

ROCK PAINTING



RC meets the rock LP sleeve illustrator extraordinaire, Rodney Matthews

Mention Rodney Matthews' name to any rock or metal collector and they'll tell you that it is synonymous with some of the most fantastic fantasy artwork ever created. Originally a graphic designer, Rodney worked on designs and lettering for records in the late 60s before, in the late 70s, turning to full scale cover design and going freelance. He has since been associated with Nazareth, Eloy, Scorpions, Praying Mantis and most notably Magnum, among a host of others. In many cases the music has at least in part been inspiration to the design, with Rodney often being a fan. Once a budding musician himself (he is a drummer at heart) Rodney often supported or worked with many artists he would later illustrate.

More recently he has followed his beliefs and taken to illustrating many Christian metal albums and branched into computer games and animation. He has also produced a plethora of calendars, posters and books which are way beyond the scope of this article, but many can be found in his books *Last Ship Home* and *In Search Of Forever*. His most recent book, *Countdown To Millennium* (published by Paper Tiger) contains an excellent guide to what is effectively a discography, see www.rodneymatthews.com for more information.

Nazareth's *No Mean City* sleeve in 1979 was your first major freelance commission. How do you feel about it now?

Looking back, I see it as a distinctive design. The band had seen my calendar for 1978 *Wizardry And Wild Romance*, and invited me up to the Isle Of Man to discuss the project. The album was influenced by the novel *No Mean City*, a tale of events in Glasgow during a time of depression. Razor gangs were rife, so my image reflected this concept but was obviously fantasy. The main character holding a pair of razors was named 'Friendly Fred' by someone in the band.

Over the years I have seen the Nazareth image painted on trucks, cars, bikes and so on, particularly in the US. Recently, I have had so many enquiries about it that I will shortly be producing limited edition prints for sale on my website together with T-shirts featuring the image.

Your fantasy style is pretty distinctive. What were your major influences?

My primary influence has always been the natural world, believing that good fantasy art has to be in some way anchored to reality, thus making the image believable. I take photographs and keep reference books of wildlife, landscapes, etc. If I had to choose my main artistic influence, it would be the English book illustrators of the late 1800s and early 1900s, including Arthur Rackham and Edmund Dulac. Also, the organic feel of the Art Nouveau period and the surrealism of Magritte.

In the early 70s you did a lot of logo and lettering work. What made you go the full album cover route?

In 1970 I had just turned my back on a career in advertising to form a partnership in general commercial design and illustration with Terry Brace: we called ourselves Plastic Dog Graphics. Because we were both active as musicians at that time, we began to get requests for logos and event posters from bands and music agencies in our area. My first record cover – *New Day* by Thin Lizzy – came about as a result of the band seeing one of my posters in a Bristol college. Later Terry and me were asked to take on record cover design for local labels, Village Thing, Saydisc and Amon Ra, which led to commissions from Sonet, Transatlantic, United Artists and many others.

Your early band, Squidd, mixed prog with jazz.

I have always liked jazz but the main reason for the jazz influence in Squidd was that I had taken lessons from a jazz drummer, Keith West, who taught me the rudiments, and for me it seemed natural to throw these into the prog-rock mix. It was the swing drumming of Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich and Louis Bellson that took my imagination.

At what point did you decide to give up music and concentrate on the artwork?

I had been running rock bands of my own with names like The Cheetahs, Pentworths People and Origin, but Squidd was my final effort to obtain a recording contract and sail into stardom! We didn't get the deal we needed, despite the efforts of King Crimson's Pete Sinfield who took us under his wing for a while. In 1974 I decided to call it a day and concentrate on my artwork. By a fortunate turn of events I had been invited to design posters for Big O Poster Co. in the same year I disbanded Squidd.

At what point did your Christian beliefs start to influence your work?

It was in 1980 that the penny finally dropped and I realised that Jesus Christ has everything to do with truth, and little to do with the man-made 'religion' I had witnessed while searching for some sort of meaning to life. Three years later, in 1983, Christian themes began to appear in my work commencing with the image *Be Watchful*, a futuristic interpretation of Verse 42 from Matthew 24. Since then I've done a number of paintings with Christian content, usually symbolic of future events from the Bible or direct from description such as my series on *The Revelation* – John's visions of the last days. Incidentally, this project was meant to be accompanied by music from Rick Wakeman, but has not yet come to pass!

You have a long association with Magnum. How well do you get on with Tony Clarkin?

