

Artist: Keith Thompson
Album Title: Smoke and Mirrors
Label: Density Music
Genre: Blues/Rock



Description:

This album was written and recorded mostly during lockdown in the UK between 2020 – 2021. Keith produced the album and played all instruments apart from on 'Softer Frame of Mind' which is a previously unreleased track recorded with Roy Adams on drums, Neil Simpson on bass, both from the legendary Climax Blues Band, and Nick Gibbs on violin. Instrumentation: Guitars, Bass, Keyboards, Real Drums and Programmed Drums. There is also a little bit of string orchestration arranged by Keith, in particular on the track, 'Moment of Choice'.

Influences for the album:

As a guitarist, I have been influenced by all of the original British guitar pioneers. In particular, Eric Clapton, Paul Kossoff, Jeff Beck, Peter Green, Rory Gallagher, Gary Moore and other rock bands such as Thin Lizzy, Humble Pie, Led Zeppelin and the Groundhogs. I have taken in many influences over the years particularly from songwriters such as John Martyn and Bob Dylan. I just try to incorporate all of these influences and experience gained over the years into my own authentic style.

CD Track Listing:

- 1 Easy Money
2. Moment of Choice

3. Anybody's Guess
4. Sandcastles of Lies
5. Falling
6. Foolish Pride
7. Softer Frame of Mind
8. The Ride
9. Chasing the Wind
10. What I Know Now

Band Line-up:

As Keith Thompson is essentially a solo artist with a band, the Keith Thompson Band is a very flexible situation. Mostly the band operates as a powerful three piece but can be augmented to a four or five piece depending on the gig and availability of musicians. Notable members:
Jacek Chuscinski – Bass
Artur Malik – Drums
Neil Simpson – Bass
Roy Adams – Drums
Mark Butler – Bass
Patsy Gamble – Sax
Muddy Manninen – Guitar

Hailing from Cheltenham, UK we find Blues Rocker **KEITH THOMPSON** who has an excellent new ten track CD out now called 'Smoke and Mirrors' which runs in at just over fifty-five minutes long and is the artists thirteenth release.

It is a rainy Wednesday here in Gloucestershire. We are in a small home studio belonging to guitarist, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist, Keith Thompson. The studio is packed with equipment, drum kit, a couple of Marshall amps and a small Fender. There is a Roland keyboard, several guitars including a bass. There is even a ukulele in the corner of the room, but we will ignore that. There are posters on the walls around the room of various conquests in Europe from Keith's long and varied career. We are here to talk about the new album release, 'Smoke and Mirrors' and Keith's musical career in general.

Thompson is essentially a solo artist that more often than not plays with a band. Examples that come to mind would be Eric Clapton or Gary Moore. He has quite a wide pool of musicians to choose from, so the band may vary in personnel although he does have his go to musicians. What makes him different to other artists in the genre is his songwriting. His songs are deeper than the average blues/rock material. Also, he has picked up stylistic musical approaches from other genres too.



He is in no way a purist, and initially he never set out to be a solo artist or leader of his own band as such, but it just seemed to happen and fall into place naturally. His first band when he was a kid elected him as the vocalist simply because no-one else thought they could sing. He worked through several bands, but they usually folded as it emerged that band members all wanted different things. "Finding a group of people who all want the same and have a collective vision seemed illusive to me, so the only way was to do it myself and lead the way. That's really how the Keith Thompson Band formed in the first place. I found it works because it has a focus and everyone knows their role within that process," he tells me. There is no arguing about musical direction or whatever because that's down to the artist alone. "If you want to be part of that

you stick around. What it comes down to is that I just do my own thing. I think all anyone can do is to try and be as authentically themselves as possible without hiding their influences. Many times, I have been called the thinking man's blues man, which I think pretty much sums it up," he expresses.

Thompson was five years old when he started playing so he can't actually remember a time when he didn't play the guitar. "It's just a big part of who I am. I guess back then it was the Beatles and the Stones, pop music of the day. Like a lot of people my age I learnt Beatle tunes on the guitar. I remember Hank Marvin used to appear on TV a lot in those days. I guess it must've been with Cliff & The Shadows, but I remember thinking, "wow...what a great guitar sound." I just loved anything with electric guitar in it," he expresses.

The first album he actually bought was 'Fire & Water' by Free and the moment the stylus hit the record and struck the opening chords to the title track; Keith knew there was no turning back. "This must've been 1970, when I was fourteen and playing in pubs and clubs by now. All through my teens I was like a sponge soaking up all the early blues/rock pioneers, Clapton, Hendrix, Beck, Kossoff, Peter Green, and Rory Gallagher. Rory was a big influence back then. He had such a range of tricks that you could try and emulate," he expresses. His ambition from a young age was to make a living as a musician which included getting jobs as stepping stones in order to buy guitars or amplifiers. His first pro stint was in American army bases in Germany around 1976. "That was a life changing experience...we had to play five forty-five-minute sets every night. Six on weekends! It was a real time

of seeing if we had what it takes."



