



Heavy Metal / Hard Rock Site

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Interview with Blackmore's Night - Candice Night - Winter Carols

Blackmore's Night has seen their profile rise sharply over the past decade of its existence. Their last record "The Village Lanterne" was a vastly entertaining disc that covered many musical miles, going from its core, the renaissance material that has propelled it, to more rock-based songs that trace the legacy of its founder Ritchie Blackmore. I was fortunate enough to speak with the band's co-founder and vocalist Candice Night this week about their new holiday record *Winter Carols*. Here's what she had to say:

Morley: Congratulations on the record. I find a lot of holiday records get kind of annoying and you can only listen to them once or twice. *Winter Carols* is something I have been playing a lot and will definitely be playing throughout the holidays.

Candice: Wow that's great. Good so hopefully it will stand the test of time and it won't annoy you too much by the time we finally get to the holidays.

Morley: It's passed the test already.

Candice: Oh, good.

Morley: The arrangements are nice but this is a vocalist's record. Your voice on all the songs is just beautiful but "Ding Dong Merrily On High" is extra gorgeous.

Candice: Oh, thank you so much. That's so good to hear. Yeah, we've been doing that one for a long time. As a matter of fact, Ritchie and I by this point have known each other for 17 years—I still can't believe that—but every year we kind of, you know, gather our friends and family and we play these songs for them every year. So once we know it's something they really enjoy, then we get to test out the rest of the world by putting it out for everybody. Luckily it's gotten a pretty good reaction so far, so I'm really excited about it.

Morley: The kind of music that Blackmore's Night plays, conjures images of a noisy tavern or a courtyard with a festival atmosphere. It's only natural that such traditional music as Christmas Carols would be something that you could do without it sounding cheesy or contrived, particularly with your voice which suits the material tremendously well. When did the idea of a Christmas record spring up?

Candice: We actually thought about doing it a couple of years ago. About a year and a half ago we basically put together a compilation album of all of our most romantic songs called *Beyond the Sunset* and in there we slipped in three of the Christmas songs. We put in "Christmas Eve", "We Three Kings", and "Emmanuel". It was just basically a gift because you know because we had released that album in October, November, and we kinda basically wanted to give it as a gift to the fans and the people who were buying the album. And also it kinda worked two-fold because we wanted to find out what people thought of the holiday songs and how we

were kinda perceiving them and interpreting them. And it was amazing because, considering none of those songs are really on an album per se. It was just as a bonus package for the people buying *Beyond the Sunset*. “Christmas Eve” which was an original holiday song that we had written went to number 38 on the Adult Contemporary chart on Billboard, which floored us. I mean we were completely shocked because Blackmore’s Night has never been on a Billboard chart before certainly in America and definitely not on the radio airplay charts. And again, never on Adult Contemporary which you know is very difficult to break through on because it’s usually all Celine Dion and it’s kinda hard to break through on that market (laughs). So that was an incredible acceptance for the way that we were interpreting these melodies and we just thought it might be a really good idea to continue on that path and put the rest of the songs out there on a full album and give it out there for everyone else to hear too. But the idea of doing holiday carols or Christmas songs, we’ve been thinking of that for a long time and every year in December we always have a very small and intimate show. Basically we live on Long Island, outside of New York, and we kinda just swoop in and take over a local restaurant someplace and we convert it to being a medieval tavern, like you said, and we invite, basically very close friends and family and a lot of fans and street team members and people who have really been very loyal to Blackmore’s Night over our 10 year span at this point. And we do it completely for free just because we love to play the music and the people fly in from all over the place. And the only thing we do at the end of the show, we basically just pass around a hat and ask people if they can make donations whether it’s a nickel, five dollars or whatever they have for a local animal charity. And if they don’t want to make a donation, that’s fine too. If they’re just there to enjoy the music that’s okay. There’s no pressure. For us it’s just our way to help some of the animal charities to get through the wintertime which is such a difficult time for them. So that’s basically the guise that we use our holiday songs for. We get that gathering going and although we have a wonderful time, it also works two-fold because we’re also able to donate to some of the charities locally in the area. So we’ve been doing it for years now.

