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*With the first
Tool album in 13 years,
Justin Chancellor
discusses the writing
process, his signature
tone & his band's many
odd time signatures*

By Jon D'Auria | Photographs by Travis Shinn

credible



TRAVIS SHINN

Thirteen years is a long time — maybe not in the bigger picture of human existence or from an existential standpoint, but for a gap in a widely influential band's album-release schedule, it's sizeable. For a little perspective on the matter, back when Tool released its previous album, *10,000 Days*, George W. Bush was still president, Twitter had yet to exist, and current pop sensation Billie Eilish was only five years old. A studio hiatus of that length would mean certain career suicide for most bands, but Tool is not most bands. In fact, during that wait as the months and years went by, Tool's rabid fan base only became more fixated and interested in the group's happenings. Speculation turned into rumors, rumors into viral headlines, viral headlines into false leads,

false leads into dead ends, and back to the beginning of the spiral cycle. But suddenly, the frenzy broke, and on August 30, 2019, it happened. Tool released its fifth studio album, *Fear Inoculum*.

Boasting ten tracks with four interludes on the full edition, and all of the main songs exceeding ten minutes, the album has been received as a masterpiece by fans and critics alike. The first thing listeners hear when they cue up the opening title track are the brooding and ominous guitar sweeps of Adam Jones, met with the tribal percussion of drummer Danny Carey. As the intro starts to build steam, we're greeted at the 1:37 mark with a sound that is so specific and familiar, it can be nothing other than the bass of Justin Chancellor: his Wal 4-string soaked heavily in delay and flanger, his picking cutting to the

front of the mix, and his intricate lines locking in with Carey's drums in a mesmerizing fashion. This is what we've been waiting for.

The album is everything a Tool fan hoped it would be, as each song patiently rises and peaks with crescendo after crescendo, led by the beautifully haunting vocals of Maynard James Keenan. While all four members play a crucial role in every moment of the record, Chancellor commands a large chunk of aural force, serving as key propulsion to myriad odd time signatures, abrupt changes, and disorienting cadences. His chordal work on "Pnuema" dances around a repetitive figure of seven, which serves as a reoccurring theme as far as time signatures go. His plucking fortitude on "Invincible" barrages the verses and choruses until the all-out riff assault that takes over with Jones' precise and speedy strum work, reminiscent of his playing on *10,000 Days*' "Jambi." The powerhouse track is undoubtedly "7empest," an almost 16-minute movement that alternates between the

extremes of rancor and serenity, with a long solo section written by Chancellor that he prefers to count in 21.

For Chancellor, *Inoculum* etches another notch on his progression as a bass player. Fluidly jumping from complex picking to beastly strumming within phrases, he pulls off wild moments throughout the record, while still serving as the foundation of a band that has one of the most formidable drummers in rock. But Chancellor's stability allows Carey to meander, explore, and subdivide in ways that only he can, and the duo show the deep connection they've built together for the past quarter-century. While Chancellor kept his rig and massive pedalboard primarily the same on this recording, for the first time ever he decided to use a few different basses in the studio, including his 1963 Fender Precision, his Music Man StingRay Classic, and even a Hamer 12-string bass borrowed from his good friend Mike Inez of Alice In Chains. But rest assured, his signature Wal tone still grac-

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LISTEN

Tool, *Fear Inoculum* [2019, Tool Dissection]

GEAR

Bass Wal 4-string basses, 1963 Fender Precision Bass, Music Man StingRay Special, Hamer 12-string

Rig Two Gallien-Krueger 2001RB heads, Demeter VTBP-201S preamp, Mesa Boogie 4x12 and 8x10

Pedals Boss GEB-7 EQ, Boss DD-3 Digital Delay, Boss BF-2 Flanger, Boss LS-2 Line Selector, Boss CE-5 Chorus, TC Electronic Tonebender, DigiTech Bass Whammy, Tech 21 Sans-Amp GT2 Distortion, Guyatone BR2 Wah, Prescription Electronics RX Overdriver, ProCo Turbo Rat distortion, Guyatone Vintage Tremolo, Foxx Fuzz Wah, MXR Bass Octave Deluxe
Strings Ernie Ball Super Slinky .045-.110
Picks Dunlop Tortex 1.0

es almost the entirety of the album, as Justin generates some of his most dominating bass tone on record to date.

