by a full year. (Note: Joe and I saw Starcastle live in 1976 at Rockvalley College... and yes they were a carbon copy of YES. On the other hand,... they did sound good live and if you closed your eyes you could swear YES was on the stage during certain tunes!

The ALBATROSS album was produced in an effort to be noticed and to promote the band. It was done as an independent effort (something not easily done at the time) in a studio that was owned by three partners, Joe Guarino, Jim Guarino, and me. We built the studio (Audio Trak Recording) in 1975 in an effort to bring professional recording to Rockford, Illinois. Rockford was the second largest city in Illinois at the time.... Unfortunately, Chicago was sitting only 70 miles away. Living in the shadow of Chicago it was difficult for bands and studios to compete within that market. So with a great deal of effort, not much in the way of market research, and a tremendous amount of hope

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

(and being very naïve) we invested in the studio.

The studio was a piece of art (to us) and we had some of the best equipment of the time:



- Auditrronics Son of Thirty-Six Grand Console (18 inputs and outputs!!!) I know that doesn't sound like much by today's high channel count, but we were impressed :-)
- MCI (later bought by Sony) 16 track 2" analog recorder (we bought it from Milam Audio in Pekin, Ill. It was the very same recorder, we were told, that Styx had laid the basic tracks for "Lady"!)
- MCI, Scully and Revox two tracks (1/4" half track)
- DBX and Dolby A noise reduction - DBX on the 16 track and Dolby A on the MCI two track
- EV Sentry III monitors
- Phase Linear Amps
- UREI compressors
- Allison Research Gates, Compressors and Expanders
- Nakamichi cassette
- Neuman U87 and U47 Mics, Sony C500 Mics, EV Mics (RE20's and RE15's),

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

Shure Mics, Byer Ribbons, AKG and Sennheiser's mics!

- Atlas stands
- AKG Pro Spring Reverb (the thing stood about five feet tall and two feet on each side!)
- Pearl studio drum kit (I think it was Pearl)
- Mason and Hamlin grand piano Note: We modified the piano by filing the hammer pads and soaking them in lacquer to make the sound "brighter" and more defined.
- We even had one of the first digital delay lines. I don't remember the maker of the unit but had an orange face, patch cords to set the delays, a very artificial sound and was VERY EASY to overload (no headroom). It was pretty much useless by today's standards but was fun to play with back in the day....
- JBL 4311 monitors in the studio for talk-back and playback.

Lots of Koss and AKG headphones with a smattering of Pioneer and Sony's

We had everything except customers!

Side Note: The studio was later upgraded to 24 tracks (MCI), a 32 input MCI 532 console and Eventide digital reverb and delay, UREI Monitors (using Altec 501 speakers), BGW amplification, Yamaha mini monitors, and a lot of new outboard gear not to mention a Steinway Grand. Joe and Jim also switched locations three times after I left with each location growing progressively bigger and better! The bigger locations even allowed for natural reverb chambers in some cases.

Audio Tank
RECORDING STUDIO
INVITES YOU TO THEIR
OPEN HOUSE

Sat.-Sun. October 9-10
9:00 am – 4:00 pm

Sat.-Sun. October 16-17
9:00 am – 4:00 pm

AUDIO TANK RECORDING STUDIO will have an Open House for the general public. We will have an actual mixdown session from 2" to 1" tape. See how 16 tracks are mixed. You will have an opportunity to participate in the mix. Studio equipment will also be discussed.

Everyday this month these specials

AMPEX RECORDING TAPE 50% off
Cassettes, 8 tracks, Reels
Buy 10 get 10 free
20% - MS. Discount on lower quantities

TAPCO
Tapco's new 14 channel mixer and will be demonstrated along with other Tapco products.
LOWEST PRICES!

BOW Save hundreds of dollars on BOW's 202 & 250 Package
30-100 watts 16/8/channel
Recording's only BOW Dealer

SHURE -- SM 58 at \$79.95
SHURE'S most popular mike
OTHER SHURE PRO MICS AT SUPER PRICES

ALTEC 40% off
on most products

OTARI Ready for a great deck
check this one out.

ALSO Cassettes and used products, Speakers including studio monitors, research equipment, mixing consoles up to 24 channels, custom rack cases and hardware, also plenty of product literature available.

Audio Tank
1-800-468-2912
400 BLACK STREET SUITE 101, BIRMINGHAM, AL 35202

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

When we brought Albatross into the studio, we had only gone through three smaller projects!

The Album - Track-By-Track - Keep in mind this was done in 1975 and is to the best of my recollection! Any one of the band members may have a completely different take on things.

Side 1:

1. Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Mark Dahlgren, Mike Novak)

Yes, this was the big one! Because of the length and complexity, we had spent the most time putting this together. It was it turned out to be the most interesting and dynamic piece on the album. It was called the Four Horsemen because there were four distinct movements in the tune. Because of the many layered keyboards and the guitar/keyboard synchronization it took many takes and overdubs. The end featured a huge Chinese gong. The gong sound was from one of Mark's Mellotrons! Live this song was a little less cluttered but actually sounded great!