Morley: With so many carols to choose from, how did you go about narrowing down the 12 that are on this record?

Candice: That’s a tricky one (laughs) because actually there are so many incredible carols and I can safely say we’re going to definitely, in the future steer away from things like “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire…” and “Jingle Bells”, and “Rocking Around the Christmas Tree” because that’s not really Blackmore’s Night’s style. (laughs) But we do like to go back to those traditional carols because many of them are hundreds of years old. They were originally traditionally renaissance songs. Or even going back to the old religions, a lot of these melodies were basically about festive celebrations for the seasons, not so much, obviously not about Christmas, but they were also in celebration of a fertile harvest or another thing that they would celebrate is the magic that they conceived of as far as pine trees and Christmas trees are, because they stayed green all year round. And at that time they couldn’t figure out why these were the only trees that stayed green and everything appeared to die at that time of year. So they really thought that pine trees and evergreen trees were magical so they composed songs for the trees. So of course it’s always been as far as Blackmore’s Night is concerned, we have this great celebration of nature. We pull a lot of our creativity and inspiration from being surrounded by nature. I don’t think we could probably compose the same songs if we were in a city kind of environment. Although there’s an amazing energy in cities, there’s also a lot of noise, and a lot of pollution and a lot of aggression and a lot of gray, you know, whenever you look out the windows, the skyscrapers and the asphalt, everything is paved. For us we need that color. We need the greens of the trees, the blue of the sky and the oceans, and the leaves changing color, this time of year especially. It keeps you awestruck. So we really pull a lot of our inspiration

from nature. And a lot of these songs were written originally about nature, so we really tried to keep that same kind of strand going through, even though we redid them again this year, we tried to keep that same original spirit that it might have been about 100 years ago.

Morley: Most of the songs are pretty faithful to the original. However, several like “Good King Wenceslas” and “We Three Kings” have interesting arrangements, How did you decide which songs to faithfully replicate and which others to play with slightly?

Candice: I think it’s always been kinda in our minds that, if someone else has done this song, I mean obviously a lot of these songs have been replicated by so many other artists or musical groups throughout the years, we always feel like if we can’t add something new or different to the arrangements or to the songs then there’s no point in us doing it because it’s already been done before, so often by other people and probably better so unless we feel like we can really put the Blackmore’s Night stamp on them, we tend to leave it to other people. And these are just particular songs that we thought it would be interesting to add. Whether it was vocal arrangements or even incorporating a lot of the older instruments, like “I Saw Three Ships”, you know, adding the pennywhistles or the harps, or the hurdy-gurdy, or the shawm on “We Three Kings”, we had like a whole section in the centre that had like shawm parts. The recorder parts on “Emmanuel”. So we really like to incorporate a lot of the older instruments with newer instruments and then also stay true to that sort of whatever the song wants to be about, which try to channel it. I have a tendency to just kinda close my eyes, take my shoes off so I can really feel grounded and just feel the song, and the music and the melody and allow it to take me wherever it wants me to go as far as vocally.

You know whether it kinda evokes this incredibly mellow, relaxing kinda sound, I kinda allow my voice to really reflect that. Or whether it wants to be celebratory, like “Ding Dong Merrily on High”, or “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”, we really try to evoke that range of emotions that the song wants to be about. So if a song really wants channel and come through and be , and have a really distinct individuality and personality then chances are we will be drawn to that song and feel that we can put it down on a cd and really hopefully put it out there for what it wants to be about. But again if it’s something that other people have done so often and we feel that it’s already been done to the best of its ability and there’s nothing that we can add, then we tend to just leave it alone.

Morley: In terms of lyrics and vocals, would you say this is a bit less stressful preparing for this record, considering it involved material that you were probably quite familiar with?

