The Journal of the Classic Rock Society

wondrous stories

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CRS 10th anniversary gig date named and that means a Return to the Centre of Rotherham for Rick; this time with those intrepid explorers John Wetton and Dave Cousins



Be there on the 29th September - details inside



More Storms Comin' says Mark Selby

Out of Focus with Akkerman

Martin Hudson

In Conversation with former Focus guitarist

Jan Akkerman

It is certainly not the norm to start any interview in Wondrous Stories with an advert but on this occasion I'll make an exception. Most will remember Dutch master Jan Akkerman for his time with Focus and the hit records that included 'Sylvia' but since those days he has forged a solo career, releasing many albums along the way. The advertisement is simple and straightforward; do not miss his visit in November when he plays for the Classic Rock Society at the Herringthorpe Leisure Centre in Rotherham, you would be doing yourself a disservice and if you aren't sure after reading this please get hold of one of his solo albums, 'Pleasure Point' for example, and listen to tracks such as 'Cool In The Shadow' or 'Halfway'. In contrast his reggae version of 'All Along The Watchtower' is originality itself. If that doesn't please the ear not much will.

Back in the 70's I would have moved heaven and earth to get Akkerman to perform such a show but he was busy becoming an international rock star with Focus and organisations like the CRS just didn't exist; there was no need for such a set up.

However, here we are in 2001 and one of the world's greatest guitar players will be coming to town, but what do we really know about him. Well 70's rock fans first heard of him after he moved over from Dutch progressive rock band Brainbox to Focus and they soon became one of the better-known rock bands of the early that time.

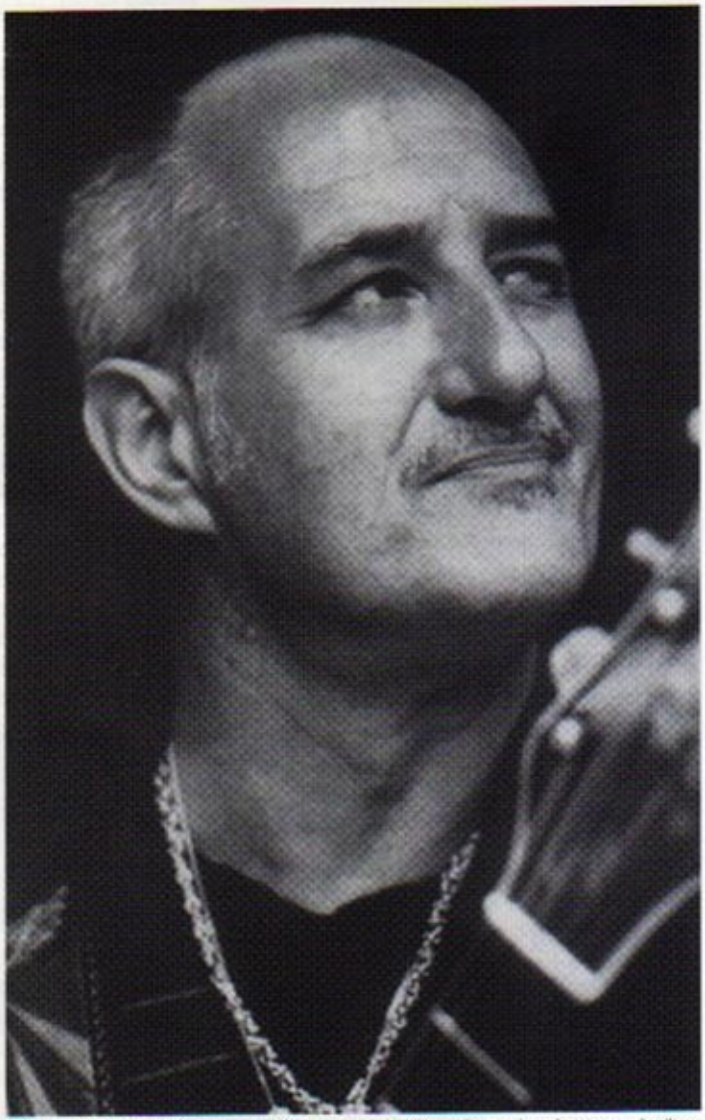
Focus were formed by Thijs Van Leer (keyboards/flute/vocals), Martin Dresden (bass), Hans Cleuver (drums) and Robin Lent, Cyril Havermans and others before, in 1969 I believe, Jan Akkerman joined the band. They soon recorded the single 'House of the Kings', a track later used in the UK as the title track for a couple of TV shows and then the debut album 'In and Out of Focus' and 'Moving Waves' in the same year, 1971. The double album 'Focus III' followed in 1972 and the live 'At The Rainbow' in 1973 before one of my favourite albums of all time 'Hamburger Concerto' in 1974. 'Mother Focus' (1975), 'Ship of Memories' (1977) and the curious 'Focus Con Proby' (1977) with PJ Proby saw the band through to its conclusion, although Van Leer has made efforts to keep the bands name afloat minus Akkerman or the other classic players, they being Pierre van der Linden (drums) and Bert Ruiter (bass).