2. Mr. Natural (Mark Dahlgren, Mike Novak)

OK.... Somebody called this a "throw-away".... To me Mr. Natural was a fun song. It always went over well in concert because it was an up-tempo tune that the crowds liked. A lot of that had to do with Mark Dahlgren's crazy antics with an old man mask and a long extension cable on his ARP pedal. He would don the mask and run into the audience, frightening the girls (truly!) and acting outrageous. When Mr. Natural was recorded some of the live feel and performance antics, of course, were lost. The recording was fairly straight forward with few overdubs.

I was the voice of Mr. Natural. As I remember Mike Novak was in the studio trying voice after voice and not quite getting where we wanted to go. I finally told Joe, "Let me try it!" I went in the vocal booth and laid down about four takes and then went back to the console where Joe and I took the different takes and bumped them over to one of the two track recorders then started layering them on the multi-track at different speeds adding reverb and delay and loops until we got the craziness we were looking for. We played a cassette dub of it before any live performance of Mr. Natural thereafter.

Side 2:

1. The Devil's Strumpet (Mark Dahlgren, Mike Novak)

Well, I hated this tune.... To me it was just a hot mess! After a long, involved intro using a real pipe organ intro recorded at a local church it just jumped into these strange time signatures and tempos. No matter how many times we tried to record this it always seemed too fast and jerky (to me) with Mike always seeming to race and then lagging on the lyrics. Paul had the same issues with the guitar parts. The band had other tunes that, to me would have worked better here. It took almost as long to record this song as the Four Horsemen.

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

It was the same in concert and was never well received. As with Mr. Natural we played the pipe organ intro from tape with Dahlgren coming in toward the end with Mellotron Pipe Organ live. I finally got the guys to cut the pipe organ intro down quite a bit and to slow the tempo and it sounded better and played better.

2. Cannot Be Found (Mark Dahlgren, Mike Novak)

Another choice of material I did not understand. Certainly, it showcased Mark's piano skills but also showed Mike's less-than-delicate ballad voice and dissed the rest of the band (other than Joe who had a bass part). It was irritating to me but there it stayed! It was easier to record as we recorded Mark's piano then later came back to Mike at a different time. We used our 7' Mason and Hamlin grand studio piano. I keep hearing occasional plays of this on internet stations like Delicious Agony and YouTube. I was talking to Joe just the other day and he did not even remember this tune as being on the album even though he was the only other instrument playing on the tune!

3. Humpback Whales (Mark Dahlgren, Mike Novak)

I really liked this song played live. I was less happy with the studio version. In concert the opening with the synths was essentially the same but Dana would take the lead in with a snare intro. The studio version with the tubular bells and triangle intro was difficult to record (the triangle kept overloading the freaking preamp in the console and we just didn't catch it!) and it seemed rather dis-jointed.

At the end the "SAILING!" ending was at my insistence. They had made the decision to take out that live element and use some synth montage thing at the end. When I heard that I just freaked. The continuity of the song was ruined. I raised such a fuss they went back to the in-concert ending but kept the crappy beginning.

While the album was being recorded the band hired a local artist for the jacket art. We formed an independent label, Anvil Records, and registered everything with ASCAP/BMI. The tapes were delivered to a mastering facility and then on to the pressing plant.

We were in business!!! The records were carried to every major record store in the Rockford area and passed out to every local record station. As I recall three stores agreed to sell the record and one radio station actually played the album in its entirety.

We always carried a few LP's with us and offered them at gigs. Unfortunately, we didn't sell too many.

Albatross went through some changes shortly after the album. They tried costumes (ala Jethro Tull)... They tried free concerts and the live sound equipment was updated to an incredible array (at the time) of JBL speakers, Altec and Tapco mixers and BGW amps. The lighting system was expanded to professional level; anything to draw some positive attention to themselves.

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

Meanwhile... The album was not selling. Disco was becoming more popular and live *progressive* music less popular. And, they were totally overshadowed in the Rockford market by Cheap Trick. (Sidebar - Bun E. Carlos happened to be Mark Dahlgren's cousin and actually played in an earlier version of the band) Even before the release of their first album Cheap Trick dominated the area club scene through a combination of solid management, an incredible live sound and an absolutely incredible stage presence.



The band was getting absolutely clobbered and pushed aside.

In an effort to become commercially viable the band went into hiding for eight weeks to re-tool. Even the live sound guy (me) was not allowed in the practice sessions. Coming out of isolation for a gig in Rockford I was informed that they had an entirely new set. They still refused to even give me a song list telling me only that they would start with an original that had been in the line-up since the beginning of the group, a song called "Saturday". "Saturday" itself was an original rocker that usually worked well with all types of audiences.