After that experience he came back to Cheltenham and formed a new band with another local big shot...Mick 'Wurzel' Burston, later of Motörhead fame. This band was called, 'Bunter.' "It was a great little band in a similar style to Thin Lizzy with the twin guitars. We did well, that is until punk hit the UK! Wurzel joined Motörhead and I kind of side stepped, doing a lot of acoustic gigs, studio session work and playing guitar in several bands before eventually forming my own band," he explains to me. As well as all the previously mentioned guitarists and other rock bands such as Thin Lizzy, Humble Pie, and The Groundhogs, he also listened to the gentler acoustic side of things in his sister's record collection, John Martyn, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Cat Stevens, Stefan Grossman. It was through them that he learned the art of song writing and saying something meaningful. "I think over the years I have always been trying to merge these two approaches, but I have found that people seem to either gravitate to the softer side or the rockier side. For 'Smoke and Mirrors' I just started recording songs about what I was going through or what I observed was happening and I put a few things out there on social media. During various lockdowns we had plenty of time to think about life and the universe! Good material for songwriting! It was just recently that I thought, "What am I going to do with all these songs?" and I realized that

these ten songs hung together well stylistically and content-wise, so I decided to put it out. Gigs are slowly returning now but after such a long layoff I just wanted to say, 'Hey, I am still out here,' he enthuses.

In his spare time Thompson likes to go out walking in the countryside or by the sea. "I like to take photographs and play around on editing software with them. My wife is a keen photographer so that is something we do together just because we love it, although it can be handy for album covers! I like spending time with family and friends doing normal stuff. Music can be pretty anti-social at times because most people want to socialize at weekends after a hard-working week and that is when we musicians are usually out working, so I do a lot of catching up in between tours," he tells me. "I don't go out watching bands much, maybe occasionally, but the trouble with this is that it is a bit of a busman's holiday. I like going to the theatre because it is a form of live performance that I don't work in and I don't sit there thinking I would do things differently if it was me, as is often the case if I'm watching a live band. I do have varied musical taste though so it's good to listen to music outside of the genre I work in."

Thompson has recorded a lot of albums with 'Smoke and Mirrors' being album number thirteen. "There are probably earlier releases that I prefer to forget. The album has elements of blues, classic rock and singer/songwriter material which is really what my style is all about. I used to play a lot heavier music, but I guess I have mellowed," he chuckles. "Having said that, when I get together with the band, we can definitely still rock out as is evident on previous albums like, 'Transcendence' and 'Strange

Brew'. The way 'Smoke and Mirrors' came about is pretty organic and it pretty much reflects where I am at right now. When the pandemic hit, we obviously had to cut short our tour. We had a very busy schedule booked as it was my fiftieth year of playing live music! What I was trying to do with the album was continue with the music somehow even though it was not possible to get together with the guys in the band. It's a guitar album but the guitar doesn't take away from the song which is the main focus as opposed to just a couple of verses until you get to the guitar solo! It is a mature album. You know, I'm getting on a bit and although music keeps you young, I didn't want to be someone in my sixties still trying to leap around and play the guitar with my teeth or something like I did when I was nineteen!



This album for me is like I'm not trying to prove anything. It is just me, my songs, my thoughts, my tunes, my music. If people like it, then great," he says with spirit. This album is different in many ways because he recorded it by himself in isolation. "I have done that before but previously it had been more acoustic work. This time, I had all these songs that were suitable to be played with my band, but I couldn't get together with the band during the pandemic, so I ended up doing it pretty much all by myself," he sighs. The previous studio album, 'Transcendence' was recorded mostly in Poland with his rhythm section guys who live in Krakow. "It is

normal for me to record my own demos for band members to learn so I guess I started out with this project just putting down the songs. The challenge then was to make finished masters of the songs as if we had recorded them with the band. Although this is just my own work, I did want it to sound like the band because at the time it was not possible for anyone to see the band live. So, this is a band sounding album, but it is just me making all the noise," he smiles.

'Smoke and Mirrors' was recorded here in Thompson's studio and produced by the man himself. "Having input from others is obviously a luxury I didn't have on this occasion. My production skills stem from way back, slowly developing over the years. Back in the early eighties my career hit a bit of a low spot and a friend of mine, David Pickering-Pick who runs a beautiful studio in the Cotswolds by the name of FFG allowed me to have open ended free time in there to learn the ropes. I had previously recorded with David. We always had a lot of fun experimenting with sounds like reverse cymbals and guitars, breathy vocals, mic placements etc. I remember doing a lot of crazy sound effects back in the day. Anyway, David gave me free reign in his studio. I basically found my way around the equipment and recorded a whole album in the process," he explains to me. He then ended up being an engineer in the studio. "I owe David for giving me that opportunity and I learnt such a lot from him and the experience. My own set up is fairly basic but it is old school music and if you know what you're doing with EQ, compression, effects and so on, you can achieve great results. I mean, you get to know what works for you. This particular album was recorded over the Eighteen-month period of the pandemic

in 2020 – 2021. I wasn't in there the whole time. Like everyone else, I did my fair share of watching Netflix too." Thompson loves the creative process, writing and recording songs from scratch.