Tony is a great bloke to work with and I count him as a personal friend. Our association goes back to 1980 when I designed the Magnum album cover for *Chase The Dragon*. This was followed by *The Eleventh Hour* in 1983 for which Tony scribbled a little sketch in ball-point on some scruffy surface. It might have been the proverbial beer mat! Tony Clarkin always had a good idea in his mind of what the album art should look like, including layout. He can't draw to save his life but he can impart his vision with clarity. *On A Story Teller's Night* and *Sleepwalking* are further collaborations featuring Tony's design and my illustration. I've had input on nine Magnum album covers to date, though some of these have been licensed from my earlier poster art.

Eloy had a prog sound and a fantasy concept that really suited your artwork. Did you listen to their music?

Yes, I did listen to Eloy and enjoyed the music very much. My first commission for the album *Planets* (1982) was a simple statement conveying the struggle between good and evil as defined by Eloy's lyric writer Frank Bornemann. Secondly, came the album *Time To Turn*. Both the designs were later published as posters. The third album was *Metromania* for which Eloy used part of the image mentioned above – *Be Watchful*. The covers were actually commissioned by Paul Birch of Heavy Metal Records. Paul was easy to work for in that he allowed me full creative freedom.

Were you into much of the music you were illustrating?

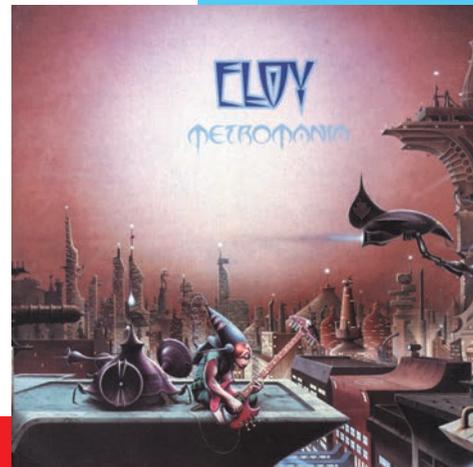
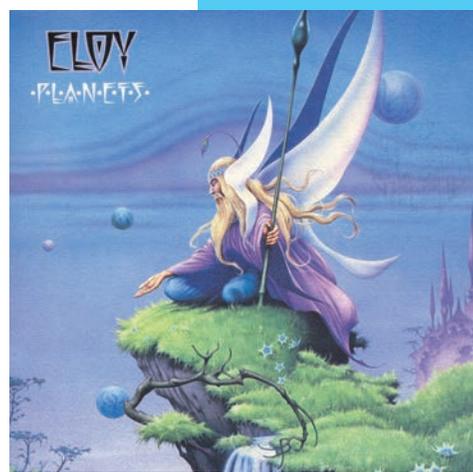
I was well into Magnum's music, particularly Clarkin's lyrics and general world view and of the

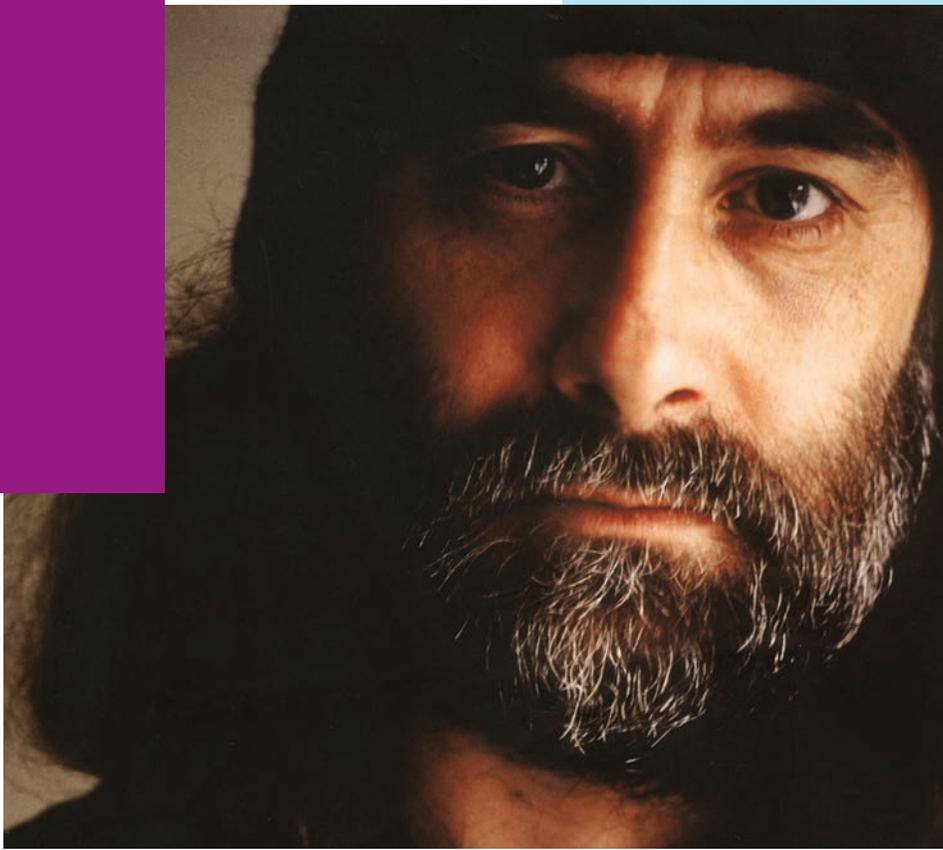
others I've been involved with – Rick Wakeman, Asia, Barclay James Harvest and as mentioned, Eloy, are the most to my taste. Having said that, some of the other bands leaning slightly more towards rock; Praying Mantis, Scorpions, Nazareth, etc are suited to my somewhat aggressive style which is obviously why they came to me.

