

July 6, 2011 GOLDMINE

Deep Purple's Blackmore happily leaves hard-rock days behind

Depending on how loudly you like to listen to "Machine Head," you probably don't need to hear this. But Ritchie Blackmore has now made more new albums with his wife than he ever made with the singers that history usually associates him with: Ian Gillan, Ronnie James Dio, Joe Lynn Turner.

More than John Lennon made with Yoko, too, lest that comparison should raise its head around here, and more than Stevie Nicks made with Lindsay Buckingham, which we wouldn't have brought up if the Blackmores hadn't already.

Candice Night, Mrs. Ritchie Blackmore for a couple of years now, but his partner since the early 1990s, is talking about her favorite music, which runs the gamut from her parents' love of Big Band (dad) and show tunes (mom), through the teenage traumas of the 1980s, and on to la belle Belladonna herself. "Stevie Nicks! I love Stevie Nicks. Her presence onstage is unparalleled, and she's been doing it for such a long amount of time ..."

You have been compared to her, ventures Goldmine tentatively, and Ritchie Blackmore pounces. "She has been compared because she does ..."

"What?" Night sounds almost incredulous. "You're saying I copy Stevie Nicks?" "You do; you know you do," responds her husband, and there's not even a moment's pause before she responds. "Well, that would make you Lindsay Buckingham."

And there's not much that anyone, not even one of the greatest rock guitarists to walk this planet, can say to that.

Night, however, concedes a soupçon of the accusation. "I think people compare us because ... long blonde hair and skirts. And subject matter, in a way. Her singing of gypsies and Rhiannon. Vocally, we're completely different. But I'm a huge Stevie fan, so that's a huge compliment when anybody says there's any similarity between us at all. But I also see major differences, because obviously she's not involved in the medieval or Renaissance thing at all. There's none of the instrumentation are going on." Then she pauses for a moment, grinning mischievously, "Maybe if I had short, black hair, they would compare me to Joan Jett."

Blackmore's Night, the combo that the eponymous Ritchie and Candice launched in the mid-1990s, issued its newest album, "Autumn Sky," last September in the U.K., but it's a hot new release in the U.S., the delayed appearance timed to coincide with the band's latest American tour.

It also allowed the pair to remain home with the now not-so-newborn daughter after whom the album was named. Autumn Esmerelda Blackmore was born May 27, 2010, not so long after Blackmore's Night undertook its last tour (a short trip up and down the East Coast) and within days of the album's actual completion.

"We recorded the album and toured the East Coast while I was pregnant," explains Night, "and I recorded up until about three weeks before my due date, so there's a lot of her in this CD. And actually, the whole time I was pregnant, nobody knew. While we were on tour, they had no idea."

The album was recorded at the couple's Long Island home studio. "We had one extra room that had no windows. It was really cell-like, really prison-like, so that's where we put all the equipment, and we keep the producer [Pat Regan] there, as well. Once in a while, we throw some Cheetos in there for him to eat. And he's shackled."

The studio itself is a new addition to the home; for the longest time, Blackmore was adamant he wanted to remain the only working musician who didn't have a home studio, and he built a bar, instead. But then, he says, he realized how much he missed the family's two cats when he was away. And Night's nightmare unfolded from there. Nine months pregnant, she walked into the living room one day ... "Well, I guess I waddled in — and all of my medieval wind instruments had been taken off the shelves," she said. "And I thought, 'Well that's not a good sign; where is everything?' Now, some of these instruments are as long as my leg. Some of them need some very intense breath control to actually get a sound out of them. So I went downstairs, and there's Ritchie and the producer surrounded by them, everything right there, and they said, 'Well, we decided the beginning of "Journeyman" needs a nine-piece Renaissance woodwind ensemble and each one has to be triple or quadruple tracked.

"Nine months pregnant, there's not a lot of breath to even walk upstairs, let alone play these instruments, and I really thought at that point that they must be trying to kill me. But I'm always up for a challenge, and I started with the first one. And I'd go completely blue in the face, and they'd give me about 30 seconds to recuperate before handing me the next one," she said. "Now, looking back at it, when I hear it, I sort of cringe from the memory. But, at the same time, I have a lot of pride that I got through it, that I was able to do it. I just thank God I didn't go into labor while they were doing it."

