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★CLASSIC★ ROCK

ICONS of Rock 'n' Roll

Intimate conversations with rock's biggest stars

132 pages of classic encounters

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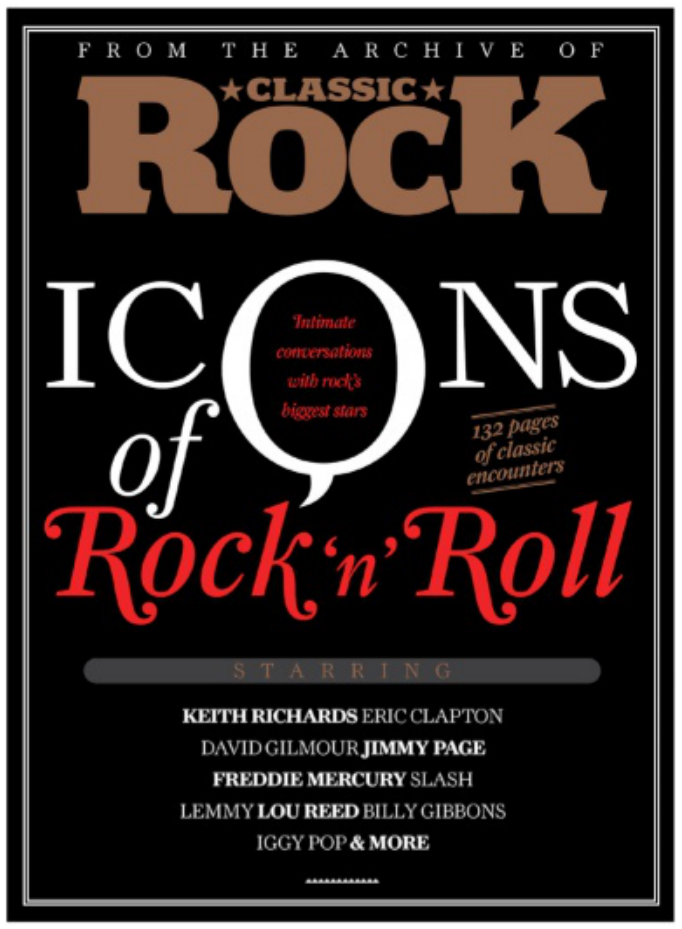
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Here's a question: who's the greatest rock icon of them all? Sure, it's not a competition, but you can still have some fun with it. Is it Jimmy Page, the man in the dragon suit who sold hard rock and guitar heroism to millions of kids across America? Is it Keith Richards, cigarette in mouth, living the lifestyle everybody dreams about but no one but him could survive? Is it ZZ Top's king of cool Billy Gibbons, monolithic Metallica frontman James Hetfield, or even Eric Clapton, who has spent more than 50 years keeping it classy? (For me it's Lemmy, purely because no one gave fewer fucks for as long as he did).

In truth, there's no right answer, just as there's no way of boiling down exactly what it is that makes a "rock star". But in this special magazine you're holding, you'll find a series of extraordinary up-close-and-personal interviews with some of the icons who built the music we all love, taken from the archives of *Classic Rock* magazine, which hopefully go some way to shining a light on what makes these legends the people they are.

You'll find everyone from Jimmy Page talking about the world-beating success of Led Zeppelin in the 70s to Guns N' Roses guitarist Slash reflecting on the rock'n'roll life as recently as 2018, via the likes of AC/DC's Angus Young, Freddie Mercury, Iggy Pop, Pink Floyd's David Gilmour and Lou Reed, not to mention such cult heroes as Johnny Winter and JJ Cale. They're all wildly different personalities, but if there's one thing that unites them, it's their dedication to the music they play.

And maybe that's what makes an icon an icon. It's not the way they look (though that helps), or what they say (likewise), but the legacy they'll leave. And on that front, you won't meet any finer examples than in these pages. We hope you enjoy reading about them as much as we did sitting down and talking to them.



Dave Everley,
Editor

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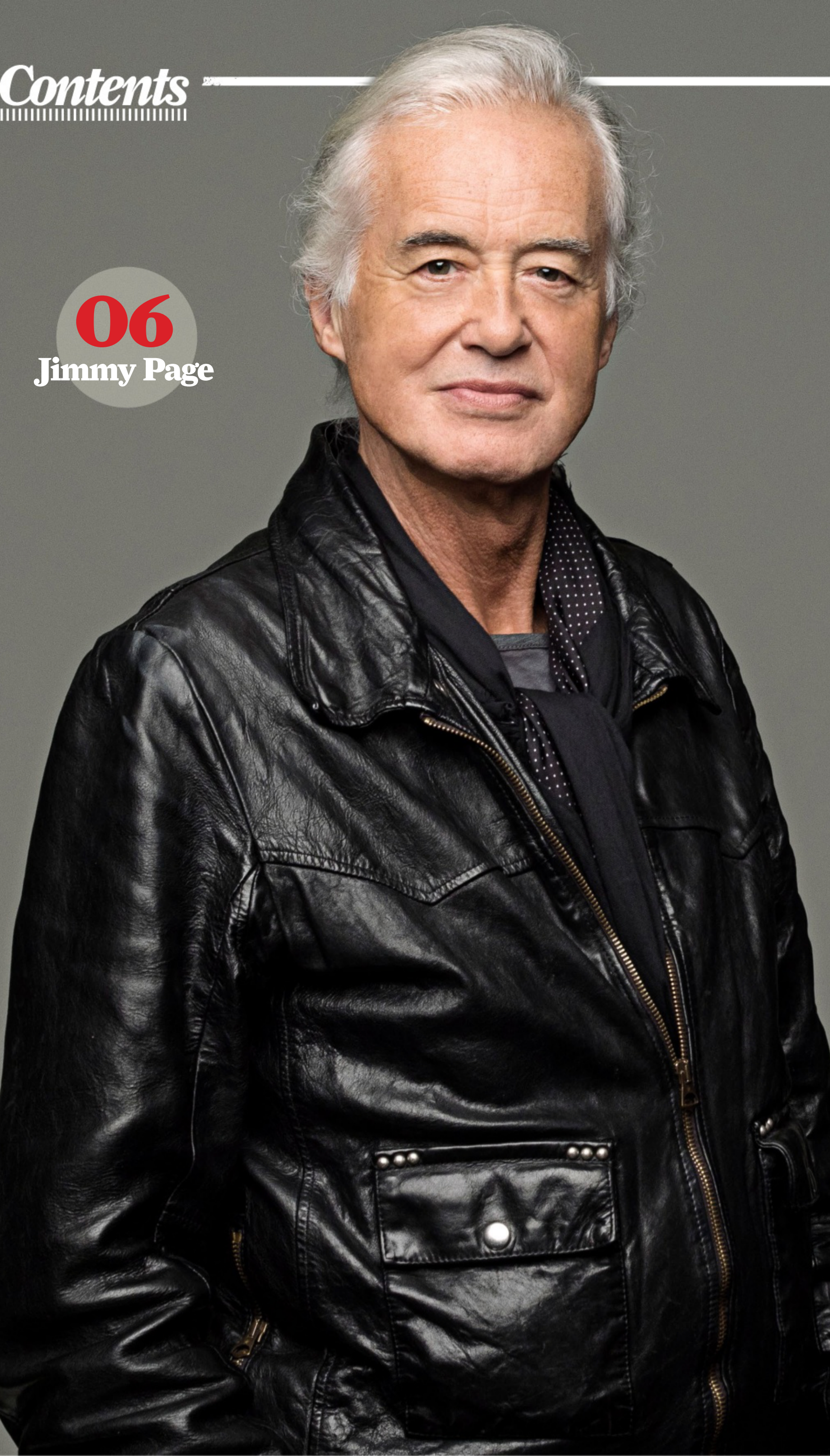
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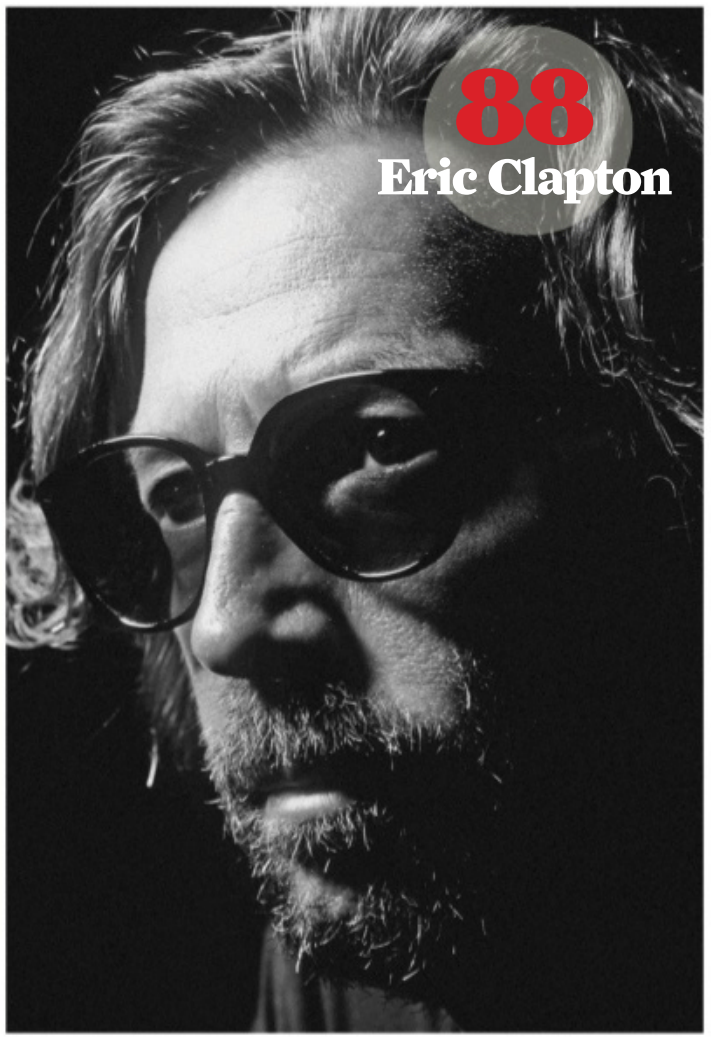
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"The fourth album? It's good, isn't it?"

In 2015, the Led Zeppelin reissue campaign was in full swing when **Jimmy Page** granted *Classic Rock* an audience to reveal the secrets of his twin masterpieces, *Led Zeppelin V* and *Houses Of The Holy* – and explain why one of the greatest rock bands of them all was finally part of the past.

Words: **Paul Elliott** Portraits: **Ross Halfin**

It is 10 o'clock on a rainy late summer morning when Jimmy Page arrives at The Gore Hotel to meet with *Classic Rock*. Situated in the London borough of Kensington, Page knows the hotel and the area well. He has a home nearby, and within a few minutes' walk is the Royal Albert Hall, where Led Zeppelin were filmed in concert on January 9, 1970 – which was also Page's 26th birthday.

In the hotel's Green Room, decorated with antique portraits of English nobility and lit by a vast chandelier, Page offers a warm handshake and settles on one of two facing sofas. Now 70, his shoulder-length hair its natural silver, the guitarist has aged better than most of his contemporaries. He is elegantly dressed in black shirt, trousers and boots, and drinking strong black coffee, with sweetener. "Too many of these and I'll start speeding," he says.





There's a lot to talk about. In a conversation that runs to 80 minutes, Page will discuss everything from his life during those heady days of the early 70s as the leader, guitarist and primary creative force in one of the most successful rock groups of all time to his plans to release new music in 2015, music that he has been crafting for years. And he will also address the one question that will not go away: will Led Zeppelin ever perform together again?

But there's a more immediate matter at hand, which is the release of the two Led Zeppelin albums that form the second instalment in the high-profile reissue programme of the band's entire catalogue: *Led Zeppelin IV* and *Houses Of The Holy*. Page smiles broadly when he recalls that untouchable period. "It was a wonderful time," he says. "I can't remember it all. But let's see what I can remember…"

With* Led Zep IV *and* Houses Of The Holy, *there's a broad consensus that this was the band at its absolute peak.

Well, I can't say which album is the peak. The first album was a pretty fair introduction to what the band was. That album has so many ideas, and those ideas blossomed as time went on. But the fourth album, yeah, it was really serious, really good.

The received wisdom is that* Led Zep IV *was a reaction to the negativity that greeted the previous album. Is that how you remember it – that* Led Zeppelin III *was poorly received?

By the press – yeah. The press didn't 'get' any of the albums. With the third album, they didn't understand why we were doing acoustic music, except that it was all over the first album anyway. I wondered, where are these people coming from?

But the public got it.

We did great by the public, because once you've listened to Led Zeppelin, it's got you. You get it: what's going on, why it ticks, and the brilliant musicianship.

So with the fourth album, did you feel that you had to stick that press criticism back down their throats?

It just got to the point where you didn't bother to pay any attention to them. Even after the third album, there were silly elements of the press in America that were saying, 'Oh, the band's a hype.' And I was thinking, 'Goodness gracious, this is just ridiculous now!' But it didn't matter.

For the making of the fourth album, in December 1970, you took the band to Headley Grange in Hampshire.

It was a manse, an old Victorian house, a wonderful place, and very imposing. I liked the idea of the whole band being in the same house, in residence, working. Fleetwood Mac had rehearsed there, although they didn't record there. So I knew there wouldn't be noise problems. It was in the countryside, so you weren't going to have neighbours complaining. It seemed ideal.

What was the appeal of working there and being in residence? Was it the fact that you could make music at any time, day or night, whenever the inspiration came?

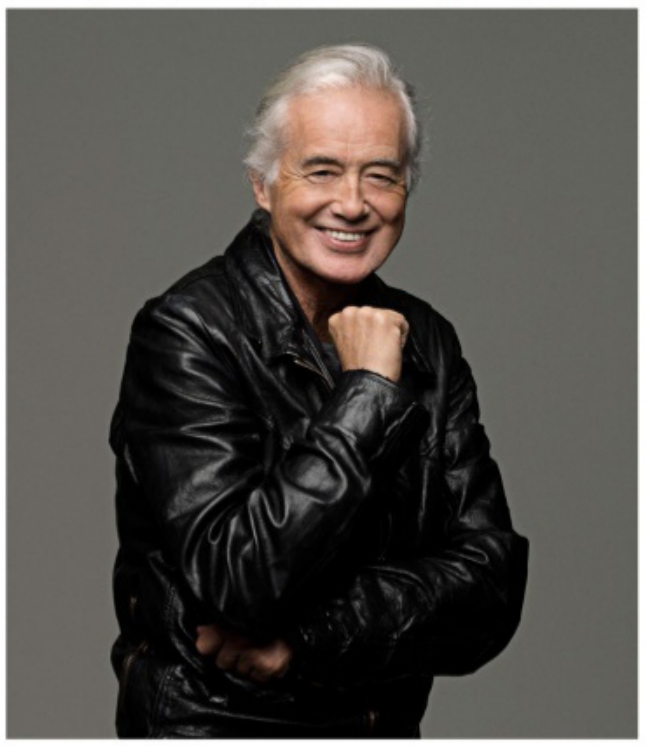
That's the whole point. It's a working environment. If it didn't work, we'd go into a studio. But in fact it was great. While touring, we would mutate songs. From the beginning we were doing it, but now it was really evident from one concert to the next.

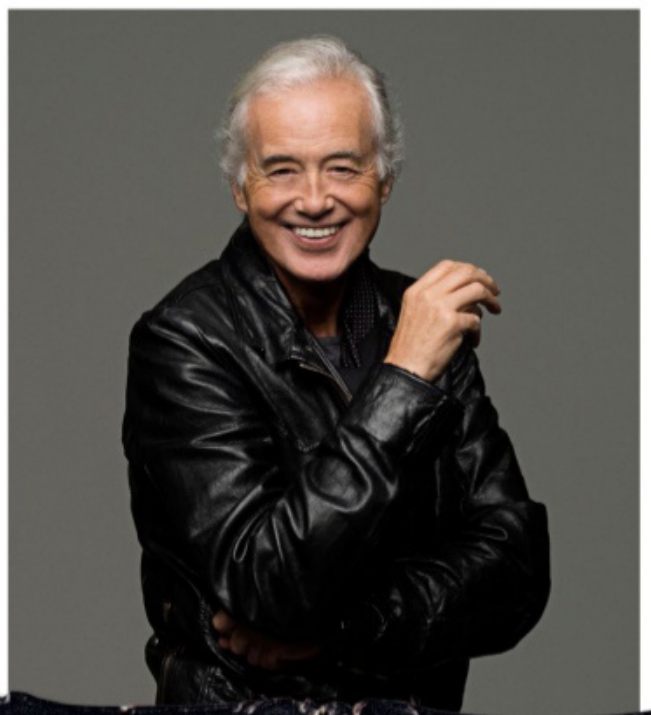
Did you take that improvisational approach into the writing and recording of the album?

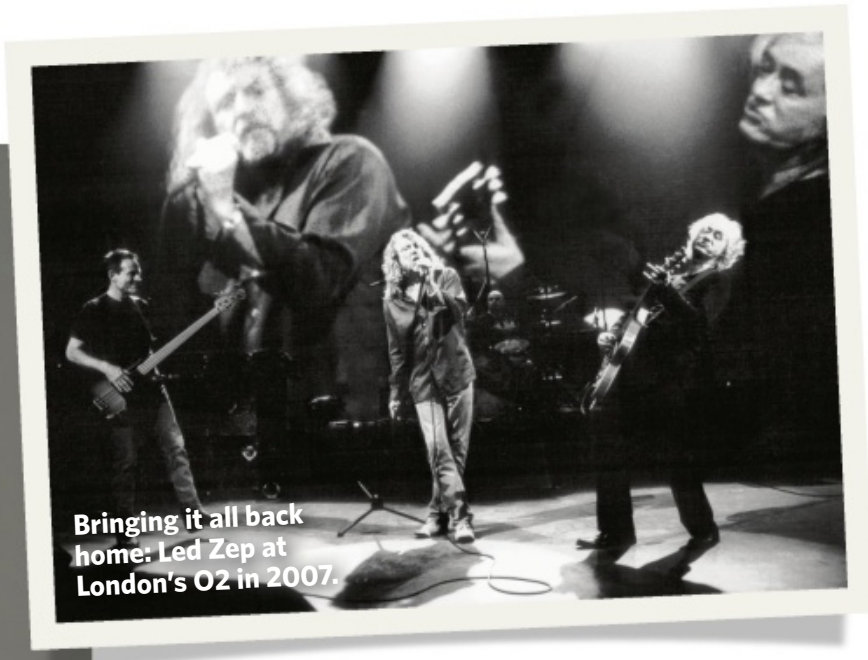
Yeah. And we used the acoustics of the house. We were playing in this drawing room to begin with, and then John Bonham had another drum kit set up in the hall, with this really high ceiling. When he started playing I said, 'Right, we'll have to do something in here now.' The drum sound in that hall was just huge. You've heard it – on *When The Levee Breaks*. So we were moving from drums in the hall to drums back in another area, and really using the acoustics of the building.



Jimmy shot exclusively for *Classic Rock* in London in September 2014.







Bringing it all back home: Led Zep at London's O2 in 2007.

Did you have a way of preparing for a take, for getting in the right headspace?

Collectively – absolutely. This is how we managed to record so quickly and efficiently. At any time there would be a few songs that you're working on. But working on one number to record, we'd get it up to a serious speed, so it's really firing on all cylinders and the real essence of the song is cooking, and then you'd start recording. It was very easy to get to that point, because you're already rehearsed, but with the red light on there's even more urgency to it. We'd arrive at those takes in a pretty short time – just a handful of takes, maybe.

What if a song just wasn't working?

If a song started to labour, if the essence wasn't happening, we'd stop and do something else. We didn't over-rehearse. We just had them so that they were just right, so that there was this tension – you know, 'Maybe there might be a mistake. But there won't be, because this is how we're all going to do it, and it's going to work!' That was a measure of how good everybody was in this band. And because of that, you could get these 'character' numbers through the whole of the Zeppelin soundscape. Each song has its own character. Theoretically, there was nothing we couldn't do, because musically we were all capable of doing anything. Together, I mean. We didn't need to get in horn sections or whatever. It was all in-house.

Did you feel that you were pushing the envelope with this album?

The whole history of Led Zeppelin is musical expansion. We were really pioneering in every way, I think. And with this album, we were moving the acoustic aspect of what we'd done on the third album into these more intimate areas with *Going To California* and *The Battle Of Evermore*.

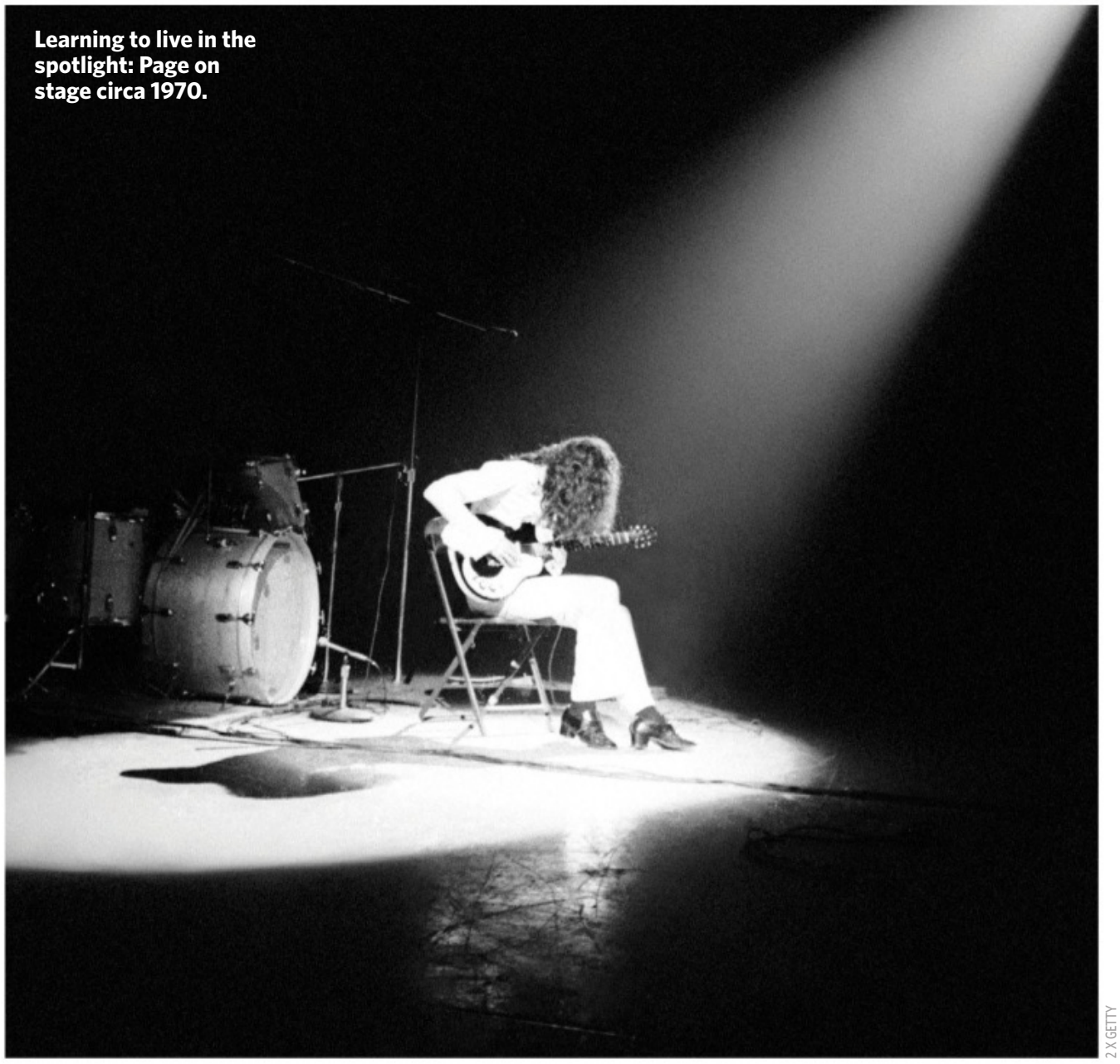
When I interviewed you in 1993, you said that with* Stairway To Heaven *you set out to make a "profound" piece of music. Did that make it a difficult song to write?

I had the sections for it. It was a question of piecing them together. But by nature of the fact that it had acceleration through it, it needed some work on it. There was a lot to remember in *Stairway*, when you were playing it and routining the track.

You also said that Robert wrote the lyrics for* Stairway To Heaven *very quickly, while you were at Headley Grange, with the band working on the arrangement.

I can say – he'll probably deny it, ha ha – but during the running through of *Stairway*, I remember Robert was sitting down in

"How could the Sunset Sound sessions be a disaster if you've heard When The Levee Breaks? It's a myth."



Learning to live in the spotlight: Page on stage circa 1970.

2 X GETTY

the room and he was writing and writing. At the point where he came to sing it he had a major percentage of the lyrics already done. And he went home and tweaked things. That's how it was. That's what the whole magic of the environment was like. Everybody's creative energies were all joined.

Over the years, Robert has made light of those lyrics, as if he were embarrassed by the naivety in them. But the words in that song are very evocative, very deep.

They are. They come at you on many levels. I thought his lyrics were superb. So… maybe we all criticise our past work. I'm not going to tell you what, but I could say, 'Well, I could have played better guitar on such and such a number.' But I ain't gonna do that, because it is what it is.

Is it true that you would record your solos alone, in complete isolation?

Always. I'd use the same approach as doing the tracks. I'd try to put the solo on at the end, because I wanted it to be totally in character of what's going on with the lyrics. What I'd do is just limber up, limber up, limber up and then, "Okay, put the red light on." Those solos weren't done over hours and hours. I'd know if I was there with it. And they were pretty much improvised. They weren't worked out note for note. Never. The solos were always... take a deep breath and go for it. I might have worked out how I might start it off, but that's it. The solo for *Stairway* comes right into that equation.

Famously, there is a story that the release of the fourth album was delayed because there was a problem with the mixing at Sunset Sound studios in Los Angeles.

There wasn't really a delay. I was at Sunset Sound for much less than a week. I arrived there with [engineer] Andy Johns, and there was literally an earthquake going on when we walked through the airport. In the hotel you could feel the bed shaking with all the aftershocks. We were due to go into the studio, and I said, "Okay, but we're not going to do *Going To California* till the end."

Why not?

Because the lyrics in that song were talking about an earthquake, and we've just arrived during an earthquake! But I wasn't going to turn around and go back to England. It was just Andy Johns and myself, and Sunset Sound was a superb studio. We mixed a lot of the stuff that was done at Headley. But the only evidence you'd know of the Sunset Sound recordings up to now would be *When The Levee Breaks*, because that was the version that went on the album.

It has it been reported that the Sunset Sound sessions were a disaster.

How could it be a disaster if you've heard *When The Levee Breaks*? It's all myth.

So why did you remix the album in the UK?

When the rest of the band heard the Sunset Sound mixes, they didn't get it. So I said, "Okay, we'll remix it again over here." At Sunset Sound, the playback system was so colourful – really sort of high top-end and low bass-end. But when we came back and played it at Olympic [studio in London], where the speakers were very middle-y, suddenly the huge headroom had disappeared. That's all it was – the monitor systems in each studio were so vastly different. It just needed a little bit of EQ mastering and it was fantastic.

The Ages of PAGE



"No ego at all"

Producer/musician **John Carter** recalls hiring the young JP for his band.

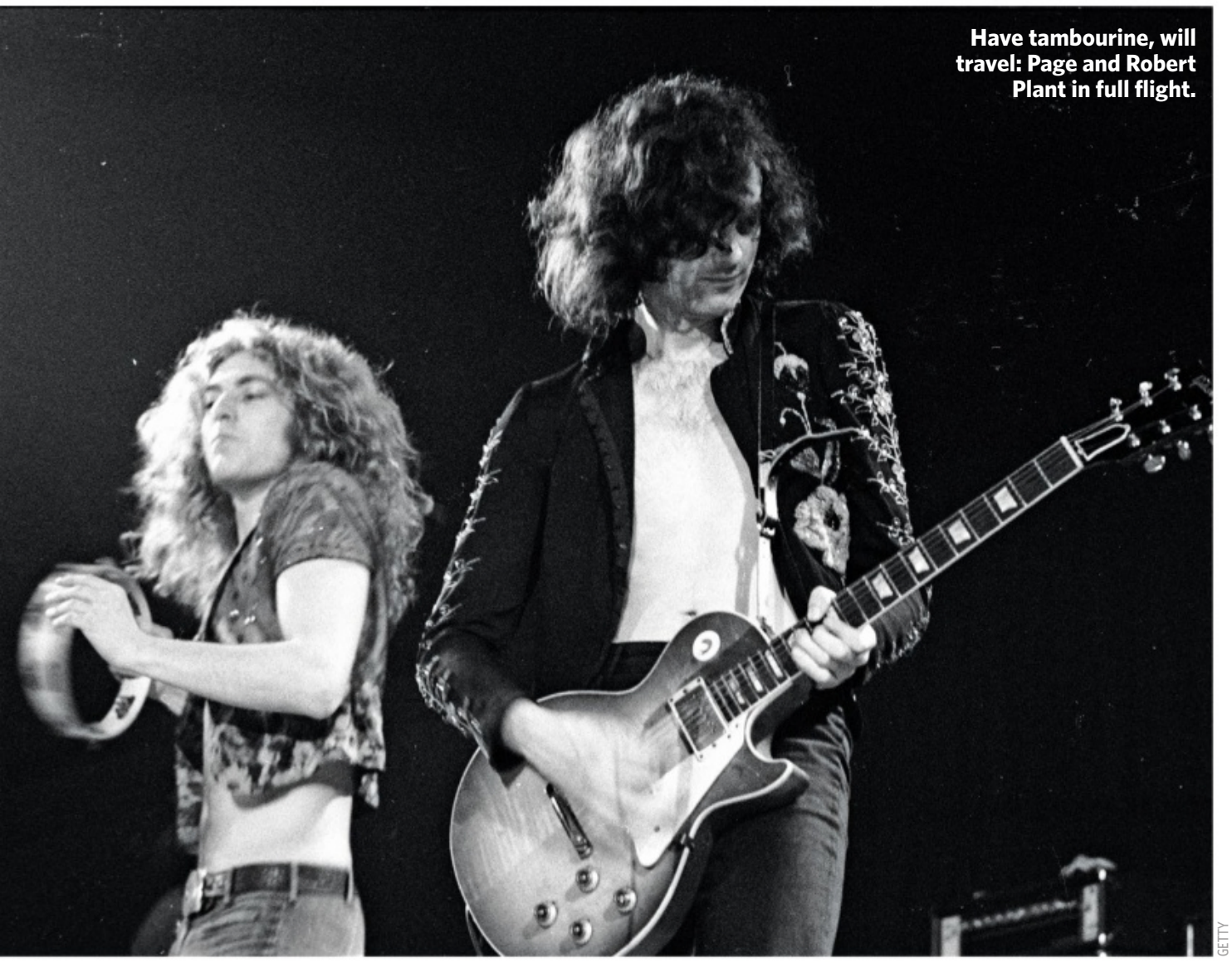
"It must have been 1964. The personnel of my band, Carter-Lewis And The Southerners (pictured), was flexible, and we had a tour coming up but we didn't have a proper band. Me and Ken Lewis knew Jimmy from sessions. We'd played together on [Dave Berry's] *The Crying Game*, and we'd booked him for a few Carter-Lewis sessions, which he was brilliant on. So we asked him to join: 'Yeah, why not?'

