



Cheating death, riffing hard, speaking truth: all in a life's work for Queens Of The Stone Age's **Ginger Elvis**. Perhaps he really has been chosen to save rock, single-handed. "This is my religion," shrugs **Josh Homme**.

Interview by **KEITH CAMERON** • Portrait by **TOM SHEEHAN**

"T HAT'S THE STUFF!" JOSHUA HOMME accepts MOJO's proffered tube of E45 moisturising cream and decants its contents onto his left forearm, where a large, freshly-inked scorpion tattoo has begun to sting. Inscribed above the eight-legged beast is one word: "Desert".

Limb soothed, Homme turns to greet Mark Ronson, who has joined the five Queens Of The Stone Age at central London's Edition Hotel to celebrate the UK Number 1 chart entry of *Villains*, the latest QOTSA album, which Ronson produced.

The Edition is a hi-spec Ian Schrager remodel of the formerly dowdy Berners Hotel, and you could argue that London-born, New York-raised Ronson sprinkled an equivalent dusting of uptown chic onto Queens Of The Stone Age, the smouldering edifice hewn by Josh Homme from the libertine rock scene of the desert communities 150 miles east of Los Angeles. Ronson didn't tame the beast so much as arrange the necessary ambience for Homme to reconnect with the diamond-hard groove that underpins his most admired music, which by 2013's ... *Like Clockwork* was subsumed by gloom and gravitas. That the best rock album of 2017 should have been produced by a pop auteur is testimony to the skills of both Ronson and the music's complex, restless creator.

"My name is not by the producer credit, because it's Ronson's victory or loss to carry," Homme says. "He really did an amazing fucking job."

Built like a bear but with the dainty comportment of a cat, Homme is the one constant in Queens Of The Stone Age's 20-year span, the only survivor from *Rated R* and *Songs For The Deaf*, twin thunderbolts that redefined heaviness for a new millennium. In 2004, he quashed QOTSA's vagabond mythos by firing volatile bassist/vocalist Nick Oliveri, his friend and wingman since teenage years in stoner rock legends Kyuss, and began building a new model Queens in solely his own image. But though this narrative plays to stereotypical notions of control, Homme's collaborative résumé tells another story. As well as ongoing membership of Eagles Of Death Metal with school friend Jesse Hughes, he's worked with Dave Grohl and John Paul Jones as Them Crooked Vultures,

produced and co-written Iggy Pop's valedictory *Post Pop Depression*, drawn PJ. Harvey and Mark Lanegan into his Desert Sessions collective, and other credits include Arctic Monkeys and Lady Gaga (Homme and Ronson first worked together during sessions for 2016's *Joanne*). His most important collaboration, meanwhile, is with former Distillers singer Brody Dalle, his wife since 2006, with whom he has three children.

Homme admits the kids were thrilled at dad's recent stint reading the CBeebies ➤

WE'RE NOTWORTHY

Mark Ronson on how to produce Josh Homme.



"He's a great songwriter, lyricist, producer and arranger who also has the most sublime falsetto. He knows more about gear than any engineer. He's like Sly, D'Angelo, Jack White, McCartney, people who can do everything better than you. It's quite intimidating. His quality bar is so high."

◀ bedtime story. “I gotta be honest, I never watch or read about myself ’cos it makes me wanna quit, but because of how they were holding me, I could have watched that a million times.” He beams. “If I could sprinkle that behind my ear every day, I could go anywhere!”

Villains’ opening lyric is a statement of fact: “I was born in the desert, May 17, ’73.” What impact did your place of arrival have on the subsequent journey?

I suppose everything. It impacted me heavily because of the lack of outside influence. And the enormity of space. The scene that I walked into was created by a guy named Mario Lalli, who we called Boomer. It was his ethos that ruled the roost. He had this extremely open mind. He listened to Zappa, Deep Purple and Black Flag, and classical music: “That’s all wonderful – what could be wrong with that?”

How did you meet him?

