

FALLUJAH – INTERVIEW TNT RADIO ROCK – BY JOSE A. MARROQUI

Kyle Schaefer (vocalist)

First, thank you for your time and congratulations on "Xenotaph," which will be released next June. How do you feel about this release, having already released a few singles and heard the reaction from your fans?

Everything seems to be going well! Reception has been very positive, and if people like these first two songs then I can only imagine what they'll think of the full album. The craziest songs are still yet to come!

Your previous album, "Empyrean," gave you a strong push, garnering excellent reviews from the press and the public. Now you're releasing your sixth album, "Xenotaph." Did you feel any internal pressure when creating this new work?

I would actually say the opposite - I think the great reception to Empyrean actually put us at ease and gave us a lot of confidence going into this new one. I personally felt very empowered to express myself in an authentic way during the creative process of Xenotaph, and I felt LESS pressure as a result. This album is very true to my own tastes and I think anyone who enjoys the same bands as me will find a lot to love here.

Another new development coming with this work is the addition of new members to Fallujah. Sam Mooradian joins you on guitars, and I believe, live, Kevin Alexander on drums and Lucas Koughan on bass. I'm not sure if I'm right. What are the reasons for these changes, and what do you think they've contributed to the band's sound?

Yes, this is our first album with our new guitarist Sam Mooradian, who had a significant hand in the writing of the album! A few songs in particular have Sam's riffs all over them. Kevin was hired as a session drummer for this album, but he did an amazing job, which was not an easy task considering it's our first album ever without our original drummer Andrew Baird. Lucas is a great bassist who has been playing with us on tour, but the album bass tracks are actually all by Evan Brewer, who also appeared on our previous album Empyrean. I think the music we managed to record with this lineup will speak for itself!

The recording of this new album was largely done in your own homes. How did this impact the feel of the album? Do you feel that this intimacy and flexibility allowed you to capture nuances that might have been lost in a traditional studio?

It certainly gave us more time and freedom to elaborate and refine our ideas during tracking! I personally let the writing process bleed into the recording process by quite a bit, with all "demo" recordings being made in such a way that they could also be used as final studio tracks. I have worked in a home studio environment for many years so it felt perfectly natural to me. Sometimes it's good to have a trustworthy producer providing input on the writing and arrangements like Mark Lewis did with our previous album, but for Xenotaph I already knew exactly how I wanted everything to go.

"Xenotaph" takes your sound to new extremes of technique and melody. Were there moments in the songwriting process where you felt you were pushing the songs too far, or perhaps pushing your own limits? How did you decide how far you could push your sound without losing the essence of Fallujah?

I feel like everything fell into place very naturally with this album. We just wanted to write music that felt the as exciting, dynamic and balanced as possible to our own ears, and these songs are what resulted. There were some moments where we took inspiration from previous Fallujah material (mainly prompted by the newer members like me and Sam, funny enough) but overall I think the essence is just inherently there because of who we are as musicians and fans of music. We're still taking inspiration from a lot of the same bands that inspired us and previous Fallujah members many years ago.

The album has a very strong narrative focus, almost like a science fiction novel. What came first: the story or the music?

I had a vague idea of the concept before we started writing, but for the most part I let the instrumental music come first! The direction in which the music unfolds over the course of the album guided the arc of my storyline quite a bit.

How did the development of the concept influence the construction of the song structures and emotions?

The song structures came first, but there were a few considerations, such as trying to capture a particular atmospheric vibe with the opening track. Overall I just wrote the lyrics to fit into what was happening with the music.

The story of "Xenotaph" is deeply existential, exploring the ideas of deception, loss of identity, and false awakenings. Were there any points where you felt emotionally challenged by the material you were creating?

Yes, it was a lot to balance! Writing lyrics is always hard just from the perspective of trying to flow well while also sounding interesting and meaningful, so working in an entire emotional story within a complex abstract world was certainly a challenge. Sometimes many hours were spent just trying to figure out one or two lines.