"I remember the first session I ever saw Jimmy on. He was eighteen or nineteen, a young lad. He wore normal sixties clothes. I don't even remember his hair being long. We'd all meet round the corner from Decca Studios after sessions and go for a drink. We'd talk about music, the old blues guys, rock'n'roll. He may have been quiet with blokes, but not with girls. I mean, I don't want to give away any secrets.

"Jimmy was different from any other player going around. His invention was the best at that time. But he never took over on a session; no ego at all. He'd say: 'What do you want?' And we'd say: 'Just make something up.' Then he'd make up a solo which was absolutely fantastic. That was when you got the best out of Jimmy Page.

"What happened next? Sessions were getting very busy for him, and I think he wanted to concentrate on that, more than being on the road, because you earned a lot more money. The band broke up soon after. I really did think he'd go on to big things. I was pleased for him with Zeppelin, because he deserved to become famous. He was brilliant then, but with Zeppelin he just went higher and higher.

"For a while we kept in touch. I saw Jimmy again maybe four or five years ago, at an airport. We passed each other and we both just said: 'Aha! It's you!' **HY**



Have tambourine, will travel: Page and Robert Plant in full flight.

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On the companion disc included with the new reissue of IV, *there is a previously unreleased mix of* Stairway To Heaven *from the Sunset Sound sessions.*
What did you think of it? It's *Stairway*. You've heard it a million times.

It sounds a little warmer, maybe a little cleaner.
Do you think so? Personally, I think it's more of a hi-fi mix. It's got that expanse, that headroom, a real depth to it. But that's the whole thing about doing a companion disc. It just gives more information, more colours. I really thought that this is so important to do, to give all this extra information to the whole of the studio life of Led Zeppelin… for the fans. I know what they love. I know why there's a bootleg industry out there. I've paid a lot of attention to what was out there on the bootleg market as far as studio material, because I wanted to make sure that what was going on these releases wasn't already out there. I know that no one's even heard the *Stairway* mix, apart from the band.

You first played Stairway To Heaven, Black Dog, Rock And Roll *and* Going To California *live in Belfast on March 5, 1971, eight months before the album was released. Do you remember the reaction?*
In Belfast at that time, there were the Troubles. I don't know what sort of mix of Catholics and Protestants were in that hall in Belfast, but the response to everything was fantastic. And here's the key point. You've just said that we went over there before the album was released. You couldn't do that now. The whole intrigue and mystery of it would be blown because people would be publishing it on YouTube, all the new numbers. But in those days it was really good, because things would just travel by word of mouth.

When that fourth album was released on November 8, 1971, there was no band name and album title on the cover.
It was my idea to have no title. It was a novel idea to put something out which had no title on it, rather than, oh, it's just selling on the name.

The album is officially untitled yet it goes by various names: Led Zep IV, *'Four Symbols', and also 'Zoso', after your symbol…*
I think it's good that everyone calls it different things. With the [Zoso] symbol, people were calling it that, and that was a bit upsetting for the rest of the band [laughs]. It wasn't intended to be like that.

The bosses at Atlantic Records thought that an album with no title and no band name was tantamount to commercial suicide.
They did. I went over to New York with [Zep manager] Peter Grant, and Atlantic were determined to have some words on the cover. I knew they thought: he's impossible to deal with, this one. But it was so right to do it. That album cover is so iconic.

> "You know, I heard Sam Fox was on the cover of Houses Of The Holy. So it's not true, then?"

Is it true that the painting on the album cover was found by Robert in an antique shop?
It is. When I was living in Pangbourne, I used to go around the junk shops, picking up all this Arts and Crafts-era furniture. On this one occasion Robert came with me and there it was, this painting.

The cover was symbolic: the painting of the old man on the wall of a demolished house, with modern high-rise blocks behind it.
The imagery there is the old making way for the new. Those new buildings don't look new anymore. But that was the idea.

The way you sequenced this album – the juxtaposition of hard rock tracks and acoustic numbers – is expertly judged.
We were crafting albums for the album market, a certain league outside of pop singles. So it was important, I felt, to have the flow and the rise and fall of the music and the contrast, so that each song would have more impact against the other.

You placed Stairway To Heaven *at the end of side one of the original LP. Did you think about having it at the end of side two as a grand finale?*
No, no, no! *Levee Breaks* had to end it, because it was just so ominous and dense and it was just going to disturb people. After you've caressed them with *Stairway*, now you're going to disturb them [laughs]. That's what it's all about – conjuring up all these different emotions.

That side one is probably the greatest side of vinyl in all of rock history: Black Dog, Rock And Roll, The Battle Of Evermore, Stairway To Heaven. *Really, it's unbeatable.*
It is good, isn't it? But with the whole album, you get the feeling of the creativity of this band. It's just coming in with full force. It's showing the whole picture of what this band is musically. These were really honest performances – performances that you feel. No doubt about it.

If Led Zeppelin's fourth album was the band's masterpiece, what followed was their unsung classic: *Houses Of The Holy*, released on March 28, 1973. In a sense, it was overshadowed by what came before and after it – *IV* and 1975's monolithic *Physical Graffiti* – but it contained some of the most powerful tracks that Zeppelin ever created: *No Quarter, The Rain Song, Over The Hills And Far Away, The Song Remains The Same*. Adding to the mystique was the artwork created by Hipgnosis: a surreal image of naked children climbing the rocky terrain of the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, beneath a glowing yellow-orange sky. "It's evocative, isn't it?" says Page. "Its innocence, and the idea of us all being vessels of houses of the holy."

The story goes that you rejected the original artwork submitted by Hipgnosis' Storm Thorgerson, and then turned to their other designer, Aubrey 'Po' Powell.
Well, we got on better with Po than with Storm, but that's how they were. If people didn't like one person they'd work with the other one.

Handy with figures: Page indicates that Led Zeppelin's fourth and fifth album reissues are now airborne.



Zeppelin in the 70s: (l-r) Robert Plant, Jimmy Page, John Paul Jones, John Bonham.

> *"I love playing live. That's what I should be doing at this point in time. It's ever onward now."*

Did you know that the children on the cover are Stefan Gates, now a TV presenter, and his sister Samantha?
I heard it was Sam Fox. So it's not true, then?

That old story about Sam Fox? Most people dismissed that as just another urban myth about Zeppelin.
I thought it made sense because she probably was put in an agency as a child model and all that.

Perhaps you could verify another story about* Houses Of The Holy *– that you wrote* The Rain Song *after George Harrison complained to you that Zeppelin never do ballads.
No, it wasn't *from* George Harrison. He didn't say it to me. I just heard it on the grapevine that he had said, "Oh, Led Zeppelin don't do any ballads." I'm paraphrasing, but it was something similar to that. He probably said it lightheartedly. He probably hadn't really listened to very much Led Zeppelin.

***There is also a similarity, in the opening notes of* The Rain Song*, to Harrison's classic Beatles song* Something.**
Yeah [laughs]. I thought it would be interesting to put the first two notes from *Something* into the beginning of *The Rain Song*. But I thought that *The Rain Song* was really nothing like *Something*, so nobody was even going to think of it.

There is such beauty in* The Rain Song*. Do you consider it one of your best?
As a whole piece, yes, it's pretty up there, for sure. As a guitar piece it was really good, but again, it came to life with Bonzo playing really sensitively on the brushes.

On the* Houses Of The Holy *tour, in the summer of '73, Zeppelin's gig at Tampa Stadium broke the attendance record that had been held by The Beatles.
What was it, 52,000?

More. 56,800, to be precise.
Well, we'd played fifty-something thousand the day before in Atlanta. Then we went into this huge thing in Tampa, where your main worry is, can everybody at the back hear what we're doing?

Going on stage for such huge audiences, were you ever nervous?
I always had an edge, what you might call nerves, going on wherever it was. I wondered whether it was just the adrenaline. But I'd always get that sort of edge. There's no doubt about it – you suddenly go into this sort of change, which you might call stage fright. But I was more realistic about what it probably was. It wasn't being frightened on stage. I love being on stage. There's nothing to be frightened about. But there was this edginess, sure.

With all the heavy touring that Zeppelin did in the 70s, doing three-hour sets, what kept you going? Was it that the music elevated you?
The whole set just kept stretching, because we loved playing. We could have just done an hour and a half, but we didn't. We wanted to give everybody everything that we could every night. We were totally committed in the ethic of doing that.

Let's talk about your life at this time. With all the work and the success and everything that came with it, did you ever feel disoriented?
No, nothing like that. It was all just a natural progression. In retrospect, if you look at the work we did, you think, Wow, how was that done? But, you know, we were all pretty young. I wouldn't be able to take on a workload like that now – all that touring, five nights a week and the rest of it. But I was young. It was perfectly natural. That's all there is to it.

Did Zeppelin's fame at that point ever feel overwhelming, even frightening?
No. The whole climate was different then, wasn't it? When you're talking about that sort of passion from the fans, the way that it would be manifested was simply that the concerts just got bigger and bigger. So you could see, by the record sales as well, that the popularity was immense. And that was the manifestation of it, playing bigger shows and the response to it. And it never went away. The reality of Led Zeppelin, when you look at it all the way through, was that the audiences just kept swelling, right through to the end when we were doing Knebworth in 1980.

Who apart from the band would hear Zeppelin music before it was presented for release? Ahmet Ertegün, the head of your label?
[Flatly] He'd get the finished album. That's how it was. It was wonderful, because it was so insular. You know what the climate was as far as what you had to do in those days. Literally what you had to do was make albums, then present them – with the cover – and then do more concerts. The record company wasn't all over you. They couldn't be all over you, because you're telling them, "This is it – this is the new album." And because of the demand for the Led Zeppelin albums, they couldn't really get in the way. They didn't want to get in the way of it. Because they could see – I guess history was proving itself – that we knew what we were doing.

Your power was your popularity?
Yes. And as you can see with the history, it was the right decision not to do singles along the way. That gave us the benefit to do exactly what we wanted to do, without having to think, Oh, what's the single going to be? Or having some person from the record company saying, "Where's the single?" Or even worse, saying, "I think you should do this!"



Un-ledded: Zep in acoustic mood.

GETTY X2

So there was never interference from them?
No. I'd lived through it with The Yardbirds, and I knew the climate wasn't right for that.

Were you as much of a perfectionist in terms of business as you were with the music?
God, no! But that perfectionism applied to everything, to be honest.

Being such a perfectionist, were you a difficult person to work with?
No. I don't think I was at all.

Did you ever sense that the band thought you were driving them too hard?
I don't know if anyone thought I was. You're always trying to strive to be better and better and better. That's all there is to it. And sometimes, whatever you've done isn't good enough. Do better, do better. But, you know, that's my own thing. And I haven't changed. That's how I am.

In the 34 years since Led Zeppelin disbanded following the death of John Bonham, Page has continued to make music, albeit on a limited scale. There have been collaborations with Paul Rodgers and David Coverdale, and even with his old foil Robert Plant – the pair played on each other's solo albums before officially reuniting for two albums in the 90s, 1994's Zep-reimagining *No Quarter: Jimmy Page And Robert Plant Unledded*, and 1999's all-new *Walking Into Clarksdale*.

But Led Zeppelin remained part of his life throughout. Ever since 1982's archive collection *Coda*, Page has served as the curator and the guardian of the band's legacy. But now, seven years after their one-off reunion show, this is all that remains of Led Zeppelin: the past. And for Page, it is now time for a new challenge.

What does the future hold for you? In terms of the music you're making now, does that necessitate having a band?
Yes. I'm not going to just go out and do concerts with one guitar or even two guitars – one electric and one acoustic.

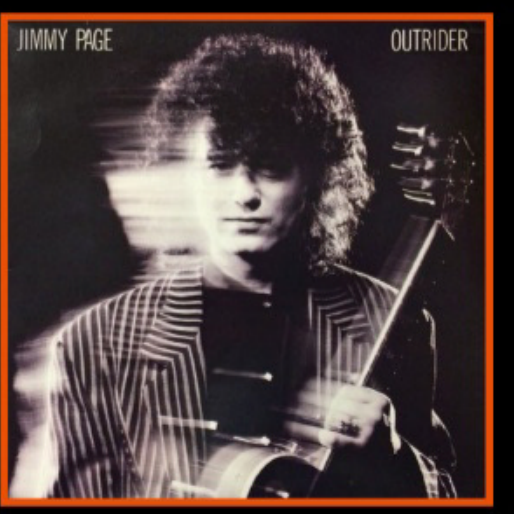
If you're going to make a new album…
Maybe…

If so, would it be similar to Outrider*, on which you had three singers?*
[Smiling] We'll have to wait and see, won't we? The music I've been writing, it's got various moods to it, various textures. That isn't going to change. So there will be real surprises within it, you know? But there would have to be. I wouldn't really be happy about it unless there was. But I have got material. It's sort of there. And in a way I'm really pleased that I haven't recorded it yet.

Why?
Because it will still be good. If something's good, it is good, isn't it? Riffs and things – they're either good or they're not good.

Robert Plant was recently asked about the possibility of making a modern Zeppelin album. He said: "The weight of expectation is too great." Do you understand where he's coming from?
No. No, no. Because I'm not doing a modern Led Zeppelin album. I'm doing the music that will be a summing up of where I am at this point in time.

The Ages of PAGE



"We'd drink JD together"

John Miles on collaborating on Page's 1987 solo album *Outrider*.

"I'd never met Jimmy before we started working together in '87 on *Outrider*. His manager called to ask if I'd be interested in doing some writing. So I went down to his studio and we wrote *Wasting My Time*, *Wanna Make Love* and a few other things. We'd both jam and come up with riffs. It took a while to get to know him, but we hit it off. And I discovered he had a wicked sense of humour. Then he decided he was going to take the album on the road and he said to me one day: 'Can you do it?'

"Most of the shows were in America. And I felt a lot of pressure having to sing Robert Plant's songs – I think Jimmy felt pressured too. I remember Robert turned up at a gig in Boston. Jimmy didn't want him anywhere near the building, so Robert turned up in a baseball cap and disguise.

"There wasn't really much time off, but when there was, Jimmy and I used to drink Jack Daniel's together. I remember flying to a gig in New Orleans on a private plane. As I was sitting with Jimmy, talking, I looked out of the window and there were fucking flames coming out of the engine. So we just had a couple more drinks! It was surreal.

"There were ideas left over from *Outrider*, but we never got round to doing anything with them. There was talk of making another album, but I felt the whole Zeppelin thing was pulling Jimmy back into that. The demand for a reunion was just ridiculous. So any plans we had just went by the wayside.

"My favourite memory of Jimmy? Just being on stage with him. He'd be standing there with sweat and snot everywhere – and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. It was just incredible to turn around and see him playing with all his might." **RH**



Past and present: Jimmy Page is looking toward the future now.



But do you get what Robert was saying? Do you feel that what you created with Led Zeppelin in the past is in some way a burden on you as you're making new music?

Well, there is pressure. But then you have to put it in context with actually thinking of all that pressure that's built up over all those decades and putting your arse on the line for one night at the O2. What sort of pressure is that? You can imagine what it was like for that show. You know, one shot. At least when you're recording an album you've got more than one shot at the solo. So you just have to look at it like that. New music is new music. But it still has to be good. It has to be vital. It has to connect with people. It doesn't want to be limp and half-hearted. It really needs to connect on one level or another, whether it's got that intensity to it, or it's something that is more rhythmic or voodoo-like, or something that is more sensitive or caressing. And that is what you're doing – you're a musician. You're not thinking about whether it's paling in the shade of Led Zeppelin. What sort of nonsense is that? [laughs] But you know what I'm saying.

Yes. But when we think back to Walking Into Clarksdale, *your last original album…*

Yeah, that's like a minimalist album.

That was sixteen years ago.

Was that my last album?

Your last original album, yes.

Good. I've only ever had one solo album out in the past anyway, and that was in 1988. So I didn't really try to cash in on the market, did I? I've done other projects along the way. I've worked with David Coverdale and this and that.

But do you feel that you've done enough?

Well, you can never do enough. But I don't care. It doesn't matter. It is what it is. And hopefully, next year I will be seen to be playing – because you need to be seen to be playing. That's why I've put so much effort into stockpiling all of this new material. I know the importance of the Led Zeppelin legacy, if you like. So that's why I've been stockpiling over a couple of years. I think it's important. That's the way to look at it and that's the way to do it.

So do you need a singer to make this new music work?

Why, are you volunteering?

Come on, Jimmy. Don't be silly.

Well, let's put it this way: I don't sing. I've said that on numerous occasions. I'm not a singer.

What is your singing voice like?

I don't know. I haven't really given it a shot, although I sort of sang many years ago, on the first Zeppelin album and a little bit on the second album.

But to answer the question about a singer…

You're asking about what I'm going to do? Okay, let's put it this way. What I would concentrate on would be the music that is going to be there. I wouldn't approach whatever was going to be recorded in a flippant way at all. But I haven't got any musicians ready at the moment to do anything, because it won't be until next year that I'd even be able to do that. I've got so much promo to do relative to all of this [the Zeppelin reissues].

There's one last thing I have to ask, and I know that it's a pain in the arse…

Go on.

After the O2 show, you wanted to continue with Led Zeppelin, to do more shows. Robert did not. Seven years down the line, nothing has changed. Are you resigned to the fact that Led Zeppelin is finished and should fans just accept that too?

Yes, it's time for me to move on to do other things. I've got a pretty fair old musical heritage. It goes way, way back to being a teenager. It goes all the way through from there to almost yesterday. I enjoy that. Ever since I was a kid, it was my passion to play music, to make music, and, you know, it makes people happy. If you do something as a living that makes people happy, you're a very fortunate man. That's bloody great. And I don't mean this lightly when I say that is a wonderful lifetime achievement. That's a great feeling.

For Jimmy Page, seven years of frustration have come to an end. After that O2 show, when Plant refused a Led Zeppelin tour – no matter how much money was on the table – Page, Jones and Jason Bonham rehearsed with Steven Tyler and Myles Kennedy. Whether they would have used the Led Zeppelin name, Page would not say. But in the end, nothing came of it. The subtext was quite simple: without Robert Plant, there is no Led Zeppelin.

In August 2014, Plant said of Page: "He should get on and do something. He's a superb talent. Come on and give it to us." Making new music, and playing it all over the world, is what Plant has done since that last Zeppelin performance. And now, belatedly, Page is gearing up do the same.

"I love making music," Page says. "I love playing live. That's it. That's what I should be doing at this point in time. It's ever onward now."

"I'm not doing a modern Led Zeppelin album. I'm doing music that sums up where I am at now."



CLASSIC ROCK

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Mercury rising: Freddie gives it large onstage.

Caught In A Landslide

It's November 1975 and **Queen** are about to release the album of their career, *A Night At The Opera*. But meantime there's the small matter of this sixminute 'operatic thing' they want to release as the lead single – what radio station is gonna play that? Classic Rock goes behind the scenes with Queen as they prepare to go stratospheric.

Words: **Harry Doherty**

It could have been any other damp, cold Friday afternoon in the November of any other year. But this one was a bit special… 1975 was heading for Christmas and I was in the middle of a music mag office in sole, exclusive possession of the album, the song, from the band that would rule the world of rock for the next 30 years. Full of anticipation, I put the test pressing on the office turntable and something called *Bohemian Rhapsody* soared out. Well, it soared for me: it dive-bombed for others in the office. One colleague, Allan Jones, was horrified: "What is this?!" He guessed at 10cc. When I told him that it was Queen, his jaw dropped and hit the floor. He hated it! I loved it, and went on to review Queen's A Night At The Opera for Melody Maker.

I said things like 'easily their best work to date', some words about 'intricate musicianship' and 'displaying the variety of their talent', commented that it would be remembered as an album of 'May classics' (was it?), and hooked unashamedly on to *Bohemian Rhapsody*. 'The album,' I wrote, 'picks up the best of the concepts of *Queen II* and combines it with the studio expertise of *Sheer Heart Attack*. That combination, plus the growing maturity of the band, has given Queen a complete identity. Indeed, I don't think I'd be too far out if I said that Queen could well set a future direction in British rock'n'roll. They're hard rock, but just commercial enough to capture a massive, wide-ranging audience.'

I think I was on the button with that one…

Thirty years later, friends have come and gone – goodbye, Fred – but Queen, in one shape or other, are still very much with us. Downloaded off the net, on stage every night in the West End and Vegas, and on the road with Paul Rodgers. When Queen played at Hyde Park this past September, few remembered they had played there once before in September 1976 – a huge gig in front of over 150,000 people and one of the great free Hyde Park events. The Queen we know now are a part of the fibre of our rock community.

Back in the mid-1970s, however, Queen were mere mortals – not that they thought so. When you were was in the presence of Freddie Mercury, you knew it… and you believed it. With *Sheer Heart Attack* on the verge of release, I'd interviewed His Majesty in the office of his press officer, Tony Brainsby. Nothing could have prepared me for the experience… but I soon learned. *Sheer Heart Attack* is as close to hard rock-cum-pop perfection as you can get; but even then, the album in the bag, treading on the doorstep of humungous success, Freddie is not happy. And he's not happy that they had to record this album in bits and pieces; a situation generated when Brian May, suffering from hepatitis, took to bed and recovery while the other three recorded the tracks.

May had returned with the condition after the band's debut tour in America with Mott The Hoople. So when they started recording *Sheer Heart Attack*, it was without their guitarist. He came in afterwards on his own to add guitar. Though the ailing Brian had delivered his parts to a superlative album like a true guitar hero, Freddie was adamant that Brian had brought this upon himself. "Well, darling," he said, "we covered for him. He owed it to us."

A year later, November 1975, I'm in the presence of greatness again as Queen are close to finishing what would be recognised as the album of their lives, *A Night At The Opera*. We're in the offices of Rocket Records, because the band have by this time appointed John Reid, Elton John's chargé d'affaires, as their business manager; Reid had been appointed after an earlier disastrous management contract with a company called Trident, who also owned the studios where Queen recorded most of their early albums, including *A Night At The Opera*. It obviously went seriously sour, as described in the opening track of *A Night At The Opera*, *Death On Two Legs*, with barbed lyrics such as: 'Screw my brain 'til it hurts/You've taken all my money – and you want more' and 'You're a sewer-rat decaying in a cesspool of pride' – possibly the ultimate put-down. Reid would be a stop-gap until Queen established their own business empire.

For now, though, there's me, Freddie, John Deacon and Roger Taylor, but no Brian May. The man is exhausted after his efforts recording his parts on *A Night At The Opera* – they do say that hepatitis lingers on. Taylor is nestled in one corner. A real rock'n'roll animal during these years, he's restless. "I'm pissed off listening to the bloody album," he mutters. Four months in the making, the nights with this … *Opera* have taken their toll.

In another corner of the office, Freddie is on the phone to some American hack telling him, darling: "The album is absolutely wonderful, you really must hear it." But he, like Taylor, has had his fill of *A Night At The Opera* just now. Which is ironic because we're on our way to the first public playback of said masterpiece…

"I'll never forget this album, dear," Freddie tells me. "Never. But we've got to have this playback just to let friends hear what we've been up to. The problem, as I see it, is that they'll never understand it with one listen." He can't wait to get it over with. "Later on we'll go out, get pissed and put the damned album on hold for a while."

I'm with you Freddie, I think, but I still can't wait to hear what you're so pissed off about…

They're fidgety. John Deacon is all fingers drumming on desk and picking out faults on the tour programme. The band are going out on a worldwide tour in a week or so. No pressure…

GETTY



"Where's my other washing up glove gone?" Freddie and John Deacon onstage in 1974.

GETTY

Meanwhile, Freddie is still spreading the good word to the States about the album, and Taylor and Deacon are debating how *Bohemian Rhapsody*, six minutes long and not exactly yer typical single, will go down. They're amused, but couldn't care less. As we arrive at the North London Roundhouse studio for the playback we're greeted by a placard proclaiming: 'Welcome to A Night At The Opera'.

"We're not nervous," Taylor offers, "we're just nervous wrecks. I just want to get out on the road again." The realisation that he has just four days to achieve that particular ambition weighs heavily upon him.

The playback goes extraordinarily well. Everyone realises that they are experiencing something monumental. The record company is pleased, the party is ecstatic, the champagne is flowing – time for Freddie and I to depart. But not before we listen to the final historic rendition of *The National Anthem* on harmony guitars by Brian May, the glorious closure of *A Night At The Opera*. We listen in thrall. Freddie can't believe it. "STAND UP YOU BASTARDS!" he shouts, and whether it is in salute to Queen or *The* Queen I am still not sure. But we all did his biding as if by royal command.

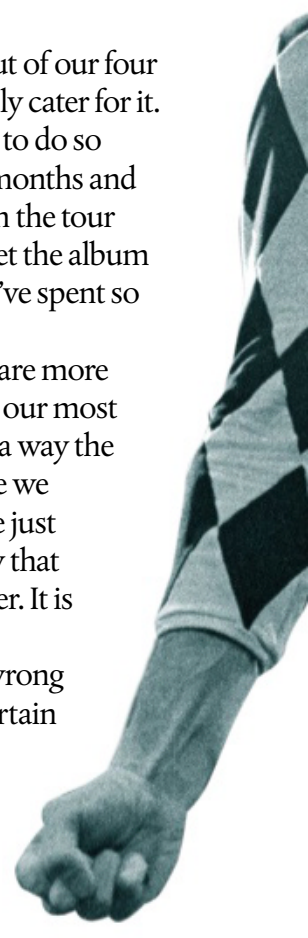
Then the Mercury Man and myself are in a car and heading to the White Elephant on the River for a tête-à-tête and review of the past couple of months of his life over dinner. "Thank goodness that's over," Freddie sighs. "Some of those people really BOO-OORE me."

On his own, Freddie's kaleidoscopic personality vibrates. If you are in his company, the feeling you get is that you are the sole purpose for his being; he is so completely entertaining and engrossing. At a top-notch restaurant, he demands the service of someone royal before finally we get down to discussing *A Night At The Opera*.

"It's really taken the longest to do out of our four albums so far," he says. "We didn't really cater for it. We just set upon it and we were going to do so many things. It's taken us about four months and now we've gone over the deadline with the tour approaching. It's more important to get the album the way we want it, especially after we've spent so long on it.

"The last bits – piecing it together – are more important than the rest of it. It's easily our most important album yet, to be honest. In a way the best judge we had was tonight because we listened to it back for the first time. We just haven't had the time to do that. I know that we've got the strongest set of songs ever. It is going to be our best album, it really is.

"If I thought there was something wrong with it, I would say so, but there are certain things on this album which we've wanted to do for a long time. I'm really pleased about the operatic thing" – ahem, we're talking about



"We went overboard on every album. But that's just the way Queen is."

Freddie Mercury

Bohemian Rhapsody now – "I really wanted to be outrageous with the vocals because we're always getting compared to other people, which is very stupid. If you really listen to the operatic bit, there are no comparisons, which is what we want. But we don't set out to be outrageous – it's in us. There are so many things that we want to do but we can't do everything at the same time. It's impossible. At the moment, I'm happy that we've made an album which, let's face it, is too much to take for some people. But it was what we wanted to do."

Mercury considers the impact Queen made with *Sheer Heart Attack*. It posited them where they wanted to be – in a sphere of influence. *Queen II* had set the cards on the table; *Sheer Heart Attack* had stated "here's what we can do"; *A Night At The Opera* took it to the limit.

Freddie uses his fork as an exclamation mark, stabbing his food as he speaks. "With *Sheer Heart Attack*, we thought, we can do certain things and establish ourselves!" Stab! "Like vocally, we can outdo any band!" Stab! "With this album, we just thought that we would go out, not restrict ourselves with any barriers, and just do what we want to do!" Stab!

He considered *Bohemian* Rhapsody specifically. "I had this operatic 'thing', and I thought why don't we doo-oo-oo it." His affectation on the 'do' really emphasises his



Freddie Mercury: "I had this operatic 'thing' and I thought, 'Why don't we do it?'

The Man Who Would Be Queen

Roy Thomas Baker was the 'fifth member of Queen', the producer who gave them that sound.

Who made who? Did Roy Thomas Baker, co-producer of *A Night at The Opera* with the band, make Queen; or did Queen make Roy Thomas Baker? A bit of both probably, because they were invaluable to each other. However, it is fair to say that, 30 years on and with the new Darkness album under his belt, RTB is still remembered as the man who produced Queen.

When 1975 was turning into '76, Roy's reputation was going through the roof. I caught up with him in the same studio where much of *A Night at The Opera* was recorded – SARM in West London. He was working with Pilot (you remember, '*Januar-eee, sick and tired, you've been hangin' on me...*' etc etc). As it happens, Pilot weren't a bad band and with Ian Bairnson on board as guitarist, they wanted a rockier edge to their stuff.

RTB first got into the record business in 1963 when he joined Decca as assistant engineer. His early conquests included Ten Years After, Savoy Brown, John Mayall, The Rolling Stones, Dr John, Eric Clapton and Delaney & Bonnie. Not a bad start, you'd think. His first production was on Nazareth's second album, 1972's *Exercises*, which failed to set the world alight.

By then, he had taken the visionary step of forming his own production company and got a call from a new band called Queen. Brian May and Roger Taylor invited him down to the just opened De Lane Lea studios to check them out. Queen had landed the gig of testing the room's acoustics. Bagging free studio time had saved them a lot of money they didn't have in the early days.

When Baker arrived at the studio, Queen were playing *Keep Yourself Alive*, yet to be recorded... He went on to produce said song and the rest on Queen.

"On a personal level, I feel closer to them than to anyone else," Baker said then. "Because I'd only produced one album before Queen, I've matured as a producer as they've matured as a band. We've grown together."

Queen and Roy Thomas Baker would constantly experiment. Baker had a reputation throughout Europe as a guinea pig for new electronic gadgets. When he would get a new-fangled gizmo, he would take it along to Queen sessions, let the band play with it, and sometimes it would end up on record.

"Working with Queen, you can't put it in normal terms," he explained. "We're up against the usual thing of diminishing returns. For instance, if you spend a month on an album, it might be good; but if you spend two months on the same album, it doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be twice as good. To get that, you have to work on something for four months."

Which is exactly what they did with *A Night At The Opera*...