I was into punk rock music, and he’d have these parties at his house. Looking back on it now, there’d be 13-year-old people – me – and 40-year-old people. Which is kinda gross, ultimately, perhaps, but in that time frame it was totally fine. Because it’s a gang of individuals and outsiders.

Did many touring bands visit the desert?

Never. Billy Idol played and he slept with my friend’s sister and I just thought that was the greatest thing of all time. Tommy Tutone came – he had this great song, 867-5309/Jenny, that I thought of as this renegade version of pop. Then Black Flag played the desert. So they brought it into our yard. That SST mentality: “Go on, be yourself.” That’s what Boomer preached – without preaching. He more lived that way.

Growing up, was music in your household?

Members of my family play instruments. They

were always my heroes. I wanted to be like my grandpa. He had a horse and a gun, and my grandma was a talented painter, thinker and played music. They had a ranch in the middle of the desert. I remember watching my grandma paint, and as soon as she finished one she put it down and started the next one. No one ever played in front of each other. Maybe that’s the Norwegian part of us. So I just played in my room. I didn’t go running through the hallways screaming, “I have music!”

What records did you listen to?

We used to take these long drives in the summertime. This was the time of cassettes, they just flipped and kept going. And perhaps it was in the background for my parents as they were driving, but it started to sink in deep. I listened to a lot of Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton, a lot of The Doors... and a lot of Jackson Browne. One album called *Running On Empty*, I used to stare at the cover. It’s just a road going to nowhere and there are songs about the road, recorded on the road... I wonder, what did that do to me? It speaks to the loneliness. There’s a huge lonely side to what we do.

Were you lonely growing up in the desert?

I never thought so. But boy, was there all this free time to be alone. I think of boredom as a gift. Because when you’re so bored you just have to do something.

You formed your first band very young.

I was 11, 12. We were called Autocracy. We just played in garages and made flyers and stuff. That seemed great. Then Katzenjammer formed, which turned into Kyuss. I was really into the Misfits. Really into GBH and The Exploited and the English Subhumans. But then something wonderful happened – people hated us. In the dez, people didn’t boo you, they did *nothing*. You finish a song – nothing. *Nothing*. It affected me. “OK I should be

inspired by that, inspired to find who I am.” I was tuning down because I’d never heard anyone tuning down, and we didn’t have tuners. Also, in the desert, with no bounce-back, when the sound just goes – it was big, right away. Then, what if you use bass amps...? What if you do things wrong on purpose? The sound was important.

Why did you leave Kyuss?

It became clear we were part of creating a scene. And I didn’t want it to go south – I loved it so much. I thought we had maybe painted ourselves into a corner. I wasn’t angry no more, I was chasing girls... Also I had melodies that John, our singer, couldn’t get to. I didn’t want to *sing*, but I felt the ceiling. I thought, “We’ve accidentally got something – don’t ride it into the ground. Blow it up! Destroy it! It’ll live forever.”

Your next move is joining Screaming Trees as auxiliary guitarist.

I was a bit disillusioned with music. I moved to Seattle ’cos my brother and his husband were living there and I wanted to be around them. My friend Mike Johnson from Dinosaur Jr, who Kyuss had toured with – I used to call him ‘Downer Mike’, ’cos he was always bummed out – I used to go to his house, we’d both drink, and he had this amazing record collection. The Trees asked him to play guitar but because he’s Downer Mike he was like, “No... but Josh could do it.” I didn’t really know the Trees’ music that well. I knew Nearly Lost You and that’s about it. I knew I loved [Mark] Lanegan’s voice, just from that song, I knew his thing was special. And I knew they notoriously hated each other. But I also did not know what it was like to be a hired gun and to make someone happy. I wanted to make them incapable of saying anything other than, “Hey thanks, man.” I was just gonna do one Lollapalooza tour. And it turned into two years.

What did you gain from that experience?

A LIFE IN PICTURES

Homme on the range: Josh in focus.

1 Homme at Palm Desert High School: “I think of boredom as a gift. Because you just have to do something.”

2 The riff robot: playing with Screaming Trees during Lollapalooza 1996, Spartan Stadium, San Jose.

3 “What if you do things wrong on purpose?”: Kyuss, 1992 (from left) John Garcia, Brant Bjork, Scott Reeder, Josh Homme.