Preparing for the first tour in support of the album, Chancellor is in full dress-rehearsal mode with Tool's new video show and stage setup, preparing the songs that are making their setlist debuts. He's thrilled to be playing these songs live for the first time, but his nerves are mounting for the sold-out shows ahead. He combats the bouts of nerves by sprinting back and forth through the arena hallways before the band hits the stage — he likes to keep his adrenaline levels high and his energy levels higher. The anticipation has been met. The tension has been released. Thirteen years may be a long time, but the wait is finally over.

How does it feel to have this album released to the world?

It's hard to describe, but it's a massive relief. First of all, just finishing it, having it mastered, and then going home on the plane with the finished CD in my hands was a tremendous feeling of unburdening and accomplishment. Then actually releasing it and getting it out into everyone's hands, with nothing we could do about it anymore, was amazing. And then having success with it and having people like it and it doing really well really has me on cloud nine. I was telling my friends that sometimes you have a birthday party and you're supposed to be really excited about it, but it doesn't quite come off as you envisioned it. But this was the real deal. I actually feel a natural high from releasing this album.

What were the weeks like leading up to the release, with all of the anticipation swirling around?

It wasn't that bad, because the record was already finished; all we could do was hope for the best. We were excited that it didn't leak — we were checking every day to make sure it didn't, because we wanted the impact of it being put out all at once. But we did have the excitement of releasing our full catalog to the web just before it, so that was a great pre-

emptive strike, almost. It distracted everybody for a moment and took some tension off us; we were able to enjoy that step for a little while. We were hoping to release the album a little earlier initially, but we had some hiccups with the artwork, and we wanted to time it right with releasing the catalog. We were actually out in Europe and did a tour, and we made the decision to play a couple of new songs live, which is something we had never done before. We fought a bit about it, but we ended up agreeing on doing two of them. We usually don't play material before it's put out, but it worked out really well. People were excited, and that kind of boiled on to the album release.

Every song feels very complete. Do you feel that you were able to achieve your full potential, front to back?

When you're in the studio, there's always the element of asking if a song is exactly how we want it, and you can change a million things before everyone is truly happy with it. We're four people who hear things differently and have different visions of ideas and how to mix them. I wouldn't say that it's always exactly individually the way that each of us would want it all to be. The finished product ends up being a compromise between all of us. If we each released our own version of the album, you'd probably hear quite a different mix from each of us. But regarding composition, sounds, and arrangements, we were all totally happy. It felt complete. But then we go and play it live and we realize, damn, maybe we should have done this *this* way. That's the beauty of getting to play these songs live — you give them new life, and they live on. The album is never the end of the road for the composition.

Tool writes from a deeply focused, spiritual place. What was the deeper journey for you in this long process?

The deeper journey involved us realizing how special our relationships with each other are, and how fortunate we are to come into this situation: getting through our differences, finding ways of communicating better, and not letting the whole thing fall apart at

times — understanding that it's worth it to keep going and strive to get to a new point in our career where we achieve something great. The benefit of taking so long over something is that you get to grow up while you're doing it and evolve into a new person through the process. As you're trying to work these things out, you're gaining skills to deal with it. It's a time for relationships and communication to strengthen more than anything else.

Per usual, the material jumps through a lot of time signatures, but there's a central theme of playing in seven. Did that come out naturally?

In the same way that the music you listen to subliminally inspires you, in the way that you write a riff of your own and you can pinpoint where it emerged from based on the things you've been absorbing, that was happening to us within the band. It's like when you have a dream and you analyze it and figure out what experiences from your past few days your subconscious was drawing it from. The same thing happened with playing in seven on this album. One of us came in with a riff in seven, and subliminally someone else would write a riff in seven, so then we have two songs in that signature, and so on. For the song "7empest" I wrote a riff that was so weird, and I seemingly counted it out to 21 beats, and then of course, Danny listened once and said it's in seven. That's the best thing about having such a master drummer like Danny: I can never throw him off or fool him with time signatures. He can always just latch right on and make it feel right. So he divides that part into seven, and Adam and I perceive it more as being in 21.

