

**THE REBIRTH OF
I MOTHER EARTH**
NEW SINGER • NEW ALBUM

Amanda Marshall
ON WRITING A HIT RECORD

JAMMING TIPS
From Open Mike's
House Band



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Brian Byrne



by Jim Kelly

Over the past two years the world of I Mother Earth has been coloured mostly in black and white, as news of lead singer Edwin's departure provided scribes with lots of excuses to spill ink, and fueled much speculation among music industry observers over which camp the fans would flock to – or even whether such polarities might occur. For their part, the remaining members of IME – guitarist Jagori Tanna, brother Christian Tanna on drums, and bass player Bruce Gordon – have moved on, choosing a new singer, 23-year-old Brian Byrne. Now with the release of their new album, *Blue Green Orange*, the group is looking to paint a brighter future with a batch of new songs, a new frontman and a new group dynamic.

The previous incarnation of the band had been together since the early 1990s, attaining multi-platinum success in Canada with their first two albums, *Dig* (1993) and *Scenery and Fish* (1996), and scoring lots of radio play for their mix of heavy alterna-rock crunch, prog-rock dexterity and psychedelic/sci-fi lyrics with singles like "Another Sunday", "Raspberry" and "One More Astronaut". Since the Tanna brothers had handled most of the songwriting and lyric duties, skeptics wondered whether Edwin's solo flight was wise. Similarly, the whispers in the wings questioned whether I Mother Earth, without its cover boy lead singer, could maintain its lofty heights. Would it be the same with the 'new guy'? Those questions were partly answered when Byrne made his live debut with the band at the *Summersault '98* festival, and apparently passed the first hurdle – fan acceptance – with flying colours. Next up for IME Version II: the recording studio.

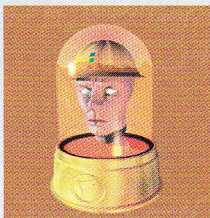
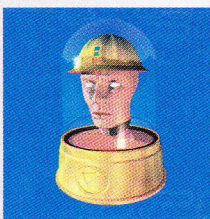
The band had just completed final mixing of the new album and had begun a short Spring tour of Eastern Canada when I caught up with them for their Montreal gig. Just prior to their late afternoon soundcheck, I managed to corral two of the Mothers – Jag Tanna and Brian Byrne – onto the group's tour bus to discuss their new album and the present state of I Mother Earth. The bus is parked on a narrow side street outside the famed club Café Campus off rue Ste. Laurent, in Montreal. It's a fairly typical tour bus, with a couch-lined front lounge section. Jag Tanna is semi-reclined on one of the couch sections, leaning on one elbow, legs stretched out across the aisle. He looks a little tired, and he has a right to be. He's been a busy man; working on the final mixing of the new album and rehearsing for the tour. He laments the fact that he hasn't been home for quite some time ("One more travellin' man with heavy tired eyes" as the song goes). Fans on the band's Internet discussion board [www.imotherearth.com] will no doubt be discussing the fact that his hair has changed again. This time he's sporting dark mini-Medusa dreads that sprout from his head like fronds on a palm tree. A two-inch twist of hair, wrapped like a billy-goat pharaoh, dangles from his chin. He's dressed in casual street-wear and sneakers. Though effusive and easy to laugh, Tanna also displays a business-like quality about him. There's a focus, a set to his features that reflects his role as musical overseer in the world of IME.

Tanna's feet are propped up next to Byrne, who is perched sideways on the couch across the aisle, a bundle of barely contained energy that finds its expression in the sprigs of blond hair that leap out from his forehead. An ornate tattoo spills out from under his left shirtsleeve venturing down past his elbow, awaiting the chance to advance further. A cool brownish-blond 'jazz patch' clings below his lower lip. He has the air of a kid who's been let into the Big Top by mistake, and he's enjoying every minute before the strongman comes to give him the bum's rush.

Byrne came to the band's attention through a common acquaintance that brought a tape over when he heard the group was looking for a new singer. Giving in to persistent badgering, the band finally gave the tape a listen. But it wasn't until they actually met Byrne that they realized they had found their man.

"I think it was a combination of a whole lot of things," says Tanna. "It wasn't the style of music we do at all, but you could tell there was something going on there – a pleasing tone to listen to. We never did a band rehearsal; we never auditioned him in that way. It was more like just conversation while we were on Edgfest. We talked for a couple of hours at a time on tour all the time, and I wasn't used to that at all – having conversations with people for that long. So that was a really good sign."