4 Queens Of The Stone Age circa *Songs For The Deaf*: (from left) Dave Grohl, Troy Van Leeuwen, Nick Oliveri, Homme, Mark Lanegan.

5 “Don’t have nightmares”: Josh reads Julia Donaldson’s *Zog* for BBC’s *CBeebies Bedtime Stories*.

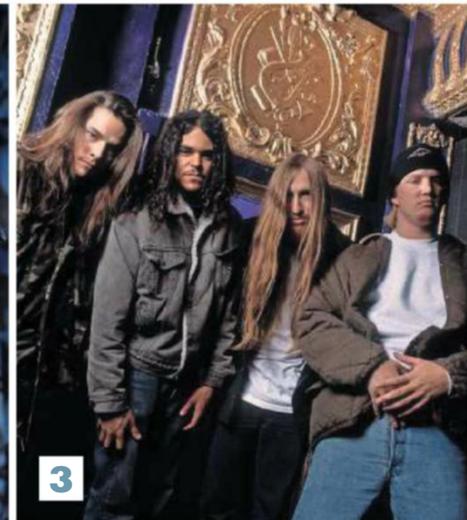
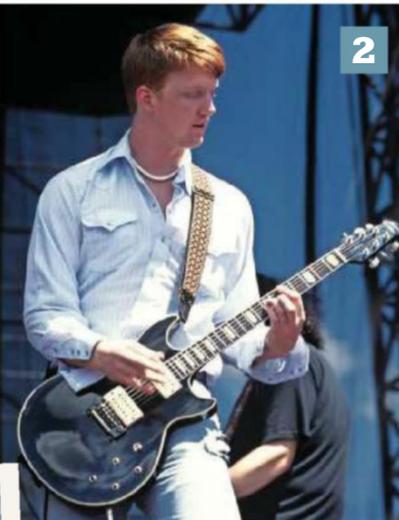
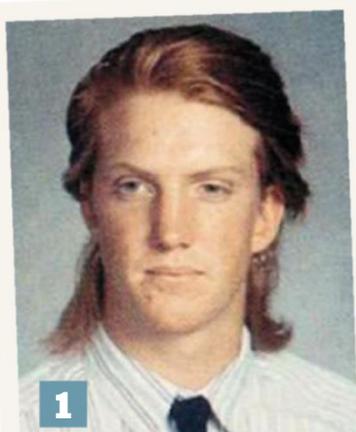
6 “The coolest thing I’ve ever been part of”: Homme does *Post Pop Depression* with Iggy Pop, Amsterdam, 2016.

7 Let us prey: Them Crooked Vultures’

Grohl, Homme and John Paul Jones at a Teenage Cancer Trust show, Royal Albert Hall, London, March 22, 2010.

8 Distilled cool: Homme with wife Brody Dalle, Hollywood, June 17, 2010.

9 The king of Queens rocks the Pinkpop Festival, Netherlands, June 1, 2008: “This is how I show who I am. I want to just get it right.”



I got along with each of them individually, and they did not get along with themselves. They had trouble communicating, which I didn't have. They had trouble listening to each other, which I didn't have. I got along with Lanegan, who was in a very *interesting* state at that time.

Lanegan described that band as: "Like prison. Without the sex."

Hahaha! But see, that's why I had no choice... All I wanted to do was listen to comments like that. I don't mind if it's awful, so long as we can giggle. The rowboat to hell can be wonderful 'til you reach the destination. Lanegan and I were inseparable. We understood each other. And didn't judge each other. 'Cos I don't know what anyone else should do, and I never have. I thought, "He's an individual. He's got troubles. He shouldn't probably do that, but he's an adult, what the fuck am I doing?"

But eventually you quit.