What is it that you like about playing in that time signature?

I like playing seven because it has a certain urgency. Everyone is used to hearing songs in 4/4, which is very comfortable because that's what we're used to. Playing in seven sort of restarts and cycles back again before you're ready for it, and I love that vibe. I love that about playing in five, as well. It kind of rushes you along, but if you spread it out long enough, you can find some amazing rhythms within those feels.

Do you count odd time signatures as you play them?

I more so just feel the riffs, because it's all more rhythmical than it is math to me. I always think about things in rhythms, and then even the melodies come in much later for me. I tend to come up with patterns when I'm out running or hiking, and I draw upon my breath and come up with different rhythms — and if they get in my head long enough, I'll write to them. Once I have something that comes naturally and feels good, then I try to count it out, because you have to map it out in order to be able to describe it to someone else. You've got to put scaffolding on it, and then you can actually handle it and move it around. By doing that, you can start to relate it to people's other ideas. We have a lot of complex parts where we're all hearing things differently. Danny and I will often hear where the downbeat is differently, and it's a bit of a mind-fuck sometimes. It can really turn you upside down. It's interesting when you're all standing there trying to come up with a common language that everyone can relate to. That's when we get out the old blackboard and start charting things out.

I've seen those blackboards in your studio. They look like they're written in an alien language.

It would definitely seem that way to someone outside of the band. Over all of these years playing together, we've definitely come up with unique systems and dialogs in channels of conveying messages to one another.

You have such a signature sound like very few bass players. Did you do anything different to enhance your tone this time around?

We went through a bunch of different options, and we tried to do new things and try new amps, but we mostly ended up coming back to the same stuff I always use. We even tested maybe ten different new DIs, and we would just come back to the Demeter, which is the same thing I've always used. It's a little harder to be experimental with the bass; it's fundamentally part of the foundation, to have that consistency. Everybody is relying on that

being the path, which is why it needs to be a signature sound within this band. Everything else grabs onto it. Adam has a lot more freedom to experiment being a guitar player, but he still has a specific sound that he ends up getting no matter what he uses, because of how he is as a player. But I have to keep my tone steady through everything. It's part of my role.

You played a few different basses, though.

The Wal wasn't sounding as good as it could have in a couple of parts, so I broke out a few other basses and got experimental with the amp settings — but that was only a few minute sections. My fundamental bass tone comes from my Wal bass, so I used the other three basses to just add a bit of sparkle in various places. We were messing around with 12-string, and it had such a cool vibe, but it was almost too much, you know? It smothered the other instruments in most parts. But I ended up using it and reversing the bass line in the mix, and it became the intro for "Mockingbeat," which was the interlude that I made. The very first thing that happens in that song is the backwards Hamer bass. It came out trippy.

We basically split it up so that we each got to make our own interlude. We were all involved in the production and mixes, but each one is an individual creation from each member. Maynard came up with "Legion Inoculum," "Litanie contre le Peur" was Adam's, mine was "Mockingbeat," and I bet you can guess which one Danny created [the drum-heavy "Chocolate Chip Trip"]. I took mine to an electronic realm and used the Arturia Drumbrute analog drum machine, so I got to jump into the musical world that I'm fascinated with for the moment.

Have you been inspired by electronic music lately?

Yeah, I listen to electronic music pretty often. When I get home from rehearsal, I don't put on much heavy rock. I find the purity in electronic music inspiring because it's all digitally created, and the frequencies are perfectly crafted — you can't really get that with a bass guitar or any analog instruments.

But you can aspire to play like that sometimes and get that really pure tone. It's just a difference in the gear you're creating with.

Speaking of gear, you have a signature pedal in the works with Dunlop. What can we expect from that?

It's going to be a wah with my own version of the sweep, but it'll have a fuzz element, as well. We started on it a long time ago, but it's been really fun to listen to different wahs and distortions and think about the people who inspire me and the core bass players who made crazy sounds that I aspire to. For me, that awesome bass wah always goes back to Cliff Burton and how he could make noises that sounded like pulling teeth. That's what I wanted for this. It's not going to be exactly that, but it'll have the ability to crank on the distortion and just make insane demonic frequencies. It allows you to get a little outlandish if you're a bass player. It's going to be quite a fun pedal. And the team making it has been just outstanding. It's not quite there yet, but it'll be out soon enough.