It was 1996 when Ritchie Blackmore announced he was forming a band with Candice Night to pursue the love of medieval and Renaissance-style music that has always been a component of his musicianship — regardless if it was apparent in the music he'd been making. For 30 years before that, he had helmed either Deep Purple or Rainbow.

Blackmore's Night's debut CD, "Shadow of the Moon," was released while a revitalized Rainbow was touring the U.S. in support of 1995's "Stranger in Us All" album, which probably led to some puzzled faces at the merchandising table. There are, after all, few strolling minstrels cavorting through "Smoke on the Water," "Space Truckin'," "Man on the Silver Mountain," or any of the other riffs for which Blackmore was renowned.

Predominantly acoustic and exploring areas — Renaissance melodies, classical motifs, Middle Eastern cadences — that Blackmore had scarcely been able to pursue in the past, Blackmore's Night was nevertheless aimed straight into the heart of his former

constituency, confident that listeners who had remained with him for so many years already would readily appreciate this latest shift. Either that, or they would applaud one of the most bloody-mindedly courageous moves any of rock's old-guard guitar heroes have ever made.

It was not a move that Night — barely out of her teens when she met Blackmore — expected, either.

“So I always loved music, but I never thought I'd be involved to the extent I am now. I met Ritchie when I was working for a radio station, so I was trying to be around music as much as I could, but my career was taking a different shape, and when I met him, it made a complete about turn. I went on the road with him and Deep Purple in 1993, and he asked me to sing some background vocals there, because we'd always be singing together at parties.”

She co-wrote four of the songs on “Stranger in Us All” and added backing vocals to the rest, but it was not until she and Blackmore found their first home together in Connecticut that she discovered the music for which she has such a unique gift.

“It's funny, because a lot of people ... I either get the credit or the blame for making Ritchie do Renaissance music ... Yoko Ono, that's me,” she said.

However, Night had never heard of Renaissance music before she met Blackmore; he introduced her to it, as it was literally all he would listen to. Little has changed in that respect.

“He only listens to Renaissance and medieval-type music in the house, so even if he goes out for a walk and I sneak on different kind of music, as soon as he gets back he takes my CD off and puts his back on, and it's back to Renaissance. So, he's slightly obsessed; he has about 2,000 Renaissance and medieval CDs in our kitchen ... or at least the covers; I don't know where the CDs are.”

Night may not be as obsessive about Renaissance music as her husband, but she got hooked on it all the same. The couple was living together in rural Connecticut, miles away from billboards, McDonald's signs and all the other hustle and bustle of the modern world.

“There was nothing around for miles and miles around except deer and trees ... beautiful, though. For peace of mind, it was amazing,” she said. “If you really immerse yourself in nature and you turn on that kind of music, it's almost like the soundtrack to nature. It seemed to really come alive and breathe life into your surroundings; it's just beautiful. So, I got really entranced as soon as he played it for me in those natural surroundings; it all seemed to fit really well together.”

She was astonished, too, by the ease with which she picked up the range of wind instruments that are integral to the sound — and which Blackmore confesses leave him baffled. Chanter, comamuse, shawm and rauschpfeife are just a few of the weapons in her

arsenal. “I’m self-taught, and I’m sure anybody who has gone to a proper school for it is going to look at me and say, ‘You’re doing it completely wrong; all the fingering is incorrect and that reed shouldn’t be on that instrument.’ But I don’t care, because I’m getting the sounds that I need to, the scales and the notes and everything that I need,” she said. “I’m probably making it more difficult for myself, but it works for me.”

And for a lot of other people, too. Sales of 70,000-plus awaited the German release of “Shadow of the Moon;” loyal Japan purchased 100,000 more as word spread of an intoxicatingly ethereal journey into a parallel universe where music was made for its sheer beauty.

Touring honed both the music and its makers’ understanding of what it meant. Almost bashfully, Blackmore recalls one of Blackmore’s Night’s first live shows, at a Berlin church. Certain that at least part of the audience would only go home happy if he served up some reminder of his past, he readied a pair of Rainbow oldies to wheel out for encores. “And as soon as we started playing the old favorites, some people put on their coats to leave!” he said.

They are more understanding now. Catch Blackmore’s Night in concert, and any number of surprises leap out at you, including, on occasion, such old Purple classics as “Child in Time,” “Woman From Tokyo” and “Black Night.” The fact that they all lend themselves exquisitely to the Blackmore’s Night framework proves Blackmore has always known what he is doing.