It was time for me to do what I needed to do. I tried to find a guy who could sing and play an instrument. The first incarnation of [QOTSA] was actually John McBain, from Monster Magnet, who's a very peculiar person. He basically does crosswords and says "No". Which I found fascinating, his disdain for humanity. There was a kid named Jason Albertini who I just called The Kid. He had to talk to his mum to let him rehearse. He was a virtuoso. But he didn't talk, he just ate rice and jogged. So he was weird. And then Matt Cameron on drums, and Mike Johnson played bass. We played a gig, I can't remember if it was good or bad. I was going to make a record, but I realised I had a singular idea and I was asking for people to muddle it.

What was your singular idea?

I wanted to see what it was like when you just

played one thing until you got lost in a trance. One note is so much more difficult than 50. That's what I learned in the Trees, because I was playing rhythm, I was trying to play like [AC/DC's] Malcolm Young, trying to play that riff like a robot. So I had the first Queens record written, this robotic trance stuff, and then my friend Hutch, our sound man, who has turned me on to so much music, was like, *Cough...* and plays me Can, Neu!, Wire... I was like, "What?!" Really disheartened.

"Billy Idol slept with my friend's sister and I just thought that was the greatest thing of all time."

On the debut QOTSA album, the music doesn't seem compelled by the words. It's like they're an afterthought...

I did not want to sing but I did not want to tell someone what to do, so I was forced to do what I wanted to hear. I was very conservative. As luck would have it, I was dating a crazy person. So there were songs like You Can't Quit Me and they were very real, but they were the least words I could say to get it across. I wrote a lot of lyrics in Kyuss but they weren't always very good. To this day I find lyrics difficult. But I wanted to talk about how outside I felt, so I found this weird character that made me feel safe. I called it 'The Cad' – and The Cad is in You Would Know and Walkin' On The Sidewalks, and I can track it

all the way up to [2013's] Smooth Sailing. I can track that Cad.

From doing the first album practically on your own, you make *Rated R* with a shifting troupe of guests and accomplices.

That was the idea. I did this Desert Sessions stuff, and I didn't have a band so I had to come up with a way to convince people to play with me and also not have their bands be outraged. Like – Fuck me tonight, then go back, I don't care. No commitment, it's just about music.

So I opened a brothel, in the middle of nowhere, and that seemed to be exciting for other people... It was totally normal for me.

It feels like your quantum leap.

Not to me. I thought the first record should be singular and it'll announce I Are This. The second one will fan out its wingspan, and the third one will answer everything. And so *Rated R* was like, I guess all bets are off. I'd heard that Paul McCartney and George Martin had taken a speaker to use as a microphone – so what if you take two speakers and put a microphone on omni in the middle? That's an extremely important sound on *Rated R* for guitar and bass. I was a bit like Dr Frankenstein but shooting the injections on myself. I was up late a lot... (*laughs*). There's still the robotic skeleton inside *Rated R*, but I wanted to dance, I wanted to groove, I wanted there to be girls, I wanted it to be hedonistic. I liked this rogue cast. Also, I knew I didn't want to sing, so I was like, "What if we had three singers?" Nick had a cool voice, Lanegan did too... I wanted it to feel like monsters coming over the horizon – "Ohmigod, there they come!"

You built a piratical fantasy world – yet "Nicotine, Valium, Vicodin, marijuana, ecstasy and alcohol" was also your





“When I was younger I almost drowned – and when I got out of the water I remember thinking, ‘I’m never gonna wait...’”

◀ **reality. Was it as wild as it appeared from the outside?**

It was way worse. It was dangerous. It was... stupefying. *Stupid-defying.* (Laughs) And I was proud of it. And I knew that it would meet a wall. Because it had no choice. You cannot harness chaos. You can touch it and die, or touch it and live.

At what point did it meet that wall?

When the money showed up. I want to be there for my people that I’m close to, ‘cos that’s all you have, right? Your family, your friends. But sometimes I realise I’ve enabled people to go longer. When the money’s there, you stop communicating. Everyone I’ve let go should have been let go probably two years before. And I desperately tried to hang on to them.

Presumably you’re alluding to Nick [Oliveri]’s departure?