"Queen can't work like any normal group. They utilise each other's talents to the fullest. The middle operatic section in Bohemian Rhapsody, for example, took about six to seven days to record in total. It was multi-tracked and there were so many harmonies that it takes quite a while to sort it out It's the same case with Brian May's harmony guitar work."

Baker concluded: "A lot of the band's ideas are revolutionary in 1975; a lot of the style is revolutionary. You've got a band that has a relatively heavy rhythm section, is versatile musically and sings exceedingly well. The Queen situation is unique." He wasn't far wrong.



Coming up roses: Queen pick up gold discs and flowers for *A Night At The Opera*.

GETTY X3



The live show proved to be a spontaneous release for Queen after months in the studio

determination to achieve something radically different. By then, I'd heard the track a few times. 'Overboard' was a word I used to him to describe the work.

"We went a bit overboard on every album, actually," he responded gleefully. "But that's just the way Queen is. In certain areas, we feel that we want to go overboard. It's what keeps us going really, darling. If we were to come up with an album where people said: 'It's just like *Sheer Heart Attack* but there were a few bits on *Sheer Heart Attack* that are better…' Well, I'd give up. Wouldn't you?"

I pathetically nod 'yes', as if I had just made an album the measure of *Sheer Heart Attack* that very evening…

As we tucked into a main course avec bubbly, Freddie, though, was sure that Queen were firmly set on a right royal journey. "What really helped was the last tour. We've done a really successful worldwide tour which we've never done before. All that experience was accumulating and when we came to do this album, there were certain things which we had done in the past which we can do much better now.

"Our playing ability was better. Backing tracks on this album are far superior. We start off with backing tracks and we really felt they were really closely knit, and we seemed to feel each other's needs, which is very important for backing tracks.

"I think Queen has really got its own identity now. I don't care what journalists say – we got our identity after *Queen II*. With that album, we had our own thing. America saw that it was good, and so did Japan. Since then, we're the biggest group in Japan. I don't mind saying that. We are! We outdo anybody. And that's because we've taken it on our own musical terms.

"So since Queen II we've had our own identity and, of course, if we do something that's harmonised, we'll be The Beach Boys and if we do something that's heavy, we'll be Led Zeppelin, or whatever. But the thing is that we have an identity of our own because we combine all those things which mean Queen. That's what people don't seem to realise.

"A lot of people have slammed *Bohemian Rhapsody* but if you listen to that single, who can you compare it to? Tell me one group that's done an operatic single? I can't think of one! But we didn't do an operatic single because we thought we'd be the only group to do it. It just happened!

"The title of the album came at the very end of recording. We thought: 'Oh God, what are we going to call this album?'" Typically, the two most humorous members of the band reverted to The Marx Brothers, but this was certainly an album made by a group firmly placing collective heads in the noose.

"We've always done that," Freddie agreed. "We've always put our necks on the line. We did it with *Queen II*. On that album we did so many outrageous things that people started to say 'self-indulgent', 'crap', 'too many vocals'… but that is Queen. After that, they seemed to realise what Queen was all about."

And just to tighten the noose, let's stick out a six-minute mini-opera that possibly stands no chance of getting radio play… "We look upon our product as songs," Freddie considers gently. "We don't worry about singles or albums. All we do is pick the cream of the crop. Then we look upon it as a whole to make sure the whole album works.

"With *Bohemian Rhapsody*, we just thought it was a very strong song and so we released it. But there were so many arguments about it. Somebody suggested cutting it down because the media reckons we have to have a three minute single, but we want to put across Queen as songs. There is no point in cutting it. If you want to cut down *Bohemian Rhapsody*, it just won't work.

"We just wanted to release it to say that this is what Queen are about at this stage. This is the single and you're going to have an album after that."

And this, asserts Fred, is the uniqueness of Queen. Their USP (Unique Selling Point) is simply: take it or leave it. Like it or loathe it. "We're just very different. We do things now in a style that is very different to anybody else. But we haven't

acquired that just to be different, it just happened. We go through so many traumas, and we're so meticulous. There are literally scores of songs that have been rejected for this album – some of them nice ones. If people don't like the songs we're doing at the moment, we couldn't give a fuck. We're probably the fussiest band in the world, to be honest. We take so much care with what we do because we feel so much about what we put across.

"And if we do an amazing album we make sure that album is packaged right, because we've put so much loving into it. It's what we do, darling."

The interview finished, Freddie invites his multicolour, multisexual, effervescent, personal entourage to join us – here's Kenny Everett pushing to the front to embrace and congratulate his buddy on a job well done. Everett was the first Freddie turned to when he realised that *Bohemian Rhapsody* might not make it to the nation's airwaves. Six minutes, he told Freddie, you have no chance. And then proceeded to play it something like 10 times on his radio show that weekend. *Bo-Rhap* was on its way…

The next day, after exposing their masterwork to the fickle elements of the media, the band got together again to listen through to *A Night At The Opera* one more time before sending it to the pressing factory. And that's when they decided to remix it…

A few weeks later, and I'm sitting backstage at Hammersmith Odeon talking with Brian May, just as Queen are preparing for a soundcheck for a series of gigs in west London. Sitting there, considering the immensity of what is happening around his band, May is calmness itself.

"We're a bigger band now and we can afford to plough more into the presentation. We've always lived beyond our means anyway! Dynamics are things we consider worthwhile in a show, just so that we can make it a complete evening out for the fans. The glamour will never take away from the music. We're much too conscious of the music to let that happen.

"The music is first in everything and if we add a particular effect or particular lights, it's to get across a certain mood at a certain time to emphasise the music.

"You see, you have to understand it's romantic music we're playing – in the old sense of the word. It's music to tear your emotions apart. There's a kind of personality we share with our audience. We're like that. We're sort of schizophrenic. We like to be serious about some things and not as serious about others."

Ah, and here we have Queen on tour. Here we have in *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *A Night At The Opera*, a quintessential 'studio record'; we have the Queen that proudly proclaim on album sleeves 'no synthesisers'; the Queen lording it



GETTY x2

Freddie Mercury: easy come, easy go… and wearing a poncho

"Tell me one group that's done an operatic single. I can't think of one!"

Freddie Mercury



Queen: multicolour, multisexual, personal entourage out of shot.

on the road; the Queen that has to reproduce this on stage. How do you square that circle, Brian?

May considered this. "We play differently on stage from on record. On stage, it's good to have a two-way conversation with the audience rather than oneway. Let me explain this. It's no good just getting out there and playing if you're not getting across to the people. We treat recording as a separate thing altogether from the stage act. We don't have any thought of holding back something on record if we couldn't do it on stage. There are very complicated things on the record but, hopefully, not complicated for complication's sake.

"There's a lot of texture on our albums. We started that with our second album." You see now that *Queen II* is a significant album in the growth of Queen. It is my favourite Queen album, by the way. Brian developed the theme. "That album has a lot of impact. If you listen to our albums more and more, you will get more and more out of them."

Still, as *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *A Night At The Opera* were being unleashed, May was ticking the box that said 'room for improvement'. "I'd like to see us, as a four-piece, work together more on songs. In the case of *A Night At The Opera*, it was impossible because we didn't have enough time, and we were in the situation where a couple of us were in one studio and the others in another, so you lose a bit of the group feeling in that way.

"It's good to be out on the road," he says. "It draws you together."

You get a sense that Brian thinks too much, and when he talks to you about *A Night At The Opera*, he's what you might call 'picky'…

"It's not that there is too much individualism," he says. "I can point toward things on this album which have suffered from us not having us all there at one time. and because there was too much responsibility on one person at one time very often. I can't say which tracks because it would spoil it for people. That's not to say I don't think it's a good album. I love it."

We went on to talk about the Queen modus operandi; how the band got from college to collective. I point out that with four very strong personalities in the Queen ranks, it wouldn't be surprising that things might get a little bit hectic now and then.

"Generally," May answers, "the working relationship within the band is that we tend to leave each other alone musically, unless asked. That would be my interpretation. If someone has an idea, you assume that they want to be left alone to get on with it and put it across the best way.

"Sometimes, they'll come and talk about it, which I do a lot. Maybe I can't make a decision and I'll come to the others and say, 'How does this strike you?' and they'll suggest something and usually I'll agree.

"The relationship gets strained sometimes. I got very worried once that I was going out on a limb and that the rest of the band didn't really approve of what I was doing. It happened on a track on *A*

"It's romantic music we're playing. It's music to tear your emotions apart."

Brian May

Night At The Opera – Good Company. I spent days and days doing those trumpet and trombone things [all of which were played by May on the guitar] and trying to get into the character of those instruments. The others were doing other things and they'd pop in from time to time and say, 'Well, you haven't done much since we last saw you…'

"They probably wouldn't mean it in a dire way, but I would get very offended and very worried that I was doing something which their heart wasn't in but, in the end, it turned out well."

And Freddie. What was it about the Mercury-May chemistry, especially when May worked on Mercury songs? How did that work?

"Freddie and I worked together very well. Is it hard? No, quite the opposite. I find it natural. I think he's got a knack of using me to my best advantage. Usually he has everything sorted out until the last note, calls me over and tells me which way he wants it. There is never any friction.

"He's got a strong personality. I think we all have. We're all very stubborn, particularly in the studio, and sometimes it leads to bad feeling. Generally, however, if it comes down to a genuine musical argument, we tend to see eye to eye in the end. We all know where we're going; it's just a question of how we get there that is argued about."

We rattle on about Freddie for a while, laugh about him, his ways and his genius. May could talk on the subject for hours, he says. "Freddie is a born figurehead," he comments with deep affection. "He loves himself to be used as a figurehead. He knows exactly what's best for himself.

"Freddie knows exactly what he wants and how to get it. He's definitely the driving force behind the band getting where it is. He's flashy but he knows he's got the substance to back it up. He'll never be flash in an area where he's not confident. If there's something he knows he doesn't know much about, he'll steer completely away from it, or he'll conquer it. There's no halfway house. He won't give the impression that he knows what he's talking about when he doesn't. He'll always make sure that he knows what he is talking about and then let everybody know. Some people think that he's arrogant but in fact, he's only arrogant when he knows he can afford to be."

After all, who could challenge Freddie Mercury? The other members of Queen, if anything, pushed their singer to the front and encouraged him to impose his magnetic personality on to the media and public. Such was their confidence in their own musical ability and business nous that they were perfectly happy to let Freddie loose.

"It's good that Freddie has such a strong personality because he doesn't let it go to his head, which he could quite easily have done," says May. "It's very weird that that happened. We could see it happening from the beginning. He's our frontman and we consciously used it in that way. The press did, and still do, take it too far. A lot of the press are very dimly aware that the rest of the group exist.

"It would be a big mistake for anybody to disregard the role each member plays in Queen. It really does interlock well as a group and we couldn't do without any one of us at all. I think if anyone left it would disappear."

…Only to reappear occasionally, as if by a kind of magic.

In The Opera-ting Theatre

Brian May casts his mind back to the days of Bo-Rhap.

A few weeks after the culmination of the UK leg of the Queen + Paul Rodgers tour, we caught up with Brian May to relive a warm memory or two about the band's career-breaking album, *A Night At The Opera*. Interview: Simon Bradley

From a band member's point of view, how were Queen doing in 1975?
Business-wise, we were in crisis. We'd had a lot of success but we were in a management situation that seemed to have no light at the end of the tunnel. We weren't getting any of our royalties and although money isn't everything, it's not good to feel you're in what you perceive to be a slave-labour situation.

So *A Night At The Opera* really was make or break in that sense. John Reid, who'd just taken over our management, said that he'd take over the business side and that we should go away and make the best album we've ever made! But there was that feeling that if it didn't succeed we'd always be in the red, so we were fortunate that we did make the album of our lives… and I think it is, really.

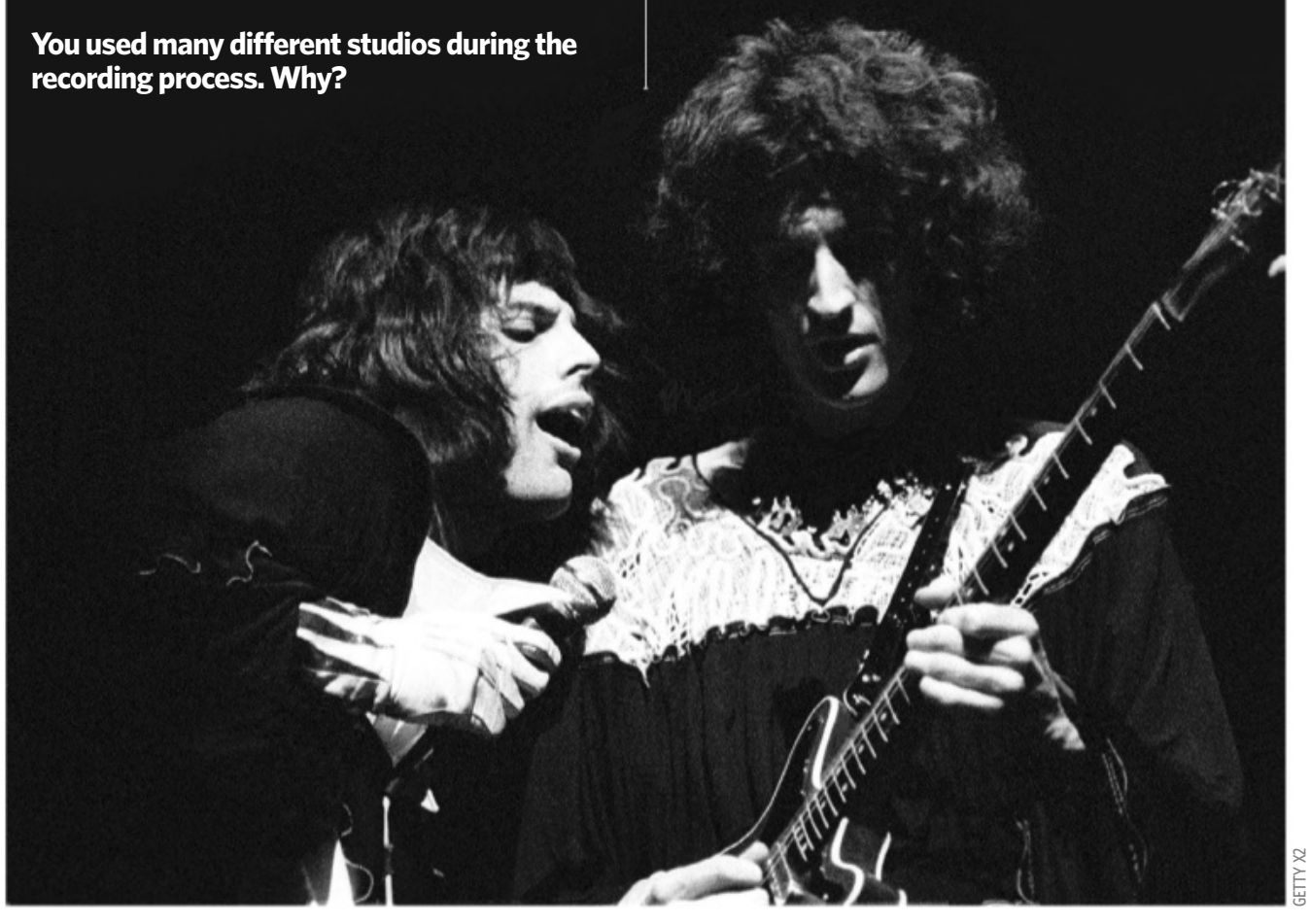
***A Night At The Opera* was definitely a very bold and adventurous album.**
It was certainly quite a leap. I don't think we realised at the time, though; it was all a natural progression. Stylistically I think it's closer to *Queen II* than *Sheer Heart Attack* as we deliberately made the latter album compressed and very slick, while A Night At The Opera was really going back to: 'This is our canvas, we will paint on it at our leisure'. Which was the philosophy behind Queen II.

You used many different studios during the recording process. Why?
It was really needs must. We had so much complexity to finish off and time was marching on. A lot of it was done separately. All those little pieces of guitars playing trumpets, clarinets and trombones on *Good Company*, I just had to just do it. Freddie would be off doing his multi-tracked harmonies by himself and on this album for the first time there was a whole period when we each went off and developed our own little areas. We were doing things that really hadn't been done before, so there was a degree of experimentation. Not everything you played got on to the tape; you had to use a selective process.

Tell us about *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Did you perceive it becoming as huge a song as it developed into?
There was always a big discussion about what would be the first single to an album. It's such a crucial decision. Whether it's a hit or not affects the whole perception and sales of the album as well as the fortunes of the group that made it for the next couple of years.

I think we always knew that Bohemian Rhapsody was, in a sense, a long shot: it would either get received extremely well or be dismissed immediately as being too complex and too long. Kenny [Everett] picked up on it, as did a few of our staff, and it just became a favourite that seemed to work.

Do you actually still like the album?
I like all the Queen albums but *A Night At The Opera* has a certain glittering quality. Not perfection as such but… something.



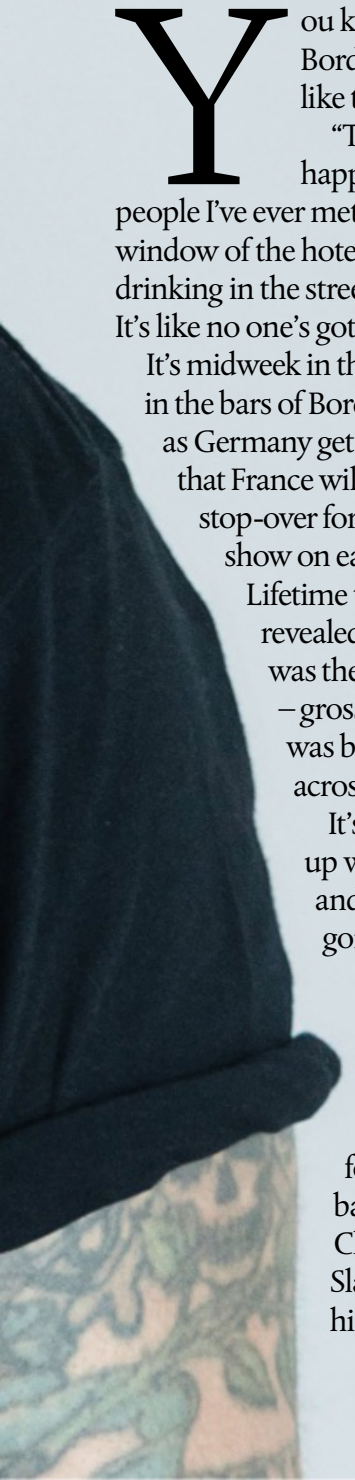
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FULL WELL

IN THIS LIFETIME

Rejoining Guns N' Roses. Lemmy's last days. The #MeToo minefield. Talking to your kids about drugs. In 2018 **Slash** had a lot to get off his chest. And in this blockbusting interview with *Classic Rock*, that's what he did...

Words: **Scott Rowley** Portraits: **Ross Halfin**



You know where you are? You're in Bordeaux, baby – and it's fuck-all like the jungle.

"These have got to be the happiest, most chilled-out French people I've ever met," says Slash, looking out of the window of the hotel. "There were people out drinking in the streets until four in the morning. It's like no one's got work to go to."

It's midweek in the wine capital of the world, and in the bars of Bordeaux the French are cheering as Germany get knocked out of a World Cup that France will later win. This is the latest stop-over for what is literally the biggest show on earth: Guns N' Roses' Not In This Lifetime tour. Back in April, *Billboard* revealed that the band's reunion tour was the fourth-biggest tour *of all time* – grossing $480 million so far. That was before they played 19 shows across Europe this summer.

It's been a while since we caught up with him – four years, in fact – and we're here to find out what's going on in the world of Slash.

Because *so much* has happened in the intervening years.

In 18 months between 2014-16 he played more than 150 gigs all over the world. His former Velvet Revolver bandmate Scott Weiland died. Chris Cornell, who sang on Slash's debut album, killed himself. David Bowie, who Slash first met aged eight, died. Lemmy, a long-time close friend, passed away after a long battle.

In his personal life, Slash got divorced from his wife of 13 years, Perla, and rekindled a relationship with a woman he went out with when he was 25. Oh, and somewhere along the way Guns N' fuckin Roses got back together.

Slash, the master of understatement, Mr Laid-Back himself shrugs. "I've been busy," he says.

There are people who are worried about our conversation. Before I can speak to Slash I have to sign a contract that says that if anything goes wrong – if some kind of shit hits the fan because of what I write – and GN'R lose money, then *Classic Rock* carries the can. This is no small thing when you're dealing with the fourth-biggest-earning tour *of all time*.

"Having an opportunity to go out and play... the fact that I'm able to do what it is that I love to do, that's living the dream."

There is paranoia around. The Not In This Lifetime tour took a lifetime to put together, and no one wants to be the one to fuck it up. You might not have noticed, but Guns N' Roses haven't really talked to *anyone* since they re-formed. They haven't done an interview.

Now Slash has a solo album coming, and so the burden has fallen to him. What will be said? What if I ask the tough questions? What if I make things awkward, open old GN'R wounds?

And then there's Slash. By his own admission, he's not much of a talker.

"I'm definitely not any kind of orator," he says. "I don't, er, I don't want to be somebody… I can't. I'm just not a good speaker in general, as far as like being someone who has a lot to communicate verbally. It's just not my thing."

Does that frustrate him?

"I don't know, maybe," he says. Then, fuck it, he changes his mind: "No, I don't give a shit."

Does he take that frustration and channel it into his guitar playing?

"Yeah, I mean, guitar playing is that for me; it's an extension of myself, it's a way to express myself that I can't do in any other sort of arena. The guitar is a release for me.

"I just love the fact that I can go and play every day. I do have frustrations in the fact that I cannot fucking put up a good fucking verbal argument with anybody for any length of time, but I just don't have it in me," he says, and his lips go into a sneer. "But I could knock you about with a guitar for a little bit."

In conversation, Slash can seem cagey, maybe even distrustful – a guy who keeps his cards close to his chest. With his reckless years behind him – and his were far more reckless than most – you might even think that sober Slash is a bit of a control freak; a private guy who doesn't give up much of himself.



"It's rock and roll, it doesn't take a hell of a lot of, like, board meetings and shit to get a song together. It's either good or it's not."

Having interviewed him a few times over the years, that's definitely what I thought. And then something happened that made me think about Slash differently.

On December 19, 2016, the company that owned *Classic Rock* (and its sister magazines *Metal Hammer* and *Prog*) went bust. Staff at offices in Hamilton, Scotland, and London were called to a floor meeting and told to gather their stuff and leave, their services were no longer required. The company, TeamRock, had been liquidated and staff wouldn't be paid for December. At the Hamilton office, the administrators were literally changing the locks on the doors as staff left.

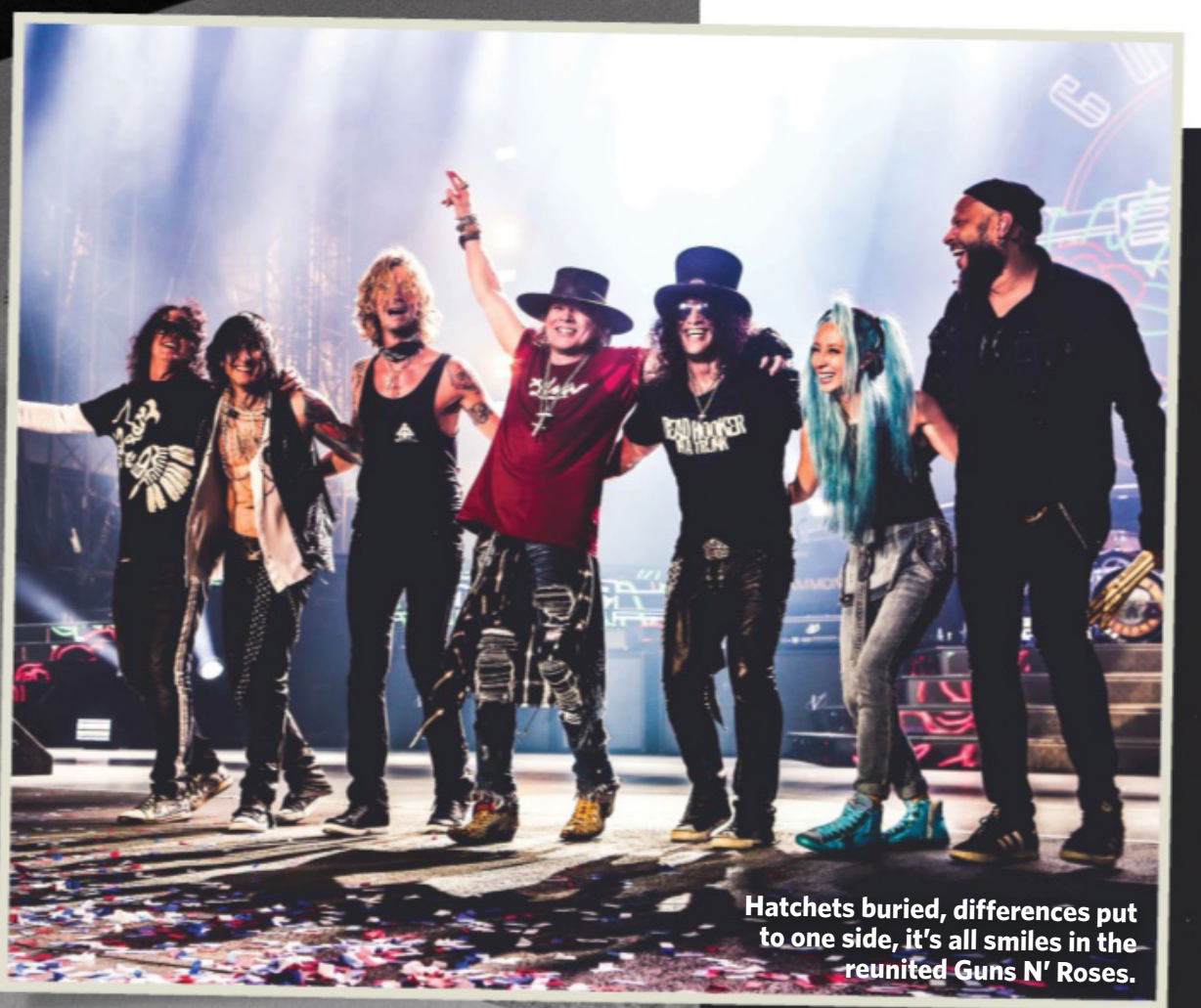
Two days later, I was at home, shell-shocked. I'd worked at *Classic Rock* since 2004. I had no clue what to do next. Christmas decorations hang half-heartedly around the house and I'm cooking dinner for my kids when the phone rings – the home number; the only people who ring on that are our parents and cold callers. I pick up.

"Hey, Scott?" says a soft American voice. "It's Slash. What the fuck's going on, man?"

And so, while I'm frying chicken for my kids, I tell Slash all about what happened, about the series of monumental management fuck-ups that led to TeamRock going bust.

There were many kind gestures in the following weeks, not least of which was the £80,000-plus raised by the public for the TeamRock staff. But Slash calling me at home – a small personal gesture, but one he didn't have to do – was one of the standouts.

He followed it up, too. A month or so later, with *Classic Rock* up and running again – bought by Future publishing, our previous home – he



Hatchets buried, differences put to one side, it's all smiles in the reunited Guns N' Roses.



KATARINA BENZOVA/PRESS x2

"Now that we've actually mended fences and gotten back together and done this, we're going to keep it together." **Slash on GN'R**

He shrugs, like it's nothing, like rock stars phone guys like me all the time. "We've known each other for a long time," he says.

We have. Covering the past and continuing adventures of Guns N' Roses has probably been the story of *Classic Rock*'s lifetime. The first issue of the mag was published more than a decade after the release of their debut album *Appetite For Destruction*, but that didn't prevent the band being on the cover of that first issue and many (some would say too many) issues thereafter.

Classic Rock's first permanent editor, Mick Wall, was one of the *'punks in the press'* named in the *Use Your Illusion* track *Get In The Ring*, which brought him closer to the story than most. Our photographer Ross Halfin did the first ever magazine shoot of the band.

Then there was the aftermath: throughout the 90s and the 00s, Slash, Duff, Adler, Izzy, Axl, Sorum, Gilby et al were all working musicians – touring, releasing records, falling in and out of trouble and giving interviews all the while.

Classic Rock was there when Velvet Revolver formed *and* when they split. We *released* all of Slash's previous solo albums. We followed the story tenaciously, passionately.

Sometimes, maybe we went too far. (So far, in fact, that I got letters from Axl's lawyers on at least two occasions.) But that's The GN'R Effect for you. They were the band that went too far – and it was infectious.



"I've been busy," he says. Yeah, just a bit. From 2014 through most of 2016 Slash was on tour with The Conspirators, 150-plus dates, writing for the next record, working on "movie projects" and so on. And then…

"And then Axl and I talked," he says, "and that was something that came totally out of the blue, totally unexpected. We talked and managed to alleviate some of this negativity that had been brewing.

"Not between us," he stresses, "because we had never actually spoken. It was sort of perpetuated through the media and stuff, and it just became a running thing – the biggest rivalry or whatever. So it was really nice to talk."

The ice broken, after a few phone calls, Slash and Axl met in person. They'd been getting offers to re-form for the Coachella festival for ages, but had never even considered it. The Coachella Valley Music And Arts Festival, in Indio, California, had developed a reputation for putting on reunions: Jane's Addiction reunited to play there in 2001, Siouxsie & The Banshees made a return in 2002, Iggy & The Stooges in 2003, the Pixies in 2004… you get the idea.

When the two of them met, Axl said: "You know, Coachella would be sort of fun, wouldn't it?"

The plan was just to do two dates at Coachella and some warm-up gigs, but…

"We just had a fucking insane blast doing it," says Slash, "that, you know, one thing led to another and the next thing you know we had booked a leg of a tour, and it just kept adding up and adding up."

And now that little get-together is the fourth-biggest tour of all time.

dropped me an email: "Hey," he said, "just checking in. How's everything working out?"

It might seem from the outside that we're all friends with the rock stars we write about, but let me tell you that *this does not happen*.

"I was sort of devastated when I heard," he says now. "It was like, fuck, there's not really many magazines left and I had a relationship with you guys. It was really sad. So I was really happy that it turned around like it did…"

Sure, I say, but you didn't have to call…

"It's been quite a fucking positive experience," he nods.

Slash got his nickname from Seymour Cassel, a character actor famous for working with John Cassavetes and in later life for appearing in Wes Anderson movies such as *Rushmore* and *The Royal Tenenbaums*. As a kid in LA, Slash hung out with Cassel's son Matt and, one day, Seymour just started calling the young Saul Hudson Slash. It stuck. No one knew what the fuck it meant but it sounded cool. Years later, on GN'R's *Use Your Illusion* tour, Slash bumped into Seymour in Paris and asked him where he'd got the name from. Why 'Slash'?

