

'Tesla's way could have been... unimaginable'



Photo Courtesy of Geffen Records

Tesla: (l to r) Brian Wheat, Tommy Skeoch, Jeff Keith, Frank Hannon and Troy Luccketta.

Tesla takes Texas in big way Eccentric inventor inspires hard rock group

By Keith Spera*

ENTERTAINMENT WRITER

If nothing else, you can be assured of getting two things from Tesla.

One is no-nonsense rock 'n' roll with a hard edge and a bit of blues thrown in.

The other is a sermon on how wonderful both Nikola Tesla (the eccentric inventor who is the band's namesake) and his ideas were.

In a phone interview earlier this week, Frank Hannon, one of Tesla's (the band's) two guitarists and one of Tesla's (the man's) biggest fans, spent a whole lot of time pondering how the world would be a better place if only folks had listened to what ol' Nikola had to say.

"There were two ways of going: one way was the money, greedy way, and another way — Tesla's way — which could have been... unimaginable," said Hannon, his voice full of awe.

And what was it that the inventor did that could have been so wonderful? As Frank tells it:

"He developed a way of transmitting electricity, without any pollution or anything, through the air — free; everybody had access to the electricity through the atmosphere.

"It's amazing, ya' know? When Tesla first found out that they had split the atom, he was really upset because that was against nature's harmony, and he said, 'We're gonna have problems in the future.' Sure enough, we've got all this radioactive bulls--- going out into the ocean."

But alas, not everyone was so impressed with Tesla's ideas to bring free power to the masses. "All the money-hungry people in the world said, 'Wait a minute, we can't have this, we gotta hide this Tesla guy,'" Hannon said. "And that's exactly what they did. He died poor. Now, nobody's ever heard of him."

And this despite a whole batch of revolutionary ideas, some of which became realities.

Tesla worked on coming up with an alternating-current system.

"It was direct current back then (the first third of this century) and they tried to power cities with direct current, and they just couldn't do it," Hannon said. "Tesla invented an alternating current system. He devised it by rotating magnetic fields; he got the idea from the earth's north and south magnetic poles."

"He also devised an electrical system of transmitting the same alternating current through the air, without wires."

This devotion to Tesla's ideas goes beyond words.

"We're trying to get it (Tesla's technology) exposed," said Hannon. "Because Troy (Luccketta, Tesla's drummer) and I are really into Tesla, we're doing all we can. We just donated some money to a Tesla Foundation, to have a statue of him put up in the Smithsonian Institute."

Besides the money, the names the band chose for both of its albums relate to Tesla. Their first, *Mechanical Resonance*, is named after one of Nikola's theories. The second album's title, *The Great Radio Controversy*, refers to a Supreme Court case in the 1940s that resulted in Nikola Tesla being deemed the "father of radio," instead of Guglielmo Marconi.

The biggest tribute, of course is the band's name. It was during a skull session to name the band that the musicians were first exposed to Tesla; they got a name for the band and a cause to promote all in one package.

"When we were recording the first album, we didn't have a name," said Hannon. "We were trying to think of a good name, but we kept on thinking of stuff that was really mediocre."

"The name Tesla was actually Cliff Bernstein's idea (Bernstein is one of Tesla's managers, who, along with his partner Peter Mensch, manages Def Leppard, Metallica, Queensryche and several other bands). He had a book on Nikola Tesla; he turned us on to the book, and we decided 'Wow, that would be a cool name for a band.'"

Of course, the theories of a man who has been dead for several decades are not all that needed to be talked about during this phone session. There is always the regular rock 'n' roll chatter about records and tours and such.

Hannon and his bandmates — vocalist and lyricist Jeff Keith, guitarist Tommy Skeoch, bassist Brian Wheat and drummer Troy Luccketta — are touring in support of *The Great Radio Controversy*, a record that has already gone gold (over 500,000 units sold) since its February release.

The album has even garnered praise from the likes of the Rolling Stone editors, who are not known for their love of hard rock.

