

The Ariel Bender Interview - 2019

In late 1973, at the height of Mott the Hoople's popularity, founding guitarist Mick Ralphs left the band to form Bad Company. With only a few weeks' notice before an upcoming American tour, band leader Ian Hunter recruited former Spooky Tooth guitarist Luther Grosvenor to learn the band's entire catalog of songs, on one condition – that he change his name to "Ariel Bender." Taking America by storm in 1974 on their infamous "Broadway Tour," featuring special guests Queen, Mott the Hoople's reputation for its raucous live shows soared, as captured on what many consider to be one of the greatest concert recordings of all time, "Mott the Hoople Live."



Forty-five years later, Hunter reformed Mott the Hoople with Bender and keyboard virtuoso Morgan Fisher, playing to sellout crowds on both American and British tours. Songwriter / guitarist Tom Guerra caught up with Ariel/Luther immediately following the tours in Spring 2019.

Tom Guerra: How did the reformation of Mott the Hoople occur, and what were you doing when you were approached to re-join?

Ariel Bender: Back in around June '17, Mick Brown, of Ian Hunter's management team, paid me a visit to discuss Mott the Hoople. He asked me what I was up to, was I in a band, did I have anybody managing me? I said "no, as a matter of fact!" I hadn't played for 12 years or so... He said I looked great and I'd stopped drinking for quite a while at this point, which of course was my choice anyway. Shortly after, Ian phoned me, asked how I was, what I was doing, and he put to me that there was real interest in the USA and UK for a return of Mott the Hoople. I said at the time I'd have to think about it...I didn't commit straightaway... He also stressed the point that a reunion could only happen with myself and (keyboardist) Morgan Fisher, otherwise it couldn't happen. After a while, I said "OK, let's do this." Last year, we did a trial of 3 shows' Spain, UK and Sweden, to see how it would be. At the worst, we knew we could come home and say we gave it the shot, but it didn't happen, but on the contrary it worked! A real treat, a little rough around the edges but it was rock and roll and very enjoyable, and the decision was made to do a full US and UK Tour in 2019. We all knew we would have a good tour, but not surprisingly, we smashed it! Were we lucky? No, we worked our socks off! We are all home now and I'm missing it already. It would be wrong of me to speculate about the future, but it looks very bright so let's be patient and see what the future brings.

TG: It had been 45 years since you last toured with Mott the Hoople...so many changes have happened since then. How do you compare the recent tour with the 1974 tour?

AB: It doesn't seem like 45 years ago... it's quite surreal...Back in the day, Ian and I had lots of stage antics going on, and the energy levels were very high. Today, I think it's better now... we have The Rant Band including James Mastro on sax...we had sax on the album "The Hoople" so having that extra addition live really works. Ian and I have again found a similar stage presence which we had back in the day...Energy levels, well some might say we have more now! It's difficult to say which is better, then or now, though I think now is better as we are living the dream. Everyone's enjoying it, Morgan Fisher is on fire, Ian's also on fire and I'm doing my bit, so it is a win-win situation all round!



(The GREAT Ariel Bender rocking with Mott the Hoople '74, U.S. Tour, April 2019. Photo by Steffi Wegewitz)

TG: “Mott the Hoople Live” is now recognized as one of the all-time great live rock and roll albums. You have such a ridiculously huge and fierce guitar sound... Tell us about the gear you used back then...

AB: For the 1974 American tour, I was using 2 1974 V4 Ampeg amps, 100 watts each. We had a backline that was all silver! As far as guitars, I was using 2 Les Paul Juniors, single cutaways, mid '50's. No pedals at all...just straight into the amp. A great combination! I also used a white 1970's Strat for the bottleneck work on the tune “Born Late '58.”



(Overend Watts, Buffin, Ian Hunter and Ariel Bender rocking with Mott the Hoople, U.S. Tour, May 1974. Not shown: Morgan Fisher, piano)

TG: In the early part of your career you were a Gibson guy, but you now play Strats exclusively...why do you prefer them these days?

AB: I hadn't played guitar for better part of 10 years, and I wasn't sure I could get my playing back for Mott the Hoople. Anyway, a friend of mine came to my home with a cheap Mexican Strat, and I bought it from him, for 120 quid! It was pale blue at the time, but I started playing around with it, using the trem bar, really simply for myself at home. I had it painted green, and you notice that I'm using the trem bar more for vibrato, as my fingers are not as strong as they once were. I also picked up another Mexican Strat, a fiesta red 1950's model and I had it set up identically to the green one. I took both out on the U.S.A. and UK tours, because they are great playing guitars.