As you will see, getting Jan to elaborate on his Focus days is a task in itself and his love of his former Focus colleague Van Leer is icy to say the least. Back to today though and Jan has played a handful of dates in the UK recently and I first asked him if when he visits the CRS would it be a longer tour?

No, in fact it's going to be just a week in November and then in January instead of just one and a half weeks in May. I like to play in the UK for a week and then whatever. I like to play in the UK more than other places.

But back to Brainbox and I had read somewhere that Akkerman's pre Focus band were somewhat progressive but surely that wasn't the direction Akkerman was coming from in the late 60's?

Actually I only really listened to skiffle (laughing), to be exact, like Lonnie Donegan, things like that and the first Springfield things with Dusty and her brothers. I tried to break away from that because before Brainbox I was in another band called The Hunters. We just did covers of The Beatles but I wanted to break away from that, I just wanted to do something more versatile, more hefty, I just wanted to join the time generation and I thought I was able to add something more like Be Bop influences in my playing. I was saying this thirty years ago in the Seventies when I was trying to figure out where my playing was coming from.



I guess it's a good time really Jan to go back even further. Were your parents musical?

Well it turned out that my father played guitar, for some reason but I found this out ten years after his death. My mother played something like the mouth harp (laughing).

So you found the guitar yourself really?

Yeah, to be precise yes I did because I come from an area of Amsterdam where everybody was playing the accordion, the national 'divider of air' as they called it in those days, but first off I was sold on guitar because I was listening already, in those days, to John Lee Hooker and Little Walter and I was eleven or twelve. I forgot all about this though

until a friend of mine who is a famous reporter for the Daily Telegraph said to me, 'Jan do you remember going camping and you were always going around carrying this portable thing when you were twelve playing Little Walter, how did you know it was mouth harp then already'. I told him that you don't really think about those things as a kid and I was flabbergasted myself (laughing), it sounds crazy but it's true.

In the UK we have things called Youth Clubs, were there such things in Holland to keep teenagers occupied?

Sort of, like in the north there's always rowdy clans, like I've seen some furniture pass by my ear, but it was really fantastic fun, of course. I had a great, great time playing there where they were basically all rock 'n' roll kids or gigs, because the people they like rock 'n' roll. All of it from country through the Top 40's, you know, Chuck Berry and all that stuff. Even then I was always on stage watching somebody else which was crazy because when I was twelve, fourteen, I had dancing classes and I could dance all styles like the foxtrot, (laughing), sure! I had to go through the scale of human emotions (laughing).

Well Jan you always learn one thing out of an interview and now I know Jan Akkerman can do the foxtrot (laughing).

(Laughing) Yeah that amazed me too. I felt like a stupid arse but you remember The Blues Brothers, I dressed like them. That was the stuff we kind of survived on or lived on. That's how we dressed, that's how we looked ..... but it's legal!

Do you still look back on your teenager years then with much fondness, it's certainly sounds like it?

They were always good years, I've always been happy until Focus when we became world famous.

At that time the London club scene was really the place to be, where bands such as Yes and many others were born. There was the Marquee and places like that, was there a similar scene in Amsterdam?

