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Maroon 5 guitarist James Valentine talks longevity before band performs at Hard Rock

By Alan Sculley

Back around the start of 2016, as Maroon 5 had started to turn their attention to doing a sixth album, guitarist James Valentine told some interviewers he thought the band might return to a sound along the lines of the band's 2002 debut album, "Songs About Jane."

But instead of returning to the old-school organic, guitar-based soul-pop of that album, Maroon 5 made its most modern, synthetic sounding electro-pop-styled release yet with the 2017 release, "Red Pill Blues."

Valentine good-naturedly says he's learning from speaking a bit too soon.

"That's my own fault for opening my big mouth," he says in a phone interview. "I always offered that with a caveat that we never really know what's going to happen until we get in there and sort of start really fighting (through) the creative process … There was no sort of grand scheme or anything. It was just, 'OK, these are the songs that we dig right now.'"

Certainly, an album like "Red Pill Blues" made sense for the climate of pop music today. It's been said plenty of times that rock music is dead and guitars are an endangered species, at least where Top 40 pop is concerned. Music on pop radio is overwhelmingly synthetic, with keyboards, synthesizers and programmed beats being the sonic tools of the trade and hip-hop and electronica blending with the-bigger-the-better pop hooks meant to immediately grab the attention of listeners.

That's pretty much what Maroon 5 delivered on "Red Pill Blues." Fans can expect many of the hits from this album when the band performs 8 p.m. Sunday, July 15, at Hard Rock Hotel & Casino's Etess Arena.

The group retains the classic songwriting structures and the R&B/soul influence that have always characterized Maroon 5 music. But the R&B influence is more modern on "Red Pill Blues," and a hip-hop feel figures strongly into songs like "Best 4 U," "Wait" (a recent Top 5 hit on "Billboard" magazine's Pop Songs chart) and "Who I Am," while the element of classic pop-rock that always ran through the band's music is less pronounced. In addition, "Red Pill Blues" finds the group dialing back on its tempos and putting more of an electronic sheen on many of the songs.

Valentine sees the contrasts between "Red Pill Blues" and the previous Maroon 5 albums, but feels it isn't that big of a musical departure.

"It's definitely a little more chill. I think that might have something to do with our age," he says. "I do think it sounds a little more mature. There was a frenetic sort of energy to a lot of our earlier stuff, so the tempos are little more laid back and the beats are more hip-hop influenced.

"But I think in our overall catalog, in all of our records there's a through line, there's a soul and R&B influence and then the sort of classic songwriting approach," Valentine says. "I think this record still contains that. So it seems to fit as a part of the overall catalog."

Coming up with songs that work for radio has obviously been a big ingredient in the continued popularity of Maroon 5, which includes Valentine, singer Adam Levine, guitarist/keyboardist Jesse Carmichael, bassist Mickey Madden, drummer Matt Flynn, multi-instrumentalist Sam Farrar and keyboardist PJ Morton.

What has also helped has been Levine's role since 2011 as a judge and coach on the hit television show "The Voice." Valentine feels Levine's much higher profile has greatly benefited the band as a whole. The band has also been able to launch its singles by performing them on "The Voice" — the kind of exposure that must leave other acts green with envy.

"I think it's been huge," Valentine says. "We already had a pretty established career. We had a pretty good catalog of songs. But I think most people, they might have been familiar with some of the songs, but they didn't really have a face for the band. And so when Adam came on the show, they're like, 'Oh, he did that song.'"

Maroon 5, though, still is happy to criss-cross the country as a touring band, and that's what's happening this summer.

Valentine said fans can expect to hear the songs they know, including the band's current Top 5 hit "Girls Like You" (featuring a guest vocal from Cardi B). But the long list of Maroon 5's hit singles means the band has to leave some songs off the set list.

"It's a blessing and a curse," Valentine said of the group's hit songs. "It's great because you could come in off of the street and not really care that much about Maroon 5 and you could still be familiar with most of the songs we play because we've been around long enough and we've been lucky enough to have a few hits. But it's challenging for the more hardcore fans who want to hear more of the obscure tracks. We don't have the time to fit them all in. There's a certain amount of songs that people are expecting to hear. So that's always a challenge. But I think we've struck the right balance with the songs we'll be playing."