TG: I notice you don't use a pick anymore, employing a similar right-hand technique as Jeff Beck...

AB: I'd be playing at home and somehow lost my picks, so I started playing with my fingers and never looked back, it allows me to feel my playing a lot more. There are things you can do with a pick you can't do with your fingers, but I'm quite happy with it.

TG: What are you using for amplifiers on these recent Mott dates?

AB: I used a pair of Fender Blues Deluxe amps on both tours, with 12-inch Celestion speakers...great amps!

TG: How about pedals...I could see a few of them on a small board that you are using...

AB: All I have is a Danelectro delay which I haven't used onstage, Tone City Golden Plexi Distortion, a Mooer Green Mile overdrive for the milder distortion, and a tuner.

TG: Going back to your early days, prior to playing with Mott the Hoople, you made a name for yourself as a fiery Gibson Les Paul wielding guitarist with Spooky Tooth. "Evil Woman" (off "Spooky Too") is an incredible display of guitar pyrotechnics. What do you remember most about those days?

AB: Even before Spooky Tooth, I was playing a Gibson. I was in a band with Jim Capaldi who was also my neighbor on a council estate...I was using a Gibson ES-335 which my dad got for me on credit...I don't think he ever paid for it (laughs). Steve Winwood would come to our recording sessions, little did we know he had Jim in mind for Traffic...so long story short, Steve put me forward for the V.I.P.'s in London, working for Island Records. As far as the Les Paul, Clapton, Beck and Page had them so I bought a black beauty from Albert Lee, who was also with Island Records. I also had the Jimmy Page sunburst one with two humbuckers and the white surrounds, and used a Telecaster for "Better by You" on the "Spooky Too" record, but you could say I was a Les Paul man all through the Spooky years. I can't get on with them now, although it's a great guitar with a big fat sound and was perfect for Spooky Tooth.



(Deep Feeling circa 1965 - a band Luther was in before he left to join the V.I.P.'s in London. In the middle is Jim Capaldi, who left shortly after this pic to form Traffic with Steve Winwood. Deep Feeling was the biggest band in and around Worcester and Birmingham at the time.)



(Spooky Tooth's "Spooky Too," their second record which many consider to be the band's best.)

TG: Let's talk about Widowmaker...like many fans, I believe that band should have been huge, but you guys called it a day after only two albums. Both records are well produced with strong songs and arrangements, with two different singers, Steve Ellis and John Butler. Can you tell us about how that band came together, and ultimately, apart?

AB: It was 1974, and I'd finished with Mott the Hoople. I had loads of ideas, nothing I would have presented to Ian as there are not a lot of people that could write for Ian's style. I was living in London and had bumped into a few players, seeing what they were doing, had a few jams at home but nothing came about. An old girlfriend of mine, Elora Goodhall, was very friendly with drummer Paul Nicholls from Newcastle. Paul had been playing with the band Lindisfarne. They had had a few hits, were on TV and all that jazz..., well, I met Paul and we hit it off right away. I said I was looking to put a band together a rock band, plus a bit of blues which was more my style of play rather than Mott, so we decided to track down players for the band.

I was in a pub in or near Chelsea Fulham, strangely enough a guy called Phil Carlo was in there from Bad Company, and he happened to be with Bob Daisley... "How lucky is that," Phil said to Bob, "There's Luther Grosvenor over there from Spooky and Mott!" so my thoughts are we had a chat, "What you up to, are you available to look at this project I'm putting together?" He'd been with Mungo Jerry and Stan Webb's Chickenshack.

So, Paul and I started to go round to Bob's flat putting our ideas on the table to see and find the sort of band we could put together, and it worked, so there was three that wanted to go ahead. We had some great ideas between us and it was great that Bob could write so now were looking for a singer. Singing is not for me, but I ended up singing on my 3 solo LPs. I asked Roger Chapman from the band Family and Bobby Tench who'd they'd recommend, and they told me to give Steve Ellis a ring. We did, we met Steve and he'd been doing his solo stuff and his own band Ellis. On first meet, he wasn't convinced as he was doing his own thing. I understood, but I went back for more talks with him and I think he thought "the only way I can stop Luther pestering me is to join the band" which he did.