Jan coughs as he announces that he has a summer cold having returned to the dampness of Holland from scorching Italy then it was back to Sixties Amsterdam.

I played the Marquee with Brainbox, but we had what is now the Paradiso and the Milky Way. All these were way out places, a lot of dope (laughing) which I didn't touch too much but once I had a drag on one of those modern cigarettes that makes you so drunk. I almost died laughing, there was this chick dancing with her boobs hanging out, I just cracked up. Me coming from this Christian, religious background, not that my parents were so religious but at the same time I had this background because it was the only school in the neighbourhood and every morning you had one hour of bible study. Nothing wrong with that I guess.

When you look back though Jan to guitar greats like Hendrix, he had to take drugs to get through and play the guitar, so it is said.

Yeah but I never took them too seriously, to me it was all a matter of getting the lute and run, that's actually what I did and some got away with it and some didn't. Jimmy did, which makes him even more of a martyr in my eyes, he was a huge talent that guy but your environment determines everything and last year one of Jimmy's closest friends died who was always with Jimmy. He took care of him in the block where they lived somewhere in Brooklyn or the Bronx. They were so bloody poor and in the winter they didn't have heating. In the winter he'd give Jimmy half of his hamburger just to get the kid by. So it's no wonder that Jimmy took so much shit just to get to what he wanted to do, to get famous or whatever he had in mind and he did it but in the true sense of the word. I think he's a martyr of that stupid business which we're all connected with.

Your meeting up with Thijs Van Leer and the eventual formation of Focus changed your life didn't it?

Oh him (laughs), you know what Leer means in Dutch don't you? It means leather! Before I was in Focus I was kind of manoeuvred out of Brainbox because it was just an up and coming band and there's always two emotions which are always under-estimated. There's envy and there's jealousy and there were other guitar players who wanted to be in that band and so they sort of manoeuvred me out and that was my favourite little band. It was my ZZ Top of those days; guitar, bass, drums, singer.

Minus the very long beard though Jan!

(Laughing) Well it was on its way, a virtual beard. Anyway after nine months, after I did an album with them, I got kicked out because I did a jam with Van Leer. He was on the doorstep everyday saying 'I have to play with you' but Brainbox found out about the jam and I got kicked out, something they regret to this day because I became famous with Mr. Focus and to this day I ask myself why it had to be with a severe nutcase like that, but of course it had to be, so I manoeuvred Pierre Van Der Linden out of Brainbox who I had played with since I was eleven. This has been a love hate relationship for the past twenty five years and the last time was enough for me. In 1973 Pierre said he wanted to leave Focus and play jazz and sometimes I have done the occasional gig with him but the other one's like Van Leer is another story.

Focus were a band that combined rock, classical, blues and traditional influences, were those influences a band thing or just yourself and Van Leer?

Well I think my influences were evident. Van Leer would create nice little melodies and I took great pride in the semi-classical stuff through to making it rock, that's saying it politely. It was my thing to make a cabaret type of thing a rock band and it came out pretty well.

What made Focus go to work with producer Mike Vernon?

Someone from Radio RTL was our manager at that time and they shoved him in our direction. In retrospect I think Mike did a great job but then you get to the 'well you're a rock band and you're supposed to play this'. Vernon was appointed by the Executive Producer of Focus and Vernon had other connections within the States which helped to get our stuff out over there and I think that's how it worked. I never understood the word producer, but that's always been my problem but Mike was pretty



good. He was full of shit too!

'House of the King' was the first single I think and I can remember buying 'Moving Waves', how do you look back on those pieces now?

Well it was the best we could do for the band at that time but much of the rest was bollocks (laughing). We Dutch are pretty open and would say that, we're very sober about things, realistic, which is pretty boring but when it comes down to the nitty-gritty they were the hey-deys. I took great pride with 'Moving Waves' and played bass on the whole album and never got credits for that, save for one or two songs like 'Hocus Pocus'.

Do you remember appearing on the Old Grey Whistle Test, a rock show that was a British institution.