“Candice is so good at being able to do the old Purple tunes,” he enthuses. “Things that you wouldn’t think she could sing, she can. That’s why we do some of those tunes as well, especially the melodic ones.

“We do quite a few live; we haven’t recorded them. ‘Rainbow Eyes’ ... they all work. Even ‘Child In Time.’ I don’t think we’d approach things like ‘Highway Star,’ ‘Space Truckin’ ... the raucous stuff. Not a lot of melodic content. Really good tunes — they’re great riffs — but not too melodic,” he said.

“It’s so nice to be able to do anything we want to. We don’t have to be in a box. Obviously, I like to listen to medieval music, Renaissance music, and play it, but it’s so nice to be able to go from that extreme to another, and not have to stay in one style.”

The Purple (and Rainbow — “Difficult to Cure” and “Since You’ve Been Gone” are also in the repertoire) oldies aren’t simply sops for the audience. Blackmore enjoys playing them because “it isn’t being forced on me any more. When I was in Purple, we could never think outside the box. It had to be heavy metal, hard rock, riffs, otherwise the committee didn’t like it, the committee being the band. And that used to bother me, because there used to be so many good tunes that we could have played, but certain members of the band would go, ‘Oh, no, we can’t do it unless we’ve written it,’ and sometimes that is motivated by money, and that’s ridiculous,” he said.

Blackmore's Night's second album, 1999's "Under a Violet Moon," was his chance to put his response to that kind of thinking into action. The remarkable "Past Time With Good Company," with its intriguing Henry VIII writing credit, was the first of five overtly traditional airs rearranged and reworded by Blackmore and Night; the daffily Arthurian "Avalon," "March the Heroes Home," the self-defining "Spanish Nights" and the percussive Cossack quick-step "Gone with the Wind" all followed in its footsteps, with the final packing one of Blackmore's best guitar solos in years — a gift that was all the more impressive because it was the only solo on the album.

Since that time, much of Blackmore's Night's magic has remained in the couple's collective ear for cover versions. Both onstage and on disc, their eclecticism soars. Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'" rubs shoulders with The Rednex's "Wish You Were Here," and for every avowedly folk-flavored number (Ralph McTell's "Streets of London," Joan Baez's "Diamonds and Rust") there is a solid pop classic: The BeeGees' "First of May" is a live staple, while "Autumn Sky" includes a fabulous rendering of The Kinks' "Celluloid Heroes," a song that Blackmore first heard on one of Purple's 1970s U.S. tours and has been in love with ever since.

"Celluloid Heroes' has always been a favorite of mine. I really loved that tune; it's got that sarcastic, dry wit that goes through the whole thing, and only a really miserable sod could think that way. I can relate to that. And the melody ... I hang everything on the melody; if it doesn't have a melody, I'm not interested. We were just running through it as we do certain songs in the house; we'll go through 'Whiter Shade of Pale' and old stuff for the fun of it, and I could tell there was a lot of potential when Candice sang it, so we took it a stage further and recorded it," he said.

"Every now and again, Candice will sing a tune that I don't like, but if it has potential we will follow it up," he said.

"Under a Violet Moon" was followed by 2001's "Fires at Midnight." Then came "Past Times with Good Company," a live album that might never have made "Made In Japan" quail, but who'd want it if it did? Two discs captured the full melodic power of the duo (and friends), 15 tracks occasionally extending well beyond their studio parameters, but always remaining true to the air of the original compositions.

Indeed, "Past Times with Good Company" wanted for nothing in terms of stirring power and evocation, a point hammered home by the fact that just two tracks hearkened back to any of Blackmore's own past incarnations: "16th Century Greensleeves," the old Rainbow standby, which was, in any case, a stern prophet of where Blackmore's interests lay, and Deep Purple's "Soldier of Fortune," an inclusion that took everybody aback.

"Soldier of Fortune" hailed from 1974's "Stormbringer" album. The last LP Blackmore recorded with the band before quitting for Rainbow (the first time) was not a high point in either his or Purple's career, and few would cite "Soldier of Fortune" in its original form as a creative highlight, either. Blackmore's Night, however, has made it their own in a way Purple never could.

“‘Soldier of Fortune’ is incredibly melodic ... it was an interesting song, because I wrote it with David Coverdale; he had the first part but he didn’t have a middle, so I put the middle in,” Blackmore said. “And it was nice to be involved in a project where the people who actually wrote it, wrote it, whereas a lot of the Purple stuff was written by basically two people, but it was always shared five ways, which was kind of ridiculous. You get into that ‘Let’s be democratic’ thing sometimes.

