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Live Members Talk Unlikely Reunion, Moving Past Mudslinging

Singer Ed Kowalczyk, guitarist Chad Taylor on high-flying Nineties, band split that threatened their friendship and prospects for a new album



"This is the first [Live](#) interview that Ed and I have done together in a very, very long time," guitarist Chad Taylor says, speaking to *Rolling Stone* from outside a Pennsylvania-area Starbucks. The Ed in question, of course, is Ed Kowalczyk, the former-and-once-again-current Live singer who underwent a public and messy breakup with his bandmates – Taylor, bassist Patrick Dahlheimer and drummer Chad Gracey – back in 2009. Prior to that moment, Live had experienced a near-20-year run of impressive success, peaking with their chart-topping, eight-times-platinum 1994 sophomore effort, *Throwing Copper*. Five more studio albums followed (including another chart-topper, 1997's *Secret Samadhi*), before the band announced a hiatus eight years ago. That hiatus, however, soon turned into a split, with Kowalczyk pursuing a full-time solo career and the remaining members of Live regrouping with a new singer, Chris Shinn.

At the same time, accusations and lawsuits – Kowalczyk was sued over publishing rights, as well as for trademark infringement – began flying. Then there was the infamous \$100,000 "lead singer bonus," as Taylor termed it, that Kowalczyk allegedly demanded prior to a 2009 Live festival performance. The legal actions, not to mention the public war of words, came as a surprise to the band's longtime fans, and all the more so given the fact that, in addition to having been together for two decades, the four members of Live were also childhood friends who had been playing music as a unit since their junior high school days in York, Pennsylvania. Kowalczyk and Taylor's bond, in fact, extends back even further.

"We met in kindergarten, I think," Kowalczyk says. "I mean, Chad and I learned how to play guitar together. I remember sitting there with chord charts and opening up guitar

magazines and saying, 'Hey, Chad, check this chord out.' And then he'd show me something he came across. We literally learned to play music together, from zero. So we have this incredibly long history. And to be able to re-experience that now, after the break, has been really incredible."

As for how they were able to come back together following the tumult of the past few years? "It took a while – I'm not gonna kid you," Kowalczyk continues. "It was a process that was years in the making. But then once we really connected, it was this incredible full-circle thing. I could look back and say, 'Yeah, I wish that hadn't happened.' But life's not like that. Life takes turns. There are forks in the road."

"There's certainly a lot of things I regret," Taylor adds. "But dammit if through that adversity you don't find yourself recharged in terms of coming together and making music. And if we hadn't aired our grievances, slinged mud, whatever, I don't know if we would be here, together, now."

In the following interview, Kowalczyk and Taylor, together, chronicle the road back to Live, including their recent surprise New Year's Eve show in their hometown of York, upcoming performances and the status of their currently in-the-works new music. They also look back on their early days, the high-flying mid-Nineties and the split that nearly ended the band for good. Regarding that time apart, how did it feel for Taylor to perform and record with Live during the years when he and his bandmates were estranged from Kowalczyk?

"Really fucked up," he says, then laughs. "I can't put it any other way."

What led to the reunion?

Ed Kowalczyk: I would say it was just Chad and I having a beer together in our hometown. We had a great meetup and it really went from there. Time had gone by, the air kinda cleared and we just realized we wanted to do it. So, yeah, it started with a beer in York, Pennsylvania.

You guys played a surprise New Year's Eve show at the Valencia Ballroom in York – your first time onstage together in more than half a decade. How did it feel?

Kowalczyk: Just from the first note, I know we all felt like literally no time had passed from when we started back in the Eighties. Of course, you have a band that's played many, many shows together over the years. But it didn't feel like that. It felt new. We had the routine, but there was a new excitement and energy there. It felt like riding a bike ... but it was better than that [*laughs*]. The fans could absolutely feel it, too. It was really a fantastic night.

Chad Taylor: For us, it was hard to keep a lid on it for as long as we did. One of things about coming together as musicians is you really have this centrifuge of, like, what powers your band. And for us it's our music. So when we got together in a room and started to play the songs, the first thought in my mind was, "No one is seeing this. I can't wait to share these songs." So when the opportunity came up to play a gig in our

hometown we were like, "We have to take advantage of this and have some fun." Go back to where it all began.

Was the Valencia a venue you used to play in the early days?

Kowalczyk: We had actually promoted our own show there. Right, Chad?

