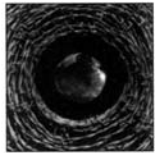


# Umpfrey's McGee

Keyboardist Joel Cummins on *Mantis*, live music and the meaning of life



## UMPHREY'S MCGEE

*Mantis* • SCI FIDELITY RECORDS

With *Mantis*, Umpfrey's McGee is challenging the music industry with a marketing plan just as nifty as their razor-sharp compositions. The band created a system where the more people who pre-order the release, the more bonus content the band will "unlock" for everyone. It's a cool concept, but the real story is the album itself. In another first, instead of road-testing the material as they have in the past, no one has heard these songs. Although the tracks may be new, they retain the Umph style, working with surgical precision, stop-start build-ups, hair-metal riffs and anthemic crescendos. The best illustration of their ambitious approach is the 12-minute title track. With the varied textures, multiple sections and highly-developed structure, it's a world unto itself. There's plenty for fans to be excited about here, particularly the subtle studio nuances such as the creepy vocals you can't quite make out on "Cemetery Walk," not to mention some of the most technical and inspired guitar soloing you'll hear on an album all year ("Mantis," "Turn & Run" in particular). But where they miss on the evolutionary process is the final impression. The band claims to be entering a "new era" with *Mantis*, and while they've clearly grown, it doesn't so much sound "new," as better. ★ Aaron Kayce

### Old-School Approach

*Mantis* kind of goes back to the classic format of putting out an album and touring behind it, which in the world of jambands you don't really see anymore. In the past we have road-tested songs and developed our arrangements live. But except for a verse of "Spires" or something, we didn't play any of these songs live and really tried to construct these songs without thinking about how we are going to perform them.

### Patience is a Virtue

We started working on this stuff in January 2006. The songs took form between then and the summer of 2007, and we spent the past year getting all the nuances right. There is something to be said for working on an arrangement, letting it sit and then

going back and tweaking. That's really what we did with this batch of songs. It's crazy to think that once *Mantis* comes out it will have been over three years since we started working on it. Some of the songs are more straightforward, while others have more weight in sections. There is no way we

could have written a song like "Mantis" in the course of a week.

### Lessons

You learn from making mistakes. Our first learning experience was playing a six-and-a-half-week summer tour when we were first starting out. The experience was awesome but once you get into that fourth week you're like, "Oh man! I hate the feeling of performing and not having as much inspiration as I did three weeks ago." So we will only tour for three weeks at a time. It's such a huge thing for us to pass the ball around and have different people feeding off the improvisation, so when that creative well dries up it can be a challenging night. The other rule we have for the same reason is that we will rarely play five nights

in a row. We realized we're going to get along a lot better if we go home, recharge and see our families and friends.

### Safety in Existentialism

*Mantis* is definitely our most important record lyrically, too. Our last big record, *Safety in Numbers*, is about dealing with loss and death. So there may be some continuity with that. The last album had a lot of very personal moments. I guess this is sort of the next step. At first you focus on the events that shape one's life and then you focus on how these events shape the greater world. There's kind of this existentialist theme where we put out some of those bigger questions and mysteries about the world or life. We leave room for the listener to ask these questions for themselves. There's definitely no pontificating about right or wrong, more just raising those important questions and moral challenges. I think Brendan [Bayliss] might have been doing this himself, challenging these questions about what exists, the here and now and the human consciousness.

### Internal Conversations

I think the lyrics really piece *Mantis* together, too. These are all conversations that could be inside someone's head, but it's this questioning or trying to ascertain what is behind everything that we do or think. It is very open-ended, but there is kind of an entire piece of conversation happening if you look at the album as a whole. We are definitely getting older and thinking about deeper things.

### Bonnaroo Goose Bumps

At the first Bonnaroo we had a full tent of maybe eight to ten thousand people, and I remember thinking, "We are playing a summer's worth of shows for all these people right here." I think that was the first time we felt like, "Wow, this really can work." We still have those moments where we're not sure how something is going to go. We recently played a show in Geneva, NY, at a venue called The Smith Opera House and, I remember thinking, "Who's going to come see us in this random little town in upstate New York?" But people came to see us and we're like, "Wow, maybe people do know who we are." ★

*Umpfrey's McGee* released *Mantis* on January 20.



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