(Widowmaker, MK I...Most definitely NOT an acoustic band, who's foolin' who?)

Steve could write great songs, as you hear on the first album and now there were four of us. I wanted another guitarist, didn't want keyboards as I'd done that with Spooky and Mott, so soon after, Steve said "Let's try a friend of mine, Hugh Lloyd Langton from Hawkwind." Hugh was a breath of fresh air, and it worked from the word go. The band was fixed, we rehearsed, got the material together and we were up and running. It was exciting... We needed management to take it forward, so we did an audition for Don Arden's Jet Records, and they took us on straight away. They promised us the Earth, and Sharon Arden and David Arden worked very close with us and then we were ready to record, so in I think 1976, we recorded the Widowmaker LP at de Layne Lee Studios in Wembley with engineer Dick Plant. It went well, and we toured the states. Unfortunately, we had difficulties with Steve over one

thing and another, so we decided to part company and once again we were stuck without a singer. But Hugh, our guitar player, knew of this chap from Leicester named John Butler. We had down him to rehearse, it worked a treat. John was a unique talent as a writer and singer and we gathered the material for the second album, "Too Late to Cry." We recorded that at Olympic Studios, Barnes, London with the great Chris Kimsey. It was a great success, John gave the band a new sound and we toured the states again, this time in support of E.L.O. The band was becoming successful with both LPs doing well saleswise. I'd go every now and again to the big boss man Don Arden wanting money and the band's royalties, went back and forth with no joy, so I went to see him for the final time and said, "I'm leaving the band!" He said, "If you leave the band, you'll never play again!" and I said, "Don't worry, I'm not goin' to!" and that was the end of my career for Widowmaker...a sad end for a great band. So many bands were getting ripped off back then...



(Top – Widowmaker, MK II. Left - Ariel Bender with Widowmaker. Right – Bob Daisley and Ariel)

TG: Is it true that you were in an early version of Motorhead?

AB: I knew Lemmy... I don't know why I went down as I had never liked the heavier type of music. I had a play with them, it didn't work and that was that. I don't even recall the year. But Lemmy and I remained friends, as I'd pop down to the Speakeasy in London, everyone in music would be there at different times but you'd always find Lemmy at the bar or playing the slot machines.

TG: Let's shift gears and look at your solo career. After Spooky Tooth, you stayed with Island Records and Chris Blackwell got you to record a solo album, which ended up being "Under Open Skies." How'd that come about?

AB: I'd been with Chris Blackwell and Island records with Spooky Tooth... let's not forget I was also with the V.I.P.'s, with Greg Ridley and Mike Kellie, and with this same line up we changed our name to Art. Then, Gary Wright joined, and we were Spooky Tooth. Chris had a soft spot for Spooky Tooth as we had been with him all that time since 1966 through when we recorded "The Last Puff," our last Island LP. Chris kept Mike and myself, offering me to stay and record my own LP. So, he sent me off to Spain to live in one of his villas to write the album that became "Under Open Skies." He had faith in me, but because I had a lot of visitors there, I didn't get all the album written. So, I got back to the UK, and Chris said, "how did it go?" Well, I said, "all's good" so then I knew I had to buckle down and finish "Under Open Skies" which I did. We recorded it at Chris Blackwell's Basing Street Studios in 1971 with engineer Tony Platt. I wrote all the songs, played all the guitars and a couple of bass guitar tracks. It was recorded quite comfortably although I was on a tight budget. Chris was happy, and so was I. It didn't light up the world, but I was so proud of it, and still am today. After that episode, I stayed with Island and did a stint with "Stealers Wheel", on license to Island Records.



TG: So, for "Under Open Skies," it was still pretty much the Les Paul through the Marshall rig you'd used in Spooky Tooth?

