



A water fix renewed Xavier Rudd's energy

By Steve Newton

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When Xavier Rudd picks up the phone in the famed surfing mecca of Bells Beach, Australia, he sounds a lot healthier than he did the last time the *Straight* called him. At that point, in February of 2008, he was suffering from a terrible flu while enduring the bitter cold of Saskatchewan. But he soldiered on with the tour and put on a stellar show at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre a week later. He was still feeling crappy after that gig, but that didn't stop him from inviting a passel of guests backstage, where a lucky dozen or so were presented with autographed boomerangs. A tuckered-looking Rudd was found bundled up in a dressing room, friends and fans gathered around him, many fortifying themselves with B.C. bud.

While Rudd wasn't seen toking that particular night, he has been known to enthusiastically dance with Mary Jane, and you wouldn't expect anything less from a pal of celebrity stoner Matthew McConaughey. Rudd contributed several songs to McConaughey's 2008 movie *Surfer, Dude*, which also boasted appearances by such famously pro-pot talents as Woody Harrelson and Willie Nelson.

"There's been times in my life when I kind of overused it," admits Rudd, "but these days I try and respect what it is and use it more occasionally." One of those occasions might well have been the recording of "Blackwater", the earthy opening track off his latest CD, *Dark Shades of Blue*. The song begins with a squalling note of feedback from Rudd that makes you wonder if he had Jimi Hendrix's "Foxy Lady" in mind at the time.

"I don't think I'm worthy to even go there," replies Rudd in deference to the psychedelic-rock guitar legend. "But to even hear you touch on that gives me goosebumps, so thank you."

Rudd may be a tad too modest about his effectiveness on guitar, because there's no shortage of impressive fretwork on *Dark Shades of Blue*, most of it coming via his prized collection of Weissenborns.

"It's got a liquid kinda quality that almost reminds me of a stream," raves Rudd of the Weissenborn, a lap-slide guitar that is also favoured by David Lindley, Steve Dawson, and Ben Harper. "The way the notes sort of translate into each other, it reminds me of running water, and I'm very much a water person."

Rudd was able to get his H2O fix by recording *Dark Shades of Blue* at Studios 301 in Byron Bay, Australia. It was the first CD he'd made Down Under in several years, his previous, *White Moth*, being recorded mostly in Gibsons, B.C., where his management is based.

"We came home to the summer," he recalls, "so I was sort of sleepin' outside with my dog by the fire every night and then recording through the day and swimming in the ocean and surfing. I just had a real strong energy about me at the time it was recorded, and I can hear it in the album."

That energy was channelled into the 31-year-old's heaviest, most intense album ever. Mixed by Joe Barresi (Tool, Queens of the Stone Age), the new disc still sports didgeridus, vocals by Aboriginal tribesmen, and environmental-activist themes, but with powerhouse drummer Dave Tolley along for the ride, the overall feel is more primal, guitar-driven rock than earthy Outback folk.

"*Dark Shades* came about during a time of change," Rudd points out, "a time where I really went within myself and unlocked some doors that I had closed, and walked into some darker rooms and turned the light on, you know, and sorta dusted off the shelves. I think I needed to do that.

"And it was interesting how that translated musically," he continues. "It's an album at a time, spiritually, that I'll never forget. And it's interesting that now, after doing that, I'm writing probably the brightest, sunniest music I've ever written. I'll be touring in Canada and America with a South African band, which is quite a contrast to what I was doing."

Rudd will be accompanied by bassist Isaac Moloantoa (aka Tio) and drummer Andile Nqubezelo, the former rhythm section of murdered reggae icon Lucky Dube. That's a big change from the days when the self-sufficient Aussie would pull off his one-man-band trick, surrounding himself with an array of didgeridus and percussion instruments that he'd deftly juggle along with guitars and vocals. Rudd's definitely psyched about how the new players might alter the vibe of his live performance.

"We've only rehearsed for one week," he explains, "and it was one of the most incredible musical weeks of my life—it was bizarre. I found it hard to concentrate on what I was doing because they were so interesting and so cool. Tio plays fretless bass, and Andile's got that real sort of 6/8 African style, so he's a completely different style drummer to Dave [Tolley]. I don't know exactly what kind of set list we'll do, but when we were rehearsin' it was just super bouncy and super groovy. I think people will have a hard time not moving."

Xavier Rudd plays the Commodore Ballroom Wednesday to Friday (July 1 to 3).

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