Cassel told him the name embodied what he saw as Slash's "sense of hustle". "His reason for calling me Slash," the guitarist wrote in his autobiography, "was that I never stood still for more than five minutes. He was right. I've always been coming or going more than I've ever stayed still. I am perpetually in motion, often saying goodbye while saying hello, and Seymour summed that quality up in a word."

He's Slash in the sense of 'and/or' or 'yes/no' – not slash as in knife wound. He's not a split, he's a *join*, a conjunction. He's not one thing, he's both. A slash is used to link alternatives: black/white, English/American. He's a walking paradox, a duality. He's a stereotype that defies categorisation. In maths the slash symbol is called a separatrix, the boundary separating two modes of behaviour. In the past he didn't see boundaries.

The word 'slash' has its roots in the old French word 'esclachier', meaning 'to break'. He's been breaking things his whole life – records, rules, bones, hearts. But his appetite for destruction was matched only by his work ethic.

On the surface he's chilled, laid back, so unassuming. But take a look at his work rate and it tells a different story: he never stops. Some rock stars, coming off what will surely be the highest-grossing tour in history, would probably, y'know, *take a holiday*. Instead, Slash has been prepping an album and can't wait to get back into it. The fact that the album has been finished for months and it isn't out yet has been driving Slash mad.

"I wonder how actors do it," he says: "Finish a project and then you can't release it for another four months or three months or whatever."

Writing for the new Slash Featuring Myles Kennedy & The Conspirators album began towards the end of the World On Fire tour – an 18-month schlep around the world – writing on the road, jamming at sound checks. And then Guns N' Roses happened. Where other people would have given up on the solo career, as soon as Guns had a break – between January and June this year – Slash and his co-conspirators Myles, Todd Kerns, Brent Fitz and Frank Sidoris (in on the recording of an album for the first time) got back together and started revisiting those earlier ideas.

Slash bought a rehearsal room with a 16-track board a few miles from his house. When the band reconvened, on the very first session they wrote a brand-new song straight off the bat. "The first chords that we hit, after all that time, was something just to warm up," says Slash, "and it became a whole new song, *Mind Your Manners*."

"I've spent the last... since two thousand and fking eight or whatever, avoiding Guns N' Roses questions, and my life has been a lot better because of it."**



And then they went in the studio and knocked out an album. "Any kind of solo project that I do," he says, "for me personally, is a quick, fucking hash it out and not too much thought involved, bam, done. It's rock and roll, it doesn't take a hell of a lot of, like, board meetings and shit to get a song together. It's either good or it's not, you know?"

The album, *Living The Dream*, is out on September 21. Twelve songs with big choruses, crunching riffs and a whole load of guitar playing, it's an album that sounds like it was made quickly – in a good way. No board meetings, no bullshit, just the kind of ballsy anthems that will keep arenas across the world bouncing for the next few months.

They threw it down quickly, Slash rejoined Guns for this 19-date European tour, "and then I'll get home and then hook up with the guys and go out in September, release the record, then it's Guns N' Roses in Asia, and then come back and do Conspirators, and it's going to be like that. That's my life."

You don't have to work that hard, you know. Does anyone ever tell you that?

"I don't mind working hard," he says. "What's exciting for me is to actually have something to do. It's exciting to know that there's something I'm doing tomorrow, as opposed to, like [twiddles thumbs], 'Ah, hmm…'"

Because he's *Slash*: one thing finishes/another begins.

The only time he can remember having nothing to do was in the period between Velvet Revolver and his first solo record ("the one with all the singers").

"That period right there I was going, 'Fuck. *Now* what am I going to do?' Because, er, there was no chance Velvet was getting back together. I don't know if you know this, but when Velvet Revolver first started I was knee-deep in doing a solo record. I was playing with Steve Gorman on drums. Actually that was where *Fall To Pieces* started…"

There's an internet rumour that you were going to put together a band with Chris Cornell around then.

"I don't know if that was ever a reality," he says. "I didn't even know that *was* a rumour. I did work with Chris on the solo record, but I never had any prospects of doing a band with him.

"Anyway, I was back to that solo stuff. Back in that place where I really didn't know what I was going to be doing. So that's when I embarked on the solo record, and then I met Myles, and Myles turned into a relationship that's spanned eight years now.

"When we're on the road, I write the entire time. That's what I do in the dressing room or in my hotel rooms. I'll play him something, or we'll record it at sound check, and he keeps all that stuff and he works on it while we're on the road or while he's out with Alter Bridge or whatever he's doing."

When Slash went out with Guns N' Roses, he noticed that his writing began to change: "When Guns started doing its thing, then the kind of writing that I was doing was actually more tailored towards Guns, because that was the environment I was in. But then we took the break and I started thinking about doing the Conspirators record.

"When it comes down to it, a riff is a riff. It could work in either context. But with The Conspirators, anything I come up with, Myles will come up with something, and that's why it's such a diverse record.

"With Guns, you have no idea where that's going to go either, so it's really sort of hard to focus on one or the other. But I feel like while I'm out with Guns I'm thinking about Guns stuff. When I'm out with Conspirators I'm thinking of Conspirators. I've been doing The Conspirators for, like, eight years now. So there's a certain kind of rhythm that I've gotten into with doing that.

"With Guns, we haven't sort of… we've just started to touch the surface of what that's going to all be, so I haven't really fallen into that groove yet. So right now there's more of a question mark around that than with Conspirators."

Wait: Have you announced this, that you're writing for a Guns record?

"Well, it's not been announced because there's nothing official, so there's nothing to talk ➢

ROSS HALFIN



Appetite for everything: Guns N' Roses at the beginning of the road to superstardom, doing their first photo shoot.

"Everything about that record [*Appetite*] is wrong for what was going on in music at the time."



Slash with Lemmy: "One of the greatest friends to have, and one of the greatest mentors."

GETTY

about. I think everybody thinks it's a good idea, and everybody would like to do it, and there's no shortage of ideas, from everybody involved, but we've been so busy on the road there hasn't really been time to go in and sit down and go: 'Okay, we're going to make a record.'"

A few weeks before Guns N' Roses played Download, the Rolling Stones toured the UK. It made people ask the question: 'When the Stones retire, who's going to fill their shoes?' Guns N' Roses could easily do what the Stones are doing now: the big, world-conquering tour, an album every few years, room in the schedule for solo projects.

"Well, we'll see what happens," he says. "I mean, I have no prospects. Now that we've actually mended fences and gotten back together and done this, we're going to keep it together. Because all the bullshit that we'd had that sort of caused all the shit back in the nineties, there was a lot of outside influence on that, and so now that that's sort of eliminated we're just left to our own devices. We get along fucking great.

"So I think we're going to go well on into the future. I mean, Axl's got a ton of shit that he recorded already, so we're just going to get in there and just start getting into that thing, and then if we do a record and then do a tour, I could see that cycle going on endlessly."

There's a lot of conversation about kids not being into rock music these days. When you're making a new album, do you feel under pressure to do something to grab kids' attention?

"You've just got to do what you do best, put your utmost integrity into it, make an effort and try and do it for yourself."

"I don't. I just can't be bothered with trying to figure it all out, you know? I mean, somewhere in your mind you're obviously conscious of the dynamics of what's happening at the moment with music, and with the industry itself, and also with where rock'n'roll is at. But there's not a hell of a lot you can do about it. Even if you were to set a goal, to go: 'I'm going to change rock', chances are you're going to fail.

"So you've just got to do what you do best, put your utmost integrity into it, make an effort and try and do it for yourself. That's really where it comes down to: you're doing all this for yourself, to satisfy some inner yearning to do something that you want to hear, or just to be whatever it is that you want to be, you know? But to think that you're important enough to try and influence the entire industry is sort of a stretch."

Some would say that Guns N' Roses did it with *Appetite For Destruction*.

"Yeah," he says, "but no one would fucking have expected that. I mean, granted, it's a good record, and there's a uniqueness to Axl's whole delivery and the songs, but it's got very unorthodox arrangements. Everything about that record is wrong for what was going on in music at the time. So I still can't find the one thing that hit that nerve and created this longevity. You don't bother trying to figure it out. Just be thankful that you were able to make a record that fucking reached that many people. Because it was such an honest record."

Maybe that was what connected with people. "That could be it," he says. "But sometimes I look out from the stage at that sea of people and wonder exactly how it's transcended generations at this point, you know? It's a trip."

I put a call-out on Facebook and Instagram for people to share their experiences of meeting Slash, and got a load of stories from people amazed at his kindness and thoughtfulness.

Betty fell ill the week that she was supposed to go and see Slash in concert, meaning that she missed out on the gig *and* the meet-and-greet she'd paid for. Five years later, Slash heard about it and got her tickets and backstage passes so she could have their own personal meet-and-greet.

When Alissa was just starting out as a photographer, Slash spotted her in the photo pit with her "cheap crappy camera". He took pity on her, and posed just for her for a minute or so, leaning into her lens, to help her get a shot.

Robert took his son, a big Slash fan, to see Velvet Revolver at Hammersmith. There was a reception afterwards, and when they got in they found Slash rowing with the organisers. Robert's son wanted a photo of himself with Slash, so nervously Robert interrupted the argument to ask. "In the middle of the aggression," Robert says, "he turned to us, smiled and said: 'Yes, of course.'" He had a photo taken, chatted with the kid about guitars, and then went back to his argument.

"He reminds me of Lemmy," says Gina Giambalvo-Glockler, the partner of Saxon drummer Nigel Glockler, who has a story of Slash taking time out at a festival to come and say hi to her daughter. "He's a complete bad-ass yet always thoughtful. We need more people like this!"

"Lemmy was one of my all-time favourite fucking human beings," says Slash, who spoke at Kilmister's funeral. "We got to be friends back in 1987, when we first came over here, when Guns played those Marquee dates."

Slash hung out during the sessions for Motörhead's *Rock'N'Roll* album, drinking with Lemmy at London rock bars like the Intrepid Fox and the St Moritz. They became friends – "good drinking buddies and whatnot" – and Slash appeared on *I Ain't No Nice Guy* and *You Better Run* on Motörhead's *March Or Die* album in 1992. Much later, Lemmy appeared the track *Doctor Alibi* on Slash's debut album, which featured a classic Lemmy response to the diagnosis of his failing

Slash shot exclusively for *Classic Rock*, July 2018.

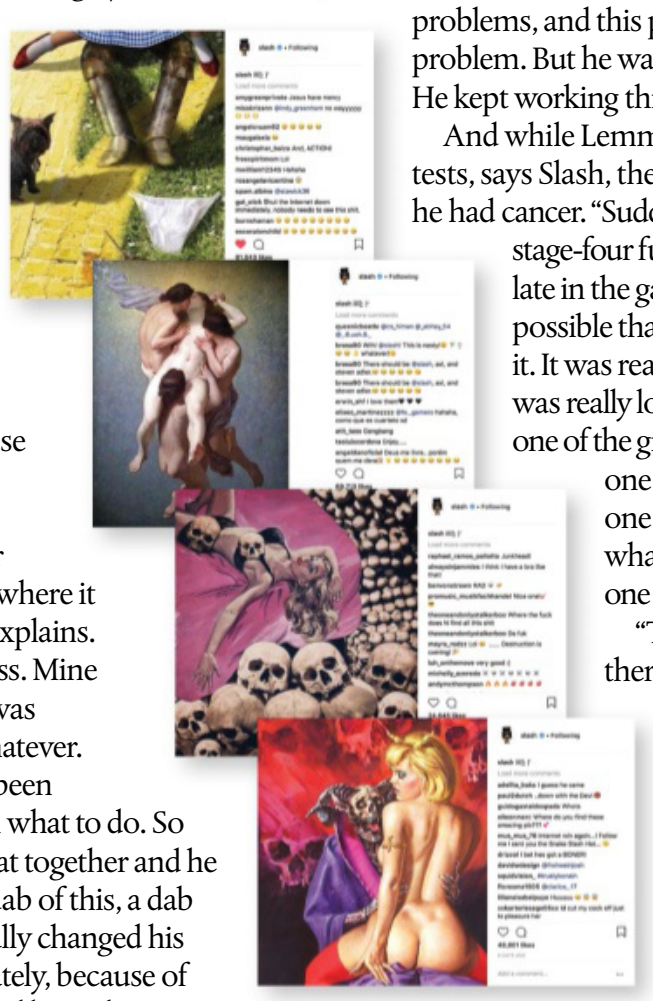


“Axl’s been fucking amazing. He’s been so professional that it blows my mind.”

health: *‘I went to see the doctor/ He said you’re pretty sick/ You got some real bad habits/You’d better stop right quick… Don’t you know that I feel alright/Doin’ what I do/I ain’t gonna toe the line/Not till I turn blue…’*

“When he got sick, it turned out that what he was suffering from initially was the same thing that I had been,” says Slash, “which was this cardiomyopathy thing.” (The British Heart Foundation describes cardiomyopathy as “a disease of the heart muscle which affects its size, shape and structure”.) “It’s where your heart enlarges to the point where it has nowhere to go,” Slash explains. “Which was just from excess. Mine was from alcohol, and his was probably from speed or whatever.

“So I told him that I had been through that and I told him what to do. So we sort of went through that together and he actually did pretty well. A dab of this, a dab of that, but he was… he really changed his whole thing. But unfortunately, because of his age, all the things that had been dormant – with the amount of chemicals he was taking that shut all that shit from happening – all of a sudden surfaced. So he had a lot of kidney problems, and this problem and that problem. But he was a tough motherfucker. He kept working through it.”



A selection of posts from Slash’s Instagram.

And while Lemmy was having all these tests, says Slash, they never discovered that he had cancer. “Suddenly they go: you’ve got stage-four fucking cancer. And that late in the game it was really not even possible that he was going to survive it. It was really, really sad. To me, it was really losing somebody that was one of the greatest friends to have, and one of the greatest mentors, one of the greatest pillars of what rock’n’roll is to me. Just one really sweet motherfucker.

“There’s so many guys out there that think you have to, you know, wear your leather jacket and be the tough guy, be rude and a fucking slob and break shit, to be rock’n’roll. And Lemmy dispelled all that because he was a perfect fucking gentleman. Very considerate and polite to everybody around him, and yet he was as hard-core a fucking rock’n’roller as you’re ever going to find.”

The GN’R live set includes a few tributes to fallen friends. *Witchita Lineman* was a tip of the cap to Glen Campbell, while Soundgarden’s *Black Hole Sun* was added as a tribute to Chris Cornell. “It just became something that we don’t feel comfortable taking out of the set now,” Slash says. Their epic versions of *Layla* and *Wish You Were Here*, meanwhile, are in there just there because they like playing them. “There’s no message there,” he says. “It would be brilliant if I had a real reason, but there isn’t.”

People are always looking for meaning in what Guns N’ Roses do. One difference between GN’R of the 80s and 90s and today’s incarnation is the rise of social media. There were always rumours and scandal surrounding Guns N’ Roses, but now blog sites, social media and web forums have taken it to a new level.

“I’m on social media for marketing,” he says. “I mean, to promote gigs or to promote a record. You can talk to fans in a direct way that you couldn’t before.”

On Instagram, Slash’s feed is a continuously entertaining stream of garish smut and comical horror gifs. “My Instagram is just me jerking off.” (Is it actually him who posts? “Oh yeah,” he says with a grin. “Who else is going to do that shit?”) But he’s careful not to get sucked in; he doesn’t read any of the comments. “It’s too much,” he says. “I don’t want to be in that world where you’re just glued to what everybody else thinks and everybody else has to say about stuff.

“It’s hard, but myself and Duff, and a lot of guys I work with, none of us go down that path, and everybody else we know does. That’s where I get all my information from.

“The depths to which people go in social media… This is a phenomenon that has changed society completely. It’s deep, man. It’s a huge outlet for cowards, a fucking horrible way for people to distance themselves and to get further away from being able to communicate directly.

“It’s craziness, you know? Especially around a band like Guns. People tell me about [what people are saying] all the time, and I don’t even want to know about it, because it’s just too much. It’s overwhelming to me.”

Almost to illustrate the point, I mention the rumour that Slash’s new partner, Meegan Hodges, and her friend (and Axl’s ex-) Erin Everly, somehow helped get Guns N’ Roses back together.

“Oh God, no,” he says. “See, this is what we don’t want to get into. Because there’s so much bullshit talk out there. Erin had nothing to do with anything. Are you saying that Meegan and Erin got Guns N’ Roses back together?”

The rumour came from Mick Wall’s Guns N’ Roses book *The Last Of The Giants*. Mick wrote that Meegan somehow started the conversation.

“I haven’t to spoken to Mick in ages so he



PRESS

Slash Featuring Myles Kennedy And The Conspirators: (l to r) Brent Fitz, Slash. Myles Kennedy, Frank Sidoris, Todd Kerns.

doesn't know shit about anything," he says. "I'm sorry, Mick, but… Because no one [in Guns] is doing any press, no one wants to talk about anything personal. I've spent the last… since two thousand and fucking eight or whatever, avoiding Guns N' Roses questions, and my life has been a lot better because of it. So I am not about to get into that now, you know. But no, there's no truth to that."

Well, let's settle something else while we're here. For years, Guns N' Roses have been famous for appearing on stage late. Since you've rejoined, that problem seems to have been cured. What's the difference? How is this Guns N' Roses getting on stage on time?

"I don't know, man," he says. "Axl's been fucking amazing. He's been so professional that it blows my mind. I mean, he's always been professional, but obviously we had some issues with a lot of different things back in the day, but there was a lot of reasons that I wasn't really aware of… You know, there was such a divide-and-conquer thing going on around us by somebody who will remain mentionless, that we never could get to the core of that problem.

"When we went to do those Coachella gigs, in the back of my mind I was wondering how this was all going to go. But Axl's been fucking unreal. We've been playing for the last almost two years without a fucking hitch. No matter what's been thrown at him.

"But it's not because of anything that was said. I think there's a rumour going around that said that I would quit [if the band were late to the stage], or that there was some contract. None of that. There was nothing even mentioned about it."

The day before our interview, Tool frontman Maynard James Keenan's reputation was on trial on Twitter: a woman had anonymously claimed that the singer had raped her when she was seventeen. Has the #MeToo movement affected the music business?

"I just love the fact that I can go and play every day."



"It's a good question," he says. "I think the Me Too Movement is definitely justified – it's actually way overdue." But obviously, he says, it's complicated "in the context of being in a fucking rock and roll band. Fortunately, I'm taken, so I'm not dealing with all that, but I have to admit there were times I looked into my past and [as if he's talking to himself]: 'Well, that was consensual.'

"I never had a working relationship with anybody that I was, you know, trying to pressure into having sex or anything.

"The problem is that you could be falsely accused of something, but it almost doesn't matter – it's out there. Even if you were to get your name cleared, the damage is already done. And that's pretty sad.

"Hopefully the plus side of it is that women will be treated more respectfully, especially in positions where they're working under people who are tremendously powerful. Because I know how that one used to work: rich guys with a lot of money and a lot of power felt completely enabled to get whatever they wanted, you know? So hopefully this first wave will sort of even out and people will just start to treat each other a little bit more respectfully."

And he says he's not a good talker.

What's the worst thing about getting old?

"I don't have issue with it. I hate people who bitch about their age all the time, because it just makes them old, you know. It does."

Slash's eldest son is 15 and in a band – he's already going out gigging, and the band ➢

have recorded a three-song demo – and sometimes that makes him feel old.

"The teenage generation does not understand or relate – or want to be too close to – the older generation," he says. "There's a definite separation where it's them against us. It doesn't matter how cool you are, it doesn't matter what you've accomplished, it doesn't matter what wisdom you have to share, it doesn't matter where you've been, who you've met, you're still an old fucker and you don't understand."

He remembers his mum's boyfriend getting into the likes of Elvis Costello and Devo and saying that Led Zeppelin were dinosaurs and the new wave was the future. "He was twenty-three, and I thought: 'You're fucking old!'" he says, laughing. "I'll never forget that moment."

Years later Slash was the other end of it. He was hanging out with Ronnie Wood, staying at his house for a while, and Ronnie's daughter Leah was dating this kid who was into The Gorillaz. "And he was disgusted at the Rolling Stones and Guns N' Roses and all those old bands. He wouldn't look us in the eye. It was just a really uncomfortable scene at the house because of this kid. He had this genuine distaste, the way punk rockers did for ELO or Emerson, Lake And Palmer back in the day. So it is just what it is."

And what about when it comes to talking to his kids about drugs? How does he deal with that minefield?

He groans. "Well, I wrote that stupid book," he says. "When I was doing book tours for the book, I was asked more than a dozen times: 'What about when your kids read it?' I said: 'My kids are never going to read it. They're never gonna be interested to see what dad had to say about anything.'

"But my eldest turned around one day and decided to read that fucking book. So now, any time I have anything to say to him about school or work, or whatever it is that he doesn't necessarily want to hear, he can fucking fire back at me: 'Well, in your book you said…'

"But the drugs thing is a real issue. I had a lot of freedom growing up. My parents didn't know what I was up to for the most part, and they were so liberal; in the sixties and seventies, that whole mind-set was so different. But with kids now you really are way more aware of their surroundings and where they are and where they've been. You really keep a watchful eye over them, compared to when I was a kid.

"The drugs thing is what it is. You've just got to sort of steer them in the right direction, but you can't be the fucking gestapo about it because you have to always remember back to when you were a kid and people were telling you 'no', you went in the opposite direction. The other thing is that most of the drugs nowadays don't actually come from God's earth. How good a chemist do you think Brian the fucking drug dealer is? The guy didn't even graduate from junior high."



Happiness is Les Paul and a warm amp.



"Guitar playing is an extension of myself. It's a way to express myself that I can't do in any other sort of arena."

So there he is. Thirteen years clean and sober, back in his old band, touring the world on one of the biggest-selling tours of all time. He's in a new relationship, with four kids between them, and he's got the freedom to do his movie projects and make solo albums. It's worked out alright, hasn't it? Like his new album's title, he really is living the dream.

"Just to get one thing straight," he says, "the title, *Living The Dream*, has nothing to do with that. It was totally about this current state of global unrest. It was a tongue-in-cheek sort of joke. I'm not one to advocate politics, but I have to take little stabs at it where I can, as innocuously as possible.

"I mean, if you were to sit there and put any news channel on right now and spend a good two hours watching it, that's when the sarcastic 'living the dream' statement comes to mind. *World On Fire* was similar.

"But at the same time, for me personally, you know, in essence that's true. I know it sounds corny, or gratuitous, but I mean, yeah, I get that. There is some truth to that…"

Once when he was still at school, Slash fell asleep in class during a discussion about stereotypes. The teacher woke him, this scruffy kid in jeans and leather jacket, and started quizzing him in front of the whole class. Was he a musician? What instrument did he play? What kind of music? Slash/Saul told him. "Notice, class," the teacher said gleefully. "This young man is the *perfect example* of a stereotype." Slash got up, flipped the teacher's desk over and left the school forever.

Don't judge him too quickly.

For the stories behind the best albums and the bands that produced them...

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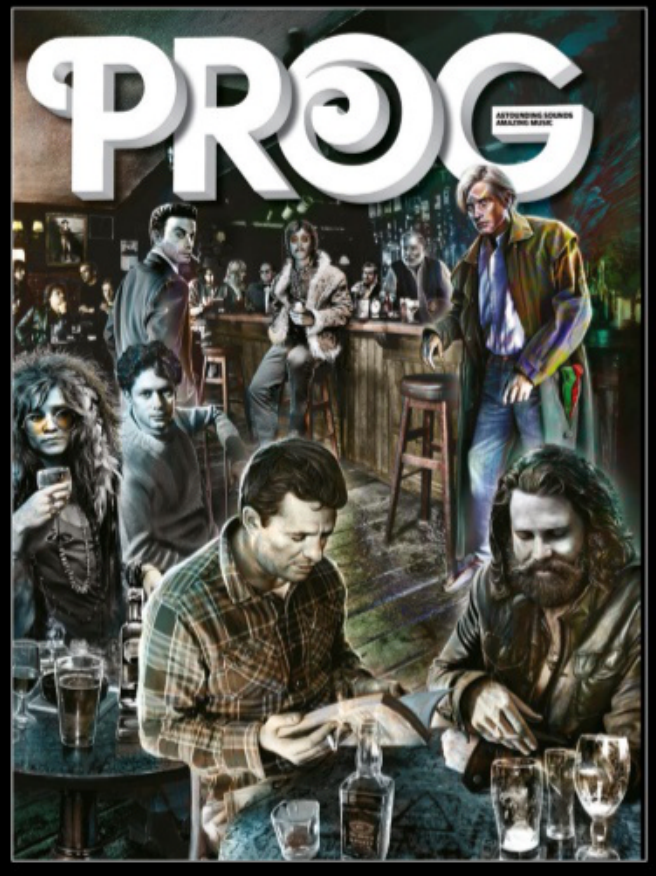
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STONES IN EXILE

Keith Richards and Charlie Watts on the fights, drugs and chaos that was the making of *Exile On Main St...*

Words: **Ian Fortnam**



GETTY

Keith Richards is completely out of control. While barrelling through North London on an intoxicated mercy dash to visit Anita Pallenberg (at Bowden House, Harrow, where she's undergoing heroin detox), Keith swerves to avoid a truck. As he hurtles across a mini roundabout straight into the wall of a neat Wembley abode, his jangled brain considers the potentially catastrophic consequences. Obviously, he's not going to die: mortality's something that only ever happens to the other guy. He is, however, carrying a chemical cargo to gladden the heart of any ambitious cop.

And so, within seconds of his massive Bentley screeching to a halt in the demolished remains of the garden wall, Keith is up, out and frantically disposing of his stash. It's at this point that he's surprised to hear a familiar voice: "Hello Keith, how are you doing?"

It's the Stones' keyboard player, Nicky Hopkins – the man whose garden he's just crashed into.

"My steaming Bentley's in the middle of their rose bushes," remembers Keith, 38 years down the line, "I'm tossing capsules, because I can hear the sirens already and suddenly there's Nicky saying: 'Come inside and have a cup of tea while we wait for the policemen.' I knew then that God was on my side."

And not for the first – or indeed last – time. Keith's crashed his car on so many occasions that even he can't be sure just how many. "You cover a lot of miles; you're bound to bump into things," he shrugs.

"Anyway, we got out of that one: my farewell to England basically, it was only about a week later that we moved out to Nellcôte."

And into exile.

→

> **Keith Richards**
>
> ***My steaming Bentley's in the middle of their rose bushes and I'm tossing capsules cos I can hear the sirens coming.***

To say that his reputation precedes him is an immeasurable understatement. The nascent art of rock journalism found its vocabulary while grasping for superlatives to describe the man we're about to meet. As rock'n'roll peaked as both a commercial and countercultural phenomenon in the late 60s and early 70s, Keith Richards was the yardstick by which all others were measured.

He was the human riff, the diseased crow-alike that, if he moved next door to you your lawn wouldn't wait around to die, it'd move to a better neighbourhood. Gypsy, pirate, Glimmer Twin, fugitive, Jack Daniel's-driven insect man from the Planet Cool. One week he was the world's most elegantly wasted human being, the next its most stylishly dissipated. More often than not he was simply 'Rock'n'roll Himself'.

But that was then, and while we're ostensibly here in New York City's exquisite Mercer Hotel to revisit those halcyon days when the Rolling Stones, officially the greatest rock'n'roll band in the world, were recording their ultimate masterpiece *Exile On Main St*, we're also here to check out Keith as he is now. We're all aware of the reputation, so what of the reality? With his eighth decade looming, how is 'Rock'n'roll Himself' holding up?

Keith is a caricature made up of certain familiar elements: the rolling gait is surprisingly unmistakable, as are the brown eyes that flash from humorous warmth to soul-freezing danger in a fraction less than a wink. Then there's the single most instantly recognisable suite of jewellery in rock: the handcuff bracelet (a reminder to the one-time jailbird that freedom cannot always be taken for granted) and skull ring (the great leveller; as Keith himself puts it: "Skulls remind us that underneath it all, we are all the same").

Keith veritably bounces into the room. He's carrying an opaque paper cup that punctuates his every pronouncement with emphatic clunks of ice. It gives every indication of being a soft drink, but it's clearly not. It's an incongruous imposter with a bendy straw. It doesn't fit. The absence of a characteristic whisky tumbler gives the impression that Keith would rather not advertise the fact that he's drinking – would rather give the impression that he's 'just saying no'.

There's nothing surreptitious about his continuing allegiance to the fags though. Yet even after all these years his ashtray skills remain rudimentary. As his arms flail emphatically the fallout's inescapable. As we settle down to spool back through time to 1971, the official Rolling Stones logo Zippo lighter sparks up yet another gasper and seemingly refuelled by an invigorating lungful of fresh nicotine, Keith's away.

"It was called *Exile* because we were basically booted out of England. It was either that or sweep the streets."

It might sound dramatic, but the Rolling Stones were in dire financial straits at the dawn of the 1970s. Their erstwhile manager, Allen Klein, with whom they were currently in ongoing litigation, had misled them into believing that they were far wealthier than they actually were. Consequently, they owed a fortune to the Inland Revenue and, with top rate taxation under the Labour Government running at 93 per cent, were unable to clear enough earnings to pay their back taxes. Keith, then being unsuccessfully busted on a regular basis, took this high rate of tax personally. It seemed like yet another way for the establishment to persecute the Stones.



GETTY

Mick and Keith were being hounded by the law during the early 70s.

"They couldn't get you in jail, so they put the economics on you, the old double whammy," he says. "So the feeling within the band was we've got to show them we're made of sterner stuff and prove you couldn't break the Stones just by kicking them out of England. We all looked at each other and said, 'Okay, we'll do it on the lam'."

So the band and their families reluctantly decamped for the South of France. "Well, if it's going to be France, it's got to be the Riviera, pal."

Somerset Maugham liked to call it 'a sunny place for shady people' – it just seemed to fit. Keith moved into Villa Nellcôte, Villefranche-sur-mer. During the war Nellcôte had served as the Gestapo headquarters (there were still swastikas embossed onto the air vents) and as no other suitable recording space could be found in the area, the band chose to record in its basement using the mobile recording studio that they'd previously rented out to the BBC to record sporting events.

"Finally this truck came in handy: a great control room on wheels, but there was a lot of slap-dash improvising because we'd never recorded outside of a studio before and this basement was… well, I can smell it now: every time I look at that cover, I can pick up a certain damp, oily, dusty flavour."

Nellcôte's basement was split into various compartments and the mobile truck was parked outside. Communication between the players, producer Jimmy Miller and engineer Andy Johns was therefore, at best, haphazard. But as the summer of '71 unfolded, the Rolling Stones' extended sessions, sometimes all-day, sometimes all-night, gradually bore fruit.

"A lot of the songs started off with an idea. Mick's playing harp, you join in and before you knew it you had a track in the making and an idea working. It might not be the finished track; you're not trying to force it. As my father used to say: 'Keith, there's a difference between scratching your ass and tearing it to bits'."

