

I first heard of Fates Warning back in 1986 with their release of "Awaken the Guardian." I picked up the CD (which was still a novelty at the time) and although I enjoyed the music, it just didn't "grab" me. Fast forward to 1989 and I heard the band again. This time it was their new release, Perfect Symmetry. "Wow! What happened?" I asked myself after listening. Well for me what happened was the drumming! This is no critique of original drummer Steve Zimmerman, who is a fine musician in his own right, but the band's music hit me in a fresh way and that was due in large part to Mark Zonder. His beats and technique flowed in a symmetry (perfect, yes, pun intended) of groove and complexity, playing patterns that made you go "huh?" but still grooving hard enough to get your toe tapping or head banging. I became a fan. Their next album, Parallels is arguably one of their finest. It seemed those four elusive ingredients of production, instrumental skill, songwriting and vocals really came together on this album. In the middle of it all, was Mark Zonder. I had the opportunity to talk to Mark during band rehearsals with the original Parallels lineup. They're touring to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the release. He talked about that time period with the band, recording Parallels, where he's at now and where he's heading. A pleasant drive up the 101 on a warm spring day took me to Mark's rehearsal studio, Bill's Place in North Hollywood. During a break between setting up gear and rehearsal we sat down together over lunch for a quick conversation.

Chuck Parker: Mark, what were the recording sessions like for Parallels and was there a certain "feeling" with the material or a certain "something" in the air that you guys felt like, "this is the stuff?"

Mark Zonder: Well, we went to Toronto, actually it was sort of the opposite, we were working with Terry Brown, who did all the Rush stuff and that was great and that'd got us all excited. We were recording at a place called Metal Works, which was (Canadian band) Triumph's studio, so you walk in and see all these Triumph banners and that kind of stuff. But, it was one of those things where half the material was sort of written and we thought we'd go to Toronto to finish it up, work as a band and it sort of turned into a big nightmare. It took a lot longer to finish than we thought and we saw the seasons change. So, I knew that the songs were great, and when I heard what Terry was doing with the drum sound and how things were moving along and how the record was going to sound and how the songs were sounding, I knew it was going to be good.

CP: That actually leads into my next question which is, how involved were you in getting the drum sounds and what was it to work with someone like Terry Brown, that in the prog world is a pretty big icon?

MZ: Actually, he brought in a drum tech, Syl Coutu, I think Syl works at Mapex now but I'm not sure. He's the one who got the sounds to be honest with you. It was a classic 1980s, 1990s kind of session where the drummer just comes in, someone else takes care of it and you play.

CP: That lets you focus on playing pretty much.

MZ: Yeah, I'm not one of these guys that need to tune their own drums. Good tuning is good tuning. Syl was phenomenal, Syl was unbelievable. I mean he's a great drummer. Honestly, a better drummer than I was and it was great. That's where that sound came from. That was a really big kit too at the time.

CP: The full on double bass

MZ: Yeah, it was 24" kicks and 10", 12", 14", 16" on the floor kind of thing and he got a great sound out of it.

CP: GMS drums?

MZ: (Nods head yes)

CP: Parallels saw the use of electronic percussion and samples. How did that come about and what do you think about the advances in that technology since then since you're going to be recreating those sounds?

MZ: Well, it's interesting. I always thought for "progressive rock", nobody was really doing it but me.

CP: Peart?

MZ: He does. But, none of those other guys really did that. In the interim between Warlord and Fates Warning, I was playing with a million bands, I hooked up the members of the band Animation. I was playing an all electronic kit. I sold my acoustic kit, I bought an Akai S900 sampler (which I still have) for \$2100, I'll never forget this, and I played an all pad kit with cymbals and that's where I learned being tied in to the click with sequencers because the keyboards are sequenced and it was the whole nine yards and that's where it all started from and was just a natural thing to move that right into Fates Warning especially when it worked.

CP: I have to say, I've heard it overused, but the way you use it, it's sort of sparse, it really enhances musically and adds an effect that becomes part of the song.

MZ: Well, the thing that Peart does, that's fine. He uses the vibraphone thing. But, when he uses it, he turns, and he's on the electronics. I try and put them together, utilizing both acoustic and electronic together to create a unique sound.

CP: Right.

MZ: Also, a lot of the Slavior stuff, there's a lot of electronics in that, that are used with the kick and snare and used *in* it and I thought that was like a really cool, progressive thing to do.

CP: Well, that's one thing about your playing is that you have the progressive concepts, but the next minute you're like, boom, boom, boom, you're four on the floor, you know? And it let's people tap their foot, because as a drummer myself, I know when people can't tap their feet, they lose interest.