I MOTHER EARTH



The new album:
Blue Green Orange



Photos by Margaret Malandrucolo

"When you work with a talent of somebody like Jag, it's appropriate to let him run with it, because that's what making records is all about."

— Producer Paul Northfield

INTERVIEW

It must have been pretty strange for Byrne, this transformation from IME fan to lead singer. "It was incredibly overwhelming," he admits. "I mean, here's one of the bands that I admire most, and not just in Canada but on a grander scale, and then all of a sudden they want me. It was a pretty bizarre feeling," he says, shaking his head. "And then even telling people, like friends back home – nobody believed me. It was really weird."

It's hard not to like this easy-going and down-to-earth guy. While he proves himself capable of being forthright and serious, he seems much more comfortable being the fancy-free joker. He comes across as a genuine straightshooter with a healthy sense of fun – nothing more up his sleeve it seems, than a few tattoos.

These two guys share an obvious camaraderie. You get the feeling they would be hanging out together even if they weren't in a band. That camaraderie has probably helped them deal with the upheaval and the scrutiny surrounding the group over the past few years. Although there's obviously some bad blood between the two camps, the guys in IME are not about to start a verbal volleyball match in the media with their former singer.

"We don't want it to turn into Van Halen-type media war here," says Tanna. "God bless Van Halen by the way. I had to say that," he chuckles at the afterthought, but then adds more seriously: "For us it's like, go listen to his record and then listen to our record and then make up your mind. I'm not gonna make up anybody's mind for them. But the music will, definitely."

The frontman switch was only the most visible change the group went through in the past couple of years. The band also switched record labels, moving from EMI Music Canada to Mercury [Universal Music Group], and they changed management as well. But Tanna emphasizes that these changes weren't due to any "evil reasons" or crookedness. Contracts were up, and the band decided they needed a change.

"It was basically a housecleaning on a really large scale. [Now] we're surrounded by a bunch of really good people. When you have those kinds of people around you, you don't have any concerns. There's a sense of calm over our whole organization that we need."

Still, it hasn't been an easy trip for the group. "You get a lot of people talking crap," spits Tanna, not trying to hide the contempt in his voice. "Just people talking because that's what they're paid to do: talk."

"On a more positive note," adds Byrne, "there have been people within the industry who have been incredibly supportive. Surprisingly so, actually."

"See, it's all new for Brian, coming into this whole scenario," Tanna points out, suddenly more animated. He adds that Byrne's fresh perspective helped the band realize where some of the weak links were in their organization.

Says the Newfoundland-born Byrne: "Where I'm from – and this is not anything negative – things are basic. You get along with people or you don't get along with people, and there are definite reasons for it. There's no pretension. So when you come into this kind of situation where things are a little flashier, things are a little more – I won't say glamorous, but you know what I mean – it's easy to pick those things out right away."

It seems that having Byrne in the mix has not only changed the way the group saw themselves and their organization, it's brought a bit of a different chemistry to the group.

"A bit of a different chemistry?" Tanna exclaims incredulously. "My God, there *is* chemistry! That's what it's all about, being in a band. I haven't hung out with my brother and Bruce for two or three years, and now all we do is hang out. It's been that way for the past two years since Brian joined the band. But that's his vibe. It kind of changes you a little bit when you add different people into your family, and you start to gel in a different way."

Not surprisingly, the new personal chemistry also carried over into the band's approach to the process of creating music.

Gear

Brian Byrne/Vocals

Microphones:

- Audio-Technica 4050
- Audio-Technica Tube 4060
- Sanken
- Shure Beta 87/Beta 57

Jagori Tanna/Guitar

Amps:

- Budda Stringmaster
- Naylor Super Drive Sixty
- Rivera Bonehead

Guitars:

- 1963 Fender Telecaster
- 1962 Gibson ES-335
- 1972 Fender Stratocaster
- 1975 Bigsby Jumbo
- Danelectro 56U2

Bruce Gordon/Bass

Amp:

- vintage '70s Ampeg SVT head and 8x10 cabinet

Basses:

- Music Man/Ernie Ball Sterling (with EMG pickups)
- Fender Precision, Jazz, Telecaster ('69)
- Charles Cote

Live:

- Mesa Boogie TriAxis preamp
- Rane compressor
- Alesis Quadraverb
- Carver power amp
- 2 Genz Benz 2x10s
- 2 Hartke 4x10s