Mick meanwhile was often absent from the sessions, attending to his pregnant wife Bianca who he'd married a month previously ("It didn't last long," says Keith. "I knew it wouldn't").

Drugs-wise, when the Stones first arrived at Nellcôte, "Nobody was particularly dirty," says Richards, "but I was probably the dirtiest of the lot… but what else is new?"

Things got rapidly out of hand on the arrival of playboy, dealer and occasional racing driver, Tommy Weber and his 'wedding present to Mick



and Bianca': a kilo of cocaine he'd smuggled through French customs taped under the T-shirts of his two young sons, Jake and Charley. The gift never made it to the happy couple, not surprising considering that it was Anita who'd instigated the plan whilst 'detoxing' back in London with Weber's wife, Puss (who, incidentally, would be dead within the month).

Events escalated yet further when Keith and Tommy Weber decided to spend the day go-karting, and with Keith at the controls of a wheeled vehicle, the inevitable happened: "Oh yeah, I stripped off most of the left side of my back," he says. "I hooked his back wheel and turned mine over. That was an interesting sensation."

It's been suggested that in order to deal with the pain from this back injury, Keith resorted to opiates and the spectre of heroin descended on Nellcôte. "No, that's all bullshit. People like to second guess my drug habits and they don't know what the fuck they're talking about."

Keith's mood changes immediately and he flashes a glance that can freeze the blood in your veins. Ian McLagan (former Faces keyboard player and occasional Stones sideman) once told me that "Keith always had a .38 with him." And how, after his former confidant Spanish Tony Sanchez betrayed his trust by writing his fix 'n' tell *Up And Down With The Rolling Stones* memoir, Keith didn't threaten him verbally, he simply showed him a revolver. A simple reminder: 'what goes around comes around'.

Up until now, Keith has been conviviality personified; a kindly old uncle in a rakishly-tilted, mustard-coloured fedora hat. With his hair newly trimmed of the piratical tchotchkes he'd previously accumulated and finally allowed to fade to a distinguished grey, he gives every indication of being a man who's mellowed and renounced his position as rock's Don Corleone.

But that look, where his right, Kohl-smudged eye widens slightly, his left narrows and his whole body pivots forward shoulder first, is the physical equivalent of producing a concealed weapon.

Say hello to His Satanic Majesty. Now here's the Keef of legend…

"I'm off and I'm on," he leers. "It's no big deal to me. Cold turkey? I spit on it. Oh, agony… It's no fun, but… At that time I was no more out of it than anybody else. Charlie was hitting the Cognac like a motherfucker, Mick loves his wine – but that didn't even occur to us. People did what they wanted to do. It was like, 'Are you going to go into that room and come up with something? If you do that I don't give a damn if you're snorting God.' What fuel you're running on is immaterial, as long as you come up with the goods."

With an emphatic clank of ice Keith settles back, his point made.

> **Keith Richards**
>
> ***People second guess my drug habits. I'm off and I'm on. It's no big deal to me. Cold turkey? I spit on it.***

While Villa Nellcôte had been temporarily occupied by the Rolling Stones and an extended entourage of guests, n'er-do-wells and hangers-on for recording and partying purposes, it was also Keith Richards' home.

Consequently, Keith would occasionally disappear upstairs for hours on end, sometimes at crucial points during recording. Not to conjure up Lucifer over exotic narcotics with Anita (who, it should be noted, the majority of the party were genuinely terrified of), but to set about the task of putting his 18-month old son, Marlon, to bed in spite of the ongoing tumult below.

"Kids can get used to anything," he shrugs.

But it's a pretty strange arrangement…

"Go tell it to the gypsies," he says. "What's so weird about it? What am I going to do? Send him to a prep school in a silly little uniform? This is what dad does. He was my navigator. At five years old he could read a map – to tell me when we're getting near the border, because I've got to dump the shit, *you know what I mean?*"

Ah yes: 'You know what I mean?' Keith's colourful discourse is liberally peppered with these five words, though they've long since evolved into a single almost unintelligible ejaculation – not unlike a lorry changing gear – that punctuates his every anecdote. Like the one about Nellcôte's French chef…

"Big, fat Jacques, yeah, he was a dealer too. Every Thursday he went to Marseille to pick up… [he checks himself and laughs: a fruity death rattle]. ➔

He also blew up the kitchen… some of this is cartoon shit, *you know what I mean?*"

Or Keith's only – as he remembers it – run-in with Monsieur Plod Le Gendarme: "I was with Spanish Tony in Beaulieu, the next town along from Villefranche, and we got pulled over by the harbour master and his bosun. Anyway, they took us into this office. They were big guys and Spanish Tony smells trouble and says: 'Get ready. They're gonna do us.' I said: 'Right, I'll watch your back' and Tony went into action. Talk about Bruce Lee, *you know what I mean?* Tony leapt onto this table, picked up a chair, and put the both of them down. Within two seconds these guys are groaning and going 'Zut alors!' and all this shit. 'Mon Dieu!' 'Sacre bleu,' and other curses in French. I stood on one while Tony finished off the other and we left."

End of story? Not quite…

"A week later there's a knock at the door and there's the Gendarme with the lovely kepi, all smiles, with some papers. They'd filed charges of course, and French courts are weird, you go through this charging structure and it's a totally different system, you're guilty until you're proven innocent over there, which is an interesting twist, *you know what I mean?* Not that it makes much difference in the long run, I've found. Anyway, it all drifted away, but that was my only brush with the constabulary in France."

Do such things usually drift away so easily? Previous reports of the incident suggest that a few signed Stones albums helped to smooth things out for Keith and that Spanish Tony, as the man ultimately wielding the chair, was fined $12,000 in his absence (which Keith paid). Bill Wyman remembers Keith having another brush with the Gendarmerie after his car was in collision (what are the chances?) with some Italian tourists, but hey, who's counting?

Anyway, Keith's side-tracking us: back to *Exile*…

Part of the magic of *Exile On Main St* stemmed from the working relationship that had developed between Keith and fellow guitarist Mick Taylor.

"Brian [Jones] and I would swap roles. There was no defined line between lead and rhythm guitar, but with Mick's style I had to readjust the shape of the band and it was beautifully lyrical. He was a lovely lead player. I loved playing with Mick Taylor. I was probably more shocked than anybody else when he decided he was going to leave. 'What, are you crazy? What d'you think you're gonna do, pal?' And sure enough: nothing."

He clearly thought that he had to match your lifestyle which, obviously, not everybody can.

"I don't know if he thought he had to. He was just sort of drawn into it. It's like a vortex… *ah…hur… hur… hur…* [the most evil laugh of the day so far: like an extended, gasping death rattle that never quite touches the sides]. Don't get too close to the whirlpool, *you know what I mean?*"

One of the most significant visitors to Nellcôte during the summer was Gram Parsons: a kindred spirit of Keith's who harboured hopes that the pair would record a country album together.

"There was an idea – but nothing in concrete," says Keith. "We'd all become very good friends, especially myself and Gram, and I think Mick [Jagger] looked a little bit askance at it. Mick doesn't like me to have anybody around me… And at that time, Mick's regular response to: 'Hey Mick, this is a mate of mine,' was [adopts sniffy, unimpressed Mick voice] 'Hmm, who are *you?*' [a laugh that starts out as emphysema and ends up as a knackered motorbike clearing its carburettor]. You could say either he was being protective or that there was a streak of jealousy there, *you know what I mean?* I'd say yes to both."

And at this point it seemed that the unwritten law was that no members of the Rolling Stones made solo albums. "Yeah, that would have been an absolute no-no at that time. That would mean that you weren't happy with the band. That came later, Mick started that."

Would you have ever made a solo album if that hadn't happened?

"No, of course not… I'm glad I did though, I'm glad Mick forced me to do that because I prefer *Talk Is Cheap* and *Main Offender* to *She's The Boss* [a satisfied chuckle as the ice clanks]. Mick thought it would be easy and found that it wasn't. He didn't quite cotton onto the fact that, yeah he's a good singer, but the important thing was… the Stones. Mick, given his enormous ego, which every lead singer needs, thought: 'Ah, they're just sidemen'… Which led to World War III."

Mick's always seemed to have something of an ambivalent attitude to *Exile*… "Well, that's Mick. Mick's never gonna tell you the truth [long pause, pops the old right eyeball for emphasis]. Who are you to get the truth out of him? To the point where he doesn't know what the truth is, or even if there is such a thing as the truth. There are a whole lot of conflicting emotions and ideas there… You're just the damn singer, man. But what do you expect of guys that have been together for 40-odd years? The whole thing works off of certain abrasions… Pointless fighting is useless, but if certain things come out of conflict, it's worth the fight."

It's the grit that makes the pearl.

"Exactly… and God help the oyster."

"You've seen Keith?" Charlie Watts, the world's most effortlessly dapper human being, sets aside his characteristically laconic, ever-so-slightly detached demeanour for a second and – fully engaged, with eyebrows raised – enquires: "How was he? Well?"

He smiles broadly at the news that Keith is, if anything, very well. In fact, the first adjective that springs to mind to describe his state of health is 'bouncy'. And, with a degree of understatement that surely only he could muster, chuckles: "He's funny, he is."

Charlie Watts, immaculately attired in a gangster-cut, navy blue, broadly pin-striped suit, Cambridge blue, round-collared shirt and Oxford blue, Windsor-knotted tie (complete with pin, naturally), cuts quite a dash.

Keith clearly thinks of Charlie what everybody else thinks of Keith – that he's the heart and soul of the Rolling Stones personified: "I can never say enough about Charlie Watts," Keith had told me a couple of weeks before. "It was the luckiest day for this band and myself personally the day that we got to play with such a drummer. With Charlie I never have to worry where the backbeat is. I mean, hey – if you're talking about rock'n'roll, the drummer is the hidden hero basically."

So what was it that Charlie saw in the fledgling Stones that finally coerced him to join? "A job," says Charlie, somewhat unromantically. There's no old flannel here, not a single scrap of diplomacy, his honesty is disarming, his openness total.

"I was in about three bands when I joined them. It was like whoever came up with somewhere to play, you'd go and play."

Charlie was distinctly unimpressed with the band's decision to move to France in '71. "I was told I had to move and I said 'No, I'm not'."

My suggestion that, as a non-songwriter his need to escape British taxation was probably not as great as that of Mick and Keith (who, then as now, commanded the lion's share of the Stones' earnings) is met with a withering: "It had nothing to do with song-writing, I don't know where you've dreamed that up."

Anyway, once it was explained to Charlie that financially a move to France was the only way forward for the band, he eventually capitulated. Did it ever occur to him that life outside of the Stones – who were not only being forced out of the country by taxation but were also being constantly hounded by the forces of law and order – might have been simpler?

"It never crossed my mind. Keith was really getting the hassle, but then Keith was a stronger drug man than anyone. I wasn't into drugs… I mean, I smoked, but everyone I admired was either a junkie or an alcoholic. It's not something to be proud of, but it's true. That world seemed very glamorous to me. It was the world that I wanted to be in from the age of 13. I didn't want to be a junkie personally, but that's the world I loved. I used to go to the all-nighters at The

Charlie Watts

Everyone I admired was either a junkie or an alcoholic. It's not something to be proud of, but it's true...



Keith's basement room at Nellcôte became a makeshift studio during the sessions for *Exile*

GETTY

Flamingo Club [in London's Wardour Street]. And, though I didn't know it at the time, half the people in there were junkies. That's where I first met Ginger Baker… So Keith suddenly taking a liking to it wasn't a shock to me at all."

Charlie has a vinyl copy of *Exile On Main St* open on the table in front of him, so it should be relatively easy to steer him back to the subject at hand. But as our tête-à-tête takes place in Dean Street, Soho, a series of stone's throws from The Flamingo, Old Compton Street's 2i's Coffee Bar and Archer Street (where as a jobbing jazz drummer pre-Stones Charlie would often tout for work), he's easily side-tracked.

Keith had told me that, with Charlie and Bill Wyman living an hour's drive away from Nellcôte, a lot of *Exile*'s recordings were made in their absence – with (in the case of *Happy*) producer Jimmy Miller on drums and Keith doubling on bass. I put this snippet of insider information to Charlie.

"We played together on *Happy*," he says.

Oh. According to Charlie, rather than being an hour's drive away, he was actually living at Nellcôte at the time.

Keith Richards? Memory lapse? *With his reputation?*

Whatever, Charlie's extremely generous in his praise of Jimmy Miller both as a producer and as a drummer: "I loved Jimmy Miller," he says. "I thought he was the best producer we ever had. Jimmy was a hands-on type of guy. When we played he could never keep still, so he'd always be banging something; a drum or a cow bell [that's him at the start of *Honky Tonk Women*]. But Jimmy was lucky; he had a good band to record back then."

Ah yes, now we're getting somewhere.

So how was working with Bill Plummer?

"Who's Bill Plummer?"

He played stand-up bass on *Rip This Joint* and *All Down The Line*.

"What, on here?" Charlie asks, gesturing toward *Exile*'s cover…

Anyway, moving on. Were you surprised when Mick announced that he was to marry Bianca?

"No."

Really? He'd always seemed to be very non-conformist up to that point and then suddenly, out of the blue, he's the marrying kind?

"Mick is a very middle-class boy from Dartford," says Charlie. "Keith is, and was always, much more outside of everything than Mick. Mick was never what he wrote: he was never Satanic Majesties and he was never a Street Fighting Man, but he wrote bloody good songs that created this persona. So for him to marry… It's what people did. I don't think it's ever suited him though. He's never really liked it… But he seems very, very happy at the moment."

While Charlie doesn't mind talking about his summer in *Exile* he'd much rather wax lyrical about the drummers he admired in his youth (Phil Seaman, Earl Phillips), but if he absolutely has to talk about the Stones, this is the period – and indeed line-up – that he remembers with the greatest fondness.

"I don't think Keith is as enamoured of Mick Taylor as I was. It was like having Carlos Santana in the band. For me it was wonderful. Mick would go off, and you'd go off with him. It was like the jazz thing, really. He gave terrific beauty to the



GETTY

Charlie was unimpressed with the decision to ship out to France.

tracks he played on: *Loving Cup* was a good one. For me, that's always been our best and most productive period: that *Exile* era."

"What came out of us on *Exile*," says Keith Richards in a blur of waving arms, jewellery and fag ash, "was what we'd learnt playing America for eight years. We were working an awful lot in America, and learning first hand what we'd only learnt before from records. Just soaking up American culture and realising that, you know… they love an Englishman, if you play it right."

Keith's been playing it right for four decades now: the English rapscallion; exiled from his homeland; trotting the globe; the quintessential lovable rogue; Terry-Thomas with a skull ring.

"Yeah right… 'You bounder!' 'Blast!' all of that." Keith grins, adopting the requisite accent.

It's not much of a stretch, to be honest. Beneath the superficial damage wrought by miscellaneous recreational toxins, Keith's customary enunciation is more that of a charm-laden, public school rotter than a Dartford-encumbered, art school drop-out.

The Keef of legend – the Keef that sells magazines – was partly created by a pre-punk 1970s music press in search of an anti-establishment figurehead. While Keith was occasionally vilified by the red-top tabloids, rock journalism's finest were regularly reinventing him as 'the world's most elegantly wasted human being' while crediting him with a degree of infamy and indulgence that could only ever have accorded him iconic status. He was the Patron Saint of Rock Misbehaviour; the Minister for Unhealth. He sold an awful lot of newspapers.

"They fed us the material and we played up to it, basically," he admits. "You wanna meet Keith Richards? Which Keith Richards would you like to meet?"

Whenever Keith makes a joke it's reported as fact because it makes for good copy and compounds the myth of Keef: Marlon's first words being 'room service', the Swiss blood changes, the snorting of the ashes [Keith greets each of these self-seeded myths with a fruity snigger].

"I enjoy finding out what other people find interesting because from the inside out it's all very amusing."

You're not a serial litigant: the likes of Spanish Tony publish their allegations without fear of a court case. Do you enjoy the notoriety that's been thrust upon you?

"As long as they talk about us who gives a shit? *You know what I me-ahh-ahh-nnng-ah…*" [He drifts off into a bit of a boggle-eyed yodel – ice clanks, ash flies, arms wave – it's classic Keith.]

With Keith long considered the essence of rock'n'roll distilled, there's more than a frisson of déjà vu when you finally meet the real thing: I've never met a band that didn't include at least one counterfeit Keef. But what of the genuine article; who is the real Keith Richards?

"Hey, I'm a family man," Keith soberly asserts, "And I have been since I was 26. I know people always like to make you all very cut and dried and simple: 'Oh, he's a fucking maniac'. *Yanarrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr* [an outboard motor-styled 'you- know-what-I-mean']? And I can be, when I have the time for it, but I'm also growing up. I pace myself. I love my families. I have several – extended. And they all love each other. I'm extremely blessed with my ladies who all, thank God, get along [raps the table three times]. Even I couldn't be that kind of Keith Richards all the time.

"When I'm at home I do as I'm told: 'Yes, darling, no, darling', like any other guy. I avoid conflict as much as possible, especially domestically, but at the same time I know there's a streak in me that given the opportunity will show you what Keith Richards can do [boggles the eye, lurches piratically, clanks, pouts and… relaxes]. But I feel no compulsion.

"I'm not a Keith Moon, who felt he had to top himself every time until he finally did. I'm not a maniac. But when I want a good time, I have one. And I take people with me, because then I find out what I actually did. There are a lot of things that I've done that even I wouldn't believe, except I've got 59 witnesses, and you can't argue with numbers."

Do you still feel, if indeed you ever have, indestructible?

"Not quite, but almost. I've never felt any compulsion to prove it. I never went for this image. An image is like a ball and chain – it's always there and you're dragging it behind you, and people, including myself, are more complicated than that. I can be a real pussycat, *hurhurhurhurhur*. I've never felt driven to live up to this image that they've made of me. That's a mug's game, a sucker shot. But I don't mind using it occasionally… especially if I want to get a reservation."

As we wind down our summit, I reveal to Keith that my Christmas celebrations always commence on his birthday, December the 18th: Keithmas Day.

"It's a real good date," says Sagittarius Keith, who was 66 last Keithmas. "You can't go wrong: half man, half horse and a licence to shit in the street."

I always open my Christmas presents to the sound of Ronnie Spector singing *Frosty The Snowman*, what about you? I venture, in the hope that Keith will reveal a little more of himself.

"I've done several things with Ronnie, very few of them to do with *Frosty The Snowman*." He leers suggestively before quickly throttling back from boggle-eyed lechery to silk-cravat suavity. "She's a very good friend of mine, lives not very far way from me up in Connecticut. A great girl, and in her day… shit… I've been blessed."

And with that Rock'n'roll Himself tips his fedora, clanks his ice, sparks his Zippo and is gone.

He's the best Keith Richards I've ever met, and there's been a few.

Keith Richards

I'm a family man. I can be a maniac but I'm also growing up. Even I couldn't be that Keith Richards all the time.

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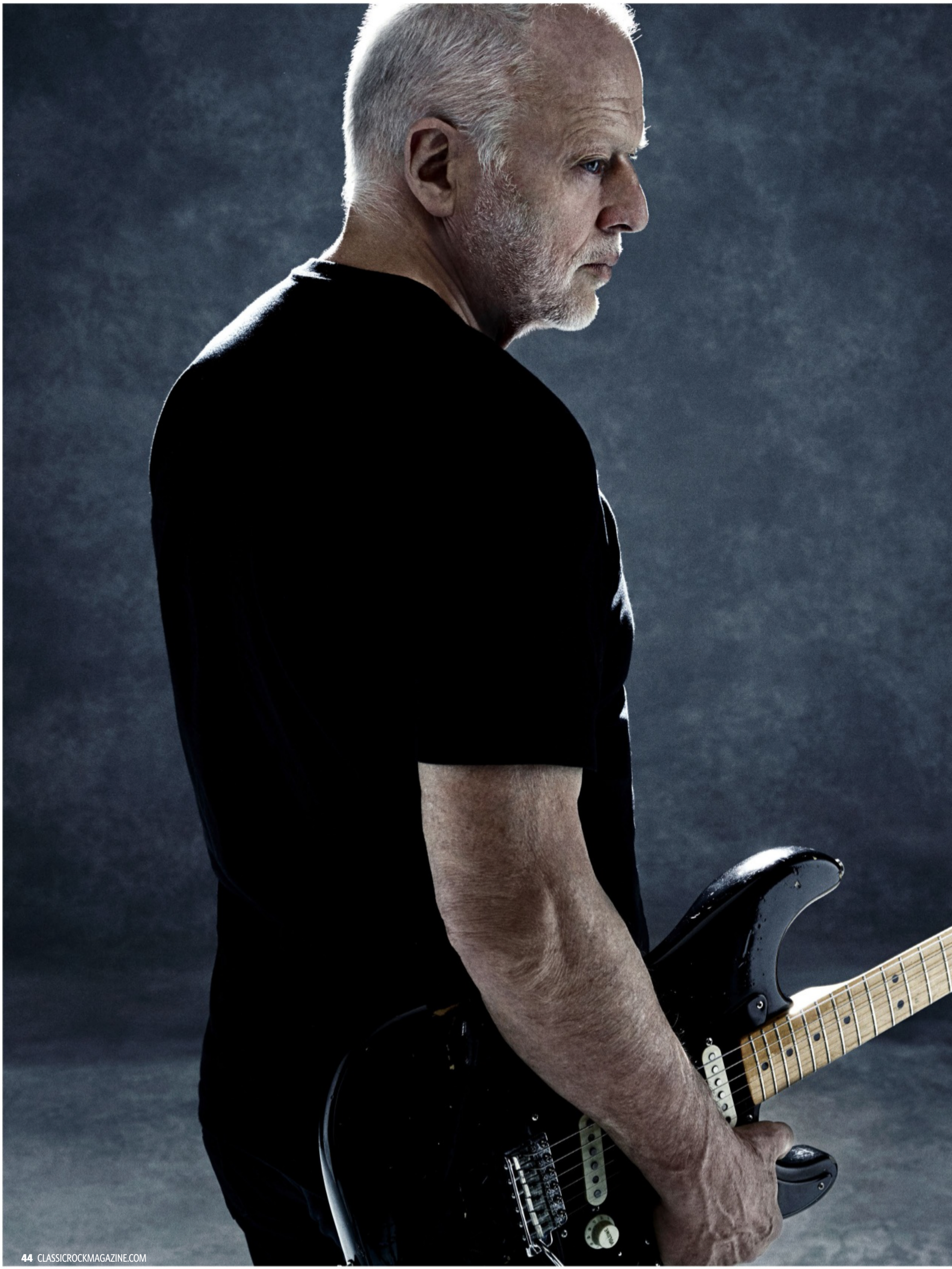
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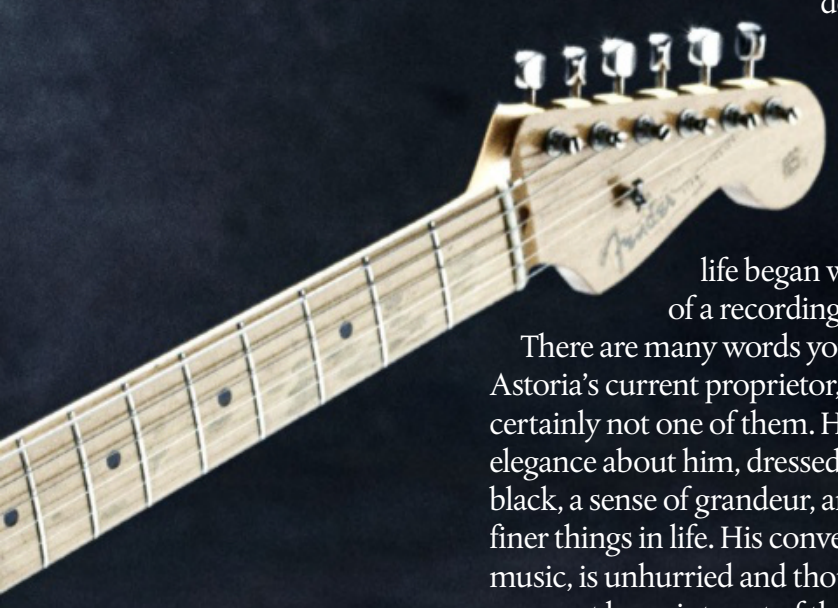
I THOUGHT I'D SOMETHING MORE TO SAY

In 2014, **David Gilmour** returned with a brand new solo album, *Rattle That Lock*, and a fresh new perspective on Pink Floyd. Here, he looks back on a stellar 50-year career...

Words: **Mark Ellen**

Tucked away on the river bank in Hampton is an exotic houseboat called The Astoria. Charlie Chaplin spent a night on board in 1921, and remembered it as "rather an elaborate affair with mahogany panelling and state rooms for the guests. It was lit up with festoons of coloured lights."

In 1986 its upper-crust owner was approached by three stubbley individuals wearing T-shirts and was surprised – though delighted – when "one of these yobbos offered to buy it for cash". At which point the next stage of this sumptuous craft's life began with the installation of a recording studio.



There are many words you might attach to The Astoria's current proprietor, but 'yobbo' is most certainly not one of them. He has a poise and elegance about him, dressed from head to toe in black, a sense of grandeur, an appreciation of the finer things in life. His conversation, much like his music, is unhurried and thoughtful. At one moment he points out of the window – "Look at that, *that's* a smart bit of kit!" – as the gleaming, gold-painted Royal Barge glides past on its way to Hampton Court.

Last November came the release of Pink Floyd's much-anticipated *The Endless River*. A series of soundscapes edited from out-takes from their 1994 album *The Division Bell*, it was, we were told, the final outing from Floyd.

David Gilmour has since finished *Rattle That Lock*, his sublime and hugely varied fourth solo album, and ushers me into The Astoria's tiny front studio to discuss it – along with the legacy of what he now rather touchingly calls "our pop group".

I recognise this room. Isn't there a picture of you, Nick Mason and Rick Wright recording here in the booklet for *The Endless River*?
There is. We made pretty much the whole of *A Momentary Lapse Of Reason* and *The Division Bell* in this room. Which works, as you often stick an amp in another room anyway to get the separation from the drums.

The view of the river from the windows – in fact having windows at all – seems to fit with the ambient sound of your music.
Well I've never been keen on the traditional cellar that most studios are – no windows, no natural light, those days when you worked all hours and didn't want the dawn light creeping in and disturbing your reveries. But [adopts creaky voice] in our *old age* we now like to stick to office hours.

There are so many different types of music on your new album, *Rattle That Lock*: a lot of the Pink Floyd signature sound, but also a waltz, some funk and two jazz songs. Is it liberating to be able to have that kind of variety?
I don't know if it's liberating. I honestly don't know how it happens, actually. Whatever arrives, we just go with it. I don't have a plan. We work on it until it starts making sense, and then we cut a few things out and concentrate on what we've got going for us.

And you listen to things like *The Girl In The Yellow Dress*, that sort of jazzy one, and you think: "Does this fit?" And then you think: "Who gives a fuck? It's great. It'll fit!" I think I'm quite lucky that – like 'em or not – my voice and my guitar playing are distinctive. They're me and recognisably so, and that ties everything together.

How do you arrive at a song like *The Girl In The Yellow Dress*? Do you just wake up in the morning with a head full of forties jazz?
These things just arrive and I don't know where

KEVIN WESTENBERG


Gilmour with his wife and lyricist Polly Samson.


Shine on: Gilmour as guitar hero.

or how. A couple of chords come and you start going down an alley – [beckons] "Come this way!" – and you follow them. Robert Wyatt plays the cornet on that one, recorded quite a few years ago.

The waltz track, *Faces Of Stone*, has echoes of Leonard Cohen, and it's about the passage of time into old age. Is it fact, or fiction?

That one is about my mother's last years and the nine-month crossover between my last child being born and my mother dying – they were on the planet together for nine months. She had a sort of dementia, and the waltz thing lends itself to a bit of madness, a clarinet waffling away, an accordion and a calliope [pump organ] to create a bit of atmosphere – that *boom-tang-tang boom-tang-tang* sound. I had a very difficult relationship with my mother, and it's just nice to… [trails off].

In what way difficult?

Well… it's difficult to explain. There's stuff in there about her getting a place at RADA [the Royal Academy Of Dramatic Art] when she was a teenager and her family not being able to afford to take it up. She was from Blackpool. Moving to London and going to RADA was her dream. So she was disappointed and unfulfilled and she… lived that fulfillment through me a bit, which created all manner of tensions. But [shrugs] life is complicated.

It's based on a particular day when we were walking in a park in London and she was having hallucinations and seeing things that weren't there, and I was thinking: "Hmmm, interesting," the beginnings of dementia. And later that day she did actually hold my new-born daughter in her arms. So you take a little idea like that and try and paint a picture.

A lot of lyrics for your music are written by your wife, Polly Samson. How does that work?

What happens is I play her a musical track – or rather, a number of tracks – and if she expresses an interest in one I'll put it on her iPod and she'll listen to it when she's walking. It has to be something she *likes*, she has to be inspired. There are two songs written by me on this album, and even those had some assistance from my talented wife. She tried very hard for years and years to see inside my mind, and look out from my eyes and write from that standpoint, and now she's realised that's not really necessary; if they come out of her but I sing them with enough conviction, they're still going to sound like they're connected to me.

The title track, *Rattle That Lock*, is built around the French travel-announcement jingle, like an echo of Kraftwerk's hymns to the joys of European trains. Where did the idea for that come from?

When you go to St Pancras station or airports, the jingles they play before announcements are usually really tacky and boring. But I heard this SNCF jingle in France, and it really bounces out. It's got a little melody, it's got a rhythm, it's got a little syncopation, and it makes you want to jig a little bit. So I recorded it on my iPhone – this was in Aix-en-Provence – and brought it home and started working on it.

The whole record has a shape to it – we tried to make it in the arc of a single day ending with the crackling camp-fire. The day starts at five a.m. – which is the title of the first track – and there's some birdsong and dog barking, and Canada geese, which I recorded at about five in the morning out of my window. And then it goes on through the things you do or the thoughts you might have. The kind of day when you could have gone to a nightclub and seen this jazz band, and you sit by a fire and cook some sausages while an owl hoots in the background before you crawl off, half-pissed, to your cot. It's not very literal or specific or linear, it's trying to make it have a flow.

> **"I'm thrilled that each new generation seems to latch on to Floyd, and we get a fresh bunch of followers."**

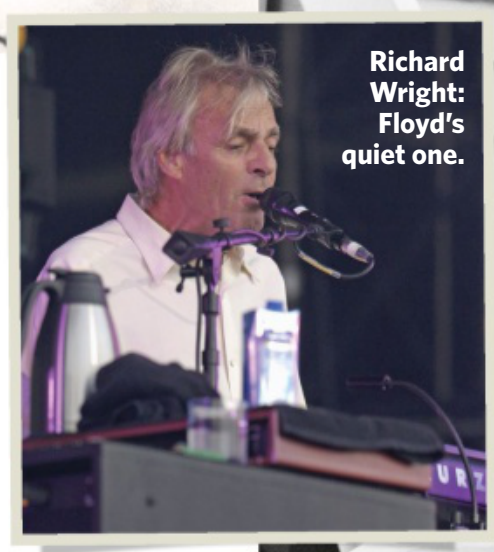
Was it hard writing the song about Rick Wright [*A Boat Lies Waiting*]? At some stage the two of you must have been very close.