Yes but I didn't know that at the time. I like Bob Harris he was a nice bloke but the place where it was recorded was a bit of a dump of a studio which I liked (laughing). These are the sort of places we were playing and it suited the occasion well but I didn't get what was going on because for me being in another country like England it was the Mecca. The Beatles came from there, the Rolling Stones, not that I gave a shit at that time, not at all. Still the tradition and the whole thing with pop music was regarded and approached as a totally different ball game to me. I was there totally for the music and I just wanted to show that there was a different way of playing blues or rock or whatever. I couldn't actually play straight blues, still can't, oh well fifty years later maybe a little bit but I always add my own twist to it. I don't feel happy with it. Miles Davis never played a straight note in his life as far as I know and a lot of it is improvisation which I like.

Before we move off the subject of Focus I wanted to ask you your thoughts about that working relationship with P J Proby, it was such a curious combination that was surely never, ever going to work, it was totally weird.

It was curious to me too (laughing). Van Leer is weird. Proby was a notorious boozer and if they were in an airport they told me they just couldn't leave him for five seconds because he would jump on any plane going in any direction. He was totally out of his nutshell but whatever made them happy. Luckily I've no connection now and don't want to feel connected but I thought Proby was a good singer but there are more of those.

If you were to some up the Seventies and your time with Focus as a whole could you do it in one sentence?

You've just mentioned it, one big hole (laughing), yeah that's it!

(Laughing) Onwards from Focus then Jan and you moved on to a solo career which appeared to move more towards jazz/rock. Was there anything else you were looking for in particular?

Well I just wanted to keep on playing the stuff I had inside me I guess, why run away from it. Things change and life changes and for me that was a blessing and a curse at the same time, at least in Focus there was some consistency, that means like for five years every night the same yodel at the same place at the same time. I don't like to work on that kind of assembly line but this is how you get big in pop music by repeating yourself for fifty years and we were so progressive. These paradoxes intrigue me, not that I had something against it but it's not my bag, it's not my cup of tea, I'm a musician and I like to be creative and I like to create different things. Why should I play the same bloody song over and over again (laughing), you know, but sometimes I will do something old for the British fans, the riff of 'Hocus Pocus' and then after that I go straight into the blues again because I have to get away from that.

Is that sort of riff and tracks like 'Sylvia' a heavy weight around your neck Jan?

No not at all, people make it a sort of heavyweight in the sense that you have to live up to your own bullshit but I can back it up but not to the level of repeating yourself over and over, that's beyond my budget. I'm not like that. I come from Holland, it's a small country and the thing I like about being in the studio is that you get to do constantly different things with the instruments. That's very satisfying as far as I'm concerned and it's like being a shoemaker but he doesn't make the same pair of shoes all the time.

Have you never been tempted to sell up and go and live in America?

Well not really and the only countries that I've ever lived in outside of Holland is Britain and Austria when I was a kid. I still like Britain, definitely, and still play there often. I don't play in Germany very often, maybe two or three times a year because always something cuckoo happens in that country, not that the people aren't OK but there's always one or two lunatics, why I don't know.

Contemporaries like Steve Howe and Steve Hackett are accomplished acoustic guitarists as well as electric guitarists, do you have a preference Jan? Do you still get a thrill out picking the guitar up every morning?

No I don't have a real preference not really but with the electric I always like to twang (laughing). Sometimes I think oh no when I go near the guitar if I've had a bad experience, an example is like when my old man died, I didn't feel like playing. I just put the thing in the corner and said that's shit and it can wait.

You seem very much in control of your life, easily able to draw the line between the music and your family life, is that how you see it?