It felt so good to hear your familiar bass come in on the opening track, "Fear Inoculum." How did that main riff come about, and what effects did you use?

I used a delay and flange pedal, which is something I like to use often. We worked backwards on that track. The second half is in a weird time; that was the original part of the song, and we started with that when it was first written. Then Adam suggested that we simplify it, and we went backwards and took the same themes, but made them in a regular 4/4 kind of swing. That's how that riff came about. We had already written the crazy complicated part, so then we got to really pull back and play a straightforward, familiar-sounding thing. It worked out beautifully how that then turns into the crazy part.

"Pnuema" has a great bass-driven riff with some crazy phrasing.

Adam actually came in with that main riff. I couldn't tell you how he wrote that, but it goes back to that playing-in-seven concept where it trips up on itself a little. A lot of times, if you come up with something that



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sounds cool, you can make it more interesting by adding or subtracting little fractions of it. We played with repeating the last phrase or taking it out and adding it somewhere else within the riff. It's like playing with Legos, moving them around to build an abstract structure. Then you have to have a drummer like Danny Carey who can make the whole thing groove and work.

You get to unleash and go pretty nuts in "Invincible." Was that written with bass in mind?

In that song, it's hard to pin down when exactly everything happened. The original

idea was really basic, but most of the composition came together in the studio with all of us and those blackboards and an incredible amount of exploration. We will jam on one idea for hours and then take it home and listen to it, and everyone comes back with different opinions the next day, or a new idea will come out of it. It comes from literal years of experimentation together on it.

"7empest" is such the powerhouse song.

I love that song so much. In this band, you're in a groove and you keep taking it into whole other worlds, but we keep the idea of



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taking our time and enjoy a certain atmosphere that you get into within it. For that song, we ride out the parts for a while, and then we find a cool transition and take it to a whole different place, and then we take it back to the original idea, but in a bold way. I just love that about being in this band; there's no limitation, so you can take things to the edge and back. That song really represents that concept.

Do you have a favorite song from the album at this point?

I think "7empest" is my favorite song right now. I love "Fear Inoculum" because it has a simplicity that's quite satisfying. But I just get so into "7empest." I love Adam's guitar playing and his soloing. That whole section was fueled by the original riff that we wrote in 21, which comes between the verses and the beginning. I found a way to groove that out. We joke that it's like a prog-rock version of [Ted Nugent's] "Stranglehold." It goes into this immense groove that is in a really strange time, but it rolls along nicely, and then we just gave Adam free rein, and he went nuts on it. I love listening to things that allow you to take your time, and they just wash over you, so they're not just over in the blink of an eye.

What has it been like playing these songs live so far?

It's exciting. We played "Invincible" and "Descending" in Europe, which was nerve-racking, but a really fun thing for us to

do. That was the first time we had ever played them in front of anyone, so they're a lot better now. It's always exciting to play new songs, especially when you put them in with your other songs so that they're in the landscape of a whole set. It presents something different for the audience. Adam and a bunch of the guys that worked on the artwork have been putting together new visuals for all of the tracks, so there's a whole new show that we're unveiling for this tour. It's looking pretty damn epic.

The new album, and all of your previous records that went online for the first time, did astoundingly well in sales. How did it feel to have your entire catalog top the charts?

It was so lovely to experience that. It felt so encouraging and supportive to have our fans embrace it so much. And for new fans to embrace our older albums was really the icing on the cake. We put so much work into this and just hoped for the best at the end of the day. It was no secret that we were working on it and that it was coming. It became a bit of a joke, and there were even memes online about it — even one with Beavis and Butt-Head that said they're still waiting on the new Tool album. To be rewarded in that way was so appreciated by us, and it made it all worthwhile. It made it seem worthy of all of the effort we put into it.

What ideally would you want a listener to say after hearing this album for the first time?

Fuck me [*laughs*].

Our sentiment exactly. ●