



Making their point: Clutch live at The Machine Shop Studios



SALT OF THE EARTH

Maryland groove machine Clutch put the finishing touches to heavy new opus *Earth Machine*.

Sunlight floods the second floor of The Machine Shop studio with autumn luminance. This main room where Clutch recorded is relatively small, only partially finished after two years, but namesake producer Machine swears by its drum sound. Click tracks are prepared and feedback issues resolved during an afternoon soundcheck, while video cameras are being positioned to film later this evening. In several hours, this tight space will host an eager, riff-hungry audience. Several dozen industry and media personnel will be bussed from New

York City to hear Clutch premiere their much-anticipated new album *Earth Rocker* by performing six of its 10 tunes.

Face-to-face with a captive audience leaves nowhere to hide, no excuses to be made. The band can make eye contact and gauge reaction from literally everyone. People are close enough to "hear any mistakes", jokes drummer JP Gaster, close enough that the band will see them "cringe", cracks bassist Dan Maines.

But there's never any reason to worry. The truth is, these new songs are all good — *real* good. Clutch have weighted their latter

era blues with the fan-favourite heaviness of the *Blast Tyrant* album. "It's pretty Motörhead," agrees Tim Sult, whose bridge coming off a very skilful wah pedal section in *Unto The Breach* is quintessential Phil Campbell. Touring for a while with Motörhead has left an indelible stamp on Clutch. The fact that they're so old, Tim jokes, and still so incredibly fast, has been a determining catalyst in the evolution of *Earth Rocker*.

"We're not looking at them as we did when we were 14, as a heavy metal band," explains frontman Neil Fallon. "We're looking at them as guys playing rhythm and blues really freaking fast. That was kind of the 'eureka moment'. That opened up a whole world of looking at heavy metal in its older incarnation — and blues rock — and then kind of

meeting at a place that we found comfortable."

That vintage approach took cues from also touring with Thin Lizzy. The new Clutch songs feature solid moments of musical suspension that heighten the riff dynamics. "There was a while when we were thinking about dumping the verse riff from *Earth Rocker* because it sounded too much like *Killer On The Loose*," adds the frontman.

Neil thinks much of that musical DNA has always been at the back of their minds in some prototypical form, awakened now by touring with those bands themselves. "A lot of those songs, you heard so many times, they got into your subconscious as kids," he explains. "When you hear a setlist of that music, back to back, 20 songs that you know every part

"THIS NEW ALBUM IS PRETTY MOTORHEAD!"

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JP has a Mikkey Dee moment



Dan Maines and Tim Sult: not a cringe between them



Clutch's latest is inspired by Lemmy, Professor Longhair and Thin Lizzy



Clutch: up close and personal

of, it kind of activates some kind of *Manchurian Candidate* of rock and roll thing."

Another less obvious spark of inspiration is Professor Longhair's *Bald Head*. "Cyborg Betty specifically took its rhythm from Earl Palmer's drumming on that song," JP admits. "There's a loping feeling — the eighth notes are swinging just in-between triplets and sixteenths. For me, it was important to try and tap into that kind of phrasing and make that very much a part of the record."

Every new song has already been performed live in some form, with the exception of *Mister Freedom*, debuted here at The Machine Shop. "The other songs we've played before, but we've

rearranged them," says Neil, before noting the exception of *The Wolfman Kindly Requests* (working title: *Newt*) that remains unchanged even now, a year later.

"That's extremely uncommon," Tim insists. "The rest

of the album tracks

changed immensely from creation to tape. *Crucial Velocity* is one we've been playing forever, and now it's a slightly different arrangement. *Earth Rocker* is different now too — we added a whole different middle section to that song."

Something else has changed too, not once does Neil strap on his guitar for tonight's six-song set — normally a staple of their live shows. The singer only plays on two *Earth Rocker* tracks, which he says was less by design and more about serving the overall need of these newer, faster songs.

"The faster they are, the harder it is to sing and play at the same time. That proficiency and

technical aspect, I'm not there yet — and, in all honesty, I probably never will be," he grins.

"I also heard the songs and realised they were kind of done. I didn't need to add anything, just for the sake of doing it. It's better sometimes to strip it down and just concentrate on the vocals and the lyrics."

Down the hall, band manager Jack Flanagan sticks his head in the studio kitchen and suggests that the band say goodbye to their guests who are about to board the bus back to Manhattan. Asked how he thinks they did tonight, Tim blows a raspberry, declaring complete failure before Neil steps in to add "No, it was pretty awesome."

We can only agree. ✦

EARTH ROCKER IS OUT MARCH 2013 VIA WEATHERMAKER