Rick and I go back… I mean, I was twenty-one when I joined our pop group. We didn't spend our time being close, but we had a musical telepathy and, at its best, we knew *exactly* what the other was going to do and could bounce off each other. Rick had his moments of being rather down about

MAIN: GETTY; INSET: KEVIN WESTENBERG


Starmen: Gilmour and Paul McCartney.


Learning to fly: Floyd in the 70s, on the way to being global superstars.


Richard Wright: Floyd's quiet one.

various things, and towards what was the end of his life – none of us knew that at the time – he came on board to do my *On An Island* tour and had the time of his life.

In what way?

We'd get to a certain moment in the set where I was introducing people, and Polly would shout [French accent] "Reee-shard! Reee-shard!" And then people in the audience who'd been there the night before noticed and started shouting it too, and it grew and grew every show, and he visibly puffed up with joy! I really think that helped boost his confidence and he started playing more effusively. We just felt he should be fêted a little, as he was so retiring and tended to be in the background, and I'm up the front there and I'm, you know, *big and strong*. So he had the time of his life and really loved it and was playing brilliantly. And I'd have loved to have had him around to help make *this* record [he died in 2008].

I interviewed Nick Mason and Roger Waters recently and asked about the likelihood of Floyd reunion. Nick said: "I love touring and I live in hope". Roger said it was "out of the question", as life at his age [71] "should be devoted to doing the things you want to do". Pink Floyd so far is three-act play. Will there ever be a fourth act?

No. I'm done with it. I've had a life in Pink Floyd for – what's twenty-one from sixty-nine? Quite a lot of years. I've had forty-eight years in Pink Floyd – quite a few of those years at the beginning, with Roger – and those years in what is now considered to be our heyday were ninety-five per cent musically fulfilling and joyous and full of fun and laughter. And I certainly don't want to let the other five per cent colour my view of what was a long and fantastic time together. But it *has* run its course, we *are* done, and it would be fakery to go back and do it again.

And to do it without Rick would just be wrong. I'm all for Roger doing whatever he wants to do and enjoying himself and getting the joy he must have had out of those *Wall* shows. I'm at peace with all of these things. But I *absolutely* don't want to go back. I don't want to go and play stadiums… under the [group] banner. I'm free to do exactly what I want to do and how I want to do it. I don't know if it's as good as Pink Floyd or worse than Pink Floyd or better than Pink Floyd. I don't give a shit. It's what I want to do and it's what I *will* do.

"I don't need or want it any more. It's fine. No regrets. Nothing – almost nothing – but great memories."

Give me an example of a Pink Floyd moment you re-run in your head over and over again because it was magnificent.

Oh, the great moments are legion. I have thousands of snapshot memories that are great. *Meddle* was a great moment for us. It showed the way forth and it was successful. But then so was *A Saucerful Of Secrets*. *Dark Side Of The Moon* obviously was *the* breakthrough moment and was terrific, and we suddenly moved up from the medium-time to the mega-time.

How about a moment when you curl up under the duvet, thinking about the horror of it all?

I don't have any that embarrassing, though if I watch *Live At Pompeii*, I cringe.

It's brilliant. And at least two of you don't have a shirt on!

Exactly! It's just… it's just personal. Mostly I can see how great it all is, and it's all sitting there in its memory box mostly happily. I'm very good at forgetting all the bad shit anyway.

When you watch those old bits of footage of the early Floyd do you recognise the person you were back then?

[Peers at an imaginary screen] I do see a chap there! In those days the music was exploratory and it was exciting to explore. But that, to me now, looks like a process – a process to find out what you do and don't like. And when you get older – necessarily, it seems to me – you find what you *do* like, and that maybe narrows your vision down a little bit. And in those early days, while it was exciting, there was an awful lot of it that was embarrassing and you go: "Oh, God, what are we going to do now?"

How do you mean?

Well we would have a template of what we were playing live. Someone would count in or start playing, and you'd know what the title was, and you'd have a rough template and then you'd just fly off on any tack you liked, and the music would build up and fly away and wander off in another direction, and some of those directions were dead-ends and some were exciting.

What do you remember of the brief period when you and Syd were in the group at the same time?

It was tragic, really. There were five gigs we did together and he would [sighs]… We've got a bit of film of Syd in a dressing room somewhere at one of those gigs, and he dances this little jig, a little dance, and he's all smiling and laughing. But you just look at him and go: "Oh God, no, tragic." Poor chap. I can't remember much about it. I was brand new and I think they knew I'd be taking it over.

Was there one song that you never got tired of playing?

For the very palpable joy that things like *Comfortably Numb* and *Wish You Were Here* give to an audience, I never tire of them as I know what they're doing. I suppose playing that same old thing again can be seen as being tedious, but really I'm always happy to do the ones people love.

I remember the big wooden aeroplane that ran down a wire over the audiences heads into the stage at Knebworth in 1975 during *Dark Side Of The Moon*. Does that funny old analogue world seem rather quaint now in the 21st century?

It *is* funny, it *is* quaint. And all those things you

GROUP: ALAMY; WRIGHT: GETTY



And then there were three: Pink Floyd's Rick Wright, David Gilmour and Nick Mason in 1994.

GETTY

could do so much better today, but would they be any more effective? I don't know. Today that could happen like magic but everyone would think: "Oh yeah? I saw that in *Star Wars III*". But back then it was really real and shocking and people went: "Fucking hell! An aeroplane flying over our heads!" Everything now has to get bigger and better and better is bigger and *not* better.

What are your memories of Live 8?
I thoroughly enjoyed it, though we had a few days of very tense rehearsals. We hadn't spoken to each other for years.

How did you decide what to play?
We made suggestions and Roger made suggestions, and I didn't care for Roger's suggestions. In the end I thought, actually, *we're* Pink Floyd and he's our guest, and he can just do what we tell him to do or fuck off.

What did he suggest?
He wanted to do *Money* – which we *all* did actually – and *Another Brick In The Wall* and *In The Flesh*.

And he was overruled.
Basically, yes.

I was just below the stage and it looked magical to me.
It *was*. It *was* magical. We were relaxed and we enjoyed it. We did a run-through of the set the night before to no audience in the park and that was terrific, and helped us feel relaxed and confident. It went very well.

But no temptation to carry on?
Been there, done that. Obviously I accept there are people who want to go and see and hear this legend that was Pink Floyd, but I'm afraid that's not my responsibility. To me it's just two words that tie together the work that four people did together. It's just a pop group. I don't need it. I don't need to go there. I'm not being coy or difficult, I just think that at my age I should do whatever I really want to do in life.

But I'm thrilled that each new generation that comes along seems to latch on to us, and we get a fresh bunch of followers and listeners as the years tick by. Though I don't quite know what's made it

"For Live 8 I thought, actually, we're Pink Floyd and Roger's our guest, and he can just do what we tell him to do or fk off."**

work for us that way when it doesn't for quite a lot of other people.

Roger once told me that musicians who achieve the level of success you achieved "must have holes in our psyche that only adulation can fill". Quite an honest thing to say.
It *is* an honest thing to say. And I think he's right, actually. But hopefully I don't have that hole in *my* psyche any longer, as I don't see the need for that sort of adulation on that scale. Also the strange thing about stadiums is you have no way of telling if it's going well. It's a crowd – in the singular. You can't really retain them as individuals. The power and energy of their 'love', so to speak, is a wonderful drug to boost your ego to the point where it's overinflated.

So why would someone like the Stones carry on if it can't be about money or critical standing? It must be about the validation of hearing 80,000 people go completely mental when you play an opening chord?
I don't know. If anyone else in any other pop group wants to go and do that, that's great. But I've forged a career that suits me pretty well. Some of these guys haven't quite got that career forged, so I guess they feel they want to carry on doing it in that way. I've had reasonable commercial success and reasonable artistic satisfaction. We'll see if this new one sells any. I suspect it'll do quite well.

Was there one particular musician who changed the way you looked at music?
There were a number of moments that were pivotal. Bill Haley's *Rock Around The Clock* was a pivotal moment for me. And that was superseded in what seemed like months by *Jailhouse Rock* by Elvis, also pivotal. The Beatles were pivotal. Jimi Hendrix was a pivotal moment. Pete Seeger was a pivotal moment when I was young. I learnt guitar from him. Too many to name.

Who do you listen to now?
I always listen to a new Bob, Neil or Leonard record [Dylan, Young, Cohen], but I don't listen to much new music. When I have the radio on it all sounds dreadfully formularised to me, but I'm not its audience. When you get to sixty-nine you're not spending every day seeking out new pop music. Obviously there are whole layers of music away from what we get on the radio and telly. It's like that thing they say about rats: 'You're never more than six feet away from a rat in London'; you're probably never more than a hundred yards from someone doing a great gig somewhere, but I'm just not aware of it. If a new Pink Floyd came along now I wouldn't know it had happened.

So the plan now is to carry on making solo albums and occasionally tour them?
I haven't looked that far ahead. I haven't been out and done a tour for nine years. I'm doing five dates in Europe and then five nights in London in September/October, and I'll see how I like it. If I like it I'll do some more.

Have you missed it in the last nine years?
Not much.

Nick Mason misses it terribly.
He plays the drums, there's less responsibility. I've had a great career. I can do it when I want to and then lay off and do all the other things that make up a life. I've done the relentless… *everything-ing* – which is what you have to do to fight your way through and create a career of the sort we had. I don't need or want it any more. It's fine. No regrets. Nothing – *almost* nothing – but great memories. I've done it. And I'm happy with it.



David Gilmour: a life less ordinary.

KEVIN WESTENBERG

American Idol. Led Zeppelin. Brand Tyler.

HAS STEVEN TYLER GOTTEN TOO BIG FOR ROCK'N'ROLL?

Words: **Ken McIntyre**
Portrait: **Ross Halfin**

In 2012, *Classic Rock* flew to California to get the latest chapter in the career of **Aerosmith**, America's biggest rock band: a story of splits and reunions, drugs and sobriety, rock'n'roll and bad feet...

"Is this article about me on drugs again?"

I'M sitting with Steven Tyler in a white-walled function room in a hotel on the Sunset Strip. The room has been hastily decorated to give it a thrift-store psychedelic vibe: Afghan rugs are tacked to the walls; a grand piano is littered with topless anime figures.

Like most people in Los Angeles, Tyler looks at least 10 years younger than he should. He's wearing open-toed sandals that give a gruesome glimpse of the horrors that lurk below his ankles: his toes wrap around each other at crazy angles, in clear defiance of their natural order. It is these toes, mangled beyond recognition from decades of athletic stadium derring-do, that have got us here today, in more ways than one. Tyler's left foot was operated on a couple of years back. They straightened some toes, got him walking without blinding pain again. They also gave him fistfuls of high-powered painkillers, the kind of pills that can send an addict back into the fevers of full-blown fiending. The kind of pills that can make a man fall off a stage and break his face. The kind of pills that can break up a band.

All of this happened and more, including the inevitable high-fiving reunion. The result is *Music From Another Dimension*, Aerosmith's first album of original material since 2001's *Just Push Play*. That's really the story here. Unfortunately you have to wade through mountains of gossipy Hollywood bullshit to get there.

Since the 70s, press coverage of Aerosmith has always focused first on the druggy antics of the Toxic Twins, at the expense of the music. It's so ingrained in them at this point that Tyler automatically spews facts and figures about who got sober first.

So, is this article about Steven Tyler, millionaire drug addict? That's up to Steven Tyler, really. In fact I never even asked him about drugs.

"I was in hospital and no one called. It really hurt."
Steven Tyler

I had to travel 3,000 miles to talk to a bunch of guys who live in my neighbourhood. If you live in Boston and you want to talk to Aerosmith about their new record – or anything else – it's remarkably easy to do. They're around. Everyone I know who grew up here has an Aerosmith story, but they're small, human stories: tiny conversations in line at the movie theatre; impromptu games of touch football on lazy Sundays; sharing a burger at the diner.

About 20 years ago, I ran into Joe Perry at the grocery store at 3am. I felt compelled to tell him that of all the Aerosmith rip-off bands, Smack were the best. He nodded and grabbed his bag of Fritos. All the big rock'n'roll shit – groupies, rehab, TV shows, open-air festivals – they do all that somewhere else. In Boston, like the rest of us, they take it easy and mind their own business. So I can see why they'd want to hold a press junket in LA; complimentary bottles of Voss water and interviews conducted on director's chairs would just seem stupid back home.

It's my first trip to Los Angeles so, naturally, I fuck it all up. My hotel room is half an hour away from where Aerosmith are, so on the morning of the interviews I walk there. This is a perfectly sensible thing to do in Boston, but in Los Angeles it's a fatal error. Everything is so far apart that 30 minutes soon stretches to 60. And despite being mid-September, it's one of hottest days of the year, peaking at 106 degrees.

By the time I get there, a sweaty, broiled mess, I'm just in time to meet Ross Halfin, *Classic Rock*'s photographer for the story and one of Britain's most legendary rockarazzi. I sip Diet Coke and nibble on bacon at a table headed by Ross and flanked by two Japanese stewardesses, Joe Perry's 'right-hand man' and a blonde Sony executive. I am mostly ignored, unless I'm getting grilled by the notoriously prickly Halfin. It goes like this:

"So, you call yourself Sleazegrinder?"

"Yep." (Confession time: on more frivolous engagements, I do indeed call myself Sleazegrinder.)

"That's a ridiculous name."

"Okay."

"Where are you from?"

"Boston."

"Ugh. I hate Boston. It's like England, only more boring."

"You know, this is my first time in LA."

"How the fuck is this your first time in LA? Was it your first time on an aeroplane, too?"

So, that was breakfast.

Suave and sober: "I'm on fire right now," Tyler says.



Steven Tyler and Joe Perry: the De-toxed Twins.

"The secret to this is that we love playing together."

Steven Tyler

Later on I'm led into a waiting room deep within the labyrinthine courtyard of the hotel. It's International Press Day, so I spend the next four hours making (very) small talk with Japanese journalists and two friendly Germans who write for heavy metal magazines. A lifetime later, when I'm finally ushered in to talk to Joe Perry, I'm so relieved to be talking to another local that Boston is, naturally, the first topic of conversation. And for good reason, really. There are very few bands in operation so closely identified with the town they're from. For decades, they've been the pride of Boston, along with the Red Sox and our ridiculous accent. To this day, on the streets of our city you can get punched for uttering a discouraging word about the band, or get laid for a righteous 'Smith logo tattoo.

"The funny thing is, we always felt like outsiders in Boston, even though we had lots of friends in local bands," says Perry, describing Aerosmith's early club days in the late 60s. "We never played there that much. We didn't want to play five nights a week, we weren't a cover band, and there was no real rock scene at the time. There just wasn't a place for us. You covered rock songs on the radio or there just wasn't any interest."

It wasn't until the band broke through nationally with their 1973 debut album that their home town finally took notice and Aerosmith became Boston's new favourite band.

"That's true, even though there was a band in town called Boston," Perry grins. "I always thought that was interesting. They were never really a band. And I think that speaks volumes about that underground energy we had. Even though they were from Boston and they were all Boston guys, people knew it was really Tom Scholz. He wrote the songs and found a few talented guys and put these incredibly successful pop records out, but they weren't a 'band' to speak of. But with us, we *were* a band. We weren't looked at as a Boston band, though. By the fans, yeah, but not by the media. Not for years."

Perry, like most of Aerosmith, still has a home in Boston. More importantly, he still considers it home. But he's still pissed off about the club days.

"I grew up there, and I've lived there my whole life. But I don't feel like we're part of Boston's musical history, no. I just feel like we were always considered the outsiders. Again, by the media. The fans have always been there for us. But we were selling out 5,000-seat halls in Detroit long before we were selling houses half that size in Boston."

Perry – who still looks like the square-jawed, guitar-slinging bad-ass from 1975 – is Aerosmith's most disarming member. Thoughtful and introspective, his quiet, cool demeanour belies the decades of physical, chemical and financial wreckage his band have survived through these past 40 years. He just doesn't seem like the lizard-in-a-bottle type. I have a note in my pocket that says: "See if Joe is sober." I don't bother to ask – he looks pretty bright-eyed to me – but I do wonder out loud why people still care.

"Well, we kind of opened that door," he says. "I think a big part of it was people had to know we were on the level, because we had to cancel so many shows when we were fucked up and we weren't playing great. The last shows before I left the band [in 1979], some nights would be great, but some nights just weren't. Every night has to be great, and we just weren't living up to our own standards. So the band just had to rethink everything. We'd reached a certain level, and it's like, what do we do now? There's only



American idols: Tyler and Perry in the 1980s.

GETTY X2

a handful of bands that have stuck together as long as we have. Everybody else died or broke up, and that was it. So when we came back in the 80s, not only are we going to get back together, but we're going to tell everybody we're sober. We had to. We'd burned a lot of bridges. So that part followed us around. And the tension between Steven and I, all through the 70s, that followed us too. And it made for good press. 'How could they be that way? How could they be on stage and make records together and still be at each other's throats?'"

Well, that *is* a good question.

"It's pathetic. We just can't find anything better to do," laughs bassist Tom Hamilton. "Really, we're just five guys that love playing with each other. It's worth all the trouble."

Hamilton, guitarist Brad Whitford and drummer Joey Kramer are the unsung heroes of Aerosmith. The fact that they're doing their interview together, in a tinier, colder room, during their lunch hour, no less, stands as a testament to that. These are the guys who deliver the goods, without pageantry or complaint.

"That's our job," Hamilton shrugs. "In any band, someone's got to fill that role, and somebody's got to be the peacock."

It's been a very eventful few years for Aerosmith's preening peacock, Steven Tyler. In August 2009 he fell off the stage in Sturgis, South Dakota, breaking his shoulder and cracking his skull. It was assumed his mishap was drug-related. Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn't. Even he's not sure.

"Yeah, I fell off the stage during the ZZ Top tour. I only went on that tour because I thought the band was over. Six months before that I was at Las Encinas [rehab centre] and I couldn't walk. I went to a pain management clinic for my feet and they said: 'Here, take this.' So I was taking that stuff, it's true. But I think I only had a beer before that gig, and I fell off the stage. My girlfriend said: 'You weren't even high that night! Why'd you tell them that?' Well, I had to tell them *something*."

"I was angry at the guys. I wanted to kill them."

Steven Tyler

The incident sparked rumours that Tyler was leaving the band to pursue a solo career. Soon after, while the band were on tour in Abu Dhabi, Tyler appeared to confirm people's suspicions.

"It was the last couple shows and we were in Abu Dhabi, and I did an interview with some English rag [Er, that would be *Classic Rock* – Ed.] and I said: 'I need some time to think. I need some time' – and this is the part that the guys obviously heard – 'I need time to work on Brand Tyler.' What does that mean? Interestingly enough, Brand Tyler is what got me *American Idol*. I'm the guy who wrote *Dream On*. That's what I am. But to hear it put in those terms? It scared the hell out of the band, and they said a lot of bad stuff about me afterward. It didn't mean anything, though. I mean, it's interesting: Joe does solo records. Isn't that Brand Perry?"

A day after the Brand Tyler comments went viral, Joe Perry was playing a gig in New York with the Joe Perry Project when an impromptu reunion occurred. Tyler says: "I was living at [daughter] Liv's house. She was off doing a movie, so I was in Greenwich Village, working on my book, doing OxyContin [a narcotic pain reliever] and waiting for some blow to come in so I could spend Christmas there and do cocaine again.

"The thing is, I heard what the guys were saying about me, and I was mad at them. Listen, I fell off the stage, I cracked my skull, I tore my shoulder, and I was in the hospital. And nobody called me. It really hurt me. It hurt me bad. I didn't say anything, but I was angry at the guys and I was still high. I wanted to kill them.

"I found out that Joe was playing in New York, and I got into a limo with a bunch of my friends. I looked on the internet for what songs he was doing, and I figured an hour into his set he'd probably be breaking and going into *Walk This Way*. Well thought out for a guy that was living at my daughter's house, still snorting Lunesta [sedative].

"I went because I didn't like the rumours that were going around that they were looking for another singer. Short of getting a gun and shooting someone, I didn't know what kind of press I could do, or cannonball I could shoot out of, or rock in the pond of life I could ripple out of to let them know how I felt. So I thought, I'll go down, walk in and do the encore. And that's what I did.

"I looked out at the audience and they roared when they saw me and Joe together. I said: 'The ➔



Aerosmith in the mid 70s: warning, may contain drugs.

band is not broken up.' Then I said some fantastic thing about: 'Joe, you may wear a coat of many colours but I, motherfucker, am the rainbow.' I said something like that. I know it was interesting at the time. It was so off the cuff, but I hated everyone thinking that Aerosmith was over. I knew it wasn't."

He was right. But first there was more rehab, a solo pop single (*It Feels So Good*), and a stint on reality TV as a season-long judge of singing competition *American Idol*. By 2011 Brand Tyler had come into full flower. "I went to Betty Ford, and six months later I did *American Idol*. I honestly did it because my feet hurt. But I was doing *Idol*, I was on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, my book was coming out, I had a hit single. That was all from getting sober."

Meanwhile, his band were still scrambling for something to do, and the rumours of a Tyler-less Aerosmith heated up once again. From the band's perspective, though, that was never a real option.

"I was just being practical," says Perry. "At the time, Steven was going through a mountain of personal stuff, and basically he said he wanted to take two years off. He didn't know what he wanted to do, but he wanted to take two years off to do 'Brand Tyler'. So the rest of us are on the phone going: 'What are we going to do for two years? The band's playing great, let's talk about getting another singer until Steven comes back. Would we call it Aerosmith? No, it wouldn't be Aerosmith. Should we even talk about doing that, or should we just take the time off?' I wanted to work on the Joe Perry Project anyway.

"Somewhere in there, a few quotes hit the media and then it exploded. But it was strictly a matter of Steven wanting to take a couple of years off and us sitting around wondering what we're gonna do. It was all just talk, that's all it was. It was never etched in stone, and it just never felt right."

"It never went further than discussion, but we had to talk about it," says Kramer. "The reality is that we have always been at least ready to go, in some fashion or another, crippled, hobbling along or in full gear. We've always been ready: let's go do a record; let's go tour. But now, all of a sudden, Steven had a job. And it was like, he's gonna be busy a lot. So we talked about it. It never went beyond that. But even if it did, it would never have been Aerosmith."



GETTY X3

Tyler's stint on *American Idol* fuelled rumours of an Aerosmith break-up.

> **"I live for Aerosmith. I need to sing. That's what I do."**
>
> **Steven Tyler**

Tyler's success on *Idol* propelled him to mainstream fame, but it was clearly not a permanent gig. Tyler claims that he mostly used the experience to promote his autobiography, *Does The Noise In My Head Bother You?*. And when the season was over, he quit.

"*American Idol* made us a household name," Perry says, "but Steven wasn't doing what he was meant to do. He can be really funny at a party, but put him on a panel like that and that's not really what he wants to do. He can do it, but that's not where his heart is. His heart is in singing in front of 10 or 20,000 people. But he did it, and now there's a whole new batch of kids finding out what Aerosmith really is."

"At first I think the band was mad at me for doing *Idol*," Tyler says. "I knew it would be good for us, but I didn't know if I would be ostracised and sent to the cornfield or what. But at the time, I was feeling great. I started writing these songs with Marti [Frederiksen] and it felt so good. But I started feeling pressure from my label, who said that if you want to go solo – and I did – you gotta get off Sony first; you gotta do one more album. So I woke up one morning and I thought, I should call Jack [Douglas, producer]. I had just gotten out of Betty Ford six months earlier, and Jack was sober too, so I thought: 'Call Jack!'

"I remember I was at the Laurel Canyon country store and I called him up and said: 'Listen, Joe's still high, but we've got to do this.' And Jack joined forces. He's the sixth member of the band. I just thought, whatever we've gotta do, whatever we've got, we've got to do this album and get off Sony. And I knew Jack could do it. So I called Joe and Tom and Brad and Joey. I said: 'I promise you, Joey, we'll get a song a day. Brad, Tom, I promise you, and we can start this album off by all of us having songs that we wrote on it.' I knew that would tweak their dial.

"After *Idol* was over, I went back to Boston, Jack joined us and the rest is history. It's that simple. We



Tyler and Perry in 2012: "I don't see a time when we all go, 'That's it.'"

got sober, that's it. We were there before, but we weren't *really* there. Now we are. People will see the difference on stage between me then and now. I'm on fire right now. Joe's off the drugs he was on three years ago, the cocksucker, and me too – we're now back in a room talking to each other. I'm not talking to the drugs, he's not talking to the drugs.

"There's another thing I realised: what if this is gonna be our last record, and what's it gonna take to get Joe back and Brad back? I need to get sober first, and the rest will follow."

The *Music From Another Dimension* album really is a patchwork affair. A collection of old songs and half-forgotten licks written by Tyler and Perry, alongside new songs penned by various band members and outsiders like Desmond Child and Marti Frederiksen, who also helped produce several of the tracks.

Production on the album originally began in 2003. The band were still riding the waves of their enormously successful 80s comeback at that point. 2001's *Just Push Play* was a platinum-selling smash anchored by a US Top 10 hit, *Jaded*. Tanned, rested and ready, the band set out to create another radio-rattling monster. But from here on, things got rough.

"This album wasn't like *Chinese Democracy*," says Tom Hamilton, anticipating my comparison, "because it wasn't officially under way all this time. The record's always been in the future. For some of us it couldn't come any sooner; for some of us it was, 'Let it happen when it happens. Let's just hit the road and have a blast.' I'm very attracted to both of those ideas. But finally we got to the moment, and it was great to do it. A new record is a big missing link in our equation."

"We tried to make this record probably three times," says Perry. "When you go to make a record, there are certain protocols that are met. You've got a record deal, and the label gives you a certain amount of money to make it. Money goes out to the producer, goes out here and there, so as soon as you start making it the machinery starts. That happened three times before we actually made the record."

One early attempt involved Rick Rubin. Or "Whassisname… that fat guy," as Steven Tyler calls him. "We went in the studio with him one night to see how it would work," Perry remembers. "That was miserable. We just didn't click."

Because of Rubin? "Because of us. We were still getting fucked up. We weren't in the right place head-wise. We were just realising we were a band again and that we were able to work together, but we were still fucked up. That's why we had to make a big deal of telling the world we were clean, because nobody was buying it at that point. So when we went in with Rick and had this horrible session, I remember waking up the next day and calling Steven and saying: 'This is shit. We suck.' Obviously we worked with him on Run DMC but, like I said, we've known him for years but it just didn't click."

Soon after, the band got in touch with an old friend: Jack Douglas. Douglas produced most of the band's 70s albums and is considered by everyone involved to be the 'sixth member' of Aerosmith. If anyone could rally the troops, it was him.

Unfortunately it turned out that nobody was in the mood for rallying, so instead they recorded an album of blues covers, 2004's *Honkin' On Bobo*. It may have been a fun exercise for the blooze-loving band, but it wasn't exactly what the hard-core 'Smith fans were after.

"Getting into the studio with Jack and doing the *Honkin' On Bobo* record, that was supposed to be this record," says Perry. "We got into a room, turned the tape machine on and it almost happened by mistake. We were playing at my place in Boston, the Boneyard. The five of us got in there with Jack, and by then it became pretty clear we weren't going to be able to buckle down. Nobody was in the right

DID STEVEN TYLER JOIN LED ZEPPELIN?

Rumours abound that the singer and the Zep legends were forming a dream team.

The last couple of years have found Aerosmith swamped by every rumour imaginable: Lenny Kravitz was their new singer; everybody was high; everybody was sober; the band was broken up; the band was back together again. One of the more interesting whispers doing the rounds suggested that Steven Tyler had been asked by Jimmy Page to join Led Zeppelin for a tour and possibly an album. That one is not entirely true, Tyler explains. But sorta.

"I went over and played with Jimmy and the rest of them [in summer 2008]. It wasn't an audition to be in Zeppelin, it was an audition to play with Zeppelin. We were gonna do a couple of stadiums. And then while I was there, Jimmy spoke to me about maybe doing an album. I went home and thought about it for a couple days, and I got back to him and said: 'Look, Jimmy, you're in an iconic band and so am I. I can't, in good faith, leave my band and be in your band.'

"We played all day for a week. Every time we took a break I smoked a cigar and Jimmy smoked a cigarette. We went out back and I spoke with Jimmy about everything on the planet. It started out with: 'Jimmy, you have no idea how grateful I am to have the chance to come over and jam with you guys.' And he goes: 'Well, maybe we can play some shows together.' And I said: 'Stop right there. I'm playing in a band with John Paul Jones?'

"They let me sing every song I wanted – *Black Dog*, *Stairway To Heaven*. But it was just a week. And yeah, Jimmy asked me to do some stuff with him. But I didn't want to be Coverdale/Page. Plus I figured in the time it would take to do that, I could rally my own band together.

"So, was I gonna be in Jimmy's band? No. But what an honour."

"For five months, I locked myself in and wrote songs."

Steven Tyler



Perry: "It doesn't matter if I wrote the riffs yesterday or 20 years ago..."

HALFIN X2

"I don't foresee a time when we'd pack it in."

Joe Perry

headspace. There was family stuff going on here, there was physical stuff going on there, we had just come off the road, the timing wasn't right. But we did have time to do *Honkin' On Bobo*. What that gave us was a chance to work with Jack, and a chance to work on music in a room together, which we hadn't done in years. We had the freedom of not writing anything new, we got to play a bunch of our old favourite songs, we got to be creative in the studio, and it gave us something to tour behind. But it wasn't the record we wanted to make."

"Jack was great," Tyler remembers. "Even though some of us were still using at the time, it was obvious to me that there was a chance. So you know what? Even if we were still high, one of the great things about Jack is, as long as he was sober, even if we were all high, he would have gotten something out of us."

Honkin' On Bobo hit the shelves in March 2004. The rest of the decade, and a chunk of this one, had been dedicated mostly to nonsense, to reality shows and pratfalls and inter-band bickering. There were fitful studio sessions, a legacy tour, some health scares, Brand Tyler, and the Great Replacement Singer Fiasco. But eventually, in 2011, the band got back in the studio and finished the record. Everyone in the band unanimously thanks Jack Douglas for dragging them to the finish line.

"We were all of mutual mind, wanting to do the record," says Kramer. "We had a couple of false starts, but what sealed it for us was when Jack came on board. With Jack back, it's comfortable, like an old shoe."