My favourite bands in the rock and prog-rock genres would include King Crimson, Genesis, Jethro Tull, Yes, Cream etc, but of course I never got invited to work for any of these. What is regretful is that I had played support to Yes and Cream with my own band in the very early days but it never occurred to me to take along my work to seek commissions.

How much was commissioned, against artwork you'd already done that was chosen?

This is known as a 'second right' commission, where a band or record company have seen an image on, for example, a poster or calendar and wish to use it. *Mirador* is a good example of this, as used by Magnum. It has subsequently become synonymous





with the band. This arrangement has probably happened about 20 times for record covers to date but also works for video and DVD covers and books.

Since the late 80s you've done much for the Christian thrash metal scene. How did you become involved with that?

I have to say, before that time I had no idea there was such a thing as a Christian thrash movement. It all came about in a strange way. In the mid-80s I did an interview with *Kerrang!* which caught the eye of Dave Williams, manager of a band called Seventh Angel. In 1989 he approached me to talk about sleeve artwork. I checked out the band for authenticity (as is my custom) and yes, they really were Christians but like myself at the time, loud and hairy! Even better!

Seventh Angel's lyrics centred on Revelations and other prophetic books of the Bible, so suited the fire and brimstone side of my style perfectly. In fact they were able to use an image I had already done for a poster (not then published) titled *The Five Months of Torment* for their album they had titled *The Torment*, unaware of my image. Later, I became involved with a Christian rock ministry with Dave

Williams called *Metal Meltdown* and it was here that I met other Christian thrash bands with artwork needs.

You've also done a lot of books, some with Michael Moorcock.

At the time of meeting Michael I was an avid reader of fantasy and sci-fi, particularly his books. He's now moved to Texas, but yes, he is a good friend, and I owe him a great deal for his kindness and artistic patronage at a time when I was trying to break into the book illustration arena. Our first collaboration was a series of 12 posters featuring his various 'eternal champion' heroes, followed by the calendar for 1978 *Wizardry And Wild Romance*. Michael wrote the short story *Elric At The End Of Time* specifically for me to illustrate. One of the pictures titled *Encore At The End Of Time* was recently used to package a CD set by Hawkwind, which of course is significant, given Moorcock's long association with the band.

How did the *House On The Rock* CD come together with Tony Clarkin?

In 1991 Rick Wakeman introduced me to a composer and keyboard playing friend Rudi Dobson.

Dobson and I later decided to write and record a few tracks to accompany my images; *Sanctuary*, *Almost Home* and *The House On The Rock*. We needed someone to pluck a few notes of guitar here and there, so we asked Tony and he agreed. The tracks were recorded at Tony's Zella studios in Birmingham and at Rudi's 'garage' studio in Taunton. I've recently considered dusting off the recordings and with a few amendments, putting it on my website mail order for sale.

Are you still involved with the computer industry, such as *Traveller's Tales*?

Haven – *The Call Of The King* For Travellers Tales and Midway was my last computer game design project. Game design is usually decently paid, but I have never been completely satisfied with the interpretation of my designs in this genre. Much depends on the talent (or lack of talent) of the 3D artists at the games company. There is seldom the time available to get things right and I have often been disappointed, particularly when seeing unsympathetic or ill-conceived characters or scenes thrown in with my own work. It also gives me a bad name as overall designer of a game.

You're currently involved with *Classic Rock Productions*. What's happening there?

Classic Rock Productions approached me via my website to license a total of 15 images (second rights) for their DVD releases. These include *Magnum*, *BJH*, *Steve Hackett* and *Uriah Heep* and various compilations. Recently *Classic Rock* have asked to see more images but things have not yet been finalised or confirmed.

What are your other current projects and plans?