Christian Tanna/Drums

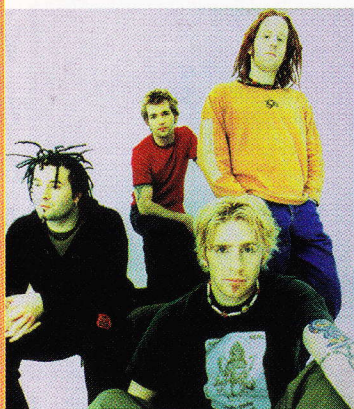
- Ayotte custom-fit toms – 10", 12", 14"
- Sabian cymbals
- Keplinger custom-fit snare
- Yamaha hardware
- Remo Ambassadors clear tom heads
- Remo Emperor coated snare head
- Rimshot 5B sticks
- Roland V-drum system

Recording Gear:

- Neve Preamps/EQ
- API 550/560 EQ
- Urei 1176 Comp
- Avalon 737 SP Preamp/Comp/EQ
- Empirical Labs Distressor Compressors
- Alesis ADAT XT20/M20

Computers

- Macintosh G3 233
- Macintosh 9600
- Emagic Logic Audio Gold/Platinum



Though the Tanna Brothers may still carry the bulk of the songwriting and lyric chores, that changed somewhat with the new album.

"I think that everybody was in there more than ever," says Tanna. "Everybody had a really strong voice. You put up an idea, and it's the idea that wins the argument; it's not the person that gave you the idea. Everybody has strength to add to the whole mix. We were never like that before, but this situation we're in now just sort of welcomes that. It's not such an uptight thing."

"But at the same time," Tanna continues, "there has to be at least one person who takes every idea that's flying around the room and stuffs it into a little pile and says 'this is the good stuff, this is the bad stuff.' Somebody's got to shape it. And that's my job."

To help with the job of producing the album, Tanna again

called upon Paul Northfield, who, along with Tanna, co-produced *Scenery and Fish*. No doubt the band's prog-rock leanings find a sympathetic collaborator in Northfield, who has worked with bands such as Rush, Yes, Gentle Giant and Moist.

"Paul's like an old friend," Tanna relates. "He's very mellow. He knows how to just sit back and take certain scenarios in and then say something and not really be pushy and bossy. Plus he's great at what he does; he's an amazing engineer. And on the production front it's another person to bounce ideas off of, and it's always good to have that."

"I think in some respects I provide a role for Jag that's like a quality control kind of guy," says Northfield from his home in Quebec's Laurentians near Studio Morin Heights, where parts of the album were recorded. "I'm a resource for him because I've made so many records. Jag has very strong ideas about what he likes, and he knows a lot about what he wants these days. When you work with a talent of somebody like Jag, it's appropriate to let him run with it, because that's what making records is all about."

As with their last record, the band chose to record the drums and some basic tracks at Morin Heights, then the rest of the album was recorded in their own studio space they had recently built back home in Toronto. The band had been in the process of moving into a new rehearsal space [since named Stigsound], so they chose one of the rooms, installed some baffles to better control the sound, and then simply rolled in the recording equipment.

Tanna runs down the set-up: "We did everything on Neve pre-amps, EQs and stuff, some API graphics and parametrics, 1176 compressors, Avalon 737 pre-amp compressors, EQs, and I got hold of some new compressors called Distressors by Empirical Labs – amazing stuff. Everything went through a Mackie digital console. And we used monitors by HHB, Circle 5s, and they're pretty incredible." For computers they used Mac G3s.

Having their own recording facility means they can now spend as long as they want on the recording process without expensive studio costs hanging over their heads, and that's just fine with Tanna. "It's not the money question, it's more the principle behind it. Just to spend \$1,500 a day doing vocal overdubs when you can do them in your bathroom. It took us a long time to convince people that this is the only way to do it. Instead of investing our album budget into a studio, we're investing it in ourselves. It's just the best way to stay creative and not have the time issue hanging over our heads, because of the cost."

Whereas for the previous album, the bed tracks, drums and bass were recorded to analog, this time around, the bed tracks were recorded in 20-bit digital using N20 ADATs.

"We figured that gave us more opportunity to play with some of the new technology," explains Northfield. "Even though we're still fans of analog recording, there's a lot of great improvements that have happened in digital that made it pertinent to track everything digital. And then we were able to do some editing and things like that to put the album together."