“I noticed the Eddie Van Halen setup, he was in the same position — it was obvious that he wrote most of it, along with the singer, and then shared it ... which he complained about the moment the band broke up. And I knew the situation. It’s amazing; when you’re in a band, people get very funny if they’re not included in the writing credits. It’s a hassle all the time to try and go around it without offending everybody ... ’cause they say, ‘Well, I was there; I was having coffee at the time’.”

Writing credits in Blackmore’s Night place credit only where’s credit is due, with Blackmore and Night largely responsible for the band’s originals. Regardless of how historically “authentic” Blackmore’s Night’s interpretation of medieval music might be, it is impossible to over-estimate just how profound an impact the group has had on the New Age scene into which Billboard, at least, lumps them. (New Age Reporter prefers to put them into the Celtic category.)

Chart regulars in Germany, where 2003’s “Ghost of a Rose” and 2006’s “The Village Lanterne” only narrowly missed the Top 10, Blackmore Night’s last album, 2008’s “Secret Voyage,” spent 70-plus weeks on Billboard’s New Age Top Ten, four of them at No. 1, without even bothering the mainstream chart. It’s a phenomenal achievement that is matched only by the size of the venues that could host a Blackmore’s Night concert — if only Blackmore would permit them.

“We have a great rapport with the fans,” Night said, “with the audience. We get everybody involved; we have requests. We’re constantly ... it’s like there is no boundary between us, no wall, it’s like we’re all enjoying ourselves, having a big party, and there’s a really positive energy, a really positive vibe wherever we go.”

It reminds her of the parties they occasionally host at their home.

“Ritchie will take out his acoustic guitar and play, but only if everybody else gives something to the party as well,” she said. “He doesn’t care if you stand up and do a dance or a poem, sing a song or play an instrument, as long as everybody gives a little piece of themselves, so we’re all equal, we’re all giving a little bit.”

But, just like we all know what happens if a party gets too big, Blackmore is well aware of the pitfalls of playing the largest venues.

“Our audiences are very friendly mostly, apart from the odd drunk who’s at the wrong show. I find that the bigger shows we do, the three-, five-, eight- thousand seater places, you always have the rowdies, those eight or 10 people who aren’t there to listen to the music, they’re there because it’s the only thing in town. And I’m always aware of them.

I can forget the other three or four thousand, it's just the three or four troublemakers who are going to yell and scream. Because we do some quiet numbers, you can hear a pin drop, and you can definitely hear a drunk drop.

“So I have people watching out for that, because that can ruin it for everybody. You're trying to play a really sensitive piece and it's, ‘Come on, Ritchie, play some rock 'n' roll!!!’ It's only every now and again, but I'm always aware that it can happen. That's one reason why we like to keep our audiences down to 600, 1,000 people. That's our ideal.”

That, too, has its downside, though.

“It's funny, because I sometimes look at the audience — I always take a sneak peek before we go onstage, always have done, because you get those pre-show nerves and I like to look at the audience and try and figure out — well, they're not there to audition us, they're there to enjoy themselves. But sometimes I look out and they're so old, the audience, and I'll suddenly realize they're probably younger than me,” he said. (Blackmore was 66 on April 14.) I'm looking at them, going, ‘Oh they're so old,’ and then — ‘Oh no, they're probably five or 10 years younger than I am.’ Does that bother him, though?

“Not at all. There's still some journalists, in Britain especially, who ask things like ‘Why are you bothering? What's the point? You're too old for that.’ In England, if you're over 21, you're too old to do anything except for lifting a pint, but that gets a little bit tedious....”

“But you have to be older to be one with your instrument, because your instrument is constantly teaching you new things,” continues Night. “If you're 16 years old and you're a great guitarist or whatever, you're only going to be better when you're 20 and even better when you're 30.”

And as for being a wrinkly old rocker, Blackmore simply laughs aloud. We've talked about Deep Purple, we've mentioned Rainbow, we could go back even further and discuss the Outlaws, Heinz, Screaming Lord Sutch ... any of the many acts with which he's played since his career began in the very early 1960s, and many of whom could regroup tomorrow and sell out any stadium you like.

