FOREIGNER

IN MUSIC THERE'S SUCCESSFUL, and then there's *Foreigner successful*. The band formed by English guitarist Mick Jones in New York City back in 1976 had impeccable timing, not only helping to invent the Adult Oriented Rock format, but also profiting from US radio's desire to play shorter hard rock songs with a more commercial edge to satisfy both advertisers and a broader spectrum of listeners. During a 10-year golden period between 1977 and 1987, Foreigner's uncanny ability to consistently add commercial sheen to rock'n'roll crunch yielded six consecutive US Top 10 albums, a seemingly endless stream of Top 10 singles, and one gigantic number, 'I Want To Know What Love Is', that became both the very definition of the rock ballad and a staple at wedding receptions for all eternity.

Leading from the front and stamping his personality all over Foreigner music was Lou Grammatico, better known as Lou Gramm, a distinctive singer from Rochester, New York, who was given the job as Foreigner vocalist in 1976 after Jones had completed an exhaustive search and auditioning process. Foreigner wasn't Foreigner when Gramm came on board. The band wasn't even called Trigger, the name that featured on the plastic box of demo cassettes that did the rounds of New York record company A&R departments in '76. "The band was called nothing at all at that point," Gramm tells me when we connect for this extensive interview. Gramm was just 26 years old when he first hooked up with Mick Jones. He's 75 now, and despite the off-the-scale success the singer has enjoyed, his life hasn't always been a bowl of cherries. There's been a battle with drugs and also health issues related to a benign brain tumour that resulted in enormous weight gain. There's also been an up-and-down relationship with Mick Jones over many years that has never been fully resolved. Jones has suffered from Parkinson's disease for a number of years now, which has meant that the guitarist and songwriter hasn't been able to perform live in the latest incarnation of Foreigner – a line-up that in the main hasn't featured Gramm – since 2023. Former Hurricane vocalist Kelly Hansen occupied the lead vocalist slot between 2005 and 2025 before stepping away and allowing Foreigner guitarist Luis Maldonado to take over. When Foreigner were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame in October of 2024, Mick Jones was absent from the event and was represented by his daughter Annabelle Dexter-Jones. Gramm, bassist Rick Wills, and keyboardist Al Greenwood accepted the award, with drummer Dennis Elliott declining to appear for personal reasons, and original band members multi-instrumentalist Ian McDonald and bassist Ed Gagliardi having both passed. It's a bit of a messy situation for a band whose brilliant songs such as 'Feels Like The First Time', 'Cold As Ice', 'Hot Blooded', and 'Juke Box Hero' provided the soundtrack to the lives of US '70s and '80s teens. But Lou Gramm is understandably "very proud" of his career with Foreigner, and we can't wait to get his views about and recollections of his life in music. Lou doesn't give too many interviews these days, much less ones that run to more than two hours. So we're grateful to this titan of rock vocalists for taking the time...

LOU, THE STORY GOES THAT YOU MADE MICK JONES AWARE OF YOU BY GIVING HIM A RECORD BY YOUR FIRST BAND BLACK SHEEP BACKSTAGE AT A GIG ONE TIME...

"That's absolutely true. Mick was playing a show in my hometown of Rochester, and Black Sheep's manager also happened to be a rep for A&M Records. He knew Mick because Mick's band Spooky Tooth had been on A&M, so after the show he took me backstage to meet Mick and I gave him the first Black Sheep album [1975's 'Black Sheep']. Of course I didn't know if he'd ever listen to it or not, but maybe eight or 10 months later he called my parents' house where I was living at the time. He'd obviously got the number from someone. I wasn't at home, but my dad called me to tell me that this guy Mick was looking to talk to me. He'd left a number."

SO YOU CALLED HIM BACK...

"Of course I did. When Mick answered, he asked if I remembered him and then told me that he'd listened to the album I'd given him. He said it was very good and that he liked my singing, that he was in New York putting a new band together with the help of his manager because Spooky Tooth was over, and that he wondered if I'd be interested in going to New York for a couple of days to audition for the band."

AND WHAT DID YOU SAY?

"I said, 'Mick, jeez, that's really nice of you to ask me, and normally I'd be very interested. But Black Sheep is in a difficult spot right now. We've got our second album ['Encouraging Words'] coming out and we've just started a tour opening for Kiss. The problem is that we had an accident right after the first show in Boston. We've lost our truck and about 80 per cent of our equipment. We're trying to figure out what to do and how we can continue the tour.' I told Mick that I couldn't see any way I could go to New York because I was loyal to Black Sheep and wanted to see things through with the group. I wasn't going to run out on those guys in the band's darkest hour, so I said I would have to turn him down. I told Mick that I was very honoured to have been asked and hoped that our paths would cross again in the future. Mick asked me if he could call me back in two or three weeks just to see how things were going, and I told him I'd be happy for him to do that."

Photo: Timeless Concert Images/Bill O'Leary

SO HOW DID THINGS PAN OUT?

"All of the Black Sheep band members asked their parents if they could help us out with the money to get hold of a van and some equipment and make it to the next date of the Kiss tour. But sadly there was a recession going on in the States at that time and they just didn't have the money to help us. So we called our label Capitol and told our day-to-day contact there what had happened. I asked if there was any way that Capitol could give us an advance against future royalties so that we could buy what we needed to carry on the tour with Kiss. She said that the decision makers were all in a meeting and that she'd call back at the end of the day. And at about seven thirty at night she did call back. I had high hopes, but she said to me, 'I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but since you can't fulfil your obligations on the Kiss tour, the label has decided to drop the band.'"

"WE WERE THRILLED TO SIGN TO ATLANTIC ON A THREE-ALBUM DEAL BECAUSE IT WAS A LABEL WITH A LOT OF HISTORY, PARTICULARLY AS AN R&B LABEL. AND WE THOUGHT THERE WAS QUITE A LOT OF R&B IN OUR SONGS."

JUST LIKE THAT?!

"Just like that. It was crazy, but I had to tell the other guys in Black Sheep the bad news. Of course I'd already told them about the phone call I'd had from Mick Jones, and to their credit they all said, 'Lou, we have to be realistic. To all intents and purposes Black Sheep is over. You really need to get hold of Mick and see what he has to offer.'"

THAT WAS VERY PUBLIC-SPIRITED OF THEM...

"It was. So I did call Mick back, and he sent me a ticket to go to New York. When I got there, I met Mick at a recording studio with the rest of the guys in the group; it wasn't a whole band at that point, I'd say it was half a band. [Research appears to show that Jones was working with Ian McDonald and Al Greenwood at this point]. Mick played me some demos he'd recorded. I think there were three songs, 'Feels Like The First Time', 'At War With The World', and 'Fool For You Anyway', but they were only instrumental versions. Mick had the lyrics written out, though, and as he was playing the demos he sang the melodies in my ear. It took me maybe 15 to 20 minutes to get familiar with each song, with the vocal melody and the phrasing of the lyrics. I started having a go at them myself. If I didn't get something quite right, Mick would sing me what he was after through the mic in the control room. I recorded a vocal for each song piecemeal, and then once each one was done I'd listen back, get my head around the pieced-together version, and then sing the song all the way through. We did that for all three songs, and while they didn't sound anything like the way the numbers were when we recorded them for the first album, they were still a pretty good representation of the core of the songs."

SO WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

"After we'd finished the recordings that day, the guys ►