Hannon said the three-and-a-half stars (out of five) that the album got from Rolling Stone was a pleasant surprise.

"Yeah, they slammed our first record, so it's kind of funny," said Hannon.

On the new record, Tesla stayed in the same vein as the first album, using Keith's raspy, powerful vocals to compliment the twin guitar of Hannon and Skeoch.

They also hired Michael Barbiero and Steve Thompson, the same producers who worked on their first album, to do *The Great Radio Controversy*.

"Heaven's Trail (No Way Out)" was the album's first video and single. It churns along as Keith belts out lyrics that are something less than hopeful.

"It's basically about life in general," said Hannon. "You think everything's cool and then you wake up and smell the coffee. Then you're back where you started again — stuck in the living hell."

Tesla knows about how a seemingly pleasant existence can suddenly take a nasty turn. The band members woke up one morning near the end of work on the second album to discover that a truck containing tens of thousands of dollars worth of their equipment had been stolen. The equipment was insured, but the distinctive instruments, some of which were gifts from other musicians and had sentimental value, were irreplaceable.

The video for "Heaven's Trail" has the band performing amidst the rubble of partially demolished buildings in a scene of industrial decay, with bursts of fire popping up here and there (Hannon said the video was shot at a place called Fontana, about an hour outside of L.A., at the site of an old Kaiser steel plant that was being torn down).

The evil of the set, along with the hopelessness of the lyrics, could tempt the observer to think Tesla is com-



menting on the old story of the rock band that makes the deal with the devil and now has "no way out." What does Hannon think of this interpretation?

"I don't know," he said. "I don't think there was any intention of that being implied, but I'd never thought of it that way. I guess it could be, couldn't it?" (laughs)

All references to the darker side of life aside, Hannon said the band members are enjoying themselves on tour. Tesla decided to make the gutsy move of headlining after only their second album (and after opening-act stints for David Lee Roth, Alice Cooper and Def Leppard), while many other bands that have sold comparable numbers of records have opted to remain in the safer, opening-band slot (you've only got to hold the crowd's attention for 45 minutes, and if tickets don't sell, it's the headliner's fault).

Hannon explained the rationale behind this move. "We knew we couldn't sell out the big arenas or anything, but we've always had great response opening for people," he said. "There are no tours, really, to go out on opening right now, so we just decided to give it a shot (as a headliner)."

Tesla also brought along some insurance for this tour (which comes to Austin this Saturday, Houston on Sunday and San Antonio on Monday): Great White, whose catchy, piano-driven rocker "Once Bitten, Twice Shy" is a favorite on MTV, and Kix, another hard-rock band with a couple of popular videos under its belt, are on the bill with Tesla.

Tesla is the main attraction, though. Radio ads for the show call them "the last American blue jean and T-shirt band," which is a fairly accurate description of Tesla's image, or lack thereof. They don't come from flashy L.A. — their home is a bit farther north, up in Sacramento.

And according to Hannon, Geffen Records put no pressure on the band to put on the make-up and spandex in order to conform more closely with the "hard-rock look."

Instead, they were able to concentrate on writing songs. And this, Hannon agrees, is the key to real success, in the form of music that will endure. Has Tesla reached that point in their songwriting where they have made music that will still be played years from now?

"I really can't tell you, man," said Hannon. "I hope it hangs in there. I know it's got all our hearts and souls in it — it's not formulated to try to sell records-type-crap music that's sold to people. It's music from our hearts and souls — that's where longevity comes from."

And so 20 years from now, you may find yourself listening to *The Great Radio Controversy* on a music machine powered by free electricity from the skies.

If you do, you'll know that both Tesla the man and Tesla the band have succeeded.

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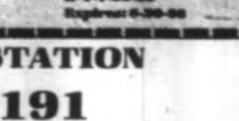
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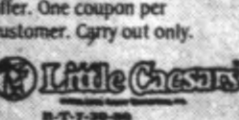


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