Candice: Well, yes and no. (laughs) We have made subtle changes on most of the songs. Basically, you know what it was? It’s because we did so much research and we realized that so many of these songs, again they were basically songs of celebration and festivity, before even the church had come in and taken a lot of the songs and added their own lyrics to it. A lot of those lyrics were added in like the 18, 17 and 19th century, so they’re still relatively new in comparison to what the melodies are from which is the 15th, 16th and even before. So what we wanted to do, what we found was that as we were trying to do a lot of these songs throughout the past 17 years or so, we found that a lot of these songs wound up being almost separatist. A lot of people... unless you believed in a certain religion, it was very difficult for you to sing along with these songs, unless it was something very generic like “O Christmas Tree”, because everybody can sing about a tree. So what we wanted to do was kinda bring it back to the original ideas of what the songs were which was to allow everyone to sing the songs without feeling that there was any segregation, so we had a tendency to change some of the words just

to make it more of an all-encompassing song that everyone can enjoy and be more just, partake basically in the celebration as opposed to anyone feeling left out because they didn't believe in a certain religion, so I know it sounds strange but that actually was kinda more stressful, to change words that were already in people's minds and had been for a couple of hundred years at this point, then it is as far as...I actually really look forward to lyric writing on a brand new slate or as soon as you hear a new melody line, I'm like let me get pens and paper and start going on this. Because that to me is one of the most creative outlets, and I always feel so energized after I finished writing lyrics to a song. It's like this incredible creation, I'm just so proud of it. So yes, it's kinda like, it was a strange balance, it was nice that a lot of it was already one for me and that I just had to interpret it, but it was kinda more stressful to have to change something that was almost written in stone at that point and kinda scratch in our own (laughs) words there.

Morley: There are several songs on here that are unfamiliar to me. What is the background on "Ma-O-Tzur"?

Candice: "Ma-O-Tzur" is the Hebrew song, traditional, so again it was just like, what we found, although the first half of it is sung in the Hebrew language, the second half of it, obviously is sung in English and again, we didn't feel that that was like segregating any specific group, although it's obviously a Jewish song the first half was in Hebrew. Basically it's just singing about love and joy and the festive candles which can relate to every religion and relate to everyone. And you know if you like candles year-round, then it can work in July if you want it to. A lot of people light candles just to relax, so we found that it was one of those songs that really had that pristine beauty and there was a lot of clarity to it and there was no separation so it just kinda of fit in really practically with the flow of what the album wanted to be about which was the celebration of winter and the holiday and the joy and love and peace that goes on there and that hopefully we can retain that spirit year round.

Morley: "Winter (Basse Dance)" is just gorgeous. Though I've not heard it before, I would guess this is based on a traditional seasonal melody. Do you know the origins and did it ever have vocals?

Candice: Actually you know, that's a complete Ritchie original. Ritchie wrote that ---he just amazes me when comes out with instrumental melodies because each one of them is just more beautiful than the last---I don't know where he comes up with them. But um, I know in that for instance, he calls it "Basse Dance", that is basically a renaissance time signature so it would be more of a rhythmic counting from that time period and that's what they would use in order to be festive and dance along with the certain specific counting. So that is why he had that in parentheses to kinda give it still that renaissance originality even though it is a completely new song that he composed himself.

Morley: "Wish You Were Here" sounds familiar, I think. Where does that come from?

Candice: Believe it or not it was a song that was written by a Scandinavian group, or performed by a Scandinavian group called The Rednecks. And they released that back probably about 10 years ago. It was a huge hit over in Europe. As a matter of fact the way that we found it is because we have a satellite dish that we always German television and Polish television, just try to keep in to what's going on with Europe because of course Ritchie is English so he likes to watch English television. So we try to keep our finger on the pulse of what's happening in Europe. And again, also because they have tendency to have incredible variety shows, where almost like what we used to have here years ago with Ed Sullivan where you'd have a juggler and then, I

don't know, you'd have a fire eater and then you'd have a musician, a band, then you'd have an acting skit. They still have that and we tend to have lost that over here so we like to always kinda just tune in and see what's going on over there as far as the variety of music and things over there are concerned.