"Everybody trusts Jack," says Hamilton. "The fact that he's going to be the producer eliminates a lot of what keeps us out of the studio. When everybody is on board with using Jack, it's like, what a relief, now we know what the project's going to be like and everyone can relax and get a chance to have a voice on the record."

"He brings fun to the table, and when you have fun doing something it usually comes out pretty good," adds Kramer.

"We have a lot of laughs with him. We were all in the room together playing. That's how we did the tracks, we did them all live again. That's how we made *Rocks* and *Toys In The Attic*. We did it that way. This time, everything fell into place. Everybody had the same hunger and wanted to do it at the same time. Being in a room together, having a good time, with Jack producing, those are the main ingredients for this album."

Of course, a cynic might say those aren't the only ingredients: that there are also a few reheated leftovers involved and, in classic Aerosmith tradition, a sprinkling of resentment as well. One issue that both Tyler and Perry are clearly sensitive about is how vintage some of the songs are. Sure, they're 'new' in the just-released sense, but a good portion of the Tyler/Perry numbers on *Dimension* were reworked from previous songcrafting sessions.

"I took a couple licks that I knew we had there," notes Tyler. "They were just sitting there. The song *Out Go The Lights* was originally *Bobbing For Piranha* [from the 1989 sessions for *Pump*], but I just never wrote lyrics to it. It was a great Joe Perry lick, and I arranged it with the band a gazillion years ago, but we never added any lyrics and I knew the lick was so good. Jimmy Page would have paid good money for it. All I had to do was finish it. So for five months I just locked myself in and wrote the songs."

"All those times getting started, getting ready to make a new record, there were more and more demos building up," adds Perry. "Songs, ideas, riffs. We went in with all this material, and some of it, it just wasn't the right time. As far as I'm concerned, a piece of music is done when we've finished it, when it's been recorded, mixed, mastered. It doesn't matter if I wrote the riff yesterday or 20 years ago. Some people don't get that. They say: 'Well, it was written way back when, so it must be a reject.' Well, that just isn't true. It just wasn't its time. That's obviously true, or the Rolling Stones wouldn't have a career, because half the songs on their early albums were old blues songs that were written years before. So you're going to tell me that because they were written by Willie Dixon back in 1944 that they're not good? I think the fact that there's riffs that I wrote 20 years ago floating around on the internet, that doesn't mean shit, because they weren't ready to be done."

Then there's the issue with the writing credits. *Music From Another Dimension* was supposed to be a group effort, but Tyler brought in some outside writers.

"Using outside writers is like being married forever and using a sex toy," Tyler explains. "Hello, it helps. Your wife's gonna scream again like she did in the beginning. Whatever it takes. But it's not like I didn't include the other guys too. I mean, I get it. Tom wrote a song with me, *Sweet Emotion*. But that was 40 years ago, and he still needs to feel part of it. You know, he's cried to me, 'No one listens to my songs, no one likes them.' But that's not it, man. It's that Joe and I went on a writing sabbatical and we came back with nine fuckin' slam dunks. But he still wants to feel part of it. Everybody wants to feel part of the band. Do I feel bad I didn't write another song with Tom after *Sweet Emotion*? Probably, but no. It was an era. But this time we came back and Tom had two songs, Joey wrote three by himself, we wrote a whole album together ourselves. Everybody's got a piece of it, and it makes the band feel better. It's like when you let your daughter sing for mom and dad. It seems silly, but it's true."

If that statement sounds dismissive – and it did – there's a good reason for that. Tyler's shadow looms large on *Dimension*. He had a hand in crafting nearly every song on the album, and a few of the album's oddest diversions – like the country-pop duet with Carrie Underwood, *Can't Stop Loving You* – were clearly his idea. ➔



Fly boys: Captain Charisma and the All-American Guitar Hero.



"I don't see anything stopping us, short of one of us dropping dead," says Tyler.

GETTY

"I'm doing a solo record next. I just am."

Steven Tyler

"Steven knows her from *American Idol*," Perry shrugs. "I'd heard her sing, she's got the pipes, she's withstood the test of time. It wasn't like, the person that won last week or anything. And Steven felt very strongly about it musically, he really thought it would work. And I think that it did. Mainstream country is weird, but I just think when those two sing together it works. It sounds natural. Whatever happens with it, that's up to the fans."

"When we were doing this record, no one liked [power ballad] *Could Have Been Love*. Not Jack, not the band, no one," says Tyler. "They didn't like *Beautiful*, which I wrote with Marti, they didn't like the Carrie Underwood song. The band wanted to start all over. Once we got Jack in, they all felt like it was a shoo-in that they'd get their voices heard. But just because I had written all these songs, it didn't mean we couldn't do more."

And they did. Tyler collaborated with Whitford on *Street Jesus*, with Hamilton on *Tell Me*, and the whole band ultimately added to *Beautiful*'s swirly flavours. But in many ways it sounds like Tyler's record – and it probably is. Or at least a precursor.

"I'm doing a solo record next," Tyler casually mentions. "I just am."

How this affects the band is anybody's guess but, for the moment, spirits are buoyant.

"I don't see this band ending," says Kramer. "If we've come as far as we have with the amount of bullshit we've been through, both as a group and individually, I don't see anything stopping us, short of one of us dropping dead from a heart attack. There's no reason to stop. As we've shown ourselves once again, by virtue of doing this record, there's still lots of juice left."

Perry, who is currently working on his autobiography, agrees with his drummer. "There might be a time when the gigs get fewer and farther apart, but we're all in it," he says. "I don't foresee a time when we'd all go, 'That's it,' and just pack it in."

"Listen, I cannot command court in a fuckin' stadium. Because of my feet, I just can't do that any more," says Tyler. "It made me cry when I realised that. But clubs I can do, and we will. The secret to all this is that we love playing together. Or maybe we love building it up and taking it down again. No, it's not that," he corrects himself. "It's miracles. Maybe we just love making miracles."

With the interviews over, racks of shiny rock-star clothes are wheeled in for tomorrow's photoshoot. I'm not invited, nor am I invited to any Hollywood parties, soirees or happenings, with Aerosmith or anybody else. Even the German metal guy rejects me – he's going to see *True Romance* in a graveyard tonight, but you need a reservation, sorry. My day(s) of munching fried pig flesh with Japanese stewardesses has come to an unceremonious end. A lone-wolf Satan rocker friend picks me up and shows me around, pointing out all the impressive rock'n'roll landmarks and where the downtown midnight cannibal gangs lurk.

Once it gets dark we drive to the Griffith Observatory, so we can view Los Angeles in all its profane glory. From the top you can smell the fear, inhale the desperation in greasy lungfuls. All the last cowboys rushing to stake their claims before the whole ugly mess breaks off and splashes into the ocean. Millions of flickering lights, each one determined to shine brighter than the rest, even if it kills them or mangles their feet into mush.

I can see why Steven Tyler likes this place so much. I can also see why the rest of the band like to get on airplanes and fly back home. This is no place for boys from Boston, even notoriously bad ones. From up here, the band's conflict of interest becomes obvious. Blame it on the pills, *American Idol*, Carrie Underwood or whatever you want: Steven Tyler has become too big for rock'n'roll and maybe too big for Aerosmith as well. That might end the band, or it might make it stronger. Either way, you get the lasting impression that things are never going to be the way they were in 1972, or '82, or '92.

But no matter what happens next, they're still the skinny, snarly motherfuckers from Boston who wrote *Dream On* and (successfully) did more drugs than any other band, ever. They're still the best-selling American rock band of all time. And considering that rock is dead – at least as we know it – they always will be. And, most importantly, the fire still burns.

"I live for Aerosmith," Tyler told me, in a quiet, confessional moment. "I couldn't be a mechanic or a cook or even a piano tuner. I need to sing. That's what I do. I have grown these wings being in Aerosmith, and when we are not on tour my wings get heavy. I don't like walking around on earth. Because we've flown for 40 years together, my wings are heavy when I stand on earth."

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THE WORLD ACCORDING TO LEMMY



In 2004, Classic Rock spent an afternoon drinking with the legendary **Motörhead** frontman while he imparted the wisdom that life had taught him. This is what we learned...

"Don't look at his toe," says Lemmy's press guy, Nik. Too late. In a hotel room in London, Lemmy Kilmister is surrounded by empty bottles of Jack Daniel's and old prescription slips. Lemmy's done something to his foot, you see, and has been confined to this room for over a week.

Before we can look away, he holds his foot up as evidence – his big toe looks like a mouldy old parsnip that's been lying in a pool of stale milk at the bottom of your fridge. It's enough to drive you to drink. So we let it.

Despite all this – or maybe because of it – Lemmy's on top form, doling out JD and Cokes all afternoon, playing us tracks scheduled for a forthcoming solo album (Lemmy with guests including Dave Grohl and the Reverend Horton Heat), and holding forth on everything from drugs to marriage to Emperor Hirohito. So hold on to your hats and prepare yourself for the wisdom of Lemmy – what he's learned in his 59 years of rock and rolling. Or at least what he can remember…

All I learned at school was how to dodge fighting and how to smoke.
And what girls' tits looked like.

There's a fine line between a heavy drinker and an alcoholic.
Just like there's a fine line between just fishing and standing on the bank looking like an arsehole. The line is whether the fuck you know what you're doing when you drink 'cos if you don't know what you're doing, you just become a terrible boring drunk. Whereas, if you know when to stop, you become an amazing, anecdotal man of the world. Which is better than being the guy having a shit in the bath tub.

I don't even get drunk any more.
A kid once said to me: "Do you get hangovers?" I said: "To get hangovers you have to stop drinking."

Journalists are the worst drinkers in the world.
Or were. Rock journalists are a really boring crowd now. Sit around drinking plastic bottles of fucking Evian.

The music business is all geared up to stealing your money.
It's just like any other business – they're out to make money, not to be good people. If you're a businessman you can't be a pleasant person. Business is 'how to be a cunt', basically. The bigger the cunt, the more successful the businessman.

I know what I'm doing.
I know what Motörhead's for. I know who it appeals to. And I know it could appeal to a lot more people if we had the coverage.

People are much weirder up north, aren't they?
You get real quality shit up there. You don't get people with affectations: these people are fucking serious.

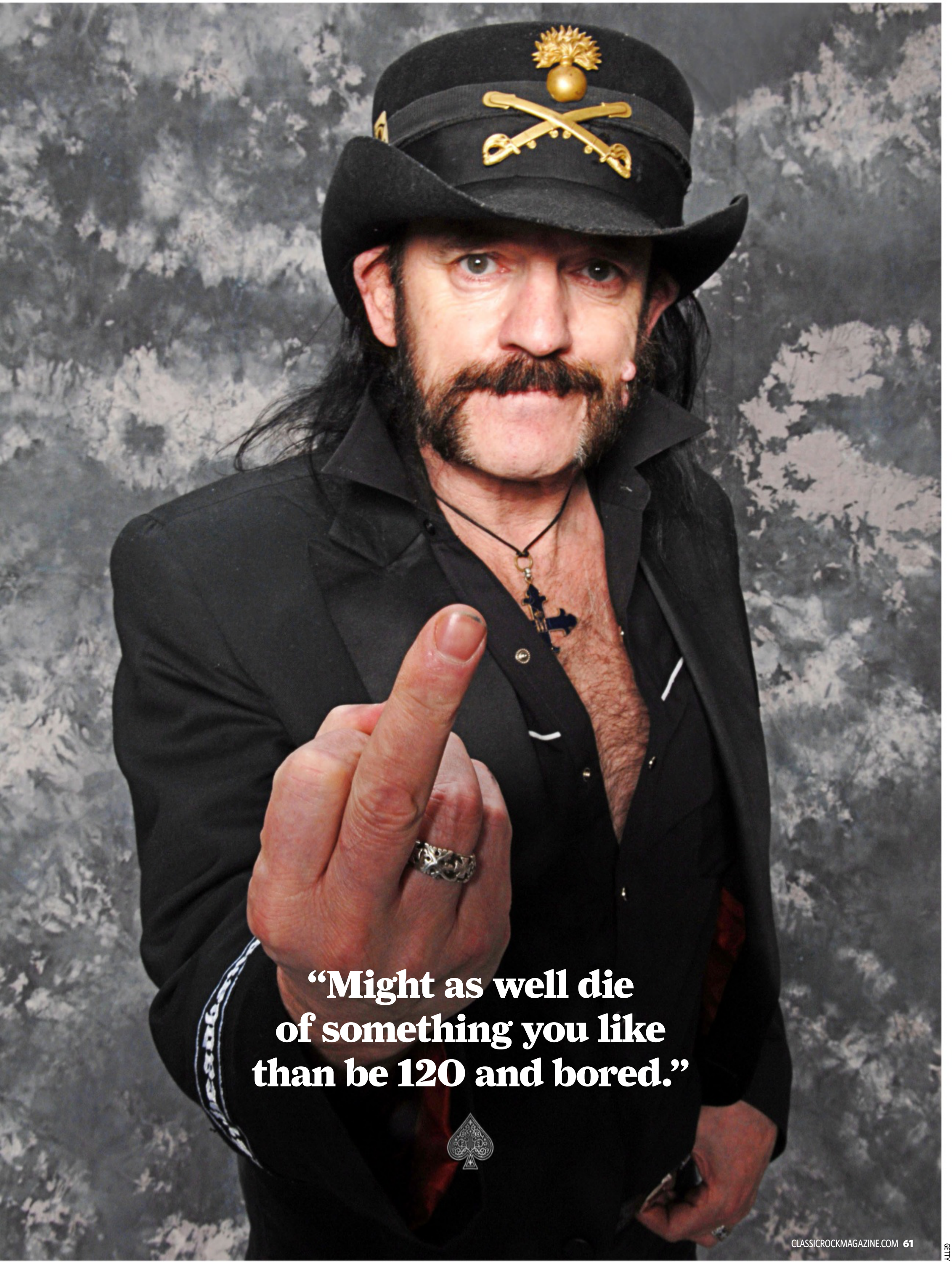
I've never understood why anyone would need a double-necked bass.
I don't even understand why you'd need a five-string. What're you gonna do? Play bigger chords? Have more room to twiddle on? I hate twiddlers and they hate me. And that's just fine.

Scotch makes me hit people.
Bourbon's a mellow high. I used to drink Scotch but I went off it. I hit a door post once and it really fucking hurt. Who did I miss? Oh, nobody famous. He would've been famous if I'd connected.

I am a womaniser, but that doesn't mean you can't respect people.
I don't understand racism or sexism – I don't get any of it. As far as I can see, a lot of feminist things that have happened have made men happy, not women. It's given women unattainable goals to shoot for. The people expounding the thing in the first place are college people, sitting in a studio in the city. But some girl in fucking Newcastle has got no chance of following them. If a girl isn't strong enough to buck the system, they're just gonna get married like they would have in any other generation but they're gonna be even more unhappy because of all this freedom they've read about which they aren't getting.

If a woman likes you, you're not bothered why they like you.
I'm really shallow like that. People say: "Doesn't it bother you that they just want you because you're famous?" And I say: "No. Never did. Ever. Not for one second." They can have me – I'm a whore, always was. In fact they don't even have to pay me. ➔

"A kid said to me: 'Do you get hangovers?' I said: 'To get hangovers you have to stop drinking.'"



“Might as well die of something you like than be 120 and bored.”

GETTY



The classic Motörhead line-up: (l-r) Fast Eddie Clarke, Philthy Animal Taylor, Lemmy.

GETTY

To a lot of people, magazines are like pictures of another world –because they are pictures of another world.
That world's never gonna show up in Cowdenbeath.

"I'm a whore, always was. In fact they don't even have to pay me."

People would say: "Have you slept with her?"
I'd say: "Oh, we didn't have time to sleep. We were too busy fucking." Aids wasn't a wake up call, it was a go-to-sleep call.

Love's a rather miserable condition.
Makes you act like an idiot, knocks all your defences down, you tear yourself in knots, and then they leave you. Brilliant.

Most love is unrequited, which is where we get all the good songs from.
Thank God it's unrequited, when you look at it like that.

If I settled down, I wouldn't be hungry any more.
I'd be thirsty.

Monogamy is possible – I'm doing it – but I don't think it's advisable.
I think polygamy is a really good idea. Nothing works over any extended time. I'm a sucker for romance but the trouble is that you can't make the fucker last – you can't have that blaze happening all your life.

The William Morris Agency made me take drugs!
We did a tour in 1979 – the Bomber tour, which was 53 shows in 56 states – and I don't care who the fuck you are, you're not gonna do that without some help.

Drugs are very subjective.
They're in the brain cell of the beholder. When I was growing up, drugs were all the go, everybody was doing them, so I did them. Smoking dope and acid. But there was a great innocence attached to them. No one had died yet. Heroin hadn't showed up and downers hadn't come in. The deals were a lot better then too. Then came the birth of the rabid dealer – with the gun in his pocket. And that's what changed it – the money you could make.

I would not advise drugs to any person, ever, of any kind.
If you think you have to try them then go ahead. I can't stop you. If you're thinking about it, you're going to do it anyway. But drugs are very powerful things – you can't just try it and go back to the way you were before, because they're going to change you. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Mostly for the worse. If you're sticking needles in yourself, then that's very bad news. Even with my famous rep, not once. Never ever.

I used to say that getting married was the only mistake I didn't make.
But the other mistake I didn't make was to stick needles in myself to get high.

You should know who the fuck you are before you start doing drugs.
I was 18, 20 before I started doing any dope. At least you had a vague idea of what you wanted to do with your life and who you were. That's hard to fathom for some kids now because they think they're adults when they're 12.

I come from a broken home.
I broke it.

I'm not religious.
My father was a priest. Anglican vicar, Church Of England. He left my mother and me when I was three months old, so that let religion down, right there. Then my mother wanted to marry my stepfather and he was Roman Catholic – he'd been devout all his life – so he wrote to the Vatican to get dispensation to marry my mother because she was a divorcee. They sent him a letter – this is the Vatican, right? The fucking Pope – saying that he could only marry my mother if he declared me illegitimate. That's the church, man. A fashion show for fags, right? So he wrote back and said: "Excommunicate my ass." And they did. They excommunicated him. It didn't seem to blight his happiness at all, from what I could see.



Another quiet night out with Lemmy...

KEVIN NIXON/METAL HAMMER MAGAZINE/FUTURE

God's a crutch for people who don't know who they are.
I'm responsible for what I do. And I'll take responsibility for everything I've said and done. I don't need to hide behind the devil. "The devil made me do it!" Well, you shoulda put your fingers in your fucking ears! God would've helped you put your fingers in your ears, wouldn't he? Might have even put His Holy Fingers in your ears.

Religion's just spiritual insurance.
Put a few quid in the plate every month and then you think you're going to heaven later.

Everybody that's good goes to heaven?
Must be fucking crowded up there! How are you going to find your loved ones? Are they gonna post a notice? "Coming up this week…" I'm going to Hell – that's where all the pool tables are. You can't imagine a pool table in Heaven, can you?

If I believe in anything, I believe in reincarnation.
Because you have these flashes of memory of something you've never known before. And then you have periods of history you're really interested in and other periods you couldn't give a shit about – even though they're just as interesting. But you just don't have a connection with them. Other bits you have a connection with, and I think it's because you were alive in those bits. That makes sense to me. But then, who says it has to make sense? That's just wishful thinking of another kind…

It always killed me about Japan.
The Emperor Hirohito – he's the son of heaven. Why did he need glasses? It's obviously ridiculous right there, but no one dare question it because he's the emperor.

You may as well die of something you like.
Or you'll live to 120 and be bored shitless. If you're gonna rail at me for smoking a cigarette in a restaurant but let cars drive by outside, then just fuck off, OK? You've got these people on pavement cafés, doggedly not smoking, and the traffic's three feet away! Fuck off! If you wanna ban cars and have rickshaws and shit then – fine – I'll stop smoking. But don't fuck around.

I'm proud to be English, but I can't live here now.
I don't know how anybody can afford to live here now. I went to America to live, right? The sun belts down all the time. The chicks wear less clothing because of that fact. And everything's half price. Any questions?

There's a line that you do not cross.
It's like your own personal Alamo. Some shit you know is shit, so you don't do it. If it gets to the stage that you're gonna be ashamed of something, then you don't do it. You think: "If I was 14 and I saw Eddie Cochran doing this, would I be embarrassed for him?" If the answer's yes, then turn the motherfucker down.

Motörhead songs use violent images but to promote non-violence.
I don't believe in wars. Why don't they get the guy who's in charge of the insurgents in Iraq and George W Bush and get them to fight it out in an arena? You could sell tickets to that motherfucker.

I pretended to like jazz for about three years, but it cost me dear.
The last time I went to a jazz concert, my mate was a sax player and he got up and he played the most appalling bunch of crap I've ever heard in my life. And before he was finished the audience was on its feet and I thought: "This is the blind leading the fucking blind. He can't play, and they can't hear." Free-form jazz gives you a licence to shit in the street.

I don't think Pete Townshend will ever speak to me again.
Do you remember when he impaled his hand on the whammy bar of his guitar? The Who did a show at the Albert Hall and I went down to see them and went backstage and Pete says: "Oh, hello Lemmy." And I shook his fucking hand! He gritted his teeth – he was a man about it – but I don't think he'll forgive. I'm sure he reads *Classic Rock*, so: sorry, Pete. I've got the foot now if you wanna come and stamp on it.

"God's a crutch for people who don't know who they are. I'm responsible for what I do."

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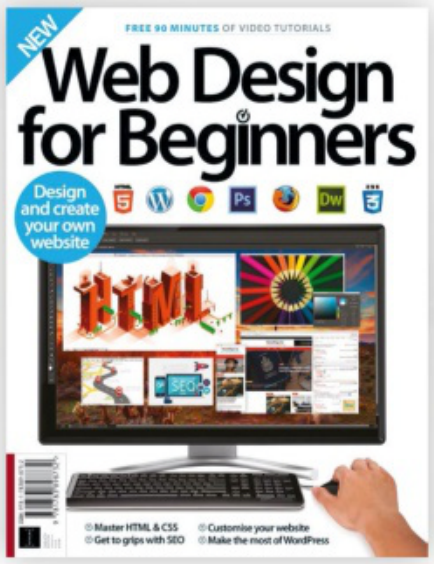


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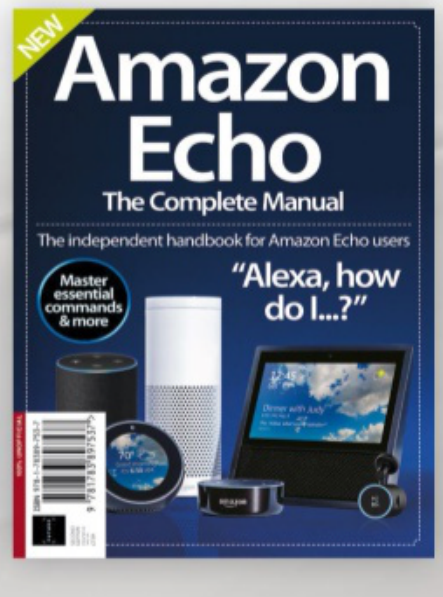




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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GREGG ALLMAN

When *Classic Rock* spoke to **Gregg Allman** in 2014, the Southern Rock legend had said farewell to The Allman Brothers Band for the final time. He was looking forward to a bright future, and back over a tumultuous past.

Words: **Jaan Uhelszki**

When the Allman Brothers played their final show, at New York's Beacon Theatre on October 29, 2014, on the 43rd anniversary of the day his brother Duane Allman died in a motorcycle accident, Gregg Allman told the audience in a quiet voice: "Never did I have any idea it would end like this." This from the man who wrote the prophetic words in *Midnight Rider*: *'The road goes on forever.'* But while the Allman Brothers Band might have reached the end of the road, Gregg Allman's new path is just beginning.

As 2014 draws to a close, Allman is clearly a man reborn, perhaps related to having undergone a liver transplant in 2010. Next month he embarks on a tour with the band he's assembled over the past eight years, on which he'll perform Allman Brothers songs without any reservations ("I did write them, after all"). He has a spring wedding planned with his 27-year-old fiancée, two albums and a rare UK appearance, at *Classic Rock*'s Ramblin' Man festival, scheduled for next year, and he and his manager Michael Lehman recently endowed a scholarship at Syracuse University for students in need.

All this from a man who never planned on becoming one of America's most recognisable white blues singers. Fortunately, life had other plans, and the slurry, blurry, often dangerous magic of Allman's voice carried on the subversive blues-rock legacy that his brother began 45 years ago.

Sitting on a sofa in Los Angeles' fabled Sunset Marquis hotel, Allman is as lithe as he was when the ABB closed down Bill Graham's Fillmore East. He has a bit of a cough. "It was cold in New York, I caught it there. I had a lot going on," is about all he will allow about the huge undertaking of dismantling the Allman Brothers at the Beacon Theatre. But, if anything, Gregory Lenoir Allman is always understated, from his fine-gauge navy sweater, to the silver jewellery, to his famous blond hair tied up with a plain rubber band. Only a few of his tattoos peek out from beneath his sweater: three shamrocks, a flower and part of a musical staff.

> *"Not a day goes by I don't think of Duane. Every time I walk onstage, I feel he's right there next to me."*
>
> GREGG ALLMAN

The first time I interviewed Allman, during ABB's *Win Lose Or Draw* tour in 1975, he had just two: the mushroom that all the band members had, and one of Wile E Coyote – his then spirit cartoon. Many tattoos and big life events have come along over those four decades. Today Gregg Allman is a much more reflective man, comfortable in his body, his eyes still the colour of a thundercloud; but no longer are there any storms on the horizon. This is a man who looks like he has finally made peace with his choices – especially the difficult ones.

You've had an eventful twelve months: the end of the Allman Brothers Band, the lawsuits over your film – and you finally being absolved of any guilt. Those are really big events.

They really are.

Did you expect it to be a tumultuous year?

I had thought maybe it was going to be. Next year is going to be the goodie, because I have a new band that I've put together over the past eight years and they were really getting good. We've got some great arrangements of some old songs I wrote, and we've got a bunch of new stuff. I hope to get in the studio, maybe this time next year.

The Allman Brothers have now played their final shows. What reaction are you having because you ended something you've done for forty-five years?

Well, no, I didn't let go of playing. I didn't let go of the blues.

But you did something very significant and final.

Change is good. It's scary but it's good.

You chose to conclude those shows on October 29, which is the anniversary of your brother Duane's death.

PRESS



The ABB at the band's farewell show: (l-r) Jaimoe, Derek Trucks, Butch Trucks, Gregg Allman (also inset), Warren Haynes, Oteil Burbridge and Marc Quiñones.

It was all dedicated to him. We had some beautiful pictures of him up on the screen.

You played some of his guitars, too. Why was that?
We did it because I heard my niece, Galadrielle, was going to bring her father's guitars to the Beacon. She was going to get them out of the Hall Of Fame and bring them. And I thought: "Man, that might be a bad idea. Because if the people find out, someone might try to steal them." It wasn't going to be a bad idea bringing them, but I mean getting away from here, everybody's going to know what we have with us, and who's going to watch them? I worry about things like that. But I didn't need to. After they used them they went straight back out to the car and were locked in the trunk. But it was a wonderful final string of shows.

What were you thinking about – did you feel Duane's presence during the Beacon shows?
Not a day goes by I don't think of him, or something we did, somewhere we went… Every time I walk up on the stage I still feel like he's standing right there next to me. He never talked much about dying. Somehow I think he never did. For a long time ago I heard my mother tell me: "A person doesn't die if he stays in your heart and in your thoughts." Duane is always with me.

It's like there's this other plane that people still exist on. Do you get that sense with Duane?
I do. It's like he's gone to another country or something, and he just steps back in every now and then. I've had some real vivid dreams about him. I remember talking with him. When I was having my liver transplant they tried some kind of miracle drug on me and it about killed me. And, you know, I barely remember it except I had this dream.

There was this little creek, and it had one of those little Japanese walkway bridges. I was on one side of the creek and there he was on the other side, and he had one of those hats that they wear in the rice paddies to keep the sun off his face. As I was approaching the walkway, he kept walking away. I never got too close to him. When I woke up I looked around the room and everybody's eyes are wide. I think they thought I wasn't going to make it. But when I woke up I said: "What's up, guy?" Course, he wasn't there any more.

Did you get the sense that you weren't supposed to cross that bridge yet?
Yes I do. That gives me a lot of faith.

What do you believe? Where do we go when we die?
I have never thought you're just dead, that's it. I mean, after all this? There's got to be more.

I interviewed Jerry Lee Lewis recently.
You earned your pay that day.

I did. But what brings him to mind is that, like him, you're the last man standing from a certain era. Especially of those who were rather excessive in their habits. You and Iggy Pop beat everyone's expectations. But some place deep within you, despite the fourteen trips to rehab, this road really did go on forever.
Oh, yeah. Wait, did you compare me to Iggy Pop?

I did.
Ha ha ha!

You must have known the road really would go on forever for you to have written those words way back then in… when was it?
Let me see. That was in 1970. No, it was '71. My brother was in on it. And in 1970 we worked three hundred and six nights and we were gone from home a whole year. That might work for John Mayall, but not me. I did a tour with John Mayall a little while ago and he showed me his itinerary. It was that thick. I said: "Man, this is next year?" He said: "Here you are griping about having to work so hard." And he's eighty – fifteen years older than me.

Maybe he thinks if he keeps booking dates then he won't die because he's made other plans.
There you go. But it's not that I don't like to play, it's the travelling I hate. If I ever retire I will retire from travelling, not from playing. I'd like a career with less travel. I'm almost a white-knuckle flyer these days. I don't want to get back into drugs, but the only thing that would ever tempt me to take something is a damned airplane.

John Lee Hooker used to phone you, and Buddy Guy said that you keep the blues alive.
John Lee used to call me on my birthday and tell me he loved me. He was religious about it. I loved how he dressed up, the hat and the whole bit.

BB King is like that too.
He's my friend. A real friend. Willie Dixon was too. I met Muddy Waters and Willie when I went over to Willie's house in Chicago. It was a housing project, actually, on South Racine Street. His wife cooked us fried chicken and collard greens and sweet potato pie. I brought over a twenty-one-year-old bottle of Scotch. It's made by Chivas. It's real expensive; I mean, even back then it was about seventy dollars a bottle.

This was around when he just had his leg cut off.



The Allman Brothers Band circa 1969.

GETTY X 2

Diabetes. He had a broomstick where it should be, with a shoe on the end of it, and… it was so cool, man. He was so knocked out with that bottle of Scotch. He thought it was something else. And the fact that I brought the limousine over to his house. I spent about four hours with him, and finally he went to sleep while we were talking. "Now I have to go to sleep," he says. "Don't get offended!" Nothing this man could do could offend me.

That day was probably as good as any compliment you've ever received.
With compliments it has a lot to do with who's giving it. I've had some nice ones. But my favourite was in a letter. It's hanging in my master bathroom, because I like to read it every now and then. The guy who wrote it said: "I've been following the Allman Brothers all my life, and now I'm following your band." He went on to say: "Of all the bands out there, yours is the most honest and you're one of the last of your kind. I would take my children to see you because I know they would be enriched by seeing you play." It was just the way he worded it, it was just beautiful.