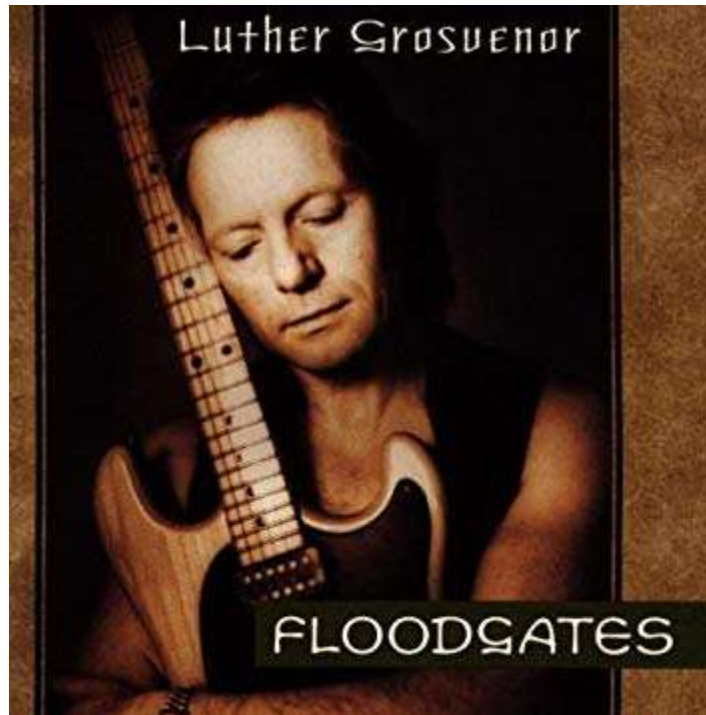
AB: I used the Les Paul on all tracks but "When I Met You," which was an old Strat using a bit of whammy. I also used a Fender Deluxe amp if I remember correctly on that album.

TG: Great sound, and of course "When I Met You" ended up on the first Widowmaker album, with "Here Comes the Queen."

AB: Yes, but not because of a shortage of material. Steve fancied singing "When I Met You" on the first album, and John did with "Here Comes the Queen" on the second.

TG: You also did a masterful second solo album called "Floodgates" in the 1990's and a third called "If You Dare" about ten years ago. What did you enjoy most about those?

AB: Well, I'd retired really before I did the Floodgates LP. I had a phone call from New York from a guy called Bob Laul, a huge Spooky Tooth fan and he said "Luther, I'm involved with a tribute album to Peter Green called "Rattlesnake Guitar, would you like to put a band together to play on a couple of tracks?" I said, "You must be joking," as I hadn't played for some years. He kept on, and I thought the only way to stop him phoning me was to do it! I got Mike Kellie on drums, Steve Dolan on bass, me on guitar and Jess Roden on vocals. It went well, end of story. A bit later on, Bob phoned me again asking if I would like to record my own album. I said "Jesus, it's gotta be written, players found and then recorded... a tall order!" Again, I said "I don't think so," so there again he kept on calling, also saying he'd put up the finances. Finally, I gave in, wrote all the songs apart from "Fire Down Below" and "Wanna Be Free." I sang 8 songs, Jess Roden sang "Fire Down Below," and "Wanna Be Free." In the end, it was Mike Kellie on drums, Steve Dolan on bass, Davey Moore on Hammond, me playing all guitars, both Steve Winwood and Jim Capaldi on "Fullness of Time" and Steve Winwood on a few harmonies. It was a great album to record, we were lucky and recorded and mixed in 12 days. It was a great time with the guys, my best solo LP of all, produced by myself and Mike Dolan in 1997. Bob put it out on his own label, "Brilliant Recording Company." It didn't light the world on fire but what a great effort and album... it worked! I still love it today, although I don't play it often. It was a proud time in my life.



TG: Do you remember what you used, gear wise for "Floodgates?"

AB: I used a vintage Music Man by Leo Fender and a small Gallien-Krueger amp.

TG: How did your third solo record, "If You Dare" come about? That was on Angel Air Records, right?

AB: I had the Ariel Bender Band going back in 2007, I think we did a bunch of gigs, played with Europe in Norway, Ten Years After, also Norway, we were put on a glam type tour in the UK with Mud, T. Rex, Steve Harley, Slade, and Sweet. It didn't last long although it was a good band. We had Mark Eden on vocals, James Houghton on bass, me on guitar, Ray Whisker on drums and Micky Triggs on keyboards. Mickey and I remained firm friends and kept in touch even to this day. He used to come to my flat in Streatham, London and we started in my bedroom knocking around with a few ideas, no plans whatsoever to do or make any type of record. We would get together now and again as songs started to grow. Mike Triggs was bit of an engineer, and we brought in a Pro Tools recording studio, got a few mikes and so on. Things were growing, ideas starting to take, shape vocals coming together.

