



Blow Up the Outside World

When a band sell five-million copies of an album, and win a Grammy for it into the bargain, as Soundgarden did with *Superunknown*, it sounds mighty silly to keep calling them 'the next big thing'. So, having blasted all expectations from the ears of those who keep score by such things, how does a band prepare their follow-up assault, in Soundgarden's case, *Down on the Upside*?

"Make stuff to eat, watch TV, light a lotta candles, and play ping-pong," according to Soundgarden's guitar maestro and fallen ping-pong champion Kim Thayil. Oh, and they'd also play a bit of music, right?

"Of course."

On the phone from the Seattle office of Susan Silver Management (yes, she is married to Soundgarden's vocalist Chris Cornell), Kim proves to be as eloquent in conversation as he is on guitar, and nowhere near as scary as his maniacally accomplished fretwork might suggest.

Superunknown seems to have taken that dreaded 'next big thing' mantle from your shoulders...

"Uh-huh."

Did you find it easier to relax musically once it became clear you were surpassing people's expectations of you?

"Yeah, I suppose so, in some ways. Well, we always did what we wanted to do, what entertained us, and we never felt we had to do a certain thing to make the record company happy, or the fans happy — but we always did respect the fans, and wanted to give them what they like about us. At the same time, we want to make sure we're interested and excited about what we're doing."

When *Superunknown* came out, Chris said he thought it would benefit from its timing, in regard to there being few other major albums being released at the time (neglecting to mention its own standout qualities). What do you see the benefits for *Down on the Upside* being?

"I don't think anyone's really doing what we're doing. You wanna get some Soundgarden material, you're gonna get it from us — no one can really imitate it. There are a lot of bands that seem to be influenced by us, but they don't have Chris' vocal range, they don't have our songwriting abilities... so, we don't feel threatened by that really."

Do you think it's fair to say your music goes somewhat towards encouraging people to look to their own realities as opposed to those created around them?

"I would agree with that very much."

Do you think that's something people who maybe aren't hardcore Soundgarden fans recognise?

"I don't know if they recognise that. People are willing to make judgements about everything around them, whether it's a political figure, or an entertainer, or a sports figure... All we've ever wanted to do and encourage was individual thought and responsibility for one's self, to have people feel confident with their own will, and their own strength and ability to get things done."

We never wanted to tell people how to think, or how to vote, or how to listen to things. We've always wanted to encourage people to be their own person.

"Sometimes even our fans miss that. They might still see us as icons or heroes in some way. That's all flattering, but we shrug a lot of that off. We want people to find themselves, and their friends, and their loved ones as their heroes and models in their lives. And if people have crappy friends and a crappy family, well, then at least you can turn to yourself and find strength in yourself. That's what we encourage of people, and that's what we expect of ourselves and people around us."

What would you say the biggest misconception you've come across regarding Soundgarden is?

"I think that we're a metal band. We've met people who are big fans now, and who are friends of ours, who originally thought because we had long hair we were some kind of metal band, and maybe we were sorta lunkheads, party, womaniser types; because that was the popular music at the time, at the end of the 80s, and maybe the beginning of the 90s. I think they would end up just being surprised when they met us, or talked with us, or hung out with us, and they'd go: 'Wow, these guys are anything but self-involved rock stars, and so by that definition,

they don't seem to be very metal at all."

I remember [Soundgarden drummer] Matt Cameron joking about you some years back, saying he thought one day soon you were gonna be like Steve Vai, and sell your services to various bands for lots and lots of dollars. You haven't left your day job yet. Can we take it Matt is no psychic?

"No, he's no psychic," Kim laughs. "I'm certainly not as proficient on my instrument as Steve Vai. That guy does many things on guitar that most people cannot do, and I would never compare myself to him in terms of his technical acquaintance with the instrument."

So, you're not going to be selling yourself willy-nilly anytime soon?

"I don't think people would want me."

A friend of mine made a prediction you would be a very scary person to interview, simply by watching you play guitar on video. What do you make of that?

"Oh, a lot of people have said that. A lot of people have met us, and they end up havin' a good time. 'Gee, I thought you'd be this arrogant, combative, argumentative person, who was perhaps ill-tempered.' Some still make that judgement by the way I look: 'A dark-skinned guy with a beard, and he doesn't look too happy.' They read the interviews and they think: 'Well, gee, he seems to be articulate and sometimes combative, so maybe he's difficult.'

"I'll tell you the truth: half the interviews I do are very pleasant and they're interesting; and there's another half where people come into the situation a bit defensive and willing to be combative, and I'm *entirely* willing to play that game if they want to. Then they leave with a bad taste in their mouth thinking [Kim feigns a moan]: 'Oh, gee, Kim was just very difficult.' I have no intention of presenting myself that way, unless someone comes with a preconception. We have dealt with people that way in interviews, and unfortunately it doesn't put us in the best light, and it doesn't put the interviewers in the best light."

I think there's a lot scarier people out there, don't you?

"Sure. I can't think of any individual right off the bat, but I would say, in general, the personality type would be one who perhaps has a short fuse and isn't particularly rational. If a person is not particularly intelligent, and has an inability to assess a situation with fair consideration to himself and other people, those people are the ones who are scary, and often dangerous, because you can't *reason* with them. They got some lunkheaded thing in their mind, and they're going to behave that way. There's not much you can do to deal with them. It's like dealing with a mad dog; I'd prefer either to ignore them or beat the fuck out of them."

So, as we've established you're not one of those people, could you give me a three-word description that would help people understand who you and the band are?

"Specifically I'd say, intelligent — I think that's something that's shared by all the band members; wilful — people in the band are gonna do what they wanna do, and they're not gonna have people tell them what to do; and pretty level-headed, that no one is that caught up in bullshit, or is likely to be seduced by a bad idea, either intellectually, socially or politically."

"For these reasons, people often see us as intimidating, 'cause we're often unreceptive to people's whimsy or silliness. Because of that people perceive us as being arrogant, or intimidating, or angry. It's like: 'Well,'" Kim chuckles, "If you deal with someone as an intelligent adult, you'll be treated with the respect you've earned by acting that way.' But we get a lot of people who act like complete idiots, and they're not going to be treated as though they were anything other than the foolish person they're being... There you go."

The intelligent individuals collectively known as Soundgarden have self-produced *Down on the Upside*. As Kim says: "We don't have any weird problems where we need guidance to make a record. We're not immature. We're not an irresponsible, fucked-up band." The album was recorded at Stone Gossard's Studio Litho in Seattle, over about four-and-a-half months between June 1995 and March 1996. New Zealand release is set for May 20, and the first single, 'Pretty Noose', will be released on May 3. Although Soundgarden have made no plans to tour to New Zealand at this stage, Kim says it seems likely they will return soon: "Everyone in the band, hands down, thought [Auckland] was one of the most beautiful cities we've ever been to."

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