"Wish You Were Here", we had tuned in to German television and we saw this band performing the song and it was a video. It is set in a civil war setting and it was so beautiful the way that they had arranged this song, like heartbreaking because of its melancholy, and it was so beautiful. So what we did was put it on our first album, *Shadow of the Moon* and although it did well over in Europe we really had put it on there because we wanted to show it to the American market. Because there's a tendency in American radio or on American MTV, they play a lot of American bands but there's not a lot of other bands even if the songs are absolutely brilliant. They tend not to get through over here. It's almost like a closed shop so and I think obviously going all the way back to Abba. Abba was one of the biggest bands in the world, selling incredible amounts of albums at that point, and over here I think we just know them for "Dancing Queen". (laughs) And everywhere else in the world, there's this incredible, classical kind of arrangements they had back in the '70s. It was amazing. And they never really broke through over here on the same scale. So we find it's the same with a lot of other incredible melodic bands that are over there. Maggie Riley is one of them. She's got an incredible voice but never really broke through here. Sarah Brightman, I think thanks to PBS, is finally getting through. But again it's just for some reason it seems to be a closed shop here. Unless you're backed by a major Sony or BMG corporation. (laughs) Nobody really gets to hear...or unless you're 16. (laughs) Then they'll really hear about it. (Laughs) So basically we put that song out here just because we thought the American audience would really like it. We thought it was very melodic. Now, since at that point when we did put it out originally in 1997, we were with the company that wasn't able to get us radio play over here. They were very, very small and independent. So now we're just hoping that we're kinda re-introducing it again, and maybe now that the band is more well-known—10 years later—and since it does refer to the snow falling, you know maybe people not being together at holiday time so everybody wishes that person was there, that melancholy, and you know that longing. So we basically just wanted to put it out again as the 2006 version and re-release it so hopefully other people could a chance here in America to hear that song and appreciate it.

Morley: Were there any carols that you attempted that somehow just didn't have enough magic for you when you were recording?

Candice: We've actually been really lucky this time where most of the things, I mean, when we go into the studio we pretty much have an idea already set in our head as to what the arrangement is going to be. And of course at this point, Ritchie and I can play so many different kinds of instruments, and whatever we can't do, like if it's a keyboard or something then the producer who is a brilliant orchestrator, if we need an ensemble kind of backing as far as the keyboard pads are concerned, he can do that. So between the three of us we pretty much get a full sound and I think we were able to basically incorporate every song that we wanted to at this point. There were a lot of songs that we had on the list to try that we really wanted to do but we didn't get a chance to because the album was going so well we actually filled up all the time that we had (laughs) on the album. But we'd still like to do probably "O Christmas Tree" and there's a few other songs that we have in mind. So I guess that's the great thing about holiday songs or Christmas songs is that there's so much to choose from because they've been around for so long. So hopefully every year we'll be able to, not only replenish this, basically our repertoire as far as the holiday songs are and add more and more to it every year. We can always put out more albums at this time of year and always refreshes the interest in this one too. I guess it's timeless, I guess it never dies.

Morley: As with most seasonal material, this was recorded I imagine in summer time. Is it hard to think snow in July?

Candice: As with most...recording in summertime, hard to think snow in summer...