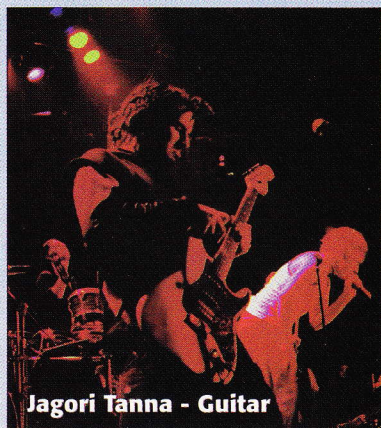
The combination of the new chemistry within the band, the more relaxed atmosphere and the band's use of digital recording technologies seem to have paid off in musical dividends. They ended up using quite a few of their demo tracks on the actual album.

"This is the first time we've done that actually," Tanna explains. "When we were making the record it was like: 'I like the demo better.' Many many times, with guitar parts and tons of vocal stuff, we just moved it over from the demos. It just worked."

Part of Northfield's role was to convince a sometime doubting Tanna to use tracks from the demos – if they felt right. Working in digital enabled them to grab the demo tracks they liked and paste them over to the album. As an example, Northfield points to the guitar tracks they ended up using for the final version of the song "Good For Sule".

"His guide guitars – the original guides that we ending up cutting drums to – just had a nice floating feeling about them. They weren't necessarily his first choice in sounds, but the feeling was so strong about the way he played them because he had done them in a relaxed manner when he was writing the song. On the previous record he found it difficult to accept using things that were first takes, or he always wanted to spend a lot of time on things. And what's interesting this time around, even though we did spend a lot of time on things, there were quite a few occasions where he was really ready to accept that there was a certain feeling about something he did off-the-cuff, and that we should use it."

And, as usual, sometimes serendipity plays a role when plans go awry. Tanna recounts how Byrne's original choice of microphone, a Sanken, started "blowing up" after a while, so they switched to an Audio-Technica 4050. "For some reason, we didn't expect it to sound really good, but it just worked. Plus I used it on all the demos, so when we were matching up and adding new parts to stuff that was from the demos, it worked perfectly in there."



Jagori Tanna - Guitar

Jeff Mackay

When it came to guitars, the high-end models sometimes got the short shrift, with Tanna choosing to go a lower-tech route. Northfield explains: "For the most part Jag's got a great collection of Strats and he's got a really wonderful Telecaster now, and a lot of great guitars. But we ended up doing quite a lot of the record with a \$200 Danelectro U2 reissue, which is about as cheap a guitar as is known to man. But they have a remarkable sound and a real personality to them, and it was quite a lot of fun to grab things like that."

For guitar amps, Tanna relied mostly on a Naylor Superdrive 60, which he used on the last record, and a Budda Stringmaster, both miked with a Shure 57 and put through a Neve API and the Distressors. "These are just amps I've had for quite a while and they just seem to work over everything else I have," he shrugs. "We basically used the same chain for everything. We just kept everything in a chain that always works and you can fix things really fast."

"With pedals, it's just whatever's lying around," says Tanna. "Mostly tons of different fuzz boxes or whatever – a whammy pedal and phasers and flangers. Everything's pedals, we didn't use any rack stuff at all. I'm not against that, but it's just more out of convenience. When you want a sound you just plug into whatever's on the ground and that's it."

For their part, Bruce Gordon's bass amp was an ancient 8x10 Ampeg and for drums, Christian Tanna used his live set up, which is an Ayyotte kit. [See equipment list for more details.]

When recording was complete, they returned to Morin Heights for final mixing, where they transferred their digital tracks to analog multi-track "to pick up the kind of harmonic thickening you get from playing around with analog tapes," says Northfield. Dubs for guitars and bass were run onto 15 ips 16-track, because of the "nice thick low end" and the drums went onto 24-track 30 ips.

Though Northfield had also mixed *Scenery and Fish*, the band wanted to change up the production team somewhat, so they called upon the capable talents of David Bottrill, who has worked with artists such as Peter Gabriel, Tool, Nusrat Fateh Ali Kahn and King Crimson. "We could have done it all again exactly how we did the last record," explains Tanna, "but that doesn't bring anything new to the table in the end. And mixing is like adding another 10 or 20 per cent to your record, even in ideas – it doesn't stop. And that's what happened: he brought a lot of really groovy ideas, just throwing stuff in."