But we don't, because — well, like he says ... “there's nothing wrong with nostalgia. I like to go and see certain old bands when they reform, or when they come out and tour. But, at the same time, I'd hate to be in that band.”

Depending on how loudly you like to listen to “Machine Head,” you probably don't need to hear this. But Ritchie Blackmore has now made more new albums with his wife than he ever made with the singers that history usually associates him with: Ian Gillan, Ronnie James Dio, Joe Lynn Turner.

More than John Lennon made with Yoko, too, lest that comparison should raise its head around here, and more than Stevie Nicks made with Lindsay Buckingham, which we wouldn't have brought up if the Blackmores hadn't already.

Candice Night, Mrs. Ritchie Blackmore for a couple of years now, but his partner since the early 1990s, is talking about her favorite music, which runs the gamut from her parents' love of Big Band (dad) and show tunes (mom), through the teenage traumas of the 1980s, and on to la belle Belladonna herself. "Stevie Nicks! I love Stevie Nicks. Her presence onstage is unparalleled, and she's been doing it for such a long amount of time ..."

You have been compared to her, ventures Goldmine tentatively, and Ritchie Blackmore pounces. "She has been compared because she does ..."

"What?" Night sounds almost incredulous. "You're saying I copy Stevie Nicks?" "You do; you know you do," responds her husband, and there's not even a moment's pause before she responds. "Well, that would make you Lindsay Buckingham."

And there's not much that anyone, not even one of the greatest rock guitarists to walk this planet, can say to that.

Night, however, concedes a soupçon of the accusation. "I think people compare us because ... long blonde hair and skirts. And subject matter, in a way. Her singing of gypsies and Rhiannon. Vocally, we're completely different. But I'm a huge Stevie fan, so that's a huge compliment when anybody says there's any similarity between us at all. But I also see major differences, because obviously she's not involved in the medieval or Renaissance thing at all. There's none of the instrumentation are going on." Then she pauses for a moment, grinning mischievously, "Maybe if I had short, black hair, they would compare me to Joan Jett."

Blackmore's Night, the combo that the eponymous Ritchie and Candice launched in the mid-1990s, issued its newest album, "Autumn Sky," last September in the U.K., but it's a hot new release in the U.S., the delayed appearance timed to coincide with the band's latest American tour.

It also allowed the pair to remain home with the now not-so-newborn daughter after whom the album was named. Autumn Esmerelda Blackmore was born May 27, 2010, not so long after Blackmore's Night undertook its last tour (a short trip up and down the East Coast) and within days of the album's actual completion.

"We recorded the album and toured the East Coast while I was pregnant," explains Night, "and I recorded up until about three weeks before my due date, so there's a lot of her in this CD. And actually, the whole time I was pregnant, nobody knew. While we were on tour, they had no idea."

The album was recorded at the couple's Long Island home studio. "We had one extra room that had no windows. It was really cell-like, really prison-like, so that's where we

put all the equipment, and we keep the producer [Pat Regan] there, as well. Once in a while, we throw some Cheetos in there for him to eat. And he's shackled."

The studio itself is a new addition to the home; for the longest time, Blackmore was adamant he wanted to remain the only working musician who didn't have a home studio, and he built a bar, instead. But then, he says, he realized how much he missed the family's two cats when he was away. And Night's nightmare unfolded from there.

Nine months pregnant, she walked into the living room one day ... "Well, I guess I waddled in — and all of my medieval wind instruments had been taken off the shelves," she said. "And I thought, 'Well that's not a good sign; where is everything?'" Now, some of these instruments are as long as my leg. Some of them need some very intense breath control to actually get a sound out of them. So I went downstairs, and there's Ritchie and the producer surrounded by them, everything right there, and they said, 'Well, we decided the beginning of "Journeyman" needs a nine-piece Renaissance woodwind ensemble and each one has to be triple or quadruple tracked.

"Nine months pregnant, there's not a lot of breath to even walk upstairs, let alone play these instruments, and I really thought at that point that they must be trying to kill me. But I'm always up for a challenge, and I started with the first one. And I'd go completely blue in the face, and they'd give me about 30 seconds to recuperate before handing me the next one," she said. "Now, looking back at it, when I hear it, I sort of cringe from the memory. But, at the same time, I have a lot of pride that I got through it, that I was able to do it. I just thank God I didn't go into labor while they were doing it."

