

No Place to Run might be the most undervalued of all the classic-era UFO albums. Its place in history appears to be the end of an era: the first post-Schenker album, the one where the hard rock edge began to be sanded off the band. That is wildly unfair.

In fact, No Place to Run might be the most consistently strong album UFO had made up to that point. Perhaps it doesn't have any of the tentpole numbers – no Doctor Doctor, or Rock Bottom, or Love to Love, or Only You Can Rock Me – but from start to finish it features strong writing, strong playing, and a sense of melody that never wavers. Even the production by George Martin – sometimes maligned, even from within the band – has a clarity that heightens the strengths, with Pete Way's bass and Andy Parker's drums given a spotlight and heft that makes the record sound timeless in a way hard rock from that era does not always manage.

Michael Schenker's departure during the production of Strangers in the Night opened the door for the return of Paul Chapman, the Welsh guitarist nicknamed "Tonka" after the metal toy cars, because he was indestructible.

"After Michael left, we looked at various hot guitarists," singer Phil Mogg recalls. "We were going to approach Steve Hunter, who'd played with Lou Reed. But that kind of thing means meeting someone you don't know, then seeing if you get on with them. That takes a while. But Paul was a great player and very easy. So it had to be Paul."

Chapman had already had a spell with the band, playing on the tour for Phenomenon, when Schenker had wanted a second guitarist alongside him, before being forced out because Schenker resented someone else wanting to play solos. He returned again to fill in when Schenker disappeared from the 1977 US tour, but only in 1979 did he become a full-time member.

"It became a little easier with Paul," Andy Parker says. "With Michael, you were never really sure what the hell was around the corner. Paul was a lot more stable and easy to get along with. I always said he'd give you the shirt off his back."

"Paul was more in the centre of things," Mogg says. "As Michael got older, he withdrew, whereas Paul was straight in there, arms and legs. The fun level went up about 10 notches, which could be dangerous."

For No Place to Run, UFO went somewhere new. No more Willesden, or even Los Angeles. Because George Martin had opened Air Studios in Montserrat in the Caribbean, and wanted to get business there, that was where the band had to go if they wanted to work with him – or, more specifically, if Chrysalis wanted them to work with him, in the hope he could conjure up hits. And so there, late in 1979, they went.

"They did push us in that direction," Parker says. "They were steering us into a pop-rock direction – they had Blondie – and it was a smart move."

"Whoever came up with that idea needs to be shot," Mogg says, less diplomatically. "I had thought, if we got George Martin we might get some really nifty string arrangements. But I got the impression Chrysalis wanted a straight rock record, and if that's what they wanted, they really shouldn't have sent us to Montserrat. We should have stayed in London and got Sid from down the road."

Nor was Montserrat a tropical paradise. There were rainstorms every afternoon; there were none of bars and other leisure distractions of Los Angeles. And while the studio was well equipped – with games and catering and a swimming pool – Parker remembers the island as “not the kind of place where you think about going out to eat at the local restaurant”.

As Martin told the band, when he worked with the Beatles, John Lennon and Paul McCartney would arrive at Abbey Road with a full selection of songs, music and lyrics complete. His job was to convert those songs into records in the studio. That, though, was not how UFO worked. Complete songs ready to record? You’ve got to be kidding.

“We’d have a few riffs, and some very scant skeletons of songs, and no lyrics,” Parker says. “Once the backing tracks were put together, Phil would write to those. I remember George saying, ‘Well, this is a bit different. John and Paul used to bring their acoustic guitars and play me their songs. But I suppose we’ll try it this way.’ Poor guy. He probably thought, ‘What the fuck have I got myself into?’ But he was very gracious, and of course he had his engineer Geoff Emerick to act as his ears, because his hearing was failing. But he was fabulous, very patient and long-suffering. For me, it was a huge privilege to work with a freaking legend: I mean, actually getting to do an album with George Martin was a real milestone.”

“George had an aura,” Mogg says. “The atmosphere was easy. You knew he wasn’t going to explode and go into a rage. You felt comfortable. George had that aura around him.”

The songwriting process was further complicated by the departure of Schenker, who had been the main supplier of music for several years. In his absence, and with Chapman not yet contributing, the bulk of the writing was done by Pete Way.

“Pete was a great one for coming up with riffs,” Parker says. “He wasn’t a huge guitar player, but he could come up with guitar riffs and we could build songs around those.”

Nevertheless, UFO – no surprises here – still had problems coming up with enough material, hence the inclusion of a cover of Mystery Train, which itself had to be cobbled together. Though they had performed it live, they couldn’t remember the song properly. So they had someone from Chrysalis play the Elvis recording down the phone for them to tape, so they could then work it out. And, actually, their version may be the best of their covers, opening with a fabulous piece of acoustic playing by Paul Chapman that starts bluesy, then takes a classical detour before picking up the riff, the full band coming in with hard rock energy for the second verse.