Alongside these seasoned studio veterans is the 'new guy.' This being Byrne's first time in a recording studio, it had to be a fairly nerve-wracking experience. "Yeah, I had to stop throwing up," Byrne offers with a laugh. "In retrospect I would say it was an incredible experience. But I had a great time doing it. I was pushed a lot. I don't know if I really knew what I was capable of. I would have to say I didn't know until it was all over and I went 'wow, I'm happy with that. That's a good album.' I'm really happy with where I am right now, singing."

Tanna also feels that the band's musicianship has evolved tremendously through the recording of their new material. "It's more demanding obviously. The old stuff, I could be playing backwards. But the new stuff, because it's so fresh, and it's not that it's fast or complicated, there's just a lot of switching and different textures going on. We haven't had any rehearsals, and we're playing these songs tighter now than we did on all of our last tours. We've all come up; our musicianship has come up enormously. Big leaps for us."

The band also brought an additional musician on board for the album: Rush's Geddy Lee. "That was a major, major thrill for me, big time," says Tanna. "The whole band was just pretty wowed. We had Alex [Lifeson] on the last record and that was a huge thrill for me too, because obviously as a guitar player he's at the top for me. All my life I've been listening to Alex. And Geddy too. So getting that chance to have him on the record – I couldn't believe it. I still think about it and I just kind of laugh. It's been a long time now, because we did it a while ago, but I still kind of laugh every time I hear that song ["Good for Sule"]. It's good."

Having a new singer has meant that the band had to decide how to handle the old pre-Byrne repertoire. Thankfully, in choosing a singer they didn't go the clone route, as bands like AC/DC and Judas Priest have, but they're not burning bridges with the older songs either.

"When Brian joined up with us and we decided to start playing live last summer," recounts Tanna, "we said 'okay, here we go, you're gonna do some old stuff.' And he had no problem with that, but our whole thing was that you have to give the fans what they expect to hear. You have to learn all the rules of the song before you go off and start breaking them. I think we made it to that point with the old stuff, where it's more his song."

And how does he think the fans will react to the new material? "I think there's enough of the old I Mother Earth in it not to alienate our fans, so they go 'yes, this is what I want' or whatever. And that immediately opens the door for the song to be a little bit different, a little bit off, a little weird. I don't think you can just all of a sudden turn around and tell your fans that everything they like about you is no good and then do a crappy little pop album or something."

Later that evening inside the Café Campus, we get a chance to see the fan reaction first-hand. Montreal has always been a good city for IME, and tonight the Montreal fans show that they're still with them. The first crowd surfer is up and airborne before the opening song is even half over. The new song "Summertime in the Void" is very well-received. The song is raw energy, balancing on Bruce's great, percolating bass line and featuring an extended Santana-esque percussion jam from Christian and percussionist Daniel Mansilla. Brian's surging vocals rattle the bottles at the bar, and Jag is wielding the guitar like a demented sewing machine, stitching all the elements together with molten thread. The set closes with a sizzling run-through of two fan favourites: "Another Sunday" and "One More Astronaut".

The balance is right. The chemistry is cooking. The fans are in tune. I Mother Earth Mach II is on the launch pad, ready to blast off into a brighter future.



Jim Kelly is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

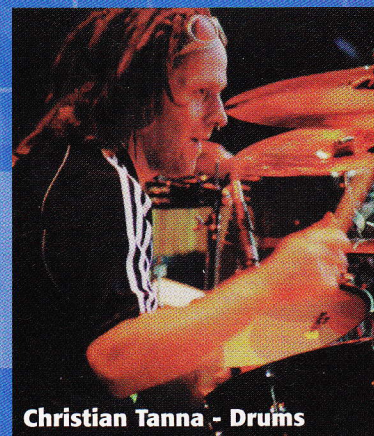


Daniel Mansilla - IME's live percussionist.

Jeff Mackay

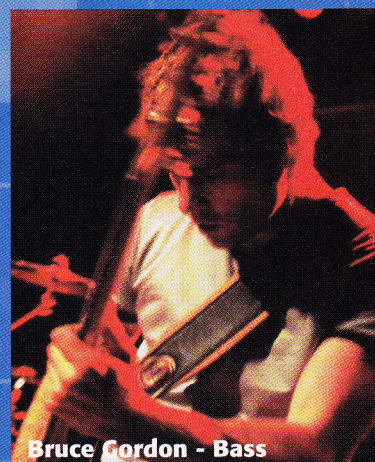
"We're playing these songs tighter now than we did on all of our last tours. We've all come up; our musicianship has come up enormously. Big leaps for us."

– Jagori Tanna



Christian Tanna - Drums

Jennifer Temple



Bruce Gordon - Bass