MZ: Like I say in my clinic, I ask people what the greatest riff of all time is and it's not Weckl's riff, even though those are amazing as well, it's four quarter notes because your grandmother can get it. I remember in Fates Warning concerts, The Eleventh Hour, when we kick into it and I just play that four thing I play, that's when everybody goes nuts! No one goes nuts for 5/6, you know what I mean?

CP: Let's talk a little bit about technique and gear. From that time period, you've gradually diminished your kit from a large double bass kit to basically a four piece with a few extra cymbals. How does a smaller kit effect your playing/creativity?

MZ: Well, if it was good enough for Buddy, it's good enough for me! It makes me...it pulls things out of me because it's basically I'm using the kick as another tom, more like musical notes, so you develop a style where the kick is used not just on "1", you know what I mean? And it's not just the time keeper, it's used within the fills so it's developed the independence quite well, and I've just been playing it for so long, that I'm used to it and I create things. It also forces me to be more creative in different ways. Maybe changing up not so many notes per say, maybe changing up the phrasing making little groupings that speak musically instead of (mimics 8th note triplet fill). I've never, even when I had a bigger kit, you've never heard me play a roll that way (mimics triplet roll again). It just...time and a place, but it's not really my thing and I sort of passed up a lot of things that were the "rudiments" of heavy metal drumming, you know, a lot of those double bass kind of filly things. I have my own things, I didn't really cop those. I know some guys have them down, you know? Like it's the bible kind of a thing. But, I just thought with a smaller kit and a double pedal, there was more room. Also, you include in there the electronics, and it just opens me up to using different things. Like on this last Slavior demo, I have a riff where I'm actually playing the rim of one of the drums. It's like in a break down. It's like whipping out a wood block kind of thing. It's really just expanding. A lot of that came from Dave Garabaldi, because I'm a huge Dave Garabaldi fan. It's the stickings that make it. I know he has a bigger kit than I do, but you don't need nine toms. It's the stickings and how they coordinate to each other. And again, you know I always said the dynamics aren't necessarily about hitting. Some guys think dynamics are just hitting a smaller crash. But the dynamics are: the snare drum sounds really loud here because the two notes after it are little hi hat taps. Now, if I went crash, crash and snare, the snare's not going to seem as loud because there's all that other stuff going on. So to me, coming up with dynamic things,

and a space and a feel and a groove is more important than “the riff.” But, I’m also a firm believer in making the groove like, so cool and unbelievable, that you don’t have to play chops and riffs and riffs and chops, because your groove is so cool. You know, it’s sort of like a (Jeff) Porcaro thing. On the Slavior record, there’s a song called Another Planet and it’s a left hand playing a cowbell, simple stuff when you break it down, but when you hear it you go “wow!” And that’s to me more than boom, tap, fill, boom, tap, fill.

CP: I’ve always like how you’ve integrated that.

MZ: It was a big door opener for me. And I was studying the whole Latin - Cuban thing. Afro - Cuban, Latin - Cuban, what ever, all that kind of stuff, in the stickings. Especially like Garabaldi’s book, Future Sounds. I ripped him off blind, it’s not even funny (laughs). But, I made it mine.

CP: Well, you’re like the linear guy of metal, or progressive.

MZ: Not a lot of guys are doing this kind of playing. You know, it’s funny, because you hear all this progressive stuff, I don’t hear to many other guys doing it. It does take some practicing and time to develop it. But I always thought that is what progressive means, to progress.

CP: You don’t hear a lot of the linear stuff.

MZ: No. To me, that was always the stuff. That separates the men from the boys. A lot of drummers, I call them “BAR” drummers. They play Beats, they hit the Accents and they hit some Rolls. There’s no interplay within the kit itself.

CP: Or within the notes of the tune sometime.

MZ: No, exactly. Now, a lot of guys are listening melodically to what’s going on, so...

CP: It’s a good thing.

MZ: Yeah! I’ve never understood, well I understood, ‘cause you’ve got to practice. It’s all about the practicing sometimes. You’ve got to practice so...

CP: I know you’ve become a DW endorser in the last year, and you’ve been a Zildjian endorser for years, but I see some different cymbals up. Want to give us a run down of what you’re using for the Fates Parallels reunion?