The album opened with Paul Raymond’s instrumental drone Alpha Centauri – originally recorded to be stage intro music, before being taken up as an overture for the record – before running into one of the band’s hardest rockers. Lettin’ Go sounds as though UFO were aware of the nascent New Wave of British Heavy Metal, riding on a tough and dirty riff, though both Mogg and Parker say they were barely aware of the new groups springing up around the UK who had been, at least in part, inspired by their work with Schenker.

Young Blood opened the second side with a clipped, terse guitar riff filled with space, the kind of thing that hinted at new wave without ever becoming a cheap cash-in attempt. It sounded like a band who had absorbed the lessons learned from touring the US: you could imagine Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers recording it. Money Money, too, had some of that quality – a guitar part that was entirely removed from the band’s bluesy routes, tense and precise, a song that should have blared out of car radios across Middle America. Perhaps for fans at the time, the leavening of the hard rock with the pop elements was a

step too far, but these songs sound fresh and alive today, far from any templates – distinctly UFO but not trying to replicate past glories.

The heart of the album, though, lies in the five mid-paced numbers and ballads – This Fire Burns Tonight, Gone in the Night, No Place to Run, Take It Or Leave It and Anyday. These were where you could hear UFO's gift for melody: they sound like songs that should have appealed equally to rock and pop fans, never overbearing but always filled with power and control.

These songs could surprise, too. Gone in the Night opened with heavy guitars, leading the listener to expect something crushing. But once the intro is past, Paul Raymond's piano comes in, and it turns into a gorgeous, dramatic power ballad, owing a little to country rock. Take It or Leave It was the obligatory acoustic song, for the brandishing of lighters in concert. Anyday was startlingly experimental – its bass intro sounds wholly unlike anything they had done before, and when it becomes apparent the verse is just to be Mogg singing – soaring into falsetto – over Way's bass, it's genuinely amazing. The dynamics of the song are simply fantastic – the explosion into the chorus, and then the bravery to let that fade into bass and voice again come the second verse. It is spooky and beautiful, rarely adjectives applied to UFO.

The signal as to where the band were going next, though, came on the title track. No Place to Run demonstrated Mogg's new obsession with Bruce Springsteen, which would be developed further on The Wild, The Willing and the Innocent (Parker can't even say that album's title without laughing at the brazenness of the steal from Springsteen). One doesn't need to be a Springsteen scholar to note the lyrical homage Mogg is making. If the reference to city streets weren't enough, the chorus chant of "Jungleland! Jungleland!" made it absolutely plain.

"I'd always liked Tom Waits and Van Morrison," Mogg says, "and I thought if we could get some decent lyrics and put them to some real rock, it might be a nice little present."

No Place to Run wasn't the commercial smash the band and Chrysalis might have hoped for – and perhaps it is overshadowed by following the brilliance that was Strangers in the Night – but it was a success, nevertheless. It reached No 11 in the UK charts, higher than any previous studio record, and went silver, in the days when going silver still meant something. The single Young Blood got the band onto Top of the Pops, in one of those awkward stagings where Mogg was at the back of the stage, Parker at the front, and the rest of them stuck in the middle (Way is wearing a new wave-style skinny tie, Chapman an extraordinary purple suit, though that might be preferable to Mogg's coral shirt and slacks). But it stalled at No 36, and that breakthrough smash hit single continued to elude them.

And once it was done, the band were straight out on the road. They had been either touring or recording constantly for several years now, and the cracks were starting to appear (they had begun recording No Place to Run straight after touring in support of Strangers in the Night, leading one to wonder: who tours to support a live album? And they would begin touring the next album before the end of 1980, before it was even released, having had to record it immediately they finished the No Place tour).

The workload was ridiculous, and it was too much – "It was insane," as Parker puts it. Music press features on the band had always noted the presence of drink and drugs, but the pieces from 1980 barely concealed the chaos; even writers who loved the band, and who loved to live the lifestyle alongside them, were describing scenes that felt a little like the last days of Rome.

This period, Parker says, "was when things were beginning to spiral. We were starting to circle the drain." Chapman's arrival brought new and stronger drugs to the band, which would soon take their toll: "Before

then it had been pretty much booze and blow. But now the brown stuff started coming in.” Tours would include three weeks without a day off, and the sheer effort of keeping the show on the road made oblivion an attractive option for some members.

Not that it was yet evident in their performances. This set comes with a recording from the band’s appearance at the Marquee in Soho on 16 November 1980, a deliberate and huge undersell to generate excitement, and you can hear how tight and taut they are, filling that small and sweaty room with passion and commitment. A shadowy world of addiction and disaster might have been on their heels, but at this point UFO were still ahead of it, still one of the great British rock bands of the era.

No Place To Run may have been undervalued, but listen to it with fresh ears. You won’t undervalue it again.

Michael Hann

2025 REMASTER:

Remastered by Phil Kinrade at AIR Mastering

Artwork by Hugh Gilmour

Photos by Aubrey Powell / Hipgnosis

LIVE AT THE MARQUEE, LONDON CONCERT:

2025 Mix by Brian Kehew at Timeless Recording

Recorded at The Marquee, London in November 1980

Engineer: Tim Pointer