God willing, I shall continue illustrating for fantasy related commissions, but my heart lies in animation and film design. In 1998 my children's animated series with Gerry Anderson, *Lavender Castle*, was completed and since that time I have provided designs for the forthcoming animated movie *Magic Roundabout*. There are many irons in the fire including a substantial portfolio of my own original animation properties, snippets of which can be seen on my website.

Also, there are musical projects underway including an album by Jeff Scheetz and myself based upon my paintings. Rough versions of the tracks have been done in Jeff's studio near Kansas City with Jeff Scheetz playing guitar and myself on drums.

JOE GEESIN



Rodney's 2005 calendar, published in October, contains 12 album covers and is available from his website, www.rodneymatthews.com.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Singles

Decca
United Artists
Gem
Arista
Arista

THIN LIZZY - New Day (1969 EP, with/without p/s)	£275/125
CAPTAIN LOCKHEED & THE STARFIGHTERS - Ejection (1973)	£25
PRAYING MANTIS - Praying Mantis (1980, some with transfer)	£25/20
PRAYING MANTIS - Cheated (1981, w/bonus single)	£8
RUDI DOBSON/RODNEY MATTHEWS - The House On The Rock (1981)	£10

LPs

Village Thing
Village Thing
Village Thing
United Artists
Kicking Mule
United Artists
United Artists
Mountain
Charisma
Arista
Jet
MCA
MCA
Heavy Metal
Heavy Metal
Heavy Metal
Heavy Metal
Jet
Rogue
Heavy Metal
FM
FM
FM
FM
FM
Rogue
Voices Of Wonder
FM
Edge
Edge
Edge
Pony Canyon
Star Song
Edge
Edge
Musicdisc
Music For Nations
Polydor
Jet
Thunderload
EMI
Receiver
Shakedown
Classic Rock

IAN A ANDERSON - A Vulture Is Not A Bird You Can Trust (1971)	£12
DAVE EVANS - Elephantasia (1972)	£12
IAN A ANDERSON - Singer Sleeps On As Blaze Rages (1972)	£12
AMON DUUL II - Live In London (1972)	£14
ART ROSENBAUM - Five String Banjo (1973)	£10
BRINSLEY SCHWARZ - Golden Greats (1974)	£15
20th CENTURY STEEL BAND - Yellow Bird Is Dead (1976)	£10
NAZARETH - No Mean City (1979)	£7
BO HANSON - Lord Of The Rings (1979)	£12
PRAYING MANTIS - Time Tells No Lies (1980)	£35
PRAYING MANTIS - Chase The Dragon (1980)	£12
TYGERS OF PAN TANG - Crazy Nights (some with bonus 12", 1981)	£22/£12
DIAMOND HEAD - Living On Borrowed Time (1982, some with poster and insert)	£22/15
BITCHES SIN - Predator (1982)	£18
ELOY - Planets (1982)	£8
ELOY - Time To Turn (1982, picture disc or clear vinyl)	£18/12
SCORPIONS - Lonesome Crow (1982, reissue)	£12
MAGNUM - The Eleventh Hour (1983, picture disc)	£15
TIGERMOTH - Tigermoth (1984)	£15
ELOY - Metromania (1984, picture disc or CD)	£18/20
MAGNUM - On A Story Teller's Night (1985)	£15
DIAMOND HEAD - Am I Evil (1987)	£20
MAGNUM - Mirador (some in pic disc)	£15/5
MAGNUM - Kingdom Of Madness (1988 reissue)	£10
MAGNUM - Magnum II (1988 reissue)	£15
TIGERMOTH - Howling Moth (1988)	£10
FULL MOON - Full Moon (1989)	£12
MAGNUM - Foundation (1989)	£40
SEVENTH ANGEL - The Torment (1990)	£6
DETritus - Perpetual Defiance (1990, LP)	£8
SEVENTH ANGEL - Lament For The Weary (1991)	£6
PRAYING MANTIS - Predator In Disguise (1991)	£12
WHITE METAL WARRIORS - Last Ship Home (1992 CD)	£8
RICK WAKEMAN - 2000AD Into The Future (1991, also CD [Ambient])	each £12
VENI DOMINE - Fall Babylon Fall (1992)	£10
ASIA - Aqua (1991)	£6
MAGNUM - Sleepwalking (1992)	£18
BARCLAY JAMES HARVEST - Caught In The Light (1993)	£8
MAGNUM - Archive (1993)	£8
VENI DOMINE - Material Sanctuary (1994)	£12
ASIA - Arena (1995)	£10
MAGNUM - Stronghold (1997)	£15
ASIA - Different Worlds (2003, 2-CD box)	£14
JOHN LAWTON BAND - Shakin' The Tale (2004)	£8