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

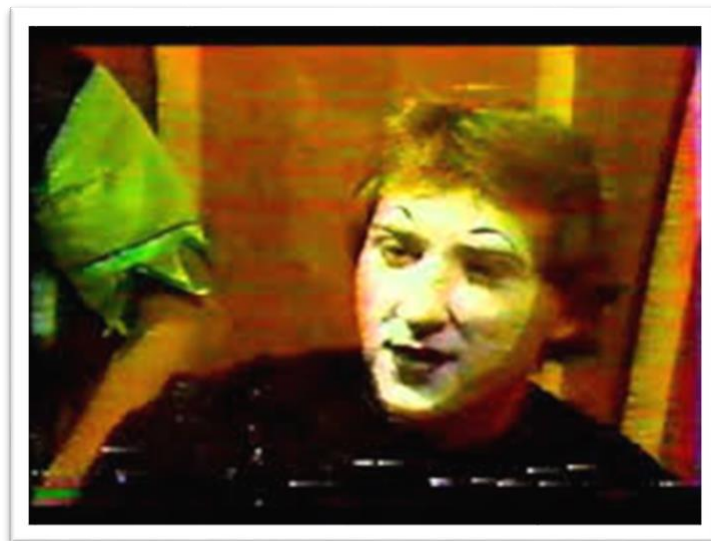
To my astonishment the band appeared on stage sans costumes (something that had been poorly implemented anyway....) and proceeded to play. After "Saturday" I was given the play list. I was flabbergasted! There were songs from a variety of artists that included Bob Seger, Queen, the Beatles, other rock acts of the time. Even Gino Vannelli!!! (Note: I have to blame myself for the last.... I had introduced the band to Gino! At least the tunes they played were "Mama Coco" and "Son of a New York Gun"!)

I could not believe my eyes or ears! Mark Dahlgren had even picked up and played a GUITAR! It seemed that the world had turned on end! That dogs and cats would soon be mating and that the lions would lie with the lambs! The only other original song they played that night was "Mr. Natural". To best of my knowledge they never played "The Four Horsemen" again! The only other Prog tune they would still hang on to was "21st Century Schizoid Man" by King Crimson.

I have to admit this sort of format change did bring more gigs and a little more visibility to the band but would also end up being the death knell of the band as well. This format would continue to be the norm until Albatross disbanded about 18 months after the album was released.

Most of the band members would go on to form a band called Blitzen and then after a year or so go their separate ways.

Mark (Keys) Would go on to other musical ventures like Puppet. You can actually find a video clip from a Rockford news station posted on YouTube about Puppet :-)



The only other references I could find of Mark were as a sort of community activist still in the Rockford area.

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away

Joe (Bass) would go on with the studio and then on to establish a *very successful* live sound touring and sales company. Today, he still resides in the Rockford area and still owns Audio-Trak, runs live sound, and specializes in sales, installation and service of REALLY BIG AV systems. He has expanded into high end home theater design, sales and installation. There are lots of references to Audio-Trak on the web but Joe never invested in a web-site of his own. **(NOTE: Joe has recently retired and moved to the Nashville area :-)**

Dana (Percussion) - Would go on to manage a cafeteria. Sorry Dana... I lost track after that! I think he may have settled in the Indianapolis area.

Mike (Vocals) - Would go on to other bands, suffer an aneurism, recover and work with a band called the Blues Hawks. Sorry Mike! I lost track after that! There is a picture of Mike on the Blues Hawks website.

Paul (Guitar) - Sorry Paul! I lost track after the band broke up. I was able to track down at least one pic of Paul performing as a guest with the Blues Hawks. Check the Blues Hawks website under "guests" for pictures of Paul.

Norman and Larry (Roadies and Lighting) – *No idea what happened to those guys! I did hear Norman had a successful alarm installation company....*

Me (live sound) - I left the band about three months before the reformation into Blitzen for personal reasons. I also had to sell my part of the studio to Joe and Jim because of an ugly divorce. I did stay associated with the studio until 1980 when I moved to Dallas, Texas and returned to my interrupted career in the electronics industry. Over the years I stayed in that industry as a technician or manager of technicians, as a videographer and video editor and IT support and eventually ended up at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center as co-director of a disaster medicine/response training program. (www.ndls.us). **Update: In 2016 I retired from UT but continue to manage the disaster medicine gig and well as manage the websites for two UT programs.**

Well... I know that this was certainly long winded and way more than any of you probably wanted to know! But there it is! Albatross was a great bunch of people and players and had a very good live sound. Each and every one of us, band and grunts alike, wanted it to work. Unfortunately, we all had far more optimism and hope than experience or Know-How.

Albatross 1976 – The View From Forty+ Years Away



If anyone is interested, I think Joe still has a few unopened LP's left :-)... ***(UPDATE! All the albums are gone. I still have my personal beat up copy and Joe still has one of the original master proofs left. It's still all out there so if you want a copy you'll have to find it "In The Wild" :-)***

Still Loving the Music,

Tom Lehman