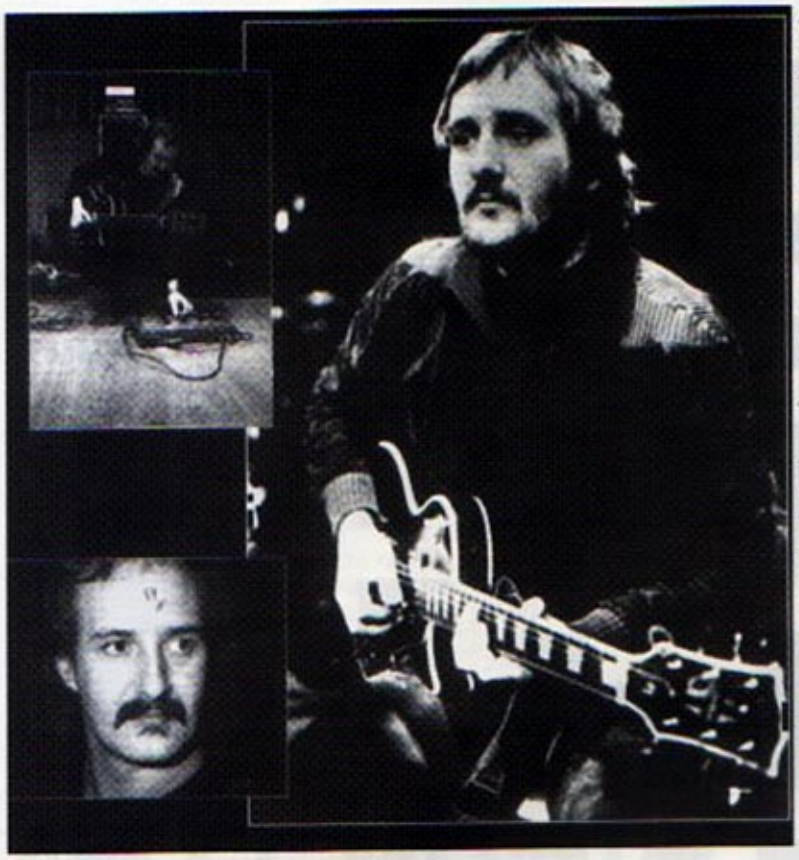
Yeah, that's actually true. I don't really want to move towards the media whatever which is stupid you know, I know it's stupid. I know you're supposed to be an artist and be there for the public, it's the public that makes you and that's true. I always have a great time gigging and talking with people afterwards but I don't like the mechanics around this business, especially the pop business it is so awful at any level. For example there's an institution here called Veronica, it's a big radio station or whatever, and they're all in their fifties and you get them on the phone and they shout 'hey Jan, what do you think of this or that'. I mean, forget it! I don't want to have anything to do with these loonies and I think it's an insult to your intelligence and it's bloody tasteless. They're just raving nuts!

I normally pick an album to comment on but this time I would like to pick on a short track that I like very much off the 'Pleasure Point' album. The opening track does it for me, it starts the album and puts you in the mood for the rest of the album. The track is called 'Valdez' and it is short, dreamy, haunting track. Do you actually have to be in the mood to write something like that. Do you lock yourself away to write your music?

Well that's a difficult one. There's also a title on there, 'Visions Of Blue', and I always have a thing in the back of my mind, a picture of a little white chapel on an island with this turquoise water around it, why I don't know. For example that's the background to that piece, it's a picture in my mind which I try to create musically. It's a very religious picture but at the same time it's also very beautiful.

It paints a picture of seclusion.

It is really, it is a picture of going back on your own in time. It's a vision and I try to express that in my music. I could paint it but it would take me too long. I try to paint this picture and I have no words for it and that's why it comes out in the music. I've just read the autobiography of Ray Charles again after twenty years and I find myself having exactly the same points of view. He was condemned for liking country music and he says, 'I really love that music, it's where I come from, it's what I was raised with as a kid, why should I deny that'. That is something that really struck me, I just read it last week again in Italy and I couldn't get into the beginning because it is very boring but then around page 100 it really started to go and he tells of his visions about why he didn't give a shit



double vodka, orange juice and a speed ball. He was also a painter, he made hundreds of paintings in five minutes and they go for about twenty thousand quid each and I tell you, my little daughter, if I give her a pencil, could do something even more beautiful, but he jumped off the bloody Hilton and he was buried in the pop temple Paradiso in Amsterdam. That was his last act, to sell out.

about what anybody else thought, about what style he should play. He kept talking about Be Bop but he liked other things and that's the sign of a real musician, you can't shut your eyes to other things or speak a hundred languages and not even be able to say yes in your own. So he tells how he is totally open to all these things maybe because of the fact that he can't see. He used to play dance halls just to cheer people up. If the customer was satisfied, he was satisfied; now what a great man is that. I think he is and I have tremendous respect for that.