It was 1996 when Ritchie Blackmore announced he was forming a band with Candice Night to pursue the love of medieval and Renaissance-style music that has always been a component of his musicianship — regardless if it was apparent in the music he'd been making. For 30 years before that, he had helmed either Deep Purple or Rainbow.

Blackmore's Night's debut CD, "Shadow of the Moon," was released while a revitalized Rainbow was touring the U.S. in support of 1995's "Stranger in Us All" album, which probably led to some puzzled faces at the merchandising table. There are, after all, few strolling minstrels cavorting through "Smoke on the Water," "Space Truckin'," "Man on the Silver Mountain," or any of the other riffs for which Blackmore was renowned.

Predominantly acoustic and exploring areas — Renaissance melodies, classical motifs, Middle Eastern cadences — that Blackmore had scarcely been able to pursue in the past, Blackmore's Night was nevertheless aimed straight into the heart of his former constituency, confident that listeners who had remained with him for so many years already would readily appreciate this latest shift. Either that, or they would applaud one of the most bloody-mindedly courageous moves any of rock's old-guard guitar heroes have ever made.

It was not a move that Night — barely out of her teens when she met Blackmore — expected, either.

"So I always loved music, but I never thought I'd be involved to the extent I am now. I met Ritchie when I was working for a radio station, so I was trying to be around music as much as I could, but my career was taking a different shape, and when I met him, it made a complete about turn. I went on the road with him and Deep Purple in 1993, and he

asked me to sing some background vocals there, because we'd always be singing together at parties."

She co-wrote four of the songs on "Stranger in Us All" and added backing vocals to the rest, but it was not until she and Blackmore found their first home together in Connecticut that she discovered the music for which she has such a unique gift.

"It's funny, because a lot of people ... I either get the credit or the blame for making Ritchie do Renaissance music ... Yoko Ono, that's me," she said.

However, Night had never heard of Renaissance music before she met Blackmore; he introduced her to it, as it was literally all he would listen to. Little has changed in that respect.

"He only listens to Renaissance and medieval-type music in the house, so even if he goes out for a walk and I sneak on different kind of music, as soon as he gets back he takes my CD off and puts his back on, and it's back to Renaissance. So, he's slightly obsessed; he has about 2,000 Renaissance and medieval CDs in our kitchen ... or at least the covers; I don't know where the CDs are."

Night may not be as obsessive about Renaissance music as her husband, but she got hooked on it all the same. The couple was living together in rural Connecticut, miles away from billboards, McDonald's signs and all the other hustle and bustle of the modern world.

"There was nothing around for miles and miles around except deer and trees ... beautiful, though. For peace of mind, it was amazing," she said. "If you really immerse yourself in nature and you turn on that kind of music, it's almost like the soundtrack to nature. It seemed to really come alive and breathe life into your surroundings; it's just beautiful. So, I got really entranced as soon as he played it for me in those natural surroundings; it all seemed to fit really well together."

She was astonished, too, by the ease with which she picked up the range of wind instruments that are integral to the sound — and which Blackmore confesses leave him baffled. Chanter, comamuse, shawm and rauschpfeife are just a few of the weapons in her arsenal. "I'm self-taught, and I'm sure anybody who has gone to a proper school for it is going to look at me and say, 'You're doing it completely wrong; all the fingering is incorrect and that reed shouldn't be on that instrument.' But I don't care, because I'm getting the sounds that I need to, the scales and the notes and everything that I need," she said. "I'm probably making it more difficult for myself, but it works for me."

And for a lot of other people, too. Sales of 70,000-plus awaited the German release of "Shadow of the Moon;" loyal Japan purchased 100,000 more as word spread of an intoxicatingly ethereal journey into a parallel universe where music was made for its sheer beauty.

Touring honed both the music and its makers' understanding of what it meant. Almost bashfully, Blackmore recalls one of Blackmore's Night's first live shows, at a Berlin church. Certain that at least part of the audience would only go home happy if he served up some reminder of his past, he readied a pair of Rainbow oldies to wheel out for encores. "And as soon as we started playing the old favorites, some people put on their coats to leave!" he said.

They are more understanding now. Catch Blackmore's Night in concert, and any number of surprises leap out at you, including, on occasion, such old Purple classics as "Child in Time," "Woman From Tokyo" and "Black Night." The fact that they all lend themselves exquisitely to the Blackmore's Night framework proves Blackmore has always known what he is doing.

