

Primus and the Chocolate Factory:

*"There's no earthly way of knowing, which direction we are going..."*

In the summer of 1971, Primus' Les Claypool was a couple months shy of his eighth birthday when David L. Wolper's *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* debuted in movie theaters; based on the Roald Dahl book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Like many people of a certain age and temperament, the movie became a perennial favorite that Claypool would come back to repeatedly, throughout different stages of his life, taking something different away from it each time.

So it seemed equal parts genius and obvious when he decided to throw a Willy Wonka-themed Primus show on New Year's Eve last year. During the second set, Primus performed the soundtrack in its entirety. "Of the 23 or so New Years shows, I don't think we've ever had a better combination of elements," Claypool reflects, seven months later. "It felt good. It felt like we needed to be doing this."

It felt so good, in fact, that he decided to take Primus into the studio to prepare the soundtrack for an album release. Claypool admits that he's always, "in some way, wanted to be Willy Wonka," and, also, that he's always wanted to work a cover of "The Candyman" -- a memorable number from the film's soundtrack -- into Primus sets. "Hell, I've been doing the line from the boat ride on stage since the '80's," then Les sings, *"There's no earthly way of knowing, which direction we are going..."*

"Larry Lalonde and I were discussing the next project for the band and one thought I had was to take on some kind of sacred cow and twist it into something of our own. Being that the whole Wonka thing was a massive part of my childhood," Claypool explains, "It just seemed like the perfect thing for us to sink our teeth into, in part because those tunes are all so strong."

The project would've worked with almost any of Claypool's diverse musical ventures, but he knew from the start that he wanted to bring Wonka straight to his flagship band. "There's excitement right now in the Primus world," he explains. Two years after releasing an album of new material, *Green Naugahyde*, the Primus machine has a full tank and is running hot. "There's this reinvigoration here," says Claypool. Beginning on New Year's, drummer Tim "Herb" Alexander returned to the lineup, following a three-year hiatus (during which the baton was passed to Jay Lane). Reunited with Claypool and guitarist Larry "Ler" LaLonde, the trio was able to capture the classic Primus sound and honor the spirit of Willy Wonka as seen through Claypool's H.G. Wells style, creative-vision goggles.

"The recording is about my early perception of the original *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* film," says Claypool. "The notion wasn't so much to go in and redo the soundtrack note for note as much as it was to utilize the classic elements of the

music yet try to reflect some of the darker undertones of the Roald Dahl books, because when you read those books, there is an eerie and somewhat menacing aspect implied.”

In order to get the full depth that he envisioned for the music, Claypool called up two celebrated players from his multi-band roster -- Mike Dillon and Sam Bass. “Otherwise, it would’ve been the ‘Wynona’s Big Brown Beaver’ version of Willy Wonka,” he says. “I don’t think it would’ve carried as well. With the added ingredients of marimba, vibraphone, tabla and various strings, we were able to bring some depth to the sonic landscape and really shift the mood around. It gets dark and creepy yet maintains that notion of innocence.” This reinforced version of Primus (featuring the Fungi Ensemble after Les’s last solo band) set about recording what would become *Primus and the Chocolate Factory* at Claypool’s home studio, Rancho Relaxo, in Sonoma County, California, during the early months of 2014.

“The whole thing just unfolded,” says Claypool, who produced the album himself. “It was a very easy and pleasant project. It wasn’t like we sat and scratched our heads... Every song was all wrapped around how I would interpret the vocals, for the most part, because that was the most challenging thing.”

For example, Claypool took on the character of Grandpa Joe on the song, “Golden Ticket.” But rather than try to emulate the voice of Jack Albertson, (Grandpa Joe from the original film), he affected an almost comical, deep vibrato that brings to mind an aging Elvis impersonator lounge singer... with a wobble. “And then it just fell into place,” he says.

Some of the album’s finest moments were inspired by the same motivation that has driven Primus’ entire career: “I spent the last 20-some odd years just trying to make Larry LaLonde laugh,” says Claypool. “The majority of Primus music is me trying to crack him up and him trying to crack me up.” So when LaLonde humorously captured a Rockmaninoff melody that Wonka briefly performs in the movie, Claypool rebranded the track “Lermaninoff” in Larry’s honor and even snuck in a surprise vocal... without informing the guitarist. “That’s been the foundation of most of our career,” says Claypool. “Just trying to one-up and impress each other, and if I can make Ler piss with laughter, I win.”

The result is an album that Claypool enjoys listening to, as a fan. “One of the things that I’m most impressed with and that I’m most drawn into, on the recording, is Tim’s percussion,” he says. In order to achieve the effect he was going for, Alexander built a drum station that Claypool describes as both “a pile of percussion” and a “huge circle of things to bang on” so dense that Alexander then had to create a door just to enter and exit the thing. “Tim was able to produce these amazing sounds and he does these things that we’ve all loved about him over the years,” says Claypool. “But it’s not your traditional drum kit or rock playing. It’s very orchestral.”

With the album drop scheduled for October 21, Primus plans to tour the *Chocolate Factory* beginning the very next day. “We’re going to do some touring with it and we put together this pretty abstract stage production,” says Claypool, “We’re going to take it out there, around the planet, and see what happens. And, in light of the record business being gutted by the internet, we’ve made some PRIMUS brand chocolate bars to peddle as well.”

Of course, Claypool realized that it was risky business to adapt a cinematic classic that is so close to so many people’s hearts. And, naturally, he realized that it was dangerous waters to swim in the wake of Gene Wilder, who portrays Willy Wonka in the original film. The band pulls it off by making something that is truly their own, without taking anything away from the movie. When asked about the fairly recent Tim Burton attempt at bringing the Roald Dahl story to the screen Claypool comments, “Look, I love me some Tim Burton, when he writes his own stuff, and I respect what Johnny Depp has done over the years. Hell, Ed Wood is one of my favorite films, but that (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*) is just unwatchable and believe me I’ve tried...twice as a matter of fact,” Les continues, “Even my kids hated it”.

“Our project is an homage to Gene Wilder and David L. Wolper’s, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* and the effect it had on me in my youth,” spouts Les, “Now we get to sell PRIMUS bars and hang out with demented Oompa Loompas. Plus to top it off, it gives me an excuse to wear a purple, velvet waistcoat and brown top hat for the next 18 months.”