

Thirty-Odd Foot of Russell Crowe

By Kelly Parker

Sure, the next few months will see the release of his new movie *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, directed by Peter Weir (*The Truman Show*), and he's getting ready to head to Morocco to shoot *Tripoli*, with *Gladiator* director Ridley Scott. But for the moment, Master Thespian Russell Crowe has got his OSCAR® polished up and sitting on the mantel back on his ranch northeast of Sydney, Australia. This past summer, he left behind the woman he wed last spring—actress Danielle Spencer—to ready the nest for the arrival of the couple's first child, and headed for North America with his band, 30-Odd Foot Of Grunts (TOFOG). After being reminded by his old friend, Manitoba film director Aaron Kim Johnston—who gave Crowe his first North American film role a decade ago in *For The Moment*—that he had promised to come back to Winnipeg with his band sometime, Crowe made good on the pledge. He took advantage of a break in the band's 5-show run at Chicago's House of Blues—promoting the self-titled CD that features a duet single with Chrissy Hynde of The Pretenders called 'Never Be Alone Again'—to haul the gear north of the border for TOFOG's only Canadian date. THE HEAT spoke with Crowe from Chicago before he travelled north, and discovered that marriage, at least so far, hasn't mellowed the infamous temper that flares when the conversation heads in a direction that doesn't please him...

TH: Congrats on your marriage and impending fatherhood. Have you gone thru the abject terror stage yet?

RC: I think there's going to be more than one passing thought about that, for sure. It's like a growing realization. It's not like a single day where you go: 'Wow, isn't that good' or whatever. There's many, many levels and stages of like, 'We're going to get more serious than this (laughs)'.

TH: You've been at it with TOFOG for about 10 years. This is your 6th CD release. You've said that you don't know if you would have had another chance to bring the band to Winnipeg if you didn't do it now. Are you winding things down, or are you just unsure of what the future will bring?

RC: Just unsure, really. We're writing a whole bunch of new songs at the moment. I mean, every time we get together, it's just like an explosion. We're a very, and you know, no pun intended, but we're a very fertile group (laughs)...of musicians, so I'm sure that we'll record a lot together. We've got our own place that we record in these days, and we've got Pro-Tools® gear that we carry around with us. But whether or not we actually get to get out of the house and off the leash from the wife, you know...

TH: In the 10 years since you put this line-up together, has the band's sound changed significantly?

RC: Oh, for sure. You know every time we get together, it develops. It just gets fuller. I very definitely think that we have a completely unique sound now in the fact that we have four vocals, and four guitars, and you know, a trumpet onstage. So it's just the blend of the way that works. I mean, you know, people ask us all the time, (in American accent) 'What kind of music do you play?' It's like, 'Mate, I don't know. Just put a CD on and you tell me what it is.'

TH: I know that one of your favourite aspects of the music thing is the live performance side; getting in front of a live audience—that interaction and immediate energy that comes back to you...

RC: I nearly died last night. We played so many fucking encores that I thought I was going to expire. We actually broke our own record. Before last night, our record was like, 2 hours and 39 minutes, and last night we actually played for 2 hrs and like, 54 minutes.

TH: You and Springsteen with the marathon shows...

RC: Yeah, except he's got all the hits! (laughs)

TH: As far as liking the energy of a live audience though, you haven't done much live theatre on the acting side, have you?

RC: Thousands of live performances, mate. Thousands of them. I started this job when I was 6 years old. (Testily) You want me to list my theatre credits?

TH: Please...

RC: Piss off. (laughs)

TH: I believe you.

RC: Yeah, thanks, mate.

TH: But you don't like the repetitiveness of theatre. You've been quoted as saying that you like the electricity of live music performance, without the repetition of theatre...

RC: You know, usually when you start doing a play, your contract starts at about 64 performances. But obviously, in order to get to the first performance, you've done a lot of work in terms of memorizing stuff. So, it's already kind of repetitive by the time you've done your first performance. And then you do a few previews, and then you've got your opening night. So it takes you maybe 5-6 performances to get it right, and then you just have to do that over and over again. It's not that I find it completely tedious. I mean I've done some plays and musicals and stuff that I really enjoy. Oddly enough, 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show' was one of the most fun things because it moves a little bit like a rock & roll show, where you don't quite know what the audience is going to throw at you...

TH: Literally...

RC: But you know; I've done some satisfying plays in terms of their content. This is all degrees of love, man. I enjoy doing it, and I'll probably do it again before too long. But when you do get into a play—and I'm drawing now on the deep, dark past—that doesn't have that same depth or spark, it can be the world's most tedious thing...going out for a couple of hours and repeating line after line...

TH: Tell me about the single with Chrissy Hynde of The Pretenders, 'Never Be Alone Again'. How did that pairing come about?

RC: Just got lucky, you know. She was listening to a CD of ours, and she didn't know it was actually us, necessarily. She asked the guy who was driving her around doing radio interviews—he happened to have toured with us in 2001, or whatever it was; doesn't work for our record company anymore. Our record company used to have staff (laughs)—in Boston, listening to some of our stuff, and she's kind of a cheeky girl, and she went on the radio and said, 'I'm going to go and tour with TOFOG', and didn't realise what a reaction it would cause. Due to that we ended up getting on the phone and chatting, and I just sent her a song, and got a message back saying that she loved it and we got together.

TH: Speaking of her not realizing what sort of reaction her joke might cause. I recall reading a couple of years ago when you brought TOFOG to play North America for the first time, that you didn't want it to be about you 'Russell Crowe'. You just wanted to be one of the guys in the band. I'm wondering if, in hindsight, you think that notion might have been a bit naïve, given that the cover of the CD is your face only, and that you're now billed on tour as 'RUSSELL CROWE & TOFOG'...

RC: (Interrupting) Mate, that's not my choice. That's your North American record company. If you have a look at the Australian version of that same album, there's two cows on the front cover...

TH: You've replaced the two cows. Excellent...

RC: Yeah. Well I just think it's bullshit, you know. I'm not fucking J-Lo, you know? Stick it up your ass. The music stands and falls by itself, and the band as a unit. It's not about me, you know? I may be the principal songwriter but if I don't have that engine-room with me, nothing works. So I just think it's kind of a silly decision on their part. You know, they're desperately trying to sell some records or some bullshit, and now they've found out that just putting some ugly face on the front of it doesn't necessarily guarantee them that, either.

TH: But isn't that the same kind of promotional machine that they put in motion to market a movie, with your name over the title and your face all over the trailer? What's the difference?

RC: Uh, well...I suppose. Except you know, I don't play along with it to the same degree. I mean, I understand the marketing required for the movies, but you know...

TH: I see.

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