"Candice is so good at being able to do the old Purple tunes," he enthuses. "Things that you wouldn't think she could sing, she can. That's why we do some of those tunes as well, especially the melodic ones.

"We do quite a few live; we haven't recorded them. 'Rainbow Eyes' ... they all work. Even 'Child In Time.' I don't think we'd approach things like 'Highway Star,' 'Space Truckin' ... the raucous stuff. Not a lot of melodic content. Really good tunes — they're great riffs — but not too melodic," he said.

"It's so nice to be able to do anything we want to. We don't have to be in a box. Obviously, I like to listen to medieval music, Renaissance music, and play it, but it's so nice to be able to go from that extreme to another, and not have to stay in one style."

The Purple (and Rainbow — "Difficult to Cure" and "Since You've Been Gone" are also in the repertoire) oldies aren't simply sops for the audience. Blackmore enjoys playing them because "it isn't being forced on me any more. When I was in Purple, we could never think outside the box. It had to be heavy metal, hard rock, riffs, otherwise the committee didn't like it, the committee being the band. And that used to bother me, because there used to be so many good tunes that we could have played, but certain members of the band would go, 'Oh, no, we can't do it unless we've written it,' and sometimes that is motivated by money, and that's ridiculous," he said.

Blackmore's Night's second album, 1999's "Under a Violet Moon," was his chance to put his response to that kind of thinking into action. The remarkable "Past Time With Good Company," with its intriguing Henry VIII writing credit, was the first of five overtly traditional airs rearranged and reworded by Blackmore and Night; the daffily Arthurian "Avalon," "March the Heroes Home," the self-defining "Spanish Nights" and the percussive Cossack quick-step "Gone with the Wind" all followed in its footsteps, with the final packing one of Blackmore's best guitar solos in years — a gift that was all the more impressive because it was the only solo on the album.

Since that time, much of Blackmore's Night's magic has remained in the couple's collective ear for cover versions. Both onstage and on disc, their eclecticism soars.

Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'" rubs shoulders with The Rednex's "Wish You Were Here," and for every avowedly folk-flavored number (Ralph McTell's "Streets of London," Joan Baez's "Diamonds and Rust") there is a solid pop classic: The BeeGees' "First of May" is a live staple, while "Autumn Sky" includes a fabulous rendering of The Kinks' "Celluloid Heroes," a song that Blackmore first heard on one of Purple's 1970s U.S. tours and has been in love with ever since.

"'Celluloid Heroes' has always been a favorite of mine. I really loved that tune; it's got that sarcastic, dry wit that goes through the whole thing, and only a really miserable sod could think that way. I can relate to that. And the melody ... I hang everything on the melody; if it doesn't have a melody, I'm not interested. We were just running through it as we do certain songs in the house; we'll go through 'Whiter Shade of Pale' and old stuff for the fun of it, and I could tell there was a lot of potential when Candice sang it, so we took it a stage further and recorded it," he said.

"Every now and again, Candice will sing a tune that I don't like, but if it has potential we will follow it up," he said.

"Under a Violet Moon" was followed by 2001's "Fires at Midnight." Then came "Past Times with Good Company," a live album that might never have made "Made In Japan" quail, but who'd want it if it did? Two discs captured the full melodic power of the duo (and friends), 15 tracks occasionally extending well beyond their studio parameters, but always remaining true to the air of the original compositions.

Indeed, "Past Times with Good Company" wanted for nothing in terms of stirring power and evocation, a point hammered home by the fact that just two tracks hearkened back to any of Blackmore's own past incarnations: "16th Century Greensleeves," the old Rainbow standby, which was, in any case, a stern prophet of where Blackmore's interests lay, and Deep Purple's "Soldier of Fortune," an inclusion that took everybody aback.

"Soldier of Fortune" hailed from 1974's "Stormbringer" album. The last LP Blackmore recorded with the band before quitting for Rainbow (the first time) was not a high point in either his or Purple's career, and few would cite "Soldier of Fortune" in its original form as a creative highlight, either. Blackmore's Night, however, has made it their own in a way Purple never could.

"'Soldier of Fortune' is incredibly melodic ... it was an interesting song, because I wrote it with David Coverdale; he had the first part but he didn't have a middle, so I put the middle in," Blackmore said. "And it was nice to be involved in a project where the people who actually wrote it, wrote it, whereas a lot of the Purple stuff was written by basically two people, but it was always shared five ways, which was kind of ridiculous. You get into that 'Let's be democratic' thing sometimes.