Yeah, and Mark’s too. Mark was not gonna live much longer. Nick was doing things that had nothing to do with music. And I love Nick so much, so I won’t say what they are. I once did and it hurt too much. The only judgement call I really can make is what I’m willing to live with. I don’t tell people how to be – this is about shepherding the weird.

Queens Of The Stone Age circa *Songs For The Deaf* was a monstrous live band – Dave Grohl ran away from the Foo Fighters to play drums for you.

I never expected him to stay, because it was the nature of our band to eat the heart, and leave the rest. In a beautiful way. We were

there to seize moments. If I hadn’t let Nick go, I would have broke up the band after that record anyway and started a new one. But then when I let Nick go, it was like, “You can’t make it without him.” Are you kidding me?! I don’t think anyone in the moment listened to our next record [*Lullabies To Paralyze*, 2005], because they had made decisions. It was ‘pick a side’ for a moment. I kept my mouth shut but other people didn’t, so I had no way to say, “You have no idea.” I fired my friend – could you do that? I went to his house and looked him in the face. I was doing what I was raised to do, in the manner I was raised to do it. So I wrote a Brothers Grimm fairytale as a response, saying, “You go ahead and have your witch trial...”

I’ve always put so much into the records and I put so much into that one. I honestly thought I had the musical answer. I was wrong (laughs). I don’t think people got it at all.

You get married in the same year *Lullabies* is released, and then in 2006 your first child is born. What was the impact?

The birth of my daughter really saved me. Meeting Brody saved me too. Because I’d cut my tether, and Brody was a grounding for me. I like to see how far things go. To *agitate* has always been my thing. At that point in my life



"Are you sitting comfortably?": Josh Homme prepares to tell us a story, *The Edition Hotel*, London, August 30, 2017.

I was actually well beyond the edge, but still looking for it. I think it's very possible it could have been a very stereotypical story: 'Band with promise flames out.' I am so very blessed to have met someone that can spit 30 feet and punch like a guy and has a really strong brain like Brody.

You've referred to ...Like Clockwork's mood as "broken", following your hospitalisation during 2010, and complications after knee surgery. What exactly happened?

It wasn't knee surgery – I'll put it at that. I never said there was a knee surgery. It may have been our publicist. I don't like talking about how I got there. I got there. And it wasn't the surgery that fucked me up, it was afterwards because I was committed to a bed, I couldn't move, and I was contagious. For three months I couldn't touch anybody. My daughter was young and I had to yell to keep her away. By the end of that, I wasn't very happy. I was desperate for another story to tell about that record. But lyrically the records are a diary of a lifetime. So they have to be real or I'm out. Also, the guys were wanting to do a record and I did not. It was actually Brody – she just talked to me. I imagine I was not the greatest person to be around, so she was like, "Please go out in the garage and play some music...!" I came back in

with *The Vampyre Of Time And Memory* and said, "Nobody will ever want to hear this." One thing I know for sure is that of all the different styles of complaint, a successful musician complaining is the worst!

It's not a great look, is it?

It's like you come out of the dressing room of life and go, "Whaddya think?" And someone goes, "Fuck you!" (laughs). It was a difficult record to make. When it was finally done I just called each guy in our band and said, "I'm really sorry, this has a strong chance of being our last record – this is probably not gonna go that well." 'Cos it was so emotionally different to everything else.

Between that record and *Villains*, you make a fourth *Eagles Of Death Metal* album and

DRIVINGHOMME

Three essential Josh vehicles.
By **Keith Cameron**.

THE PROTOTYPE

Kyuss

★★★★

Blues For The Red Sun

(DALI, 1992)



Produced by Masters Of Reality's Chris Goss, the second Kyuss album is a critical component in Homme's DNA, showcasing traits that would recur, albeit much refined, in *QOTSA*: alternate tunings, a deeply pliable rhythm section, and the distended groove quests that emerged from playing generator parties in the desert. One element missing is his subversive voice; and with John Garcia singing like a baby James Hetfield over sludge juggernauts like *Green Machine*, it made perfect sense that by 1993 Kyuss were opening for *Metallica*.