We sat down with two, three maybe four songs and said to one another "this is getting pretty serious!" Songs were pouring out, so we decided to carry on what we were doing in view to possibly putting an album out. We got to around eight tracks of which I think I'd written most. Mike started playing the intro to "Dusty Track," and I said "What's that? Is that yours?" and he said yes, so we wrote that together. I loved that track...Still, we really didn't have a full album, and didn't know which way to turn. We approached Angel Air Records as they used to take care of Pete, Buff, and Verden Allen from Mott ... seemed a good idea at the time, they liked the tracks and the rest is history. Like the other two solo records, it didn't start any fires, but you have some beautiful songs so Mike and I were happy at what we had created together.

TG: In terms of inspiration, who were the guitarists that influenced you in the beginning, and fast forward to today, who are some of your favorite players?

AB: Well, back in the day, when I was probably 15 years old, I had a very, very cheap acoustic... I was working in a pie factory and I used to go into town to the old record shop, when I heard "Apache" by The Shadows, Cliff Richards' backing band. I was blown away with this instrumental, and that guitarist was and still is Hank Marvin. To this day, he influenced people like Beck, Page, Mark Knopfler, and so on... I'd pretend to be him. When my Dad bought me a guitar that looked similar, of course it was a 45-pound Futurama 3, I'd look in the mirror and pretend I was Hank. They put out numerous singles and I was hooked on the Shadows as I progressed with my playing. I found the Claptons, the Becks and the Pages and of course one tried to play like these guys, but ultimately, I found my own style of play.



(The Shadows Jet Harris and Hank Marvin)

The guitarists I admire today is quite simple...I love Roy Buchanan, Beck of course, Knopfler, early Clapton. I'm not a lover of metal and the tapping situation although I know it's very clever. There are so many great players as you know, and I just played with Brian May, a very fine player indeed. I'm not influenced by any one player although we've all taken bits and pieces and made it our own. I hope if I've missed any player, I'll excuse myself as it happens. When I listen to The Shadows, I still feel 15 again!



(Mott the Hoople '74, with Brian May)

TG: Can you tell us about being considered for The Stones when Brian Jones left?

AB: I heard about it after Mick Taylor joined... I wasn't offered the job, but I was suggested by lots of people, one could say I was in the running.

TG: In looking back over your career, what do you feel were some of the highlights?

AB: Well, there's so many as there would be for you Tom. I was in a band with Jim Capaldi, was an Evesham Worcester band and my lucky break came when Jim joined Traffic with Winwood and Steve he put me forward to the V.I.P.'s. and also to Island Records... Thanks Steve and Penny Maso for the break. With the V.I.P.'s, we played at the Star Club in Hamburg where The Beatles played and became the biggest band in the world. It was like walking into a museum, The Beatles museum, back in 1966. Then, Spooky Tooth the album we recorded in 1969, which has gone down as one of the finest albums of its time. A great part to remember in my career after spooky disbanded was when I made my first solo album "Under Open Skies." On this recent Mott tour, I was surprised at how many people had copies of this LP, which I gladly signed. I was thrilled when I joined Stealers Wheel with the great talent of Gerry Rafferty, who went on to write some big hits including "Baker Street."

Then, getting the job with Mott the Hoople was a huge highlight. It was a completely different style of play for me, but it worked. I was wearing clothes and huge heeled shoes of which I would never have worn, and we're still going strong today. It just goes to show what a loyal following we had in Mott the Hoople. And, Widowmaker, which was short lived, but I can look back at two very good albums.

I think my proudest moments when I look back with Mott was when we were presented with gold and silver disks, which I still have to this day. I'll never forget how proud I was at the time. I'm proud off my career, as when I started I had a tin pot acoustic with a piece of string for a strap, I never dreamt I'd achieve what I have...and I'm proud of that!

TG: In conclusion, it must have been a joy to play with your old friends Ian and Morgan again...does it feel like you've come full circle?

AB: It's been an absolute blast and it doesn't feel like it's been forty-five years at all. There's the energy, the laughter, the mucking around as it used to be. Nobody expected these tours to go this well. I'm not sure what Mott the Hoople will be doing next but one thing is for definite, I will be hanging up the guitar for good. It is sad of course, but I have a great life...my lady, my kids, and I've had the most amazing career. I'm grateful and have been very lucky indeed so that's my ending. There is life after music!!



(Mott the Hoople '74 L-R, Morgan Fisher, Ian Hunter, Ariel Bender)

A very special thanks to Luther Grosvenor for providing us with the time and insight on that elusive rascal, Ariel Bender!

-Tom Guerra