Taylor: It was maybe '89, '90. ...

Kowalczyk: We were just out of high school. And we actually pulled out the posters from that show. I think it was five bucks to get in and we promised the party of your life. We hung them up on New Year's Eve, so fans could see them as they were walking in. So it really was like coming full circle. It was pretty cool.



Live in 1995. "The Nineties was such an incredible period," Kowalczyk says. "It was this real renaissance that was exciting to be a part of." Bob Berg/Getty

Live have announced a few festival dates for 2017, and there's also been some talk of new music.

Kowalczyk: When we started this again we said, "OK, we're gonna go out and book some shows. But what are we gonna do for an album?" And the one thing we knew we didn't want to do was decide that we had to finish an album before playing any shows. Because that just felt like a giant step. We wanted baby steps. We want to really experience playing together again, without any pressure. That said, we are in the studio pretty regularly. We have been since spring. And we probably have four or five things floating around in various states of completion. We're all committed to the idea that this year, when we're not playing shows, we're going to continue this journey of writing new songs. And so far, so good.

How would you describe the sound of the new music?

Kowalczyk: The one we just finished people will definitely say has the classic Live sound. There are a few where no one's gonna go, "Oh, man, they reinvented the wheel

there." But some of it's really experimental. Back when the band first started, we didn't really have any direction at all. There was a real free spirit about everything. And that lent itself to a couple of these ideas. And we have an incredible studio in York where we can just work on our own time.

Taylor: This is the first time in our career where there's not a record company sitting there waiting with any expectations. So for the first time I feel like we can approach songwriting at our own pace and with just our own expectations. If we want to veer left of center on something, we can follow that path.

Do you think we'll hear anything this year?

Kowalczyk: I think we'll start to play some things in concert and then talk about some kind of release in the latter half of the year, whether it's an EP or a song here or there. Again, we're going, "Does it have to be an album? Does it have to be the way we used to think about things? Can we embrace this era with a totally different plan?" But, long story short, I would say yes, new music at some point this year. Especially at the shows.

Looking back to 2009, what would you say led to the band's decision to take a break?

Kowalczyk: We were 20 years in at that point – even more if you count the years before that when we were growing up. And I think we just came to a fork in the road. The ebb and flow of life, we were flowing with it.

Taylor: Looking back on that time period, which was quite a long time ago, it's amazing how music-centric, how artist-centric, how band-centric all of our lives had become. And, ultimately, we all needed a break from that. And it's funny because it literally broke apart. It was almost like the ship wouldn't hold up anymore. But what's intriguing is the process of remembering – literally remembering to remember this incredible body of work we created, and also the friendship, the driving in vans and tour buses, the almost insurmountable volume of laughter and fun that we experienced together. That's what draws you back in. Like, "Oh, man, I miss those nights. I miss those songs. I miss playing together." And the proof is in the pudding. When we played that New Year's Eve show, instantly the hairs stood up on the back of my neck and it was, "Oh, God, I've missed this feeling."

What about the fact that there was so much strife – lawsuits, words exchanged in the press – during those years apart. How difficult is it to move past those things?

Kowalczyk: Well, look, I mean, there's the old cliché of time heals old wounds. And, you know, it was a process of letting time heal it. Of, like Chad said, remembering all the good things. And I think as that started to happen it opened up a space for us to start to be able to get back to the positive. And where we wound up – the feeling in the band right now, whether we're playing shows or in the studio working on new songs – I don't think we'd have any of this without everything that happened. I really believe that.

Taylor: I think that for me, so much of Live's early music came from a place of adversity. We were four guys from a small town who wanted to make good, wanted to get out. And there wasn't really a music scene in York, so we had to go explore places like CBGB or the 9:30 Club. We had to find places that might understand our music. So

there was always this underlying struggle. And those challenges sort of fuel the art. They fuel your passion. So in looking back now, I see what happened as an incredibly adverse time period that we were able to get through.

Chad, how did it feel for you during those years when you were doing Live without Ed?