THE CLASSIC

Queens Of The Stone Age

★★★★★

Rated R

(INTERSCOPE, 2000)



Rated R presented Queens Of The Stone Age as less band, more rock'n'roll circus; the wry sleeve inscription stated membership was "Restricted To Everyone".

Homme's songs were now precision-moulded boogie dune productions, in cahoots with trouble brother Nick Oliveri, providing peak material for Mark Lanegan (*In The Fade*) plus signature bakes *Feel Good Hit Of The Summer* and *The Lost Art Of Keeping A Secret*. 2010's deluxe reissue added the steaming 2000 Reading Festival set and a Kinks cover. Pure, visionary, modern rock'n'roll.

THE HYBRID

Iggy Pop

★★★★★

Post Pop Depression

(CAROLINE INTERNATIONAL, 2016)



Ostensibly an Iggy Pop solo album, *Post Pop Depression* was really a thank-you gift from Josh Homme to the man whose *Lust For Life* and *The Idiot* rescued him from post-Kyuss creative inertia. Just as David Bowie produced the Berlin diptych for his idealised vision of Iggy, so Homme and band (*QOTSA*'s Dean Fertita, Arctic Monkeys' Matt Helders) created a soundworld in the image of his hero, but also himself: desert lounge blues singer making perverted European disco, with intense performances from all.

then Iggy Pop's final album. What role does EODM play in your life?

Oh, it's just as important as Queens. *Eagles Of Death Metal* is where I put my jeans shorts on and jump in the pool. That's where you drink during the day, philosophically. Jesse [Hughes] and I have been so close. That notion of just giggling like a retard... ah, which is probably not what you're supposed to say these days. Sorry man! But that notion of being footloose and fancy free is so pleasurable. I also believe in Jesse. We have such differences and such similarities, but one thing is for sure: he's born to be a frontman.

Were you originally due to have been playing with EODM at the Paris Bataclan on November 13, 2015?

I was so adamant about touring with *Eagles*. And then Brody was pregnant again, so at the last minute I didn't go to Europe. Everything that happened after [the terror attack] felt a lot like being in a dryer filled with cannonballs. So the Iggy record was really helpful. And then Bowie died. It was a weird time. I remember sitting there with Iggy looking at each other, not needing to say anything.

What did you take from the *Post Pop Depression* experience?

It was the coolest thing I've ever been allowed to be part of. The conversations I had with Iggy in my car, which I can't share but they're all based on how to survive. To make it through. That's what I need to figure out, so that I do.

To what extent is the moodshift on *Villains* a reaction to the emotional turbulence of the preceding years?

When I was younger I almost drowned – and when I got out of the water I remember thinking, "I'm never gonna wait..." So after Bataclan and Iggy, the word 'now' just kept pulsing like a heartbeat in glaring lights. This is it – every step is all you get. Take a chance. From top to tail, I've always thought of Queens as a dance band.

In working with Mark Ronson, were you looking for a new way to be a rock band?

Absolutely. It doesn't take a rocket surgeon to understand that he was asking me to be on the Gaga record to bridge the gap. I was like, "Why deny signs along the road? Why not band together and break as many preconceived notions as we can." It's that word again – to *agitate*. It's flashing again now – agitate now, agitate now.

Another word that crops up with regard to you is "driven".

My yardstick for success is all emotional. I used to think that I was hard and absent of that, but I'm not. This is my religion, this is my way of life, this is how I explain to my kids how to be somebody. This is how I show who I am. I want to just get it right. Because I know I'm not gonna be around here as long as other people, y'know? When I'm gone the music will be there for the people that are close to me. I would like to get it right so I feel like I set a high watermark for our family. For my name.

You'll be around a long while yet, surely?

Well... I know what it's like out here, and you don't. Also, whenever I've had troubles in my life, the work has always pulled me through. My old man works, my grandpa worked, I work. So the work is everything. Being on tour can be difficult, because there's an element that's like being a vacuum salesman. You ring a doorbell and it's like, "Hi!" That's why I need the shows to be different every night. Because if they're too similar I could split at any moment. I guess I'm looking for reality.