You mention guys like Ray Charles and Miles Davis etc who were always surrounded by musicians of a rare breed, anonymous people but brilliant musicians.

Yes I've thought about that but I'm not trying to be anonymous but I guess I just got fed up with the rock scene, to say it politely. As I said before I'm not going to crawl up there and pretend I'm sixteen again, it's beyond my budget.

How old are you now Jan?

Forty five ..... (laughing) er fifty four ..... (laughing), in Dutch it's the other way around. I'm in the autumn of my life and in twenty years I could be dead.

So true for us all.

Yes, I was recently two days in Italy and there was a big thing in the newspapers, you could get Dutch newspapers there, about Herman Brood jumping off the Hilton. He's our local hero, the sort of only rock 'n' roll animal we've ever produced. For breakfast he used to have

And his paintings will be worth three times more now.

Yes and he was fifty four and he couldn't go on anymore. He was in some clinic in London that got him off the dope. If you show that part of you to the world you have to live up to it I guess, the rock 'n' roll animal and all that. Look at Keith Richards, it's like someone drilled two holes in his skull and he's looking behind them (laughing) but it's all down to music and he must be the only genius with an IQ of 40. I don't really want to knock anyone but if you look at the core of the thing it's hilarious and that's also very important and that's what I missed a bit in the Seventies and Eighties. We had some humour and then the punk thing came along, senseless, humourless and almost humanless. I came out with 'Pleasure Point'.

Was that album your antidote to post punk?

Yes that could have been and rats were in so I put two mice on my guitar and that was my answer to the punk thing, like no future, no beauty, no this, no that. We knew from the beginning that it was a fashion thing and fashion's always been the mother of death.

It's the kids that generally go along with fashion. How many kids do you have Jan.

I have four, two boys, two girls. The boys are thirty and nineteen and the girls are eight and six. They are very musical, very musical and the youngest son is constantly mixing things. He's into the samples things but still they're OK. The little girls sing and the oldest one is playing piano and she says she wants to play guitar but she has my temperament that says if it doesn't happen in five minutes it's off (laughing). She just gets bad with ramming the thing, she's a monster, incredible. Their music is by choice, they do it themselves and I like it the way they do it.

As we mentioned you have been to the UK on a short tour recently and you enjoy coming over here still. That tour was just as enjoyable I guess. Is the UK where you are most popular these days?

Yes I like to be there and it's the only country I lived in for a year. People turn up there in great numbers and they just enjoy it as much as I do, what more could you want. People even take aeroplanes to travel to places to see me. They come from Japan, Ireland and all over and I play in a local pub here and the owners, they don't believe their eyes because they see people coming from all over the bloody place just to sit and watch Mr JA from somewhere in Holland. It's a cuckoo thing and on the other hand it's great. It's the old saying, if the mountain can't come to Mohammed.

Well I'm thrilled to bits that we've managed to get you to come and play for us at the Classic Rock Society in November and I hope it's a good enough night for you to want to come and play for us again. What can we expect when you come?

Well I play with the same drummer as I have for fifteen years, Ton Dykman. This is a band you won't believe with Willbrand on guitar, Jeroen on keyboards too. There's a crossover of stuff from all the albums and it has been well received, especially in the UK to date. We'll do our best when we see you.

In conclusion Jan, you have recorded many albums over the years, will there be a new one in the near future?

Well I've finished quite a few pieces and I have my producer coming in, he's in Spain right now getting his ya-yas out (laughing). He's back next weekend and we've had some contact with Bluenote and other companies but I'm in no hurry. We have the pieces and when they're ready or whenever I'm ready we'll go in to the studio and record them. I've got so much stuff out it actually doesn't make sense to come out with any album I think but as soon as I have the feeling that my playing is improving a bit I might do it (laughing loudly).

I can't believe I'm hearing this (laughing).

No I'm not in a hurry, I got all the stuff ready and next weekend we'll go through it and record the heap. If he wants to mangle the thing together, go ahead, no problem. I'll see you all in November!

Tickets for the Jan Akkerman concert are on sale now!