MZ: Well, I use the same basic set up. I use my 12” band hi hats that I’ve had forever that I don’t even know where the hell they came from, but I love these 12” hi hats. I use a 13” K/Z combination on the right hand side, Two different chinas, not that they vary, depends on what breaks. An 18” and 19” (crash) to have two

different voicings. Then I use an 11" Oriental China splash that I turn upside down and I use an 8" K splash that I turn upside down. Now that's sort of the standard thing. The thing with Fates where you saw the new cymbals were the two crash cymbals that I use. At home, I have the Custom K Dark that are just unbelievable. I mean, recording wise, they're great! They don't quite have that live projection and quite honestly, I'm afraid I'm going to beat the crap out of them and break them. I play hard at home, it's not that I don't, it doesn't quite have that projection. It records great, because it's got overheads and that kind of thing, but for like a stage kind of thing I brought two other sets up, I brought the Hybrid thing, the 19" and 18", and I also brought up these A Projection ones that I had from a long time ago that I actually took to Europe to play with Joacim Cans (the singer from Hammerfall) when I did his solo record, and those are loud! To be honest with you, if I break 'em, I break 'em. The Ks as you know, with Zildjian, every cymbal's different. So if you got stuff...and it's not even that it sounds so much better than anybody else's, I think I'm just used to the way it sounds.

CP: Or even a feel. I know there's a certain feel.

MZ: Yeah. Well, you're hitting metal and there's a give and a take and there's that kind of thing. When it's all said and done, I can sit there and look at my kids and go, "your Dad was a Zildjian endorser." Everything else is cool, but nothing started in the 1600s! I love Garrison, I love John Goode, and Don, those guys are great. It ain't 1600s, I'm sorry. To me, when I was growing up, there was no DW. When I was growing up, there was Zildjian. It's like, that was it. There was no question. It's not even like Ferrari, Porsche, or whatever, it was Zildjian! Back then, all there was, was 14" New Beat hi hats, you have to remember when you think about this I was 1965. So, 14" New Beat hi hats, 18" ride. They didn't have that other stuff. They didn't have splashes and Chinas and all that. Zildjian has always been the one, whether it was Mike Morris, who signed me, to whoever was there. Now it's Kirsten and everyone in Norwell. All of those guys have treated me so well. They have been big supporters of my clinics as well as Drum Workshop, Remo and Vater. All great, first class companies with great people working with them. I value my relationship with these companies.

CP: Again, that personal connection.

MZ: Like I say in my clinics, it's about the relationship. Matt Connors over at Remo used to work for me at Bill's Place, plus his buddy Pete, who's a drummer with a couple of bands that have been pretty successful. Pete worked for me and Pete was moving on and Matt was coming from back east, wanted to come to L.A. for the music scene even though he's a college grad and all this kind of stuff, and worked for me. I turned him on to Mike Morris who was at Zildjian, now at Remo, cause Matt needed a job besides the studio. I was, "here you go, give Mike a call." Now he's head of A & R over at Remo. But the industry has really shifted. Back in the day, it was all about who could sell the most records, it

doesn't matter if he's not a nice person, it doesn't matter if he *might* play our stuff, we're giving him stuff. Now, you could have a hit record on the radio, they want to know where the next one's coming from before they give you anything. It's a different ball game. I guess maybe putting 30 years in says something. Let's face it, a lot of these bands that have big hit records, no one knows who the drummer really is and when the band breaks up or they switch drummers, no one even knows, so why should they give this guy stuff? The real truth of the matter is he's not going on to a bigger band, he's done. Drummers need to realize that it's all about business.

CP: What's the ride you're using?

MZ: That was a 20" K Custom Dark. A jazz cymbal but I love the bell. Remember the Earth ride? Loved the Earth ride, but a little too sterile. This K is coming back a little bit. It doesn't have a whole lot of shimmer, but it's got great stick definition and that bell, I love the bell. It's a perfect combination of an Earth ride and a K. Kinda in between. One of the other rides I use is a K flat top and it sounds great, but that bell really works well with cowbell and stuff like that. I fell in love with it and I haven't taken it off. I'm not a drum collector, but cymbals, different story. I have what I have because you just don't get rid of cymbals. I have stuff from years ago. That Earth ride I was talking about I got for 50 bucks. I'm a big loyalty person. I just have what I need and it works and I'm done. I don't need anymore. I don't need six kits. You know, I have the best. I don't need another snare. If I want another snare, I'd get another snare. I can make it sound however I need it to sound to do my thing. I have a 13"x5" that I use to my left, but I don't use it with Fates Warning, but if I need to cut a tune and they want that really perky thing, I got the drums for it.

CP: You're going to use the smaller kit configuration with the Fates tour?

MZ: Yeah, four drums, I don't even need a second kick. I have my drums, I have my samples that I need. I took them back off the S900.