Yeah (laughs) It's funny because where we live, when we first moved into our house, we were basically looking for the location more than anything else. And we really wanted a house on the water and when this one finally came up on the market, we were so happy because it wasn't overly huge and costing ridiculous amounts of money and it wasn't this tiny little fixer upper shack that we'd need to sink a lot of money into so we were lucky to find a house that fit us perfectly and it's right on the water. It's a contemporary house so when we first moved into it we it we went, "oh boy!" Everything is white, upon white, upon white which is, if you know me and Ritchie, that's for us. It would be like living in a dentist's office. (laughs) So we slowly we went about decorating it and at this point, years into living here, we now have basically converted the house so that it's Christmas all year round. Every room you go into, the rooms are deep emerald green or burgundy, the carpets are the same deep red color, or deep red color, we have a basement we've converted basically into a bar room, which we call the dungeon (laughs). And we have Christmas lights up all year round so it's kinda like the fantasy house. In that, it's such an incredibly warm feeling when you walk in, we've got the tapestries on the wall, cathedral ceilings with this huge fireplace so it's really, it's just a really warm, comfortable, very safe and secure feeling when you come home. But it also reminds you of being Christmas year round so we're kind of lucky like that so I guess it make it pretty easy just to create these songs, or at least record these songs because we record them in our home. So yeah, we have a studio downstairs so it's pretty easy for us to get into that spirit because we live it. (laughs)

Morley: Do you have a favorite song on the record?

Candice: You know it's funny because my ideas change every day depending on my emotion. But I love the way that the original one, "Christmas Eve", came out. I just think, considering it's an original song, it to me is really going to stand the test of time. I think it's just as strong as any of the other ones that have gone past throughout the ages. And basically what I did with that one, I ran down the road and collected all the little children in the neighborhood, almost like the pied piper laughs. And knocked on the door of all the women who live in my neighborhood and asked: "Could I borrow your kids?" And they said "Please! Take them for the day! (laughs) They're yours. I need some peace. I'll put my feet up. Whenever you're done, just return them." So I got to carry all these little kids back home with me and we set them up around a microphone stand and got them to sing on the chorus of "Christmas Eve". And it really, it was amazing, because it was so magical. They had obviously never sung on microphone before and some were more nervous than others and some just looked like it was an adventure. But they had such an incredible innocence to the way that they were singing. Every time I hear that song it brings a smile to my face just because I think that's the holidays should be about. I think also the very first time you see the snow come down, I think we all go "Oh wow". It reminds you of being a child. You know, you see those crystals falling from the sky and it's magical. Kind brings back that wonder of being a little kid. Obviously, as adults we know it's going to accumulate to a few feet and you're going to have to get the snow blower out (laughs) and that's not that much fun. But those first moments, I mean that really brings you back and even the smell of winter in the air, it just always brings you back to being a child. So I think for me, at this point, "Christmas Eve" really has that spirit, and it's really able to capture the innocence, even with those children singing at the end of it, it really kinda brings you back and reminds you of that wonder

and awe of being a child. But hopefully we can all hold onto for as long as you can.

Morley: Are there any plans for special shows if not a whole tour for this material?

Candice: Yeah, actually we hoping to do it this year but we had a little bit of shakeup in our band.

Morley: Yes, your bass player.

Candice: Yes, exactly, oh you know the story. I mean he had been with the band six years and he's a great guy and when he first joined the band, his children were very little and now they're teenagers and his wife basically said, "You're not leaving me alone now." (laughs) Because with teenagers you've got to stay home. So he handed in his resignation and it was sad for all of us because we'd become very close friends over the years but right now, although we did want to do shows here that were kind of in the planning, it's kinda been shifted where we now have to do auditions and interview for somebody to fill that slot. So we're able to go ahead and continue our touring for the next year which we were actually hoping on doing a lot of dates over here in America in Feb and March and then of course doing overseas and then coming back possibly in October and doing more dates here on the regular material and then doing some Christmas songs here next year. The only thing we'll probably be doing this year is, you know, one of those little tiny holiday shows where again, it's like that really intimate thing which we do every year, so we're planning on taking over a restaurant out here somewhere. (laughs) I'm not sure where yet. It'll definitely be in December, but that's just a real small thing. But as far as a proper concert that'll be next year.

Morley: I know the paint is still drying on *The Village Lanterne*, but are there any thoughts or plans being made for your next project? Anything you can share with us?