"I noticed the Eddie Van Halen setup, he was in the same position — it was obvious that he wrote most of it, along with the singer, and then shared it ... which he complained about the moment the band broke up. And I knew the situation. It's amazing; when you're in a band, people get very funny if they're not included in the writing credits. It's

a hassle all the time to try and go around it without offending everybody ... 'cause they say, 'Well, I was there; I was having coffee at the time'."

Writing credits in Blackmore's Night place credit only where's credit is due, with Blackmore and Night largely responsible for the band's originals. Regardless of how historically "authentic" Blackmore's Night's interpretation of medieval music might be, it is impossible to over-estimate just how profound an impact the group has had on the New Age scene into which Billboard, at least, lumps them. (New Age Reporter prefers to put them into the Celtic category.)

Chart regulars in Germany, where 2003's "Ghost of a Rose" and 2006's "The Village Lanterne" only narrowly missed the Top 10, Blackmore Night's last album, 2008's "Secret Voyage," spent 70-plus weeks on Billboard's New Age Top Ten, four of them at No. 1, without even bothering the mainstream chart. It's a phenomenal achievement that is matched only by the size of the venues that could host a Blackmore's Night concert — if only Blackmore would permit them.

"We have a great rapport with the fans," Night said, "with the audience. We get everybody involved; we have requests. We're constantly ... it's like there is no boundary between us, no wall, it's like we're all enjoying ourselves, having a big party, and there's a really positive energy, a really positive vibe wherever we go."

It reminds her of the parties they occasionally host at their home.

"Ritchie will take out his acoustic guitar and play, but only if everybody else gives something to the party as well," she said. "He doesn't care if you stand up and do a dance or a poem, sing a song or play an instrument, as long as everybody gives a little piece of themselves, so we're all equal, we're all giving a little bit."

But, just like we all know what happens if a party gets too big, Blackmore is well aware of the pitfalls of playing the largest venues.

"Our audiences are very friendly mostly, apart from the odd drunk who's at the wrong show. I find that the bigger shows we do, the three-, five-, eight- thousand seater places, you always have the rowdies, those eight or 10 people who aren't there to listen to the music, they're there because it's the only thing in town. And I'm always aware of them. I can forget the other three or four thousand, it's just the three or four troublemakers who are going to yell and scream. Because we do some quiet numbers, you can hear a pin drop, and you can definitely hear a drunk drop.

"So I have people watching out for that, because that can ruin it for everybody. You're trying to play a really sensitive piece and it's, 'Come on, Ritchie, play some rock 'n' roll!!!' It's only every now and again, but I'm always aware that it can happen. That's one reason why we like to keep our audiences down to 600, 1,000 people. That's our ideal."

That, too, has its downside, though.

“It’s funny, because I sometimes look at the audience — I always take a sneak peek before we go onstage, always have done, because you get those pre-show nerves and I like to look at the audience and try and figure out — well, they’re not there to audition us, they’re there to enjoy themselves. But sometimes I look out and they’re so old, the audience, and I’ll suddenly realize they’re probably younger than me,” he said. (Blackmore was 66 on April 14.) I’m looking at them, going, ‘Oh they’re so old,’ and then — ‘Oh no, they’re probably five or 10 years younger than I am.’ Does that bother him, though?

“Not at all. There’s still some journalists, in Britain especially, who ask things like ‘Why are you bothering? What’s the point? You’re too old for that.’ In England, if you’re over 21, you’re too old to do anything except for lifting a pint, but that gets a little bit tedious....”

“But you have to be older to be one with your instrument, because your instrument is constantly teaching you new things,” continues Night. “If you’re 16 years old and you’re a great guitarist or whatever, you’re only going to get better when you’re 20 and even better when you’re 30.”

And as for being a wrinkly old rocker, Blackmore simply laughs aloud. We’ve talked about Deep Purple, we’ve mentioned Rainbow, we could go back even further and discuss the Outlaws, Heinz, Screaming Lord Sutch ... any of the many acts with which he’s played since his career began in the very early 1960s, and many of whom could regroup tomorrow and sell out any stadium you like.

But we don’t, because — well, like he says ... “there’s nothing wrong with nostalgia. I like to go and see certain old bands when they reform, or when they come out and tour. But, at the same time, I’d hate to be in that band.”