CP: Are you using the original samples from the Parallels album?

MZ: Yeah, what I did, since things have come such a long way, I just played them into my computer physically on the output of the Akai, not like downloading a file. I played it, I recorded it and then I manipulated it a little bit and did what I needed to do. Then I have this new thing Yamaha has called a DTX. I used to use a Drumkat that was awesome but it weighed 900 pounds and was big and then I'd need the sampler to hold the samples and I was using an MPC1000. It was smokin', it has an 80 gig hard drive, but I have two pieces. Now, to go to Europe, how's that going to happen? So, the timing, because Stienberg, who I use all their software with Cubase and Nuendo and I've been an endorser there for years, is owned by Yamaha, so one thing led to another and I've been hooked up with this thing (the DTX). You can load your wav files right into it from a little

thumb drive. I sample it through my computer, put the thumb drive into the DTX and the pads are there. It doesn't have massive output but it has enough for what I need. The click is built in, so I just program each song to what tempos I need. The samples are all there. I can hook my extra pads into it and it's a thing that weighs like 9 pounds, goes in a back pack and I'll take it to Europe and I'll be able to play these festivals and have all the sounds because when you take away the electronics, I really think you take away something.

CP: Well, they've become part of the song.

CP: Ok, eternal technique question...traditional or matched? I know you use both, what determines which grip?

MZ: I play traditional all the time, I love playing traditional, I'd rather play traditional. On the Slavior record, I said "ok, do the whole thing matched, just so you'll develop it." And I spent time practicing and developing it. The matched is good, when you have that second snare here (motions off to his left). You know, sometimes it's tough to get in there (with traditional). But in Parallels and in Fates Warning, everything is traditional. I'd rather play traditional. I go to matched when I have to, a second snare that's over there, the pads I can play (traditional). It's a little weird sometimes, but no, traditional.

CP: What do you look for in a relationship with the bass player, being that you've played with several different ones, even within the same band?

MZ: Honestly? I don't, they follow me (smiles). I never have bass in my monitor. I have one guitar, just because I need to follow that sometimes even though I'm playing to a click, and they should be following me, it's nice to hear. Phillip Bynoe (current Slavior bassist) is a little different. But you have to remember too, the Slavior thing was developed with drums first. But he's so good, he makes me sound better. One of the few bass players that really make you sound better.

CP: One of my favorite quotes is attributed to Pat Metheny, and it goes: "when you're the best musician in the band, it's time to find a new band."

MZ: Oh no, I'll be honest with you, that's sort of, I don't want to say that's been my life story, but I've done that.

CP: It's like each band has progressively challenged you.

MZ: You get in, you're the last guy in and then it's time to go. Oh yeah. No, it's playing with better people.

CP: What's your current listening tastes and are there any current drummers that have caught your ear?

MZ: Honestly? I really don't listen to music. I have a gazillion CDs. Not that I listen to myself so much but, nothing really excites me. The last thing that I put in the car was Foreigner - Vital Information. I mean, great singer, great songs. I'm not really a "drummer listener" guy.

CP: Song guy?

MA: Yeah. And it's not like "oh, if I listen to something I'll be influenced." I don't have that much time. I'm sort of burnt on music in general if that makes sense. I love the drums and my mind's there, but I'm not a "oh, I'm a fan of this band and I'm up on"...I couldn't tell you a new band if it sat down at the table! Not that I'm proud of that, that's not what I'm saying. It doesn't influence me in anyway. I had my influences growing up, I took it, I put my time in, I did the study. One thing that's happened with me is, the more I practice, the more I realize what I don't know. Like I say in my clinic, if you think you know it all, you don't know anything and when you don't have a clue and the doors are opening, that's when you know you're on the right path.

CP: I like to say, "humility is remaining teachable." As long as you understand and know that there's always going to be something to learn then you can always progress.

MZ: To me, it's always about the progression. I always wanted to be better. Just for the enjoyment of playing something new. You know inside when you start playing something, you go "oh man, oh my god."

CP: I learned a simple linear pattern this week, Foot, R, L, Foot, RLRL, but played on different voicings...

MZ: Oh yeah, you're an animal.

CP: Pick it up to sixteenth notes at 120 bpm and it's like, "oh my god."

MZ: It's this intense groove, that if you watch someone else play, you go, "how did they ever come up with that?" But when you break it down, it's like o.k. That's why I sit down with sixteenth notes, like when I come up with certain patterns, what do I need to fill in the blank? Well, it'd be cool if that sixteenth note became a thirtysecond and I doubled it with my left hand and made it more of a roll kind of thing. You know, I mean all those little things, they're all there you know?