Candice: Oh my goodness. (laughs) Always, always. As a matter of fact, Ritchie and I do most of our writing as we're touring because we spend most of the year... although we go out for about three weeks to four weeks and then we come home for about a month and then go back out again. You know, Ritchie has been touring for such a long time that he doesn't want to be on the road for a year at a time, it's exhausting. At this point we only play, about 2, probably 2 shows in a row then we take a day off. Then play another couple of shows. Then take a day off just because we give so much of ourselves on stage. It's not the kind of band that plays the same way every night. We change the set list. We change the arrangement every single thing every night. So we always have to stay fresh and we give 100 per cent of ourselves on stage, so afterwards we need time to rest and basically recharge the batteries so we can go on and everyone can see us at our absolute best. So we do take a lot of time off when we're not on stage but as we're touring so many different places in the world, we tend to really try to stay in these big castles or absorb the 14th., 15th century spirits in some of the traditional homes or fortresses or even just the towns that we're going through, the cobblestones, the lanterns and things and really just kind of absorb those spirits that have gone through there in the past hundreds of years and channel them in to songs. So by the time we get home at the end of the tour we already have so much, you know, or so many songs or melodies at least, that we can kind of craft into songs. And at this point I think we already have about six songs already written and arranged kinda in a skeletal way in our heads before we head into the studio which will definitely be next year so, yeah, there's no rest for the minstrels (laughs) And we wouldn't have it any other way.

Morley: Absolutely. We wouldn't either.

Candice: Good. Thanks.

Morley: That's all the questions I have Candice. Anything else you want to mention that I didn't ask you?

Candice: Let's see. We recorded a DVD on our show in Paris. It's the first time we've ever played France actually as Blackmore's Night. And so we got the cameras in and they actually recorded a big DVD there, as well as us running the streets of Paris and extra footage so I think that actually might be out next year also. That's besides a lot of things that we're kinda working on behind the scenes.

Morley: I can't wait for that. Your last DVD Castles & Dreams was excellent.

Candice: Thank you. There's a lot of footage on castles (laughs). We had to cut out almost an hour's worth of music just because there was no more room. We ran out of room on the DVD (laughs) so the record company said, "Well we can make it a 3 cd set but..." (laughs) As it is with 2 full DVDs, people are going to have to stay home a whole entire weekend just to watch it. (laughs) But I was really proud with the way that that one turned out, ultimately it came out in exactly the picture I had in my mind. And we were very closely related to working on every single...I mean it got to the point where we were talking time signatures...I would be sit down and go okay, at point 033, you need to edit this, and do the camera angle...so we were totally hands on with it. It took a lot of energy but at the end of the day, I think it was really worth it. So we're just going to continue on in this vein and they'll definitely be a new album out next year, and a new DVD and touring and hopefully more touring in the states and we're just really excited about everything.

You're in Canada? You know, of course, we've never played in Canada yet, so right now our main problem seems to be that, it's never the band and it's never the fans. It's always the people in between. (laughs). The band's ready to go. The fans are always asking "When are you coming?" For us it always winds up being the agent or the promoter in between and it seems in North America if you're not really huge and playing arenas and stadiums then they want to stick you in a rock club and of course this music doesn't fit in a rock club because although we can play rock music and we do, it's not all we play. If you go into a rock club a lot of people already have in mind that it's going to be a rock show and when you start playing really intricate, emotional passages, whether it's you know, an instrumental, or just an intro or you know, there are times when Ritchie will just stop a song completely and he just wants to completely emote on acoustic and just go out there and really wear his heart on his sleeve and almost be naked on stage and play from his heart. And people if they're in a rock club and they're drinking, they'll have a tendency to yell across that which completely ruins the moment not only for the band but for everyone else who came to see it. So we always have a tendency to request theatres. And it just seems to be so difficult to get into theatres. So we're hoping to get our foot in the door with specific agents and hopefully the more that we play, the more doors that will open, but it just seems to be a really long process so we are constantly chipping away and working at it. (laughs) So we're definitely hoping to get out there. We have so many requests from Canada. So we'll just keep working on it from this end, and you keep spreading the word and hopefully we'll meet in the middle so we can play for you guys live.

Morley: We will.

Candice: Thank you!