Taylor: It was like I was in the Twilight Zone. If anything really stands out for me, I remember playing a show somewhere in the Midwest, and we were in the breakdown portion of "Lightning Crashes," where the crowd will typically take over the song and sing. And I looked over to the center of the stage and literally thought to myself, "Who the fuck is that guy standing there?" At that moment, I knew that, OK, this is bizarre. It definitely started this spiritual thing in me where I was like, "I haven't done the heavy lifting and the hard work of forgiveness." I hadn't tried to reach out. I hadn't done all the important things that had to happen – regardless of the music – as men. As people who grew up together. And I think it was like a dawning. I was standing onstage and thought, "I need to start to build this bridge back to Ed." Because the truth is if you hang onto that stuff it erodes you. And it takes away from the music. When Ed and I were talking, one thing he learned from playing the songs on his own, when he was solo, was that they didn't need a band. They have a life of their own. And I experienced the same thing. But there is a different magic when you put all the pieces together. "I was standing onstage and thought, 'I need to start to build this bridge back to Ed.'" – Chad Taylor

Ed, did you listen to any of the music Live released with Chris Shinn?

Kowalczyk: Not really. Because, you know, I was developing this new chapter of my life, my solo career. And probably 60 percent of what I was doing was literally me and an acoustic guitar. Especially in the beginning. So I was hyper-focused on that. And I was also getting back in touch with the lyrics, and why I say these things in the way I say them. I was reconnecting with that was really important to me. And it became a hardcore focus, probably in reaction to knowing in the periphery that someone else was singing my songs. I think my reaction to that was, "Well, I'm gonna grab my acoustic guitar and there's not going to be any production or anything. I'm going to connect to 200 people in a room and get back to the core of it."

Taylor: What's interesting is that Ed performing on his own made him a better musician, and it drew him back into the songs. I can tell you that firsthand from being on the stage. And, interestingly enough, performing the songs without Ed made us better musicians, too.

Kowalczyk: I agree.

Taylor: It's odd. It's like we both went off to training camp and we've come back together strengthened.

Back during the *Throwing Copper* days, did you struggle at all with the enormous success you were experiencing?

Kowalczyk: I don't know that I was able to process it back then. It took me a long time after that – at least a couple records – to be able to say, "OK, that happened." Because when you start out as a band, you stake your claim and you go for it. And there's a part

of you that dreams it and imagines it and does everything to get there, but you can't ever expect to sell 8, 10, 12, 20 million albums. It becomes this thing that you really have to figure out as you go. But the Nineties was such an incredible period. There was this real sense of community and such a uniqueness to it. There were unique personalities, unique bands, unique lyrical takes. A lot of artistic expression. It was this real renaissance that was exciting to be a part of. It's hard to not look back on that period and say, "Yeah, it was crazy. But it was crazy good."

Is there any moment that felt particularly surreal?

Taylor: I would probably say when we played Woodstock ['94]. My brain couldn't compute how many people were there. It was an infinite ocean of humans. So that was a spectacle unto itself. And if you look back at the lineup there were such amazing bands. The Chili Peppers were insane. There were so many incredible artists. To be a part of that ... I remember at the time being the most nervous I had ever been onstage. Because at that point I think we were still just in clubs. We'd never experienced anything like that. So that was a magical turning point. It was like cultural shock. We were standing there going, "What the hell are we doing here?"



Unlike, say, the Chili Peppers, the general consensus on Live back then was that you were a very "serious" band. Were you?

Kowalczyk: Well, all my favorite artists were pretty serious in the sense that their music was something I could sink my teeth into, from Peter Gabriel to U2 to these artists that made me want to read the lyrics and dig into it. And I think that my take on lyrics, there's always been this seeker in me. So, yeah, we've never been the band where people would think anything but "they take it seriously." We take the art seriously. We take communicating it seriously. And maybe we took ourselves a little too seriously in the beginning. Sometimes I watch the videos and I think, "Yeah, you could've relaxed a lot in the 'I Alone' video," you know? [Laughs]

But I think that with time and aging, what I'm hoping is this new energy in the band can show not only the serious side of the music, which is obviously important to us – we want to get out there and really emote and be visceral onstage – but also the fact that these are now guys who have 30 years of perspective. So I'm excited. I think the New Year's Eve show that we played, it really was a new moment. The songs, yeah, you've heard them before, but there's a sort of ease and a kind of feeling within the band now that I just really love. And I could tell the fans really got it, too. That these are guys who

know what they're doing. They don't have to drill so hard into it anymore. You find that balance.

Armed with that 30-year perspective, what would you guys say to your early-Nineties selves if given the opportunity?

Taylor: [*Laughs*] I'd probably say, "Enjoy the ride."

Kowalczyk: "Relax. It's gonna be OK."