CP: What's next after the Parallels reunion?

MZ: We're playing dates through July basically. The Sweden Rock Festival, Bang Your Head Festival. There's a gig in Connecticut at the Webster Theater,

sort of a warm up. Supposedly two, one in San Antonio, one in Houston, two Texas back to back. I'm just busy recording, I mean, I'm really turning up the whole recording other peoples stuff 'cause I've got the studio, I've got all the analog stuff. It's time to go to work. It's time to make money. I hate to say it. I'd like to be an "artist", but I'm not nineteen. I've lived with the cockroaches and the big warehouse with everybody and we all used that community shower. We've all eaten salad off the same plate. I've done it, you know? Really gotta take care of business. I really want to develop that as a viable job. My plan, hopefully, is to move it up the line. I've done a lot for people already, different people that have contacted me. More people who know about it who tell two friends, who tell two friends... To me, the best way of getting out there is being busy. You can't go around spending your life putting flyers on people's cars.

CP: Just get out there and play.

MZ: More than playing, be able to adapt. This day and age, especially living in San Diego, I'm not going to go gigging. I've been fortunate enough that when I was single and at the studio, things were good and I was buying gear, all the right stuff. I've got a great relationship with Summit Audio and Lauten Audio. I've got everything you need to do drums. The thing I've really hit across the country, as you know, you've got a million guys got studios in their houses, they can't record drums. They can record everything else, some can do it really, really well, some are just amateurs, but if they can get analog, in your face drum sounds, for the guy that really worked out the songs, it makes your project a little bit more viable than the old drum machine or that crappy drum sound. I'm using a guy name Joe Marlett who I met in San Diego who's a platinum award winning engineer guy. Great guy, totally humble, but getting real deal sounds you know? Anybody who wants that kind of a thing, on their song, their record, their project, whatever..

CP: And you can do it from the convenience of you home.

MZ: Exactly. I don't have to leave home, I have great quality control over it and they're getting what they want. My big thing on that whole recording process is, and I've seen a lot of other guys are doing it too, lot of other guys are doing the old one take, two takes, I'm done, thanks for coming. You know, I'll never forget a story about a famous guitar player where a band paid him a thousand bucks to play a lead. The tech sets up the gear, the guy comes in, they run the track, he plays it once, puts it down and goes "where's my check?" It's like a one shot deal. I know a lot of these guys because I researched it and went online and looked at who else was doing drum track stuff and a lot of the other people doing it, it's sort of cold and calculated. It's like, "send it to me, send me half the money, within four hours I'll turn around the track", I'm thinking, "man, within four hours, I'm going to barely listen to your song." I'm going to spend a lot more time than that.

CP: It's a personal touch.

MZ: Oh yeah, way personal, especially with this kind of music. Especially you'd have to think, I would think, so far, anyways, everybody that's contacted me so far, it's because it's Mark Zonder, it's not just a guy doing drums, so they want *that*. You know if I needed a singer and I was doing a record and I wanted Steve Walsh from Kansas, I don't want him to sing like Brian Johnson of AC/DC, I want Steve Walsh. That's my pitch. Because I know those other guys do it and they give you one retake? The music is just way to personal to people and almost, the lower down on the food chain, it's more personal to them, if that makes sense. I think the guys that aren't "big time" that have done it 150,000 times, the lower guys are really personal, you just can't wing it.

CP: There's a vested interest in a more emotional connection.

MZ: Plus, they're paying their hard earned money. My thing is just to give everybody exactly what they want, and that's what I'm there for. If you want Bon Jovi drums, that's ok, if you have a Bon Jovi tune.

CP: You can do that too.

MZ: I'm going to play to it. What ever you want.

CP: Well, that's great that they contact you to do *your* thing, because I think you do have a voice. There's drummers in the world and you hear them and go "that's \_\_\_\_\_". I think you have a recognizable sound.

MZ: Thank you.

CP: How has it been playing the Parallels material again?

MZ: I mean, I love playing it. I've been doing it for a couple of months, rehearsing, because I sort of "over practice" and over do it a little bit, but it's all my favorite songs. It's all the songs that are more choruses and verses and "song" songs as compared to the really meaty, proggy, five, six, nine, twelve, fourteen, sixteen, hut, hut, hut kinda stuff, which I'm not an overly big fan of. It's almost, not that it's too much thinking, but it's... I like the meat. The stuff we're doing is very groove and it's music. The songs are there.

That's what it really is all about for Mark. The song. Even if it's developed on drums first, he's always thinking about the song.

Chuck Parker 4/11/10