We know that the concept of "Xenotaph" draws on influences like Children of Dune and other sci-fi stories. What kind of universe or experience did you want to build with these references? What emotions or ideas did you hope to convey to the listener through this narrative?

The story begins with the death of the narrator, when he awakens in another dimension as a surreal sort of afterlife far beyond human comprehension. I wanted it to feel very alien and otherworldly, like something nobody could have imagined, rather than anything close to traditional depictions of heaven or hell. I wanted this album's story to feel like it's in the realm of science fiction while still maintaining emotion and relatability due to the fact that death is a concept everyone can relate with.

Although you've already released a few singles in which we can explore the sounds of "Xenotaph," I think the opening track, "In Stars We Drown," includes small doses of each essence of this album. Immersive atmospheres with ethereal guitars, clean and delicate vocals that break into more abrupt rhythm changes and different vocal registers. It also serves as a bridge, connecting with the single "Kaleidoscopic Waves." Do you think "In Stars We Drown" serves as an intro to "Xenotaph"?

Yes absolutely! That song was deliberately made to be the album's intro, and I remember saying YEARS ago that our next album after Empyrean should start with extended sections of clean guitars and soundscapes just as this one does.

"Step Through the Portal and Breathe" seems like a brilliant track to me. Behind that extreme forcefulness lie many nuances: the bass taking center stage at times, an excellent, very electrifying guitar solo, and jazzy passages... For me, it's one of the album's highlights. Tell me about this song.

That's my favorite song on the album, and will be released as the third single in one week from the time that I'm writing this! It's a long, epic song and I think it perfectly encapsulates what we were trying to achieve with this album as a whole. High energy and fast-paced, but with tons of striking dynamics and constant surprises worked into the song structure. I like to think of it as a 5-minute death metal song with an extra prog-rock epilogue added onto the end.

Another song I really liked because of its structure is "The Obsidian Architect." It has very apocalyptic sections, and is perhaps one of the most extreme on the album. One of the greatest achievements of "Xenotaph" is how it transitions between extreme brutality and moments of atmospheric beauty. How did you manage that balance in production and songwriting to make the album feel cohesive and dynamic?

Thanks! That's one of our favorites as well, we decided to debut that one very early as a not-yet-released track during our live performances last year. We just spent a lot of time listening through the song structures while we were writing, and were constantly moving sections around in order to achieve the flow that sounded the most exciting and balanced to us.

Throughout your career, Fallujah has avoided easy labels. After an album like "Xenotaph," do you feel you fit into a particular genre or scene, or do you think you're carving out your own space?

We're definitely moving further into "progressive" territory with this one but I'm fine with whatever labels people want to give it. Progressive technical death metal sounds right to me!

Looking ahead, now that "Xenotaph" is finished, what musical or conceptual territories would you like to explore in Fallujah's next steps? Are there any ideas or sounds you feel are still waiting to be discovered by you?

I'm sure we will change up the format for our next release. The official path is yet to be determined, but I could see us either doing something short and snappy like an EP, or go the opposite route and write a huge double album with more slow atmospheric sections. We'll just start writing soon and see where it takes us!

With Xenotaph set to be released on June 13th, what plans do you have to accompany its release? Are there any tours, special performances, or promotional activities already in the works? How do you imagine the rest of the year for Fallujah on stage?

Nothing has been announced yet, but we've got many tours in the works. You can expect to see us all over the world within the next year! Until then, you can watch me, Scott and Sam all playing these songs (along with the rest of the Fallujah discography) live on Twitch every week!

"After all these years pushing the boundaries of technical death metal, what would you like Xenotaph to represent for Fallujah and the scene in general? What mark do you hope to leave with this album, both on your fans and on bands that follow?"

This album was very directly inspired by a number of legendary death metal/prog metal albums that massively influenced us and convinced us to dedicate our entire lives to this music. Records from bands like Necrophagist, Cynic, The Faceless, and many more. Even if Xenotaph never achieves that same level of recognition, I hope that this album can affect someone else in the same way that those albums affected us.

Thanks