"I think that is the biggest buzz for me," he enthuses. The album presented a few challenges. The song 'Easy Money' for example, in order for it to sound like the band he used some of the sounds and riffs from his Polish rhythm section, Artur Malik on drums and Jacek Chruscinski on bass. To complete it he had to find a way to match his own playing with theirs. "Not an easy task but I think the result is pretty close to what they sound like. There is definitely a bit of production or cheating if you like with the drums. I am primarily a guitarist but outside of that a bit of a jack of all trades but these guys in my band are some of the best out there in my opinion so I had to analyse their styles and try and put it together. 'Easy Money' started unusually with the drums. The easy bit was adding the guitar parts. I put in a few ninth chords in the turn-around and added some subtle string parts. The strings were also a bit of a challenge to get authentic sounding. When it came to the guitar solo, I cranked up the Les Paul through a Marshall and deliberately kept it melodic. When you add all those factors together you are instantly in Gary Moore territory, which is no bad thing. I guess it was a bit of a highlight when that came together. Easy Money was the first track I attempted, and it made me realize that the

approach was working. I had also set myself a bit of a challenge with these string parts. You know, I didn't want to just hold down a chord on a synth, so I wrote individual parts, most noticeable on Moment of Choice.

Obviously, I couldn't stretch to London Philharmonic, so they are samples played on a keyboard, used sparingly for effect."

Live the Thompson band have always done better in mainland Europe than in the UK. He signed to a record label in the early nineties based in Switzerland which was great because it meant regular touring. "We did well in Switzerland, Croatia and Poland in particular. We had a headlining slot at the Jerry Ricks Blues Festival in Croatia in 2019 which was brilliant. I am so glad we got to do that before everything ground to a halt. We are back there in the summer this year, so we are looking forward to that. We have Upton Blues Festival in the UK and some other gigs booked for later in the year. We are also talking with promoters and trying to set up more European tours again. Live shows are slowly returning so we hope to get out there and enjoy ourselves. We are not looking for pop stardom, but we do love connecting with the audience. As long as there is a progression and people are enjoying what we do, I guess we will keep going."

He also thinks that some things have changed due to the pandemic. "Some clubs have closed permanently. Some are still not getting the numbers back in. Also, I think the pandemic gave everyone a chance to reflect on what they wanted. There was a time when I would play just about anywhere and everywhere and for that time, I think it was fair enough, but I don't need to do that now. I know some musicians that have more or less packed it in. It sounds crazy but self-

confidence took a little bit of a knock too after such a long layoff. I am glad to say that it is all coming good. I'm a bit of an all or nothing kind of guy so if I can keep moving forward then great. I would rather walk away than go backwards. I have been making a living with music on and off for most of my life now.



This didn't always involve playing live," he adds. Quite early on he decided that if he was going to get into this business then he needed to know more about all the aspects of the business. "I learned the recording process, I did 'Live' sound engineering and studio production, I did some work for a record company learning about copyright, licensing etc. I've booked my own gigs, created my own web site. Mostly out of necessity it is just the way things have turned out. I was always looking for agents and managers and all the help I could find but I wasn't going to sit around doing nothing while I waited! You have to make a living, so you do whatever it takes. For example, I did music for computer games. If you ever played 'Grand Prix 2', I am the dude rocking out on guitar while you're racing around the track! It is what it is, no hype or massive industry backing. I have my own little cottage industry and that is pretty satisfying really. However, these days I don't want to be spread so thin. I have stopped some of the bits and pieces of work that I used to fill my time with chasing the dollar. I am now

just dividing my time between my own music and one other band I am the guitarist for." He thinks that we are all getting used to an uncertain future. "I guess in a way it always was, but there was an illusion of certainty. If all things go according to plan, we have some nice gigs ahead this year. I also want to go back into the studio with the band. I want to revisit some of my best ever songs and continue to write new material. I have enough going on to keep me happy right now. The business side of things may be changing. Free streaming platforms and the way in which people consume music is definitely presenting problems for musicians that rely on their music for their livelihoods, but music will always survive. Art separates humans from the animal kingdom! People will always want to express themselves. Everything is crazy but I am optimistic that ultimately a new business will emerge. I do hope that 'live' music will be part of that because it is a common language that brings people together. It's a two-way conversation, you know, when you have a conversation with someone, you may make them laugh, you may inspire them or cause them to think, you may just enjoy the shared connection, you may excite them, you may show your appreciation. All this goes on between a performer and the audience. Humans are meant to be social/relational beings," concludes Keith, bringing an end to our conversation.

'Smoke and Mirrors' is an excellent album and is out right now digital only from all the usual platforms, check it out.

Photos: Jan Thompson - Photography

Check Keith out at:

www.densitymusic.com

<https://keiththompson.bandcamp.com/album/smoke-and-mirrors>
<https://www.facebook.com/KeithThompsonBand>
<https://www.youtube.com/c/KeithThompson>