Somebody once said about you that all your songwriting comes from just looking for love, never giving up on it.
I've got it now. We've been together now three years. We're going to get married in springtime. I found one woman and that's fine. You meet somebody, and every day you learn something else about them. And she does not treat me like a celebrity. She's twenty-seven years old – forty years' difference.

"When I was having my liver transplant, they tried some miracle drug on me and it about killed me."

GREGG ALLMAN

Your mother, Mama A, has always been a big presence in your life. Is she still alive?
Yeah. She's 97.

You're a different man now compared to the man I interviewed back in 1975.
I hope so. It took me a long time to get up fool's hill, you know?

Do you still smoke pot?
I do.

Does that play havoc with your sobriety?
No. I didn't have to go to rehab for that.

You've just received* Classic Rock*'s Living Legend award. Did you always know you had an extraordinary gift?
Absolutely not! I've never thought my voice would even warrant putting on the radio, I never thought it would be good enough. It's only been about ten or fifteen years where I stopped doubting myself. You're your worst critic and you sound like a million other people at once, and then pretty soon one day you wake up and say: "Well, by God, I do have a style all my own."

Was there a moment where you thought: okay, I'm in the right place at the right time?
Oh, hundreds of thousands of moments like that. Even though I was barely there, I really was proud when I got inducted in the Hall Of Fame. I just wish we could redo it, that night. You know, let me have another crack at that acceptance speech. But I think that's what it took to wake me up into getting sober.

What do people always get wrong about you?
A lot of times shyness can be misconstrued for people being stuck up. I don't really let out that much personal stuff. I don't talk much on stage, because I just… I don't have anything to say. If you have something to say, I believe in saying it, but if you have to create something to try to be cool or to try to be witty… that's not me.

You seem so stoic most of the time.
I'm taking it all in. My grandmother once told me it's the quiet ones you have to watch. The guy running his mouth over there, you don't have to worry about him at all.

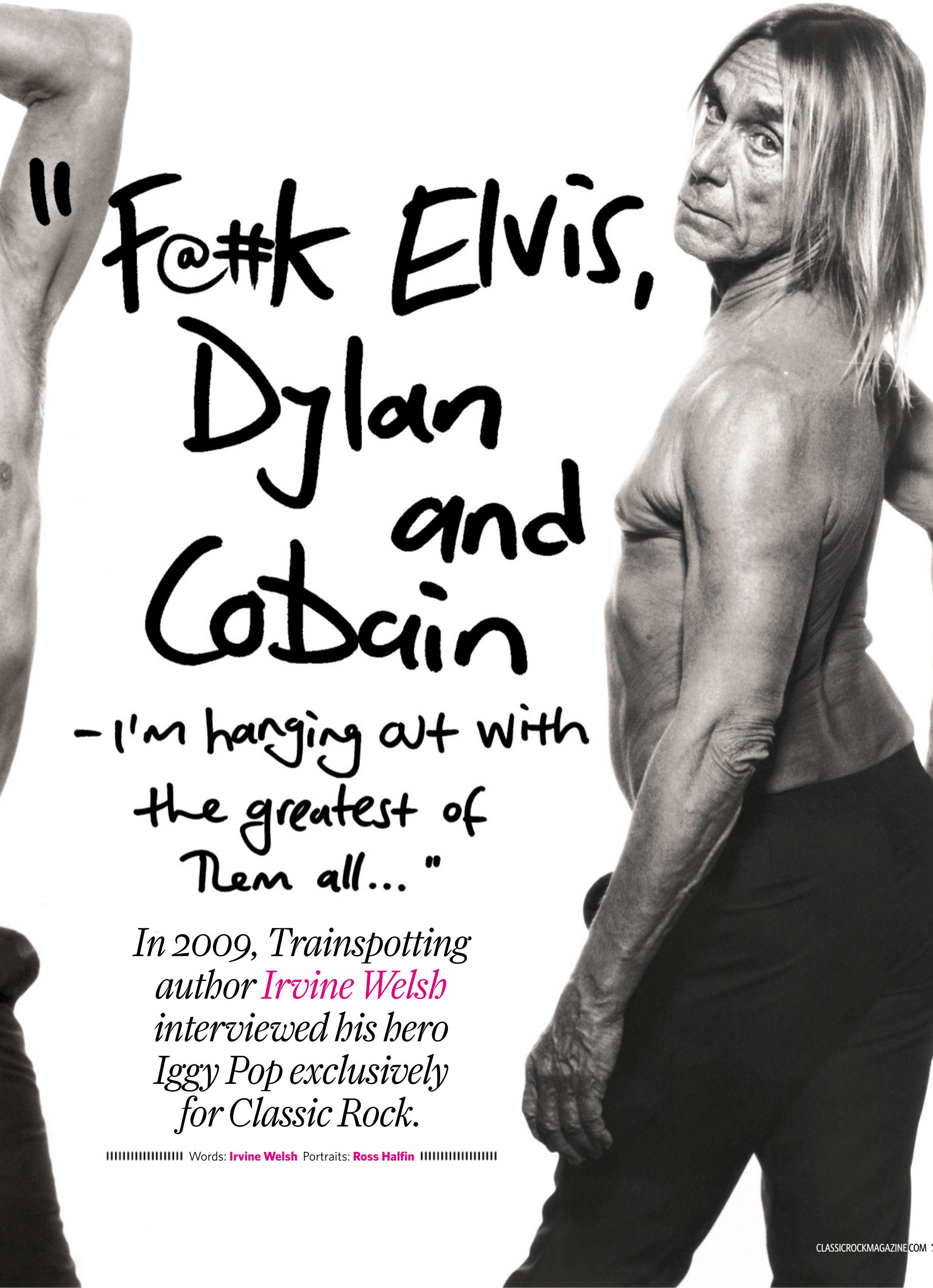
Now you've done your final show as an Allman Brother, what do you think the legacy of the band is?
I think the most important thing is we never had anybody ask for their money back. I've never left a concert thinking: "We sure short-changed them. That sure was a shitty show." I still always play like it's going to be my last show.



"F@#k Elvis, Dylan and Cobain – I'm hanging out with the greatest of them all..."

In 2009, Trainspotting author Irvine Welsh interviewed his hero Iggy Pop exclusively for Classic Rock.

Words: **Irvine Welsh** Portraits: **Ross Halfin**

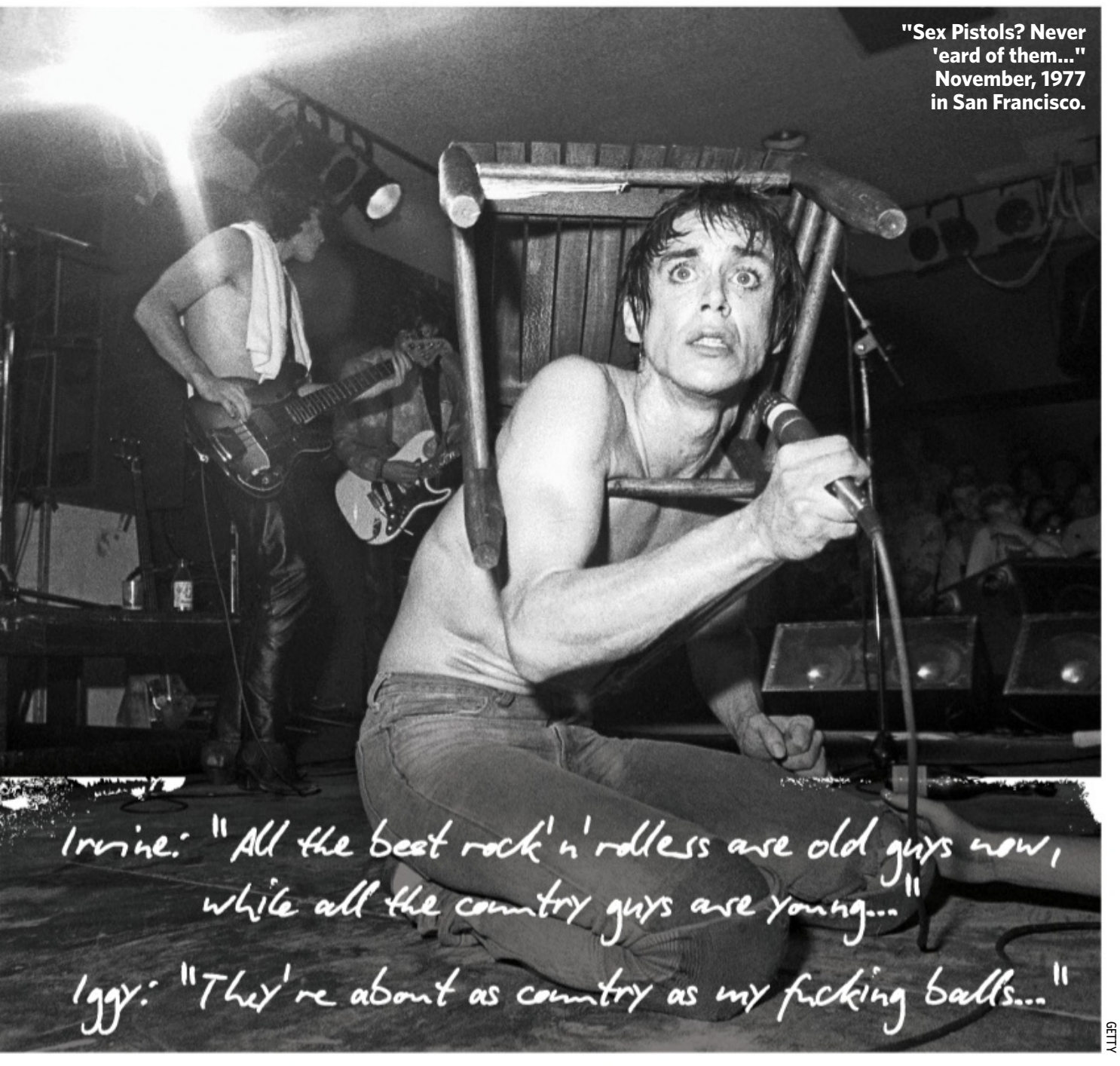


It's been a while since I've seen Iggy Pop, despite us living pretty close to each other in Miami, so doing this piece was a great chance to catch up. Iggy has two homes in South Florida, his main residency he shares with his wife and an assortment of animals. I meet him at the one he uses to 'hang out with the guys'; a pleasant spot with a garden of dense tropical vegetation, backing onto a slow-moving river.

As we make our way to the patio furniture at the river's edge, a huge blue crab greets us, standing its ground and waving its pincers threateningly. He's just a foretaste of the wildlife to come; as we sit down, we disturb an alligator, who slithers from under a mangrove bush into the river. I'm a little disconcerted, but Iggy smiles appreciatively; those guys are obviously old neighbours. Deeply tanned and relaxed in waistcoat and jeans, Iggy's rimless spectacles evoke the studious intellectual Jim Osterberg, the alter ego of the über rock'n'roller, though he navigates between those two sides of his personality with seamless ease, his Midwest voice as rich in timbre as ever.

We swap tales about our respective Miami lives, as a Muscovy (a kind of red-faced tropical duck) comes to beg some food. Iggy asks me about how things are going at Hibs (he looks out for them since I gave him a football strip some years back), and hasn't heard much lately other than that things got pretty dull last season. I bring him up to speed, telling him about the new manager, Leith born-and-bred John Hughes. He's delighted that a local man is at the helm and starts talking about the impact young black Miamians are making on the city's sporting franchises. Our conversation moves on to the Miami Heat basketball team and the current Dolphins football side.

I tell him a tale about my dark old days before laser eye surgery, when I ended up embracing Hulk Hogan in a Mexican restaurant on Miami Beach's Alton Road, thinking he was Iggy, who'd been hammering the steroids. This incident confirmed that it really was time for the procedure, and is a source of great mirth to Mr Osterberg. But you want to know about Iggy Pop, not Jim Osterberg, or Irvine Welsh, so it's down to business. Iggy is as good a listener as he is conversationalist, so I've edited out the bulk of my own ramblings.



"Sex Pistols? Never 'eard of them..." November, 1977 in San Francisco.

GETTY

IRVINE WELSH: I saw your performance for Madonna's induction into the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame on YouTube. You were dancing around all those stiff-arsed suits and she was looking like the girl from the Bronx enjoying her society wedding in the Hamptons, when the drunken big brother comes crashing in…
IGGY POP: I know! "Here he comes!" I knew it was gonna be like that, and I think she did too. She worked with us before – she hired us to open for her in Ireland, at Slaine Castle. That was not a dissimilar reaction. There were 85, 000 mentally-challenged people there to listen to her drum machine and watch one very overpaid person and a bunch of underpaid acolytes go through similar motions.

Why did she hire you again?
She's from up the road. She's from Rochester, Michigan, I'm from Ypsilanti. We're a long spit from each other. So I think that's one thing. I think she wanted to keep it just a little edgy, I guess she wasn't fuckin' any bad boys at the time, so she thought: "I'll hire one anyway." I think she felt conflicted about the Hall Of Fame thing and thought, "Well, if you want me, you're gonna get this…"

I remember the last time we sat down like this and chatted into a tape, it must have been ten years ago, you told me you were going to get the Stooges back together and do a ballad album. You've done both those things.
Yeah, those were the things I wanted to do, and it takes a while to get it done sometimes, but I got it the fuck out…

Obviously, with Ron (Asheton, the Stooges guitarist who died earlier this year) gone now, where does that leave the Stooges?
You know, the Stooges, capital 'S', is over, and sort of my last official act as the head of that is to go to New York and sign copies of our coffee-table book. It was important to me to publicly endorse it: a hardback full-bound book that you can put on your coffee table with pictures of us snarling and nodding out, weiner sticking out of my pants, all this various stuff… So that's that. But the one thing that never got done, was what I'd call the second growth group, which is Iggy and the Stooges.

This is the *Raw Power* era rather than the first album/*Funhouse* era?
Yeah. So that group has its first gig in about four weeks in São Paulo. [They played on 7 November.]

Excellent… Will you do fresh material with them?
Oh, this is something interesting. Probably. Eventually. We started actually, and wrote two things, neither of which are very good, which is always how you start… Because Ron passed away and we wrote a song about that, a sombre piece of music with sombre vocals… Nobody's ever gonna hear it. [Laughs.]

So it was something you had to do, to get it out your system?
Exactly, exactly. We did that. What I'm really interested in, is the body of work that we wrote and never recorded. There's a whole album's worth that we only played live after we'd been suspended by Mainman, dropped by CBS, kicked out of our

apartments, and finally we were living in a daily rental with Mexican labourers. But still we were going out and going "Wait, no, here's another one!" (laughs). "Ok, so maybe they didn't like *Search And Destroy*, but have they heard *Wet My Bed*?" (laughter). But that's what I actually thought! It's 1974 and, like, *Rainy Days And Mondays* and *Loving You Is Easy Cause It's Beautiful* are at the top of the charts. So I'm like: "No! *Wet My Bed!* Wait till they hear this!" So I've been listening to the live recordings of all this stuff, there's *Open Up And Bleed, Rubber Legs, Rich Bitch, Cock In My Pocket, Wet My Bed, Heavy Liquid, Head On The Curb, She Creatures Of The Hollywood Hills, Jesus Loves The Stooges*, our gospel song… We got about ten, and I would like to do those. I would like go into the studio on the right occasion and finally get that fuckin work out!

They've all been bootlegged to fuck.
Oh yeah, but it doesn't matter cause they're all from live recordings. Not only are they not studio versions, but we couldn't play them right cause I was way too stoned. [Laughs] The band would start, and it's time for the first verse, but a minute later I still haven't stopped insulting people…

So this is the lost album you're going to try and get together?
Yeah, it's the lost album. I'd really like to do that, and while we're in there, and with no pressure, not expecting anything, jam like hell…

…And see what come out…
…Or not! It could just be a bunch of old farts opening their legs and going, "Ooh, I'll compare my fart to yours…" so I'm looking for an occasion, hopefully there's an occasion. That's the thing. There's no occasion any more. Nobody cares if anybody makes a new album.

It's not an event now, is it? There's too much out there.
No, it's only an event if they're like 16 years old and on TV, if their audience is large and stupid enough. So I'm looking for a filmmaker. I'm talking to one now, trying to pitch it to this guy, and there's another that's popped up who wants to make a Stooges movie. So I'm looking for an occasion… [At this point Iggy's grin could give our gator pal a run for its money] …and somebody to just do it on their dime…

[Laughing] Yeah, it's always the best way.
Other than that, I don't care that much. I feel guilty when I don't write though. I had one song, which is how *Preliminaires* came about. These guys wanted something sombre for a documentary on Houellebecq [Michel, the French novelist], something nice and depressing that didn't fit elsewhere. You know the Stooges would never let me [he does an imitation of a redneck snarl] "record that shit…" [dog barking sounds] …so I haven't been writing my own stuff but I take on these projects.

I wrote one with Slash – let's see if it comes out. I wrote one with Danger Mouse – but these guys are so big now it's all that, "It's a book, no it's a film, no it's an album, wait… the record company doesn't hear a single…" you know, you get caught up in other people's problems. So the last piece of writing I done, I wrote for Michael Moore, for his film that's just out now…



***Capitalism: A Love Story*. I haven't seen it yet.**
Yeah, I ain't seen it either, but it starts out with *Louie Louie*. He heard a version I did, a political version from the 90s. You know, how did it go: [voice of a vocalist] *'The communist world is falling apart…'*

[Voice of a novelist] '*…capitalism is just breakin' hearts…*'
Yeah, so he wanted me to write other verses to bring in current affairs. It was pretty interesting. We did it all by email.

He's from your home state as well, isn't he? Another Michiganite. (Like Madonna and Hulk Hogan.)
Yeah, he called me, and it was nice, you know, no agents, no managers… So I did that on assignment, and he'd go, "How about something on credit default swaps?"

But you'd be good at that now. You'd be able to write about your insurance experience.
Oh, my car insurance….

Yeah, your car insurance.
The car insurance experience was awesome. I meet a lot of nice British families now, round the hotel pools in America. [Posh BBC accent] "Oh I say, it's the man from the telly, who sells the car insurance! I say! Do you actually have the insurance yourself?" [Laughter] "Wellll…"

You can't have it, can you? They won't let you?
Hey! I think I could have it…

If you dug your heels in they'd give you it, aye?
Yeah, they were willing to do it… [*In April 2009, the Advertising Standards Authority upheld complaints that Iggy's Swiftcover ad was misleading because the company did not insure musicians. Swiftcover changed their policy and Iggy is still the face of their campaign – Ed.*]
I could buy a car over there, or I could be a second driver on your car – if you had one! [Laughs] I had a ball. Since I was six years old I wanted to be in an advert. Ever since our first Stooges album I thought: "Why doesn't somebody hire me to do an advert? I can sell shit better than the zombies on TV!"

You've also got involved in Lego.
Yeah, I'm in the game called *Lego Rock Band*. I'm a character in that.

Now that *is* brilliant.
Yeah… always wanted to be…

(Iggy tails off as IW laughs. He joins in. At this point a manatee swims downriver, passing just a few feet away from us. We're both thrilled to be so close to one of these amazing creatures.)

What about *Preliminaires*? Have you done any gigs for it?
I did one really weird thing; something called the Century of Song in the Ruhr in Germany. I played in a converted steelmill. I collaborated with Marc Ribot and a lady named Tine Kindermann. We did songs of love and death, but my songs were basically sex and death. I don't really do love, I just do sex. [Laughs] I did four from *Preliminaires*, one German folk song with her, then "One-two – fuck you pricks!" and we're into *Cock In My Pocket*.

Then I did a live radio gig and a French TV concert.

Do you think they would take that more over there, whereas here they'd just want you to rock out?
Yeah, I didn't want to do it over here. I was almost ready to do it for the Dolphins, at a big tailgate party, but we didn't come to terms and there were too many other things I was doing at the time. But I was working myself up to doing stuff from *Preliminaires* and other stuff from some of my records that I thought would sound good with horns and traditional instruments. But I didn't wanna tour at all this year, cause I told myself for one year that I'm not gonna tour.

What about acting in general, are you still into that? (Iggy's already aware that I'm working on an extremely low-budget film, so his tone becomes a bit more cautious in response to this question.)
I approach it as I always have… Well that's not true. For the first year, which was 1985, I actually pursued it on a novice level where I got a coach and went to acting classes. I was with all these models with shit-for-brains, and of course, I was no better than they were! I went to auditions and got turned down continually till finally I got a non-speaking part in *The Color Of Money*. For a couple of years I didn't pursue it, but if you called me up I would go coast-to-coast for a few hundred bucks. I would be the dead body on a detective series, anything.

Did you enjoy doing it?
No, I hated it. But I understood, I had a side strategy, which ended up culminating with the book you wrote (*Trainspotting*), though it obviously came about the other way; which was to get my music out there through films.

Ah, right!
That's what I was after! I saw how people are. How they think. I thought, "I could do that, and if I'm in that…"

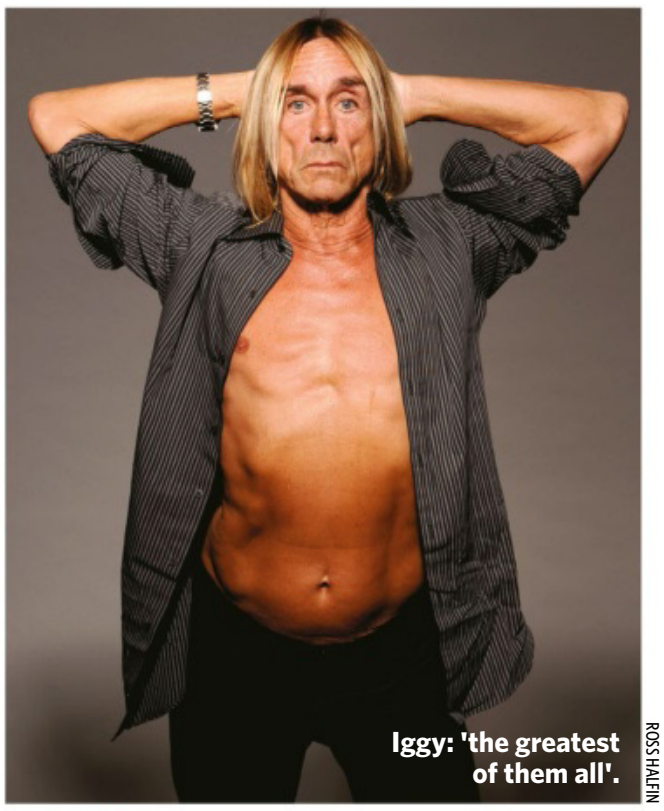
So you'd have that visual recognition and then people would get turned on to the music… Just pushing your stuff up into the light.
This is it. That's what I was after. I pushed it for a couple of years, and now it lies dormant and has since 1990 really. But if I like the script and you pay me, I'll do it. If I knew how to fix pipes, that's good money too, I'd do that. There are a lot of days I'm not busy, I'd go fix their pipes. But when I was 18, outta high school, I not only gave myself a dream job, I was president of the fuckin' dream company. I started out at the top job and I've been working my way down since, because nothing's really as good as that.

Any plans to do another straight-down-the-line Iggy Pop album?
I dunno what else I want to do. I haven't murdered country yet. I've done a little country…

What do you think about doing country and western? *Cookie McBride* on *Zombie Birdhouse* was a country song.
Yeah, that's kinda country, and there's one called *Highway* on *Blah Blah Blah*.

Would you ever go the full hog and just think, "Fuck it, I'm off to Nashville for six months, I'm just gonna hang out, round up some incredible musicians, get in the studio and do some shit?"
No, because it would be Memphis.

You'd go to Memphis?
Oh fuck yeah, that's the centre of the universe. The only good place in the whole universe. I often feel like a fool that I'm not there…


Iggy: 'the greatest of them all'. ROSS HALFIN

"73,000 neo-vegetarians in a stadium being played at by a commercial rock band that can't roll? Fuck that!"
– Iggy Pop

(Personally I think Memphis is a bit of a shithole, but Iggy was in full flight so I kept my counsel. Maybe I just had bad luck the last two times I was there.)

…and the music – it's not really happening now, but the people who have that attitude, most of them all black… "Yeah, yeah, Memphis man… Nashville, aw you know, I can take it or leave it", all that stuff. Even Merle Haggard doesn't like it. I read an article in *Rolling Stone* where he was going on about "cowboys think they can send cow turds down the river to my property…"

It's kind of weird how things have changed, cause when you see these country musicians, a lot of them are young guys. Whereas all the best rock'n'rollers are old guys. It's like rock'n'roll is the older medium now.
Cos country music in America is a huge and viable career opportunity for a young professional. They're about as country as my fuckin' balls with their crappy little starched pants, wearing a stupid fuckin' cowboy hat, and the songs are just pop pap, but it's the only form of white music that America buys in large, consistent quantities, except for teen bitches. You can be a pin-up or you can be country. Basically, because of broadcast politics, most of the radio stations are in the south. The people in the north don't have time for music. Don't have time to make it, don't have time to sell it, don't have time to listen to it. But the people down south still do, so it's still a good thing to do if you're 20 years old and you're a kinda good-lookin' guy from Tennessee and you can strum three chords, [excited southern voice] "I can be a rich 'un in five or six years. Hell yeah ah could!" They are very organised, these people.

How do you see rock'n'roll now in the world of downloads and the whole disposable culture of music?
That's healthy, all the internet trading and chitter-chatter. I think it's the last stand, because, well, the west wants to be comfortable as it gets older and the rest of the world doesn't wanna rock, they wanna just kill all the white people [laughs]. "Kill whitey and let's move along!" In its quest for comfort and stability the west has taken away… Where does a kid 13 to 16 – the age I was when I found buds to play with – where do you do that? We played church socials, teen clubs, ice-cream parlours. Where do you go now? You only go to the mall, and there are restrictions on everything you do. As long as there are kids who want to pervert themselves in the name of life – I don't mean 'pervert' in a bad way, but not go with the programme – there's gonna be the spirit of rock'n'roll, but where do they go? They can't find each other any more.

And if they do manage, it's easier to buy a big bag of coke and a gun.
Yeah, and you can buy a little drum machine too. Affordability, portability, ease of access, easier to steal. Rock'n'roll will be around but I'm happy to say it's not my problem, the real problem is the attitude, "Oh my god… People have stopped buying ten million Bruce Springsteen albums!"

That's not a problem.
Damn straight! They never bought ten million of my goddamn albums! I've been at it 40 years, I've probably sold under four million albums. So, fuck, do I care? I don't care! I don't care if there's no more Beatles, you know! So I don't really see it as a huge problem if vast amounts of money and huge economies of scale which result in what? Which result in the piteous sight of seventy-three thousand neo-vegetarians bowing their heads and shuffling into a gigantic stadium to be played at by a commercial rock group that can't roll. Fuck that! I don't care! Whoo! Whoo!

It was a great pleasure to see Iggy again. He remains a born raconteur, his charm and grace as abundant as ever, while he stills brims with anecdotes, insights and information on just about anything you care to mention. If I had to put together a Rock'N'Roll University Challenge team, his would be the first name that would spring to mind. Mind you, he'd be *numero uno* on any list I had to compile on all things pertinent to rock'n'roll. It amazes me that in my cynical middle-age I'm still as much a fan as ever. So fuck Cash, Presley, The Big O, Dylan, Brian Wilson, Springsteen, Morrison or Cobain. I'm hanging out with the greatest of them all, watching the tropical afternoon sun falling behind the palm trees.

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FUTURE



“When I put the uniform on, and the legs start shaking, I’m ready...”

So says Angus Young, **AC/DC** guitarist and rock’n’roll icon. In this classic interview, he looks back on the band’s early days, remembers the late, great Bon Scott, and reveals the secrets of his band’s everlasting success.

Words: **Paul Elliott** Portrait: **Martyn Goodacre/Getty**

For all that he has achieved in one of the biggest rock’n’roll bands the world has ever seen, Angus Young has never taken himself too seriously. As a man who has spent his entire adult life performing on stage in a schoolboy uniform, AC/DC’s lead guitarist always has a joke at the ready. As he says of his formative years: “Had my first cigarette at six months, first woman at twelve months, family man at eighteen months. What a life!”

Born on March 31, 1955 in Glasgow, the youngest of eight children, Angus McKinnon Young was just eight when his family emigrated to Australia, and it was in Sydney, in 1973, that he and his older brother Malcolm, rhythm guitarist, formed AC/DC. The band went on to sell more than 200 million albums worldwide, including 50 million of Back In Black, the 1980 comeback, recorded with new vocalist Brian Johnson in place of the recently deceased Bon Scott, which became the biggest selling rock album of all time.

The death of Malcolm Young on November 18, 2017 left Angus as the last remaining founder member of AC/DC. But it was Malcolm’s wish that the band carried on, playing loud rock’n’roll, just as they always did, right from the very start.

“I enjoy playing,” Angus says. “That’s what keeps me going.”

What first turned you on to rock’n’roll?

The sound of Chuck Berry’s guitar. It’s everything rolled into one: it’s blues, it’s rock and roll, and it’s got that hard edge to it. To me, that’s pure rock’n’roll. It’s not clean – it’s nasty.

Did playing guitar come easily to you?

As a kid, I was never one for the tennis racket. I was more interested in getting my fingers round the guitar neck, because when I was little – I’m little now, but I was ‘little’ little – getting a hand around the neck was a big thing. That was the hardest part.

What do you remember of those early days, when you were just a regular schoolboy like all the others?

I didn’t go to school much. I was prize truant. When I went in it was like, ‘Welcome Mr. Young! A year is a long holiday, you know? The first day I went to that school, we all went to assembly and the headmaster dragged all the boys who’d been caught smoking up on the stage in front of the whole school. Of course Malcolm was one of them.

So you were always a naughty boy?

I got into a lot of trouble when I was young. I wouldn’t say I was a budding bank-robber or anything, but I was a bit of a juvenile delinquent.

You also got into blues music at an early age. What did you love about it?

It’s the emotion in those old blues records. I’ve never really been into the depression stuff. I’ve always liked the happy sort of blues music, like Muddy Waters. Even though he might have been singing about his woman running off with a nineteen year-old bus driver from Florida, there would be an element of humour in it, and that’s what I’ve always loved. I’ve never been a great lover of the real sad element of the blues. There are some great sad songs, but I prefer the happier side. And the grammar in blues music is fantastic. Some of the things that Muddy would sing: ‘I just love them pretty womens, I’ll kill for them young pretty things.’ They’d sing ‘whummen’ instead of women, and ‘choo’ instead of you. But you get what they mean.

“Early on, we always thought we’d be lucky if we got past the first week!”

When you and Malcolm formed AC/DC, with Dave Evans as singer, were you thinking big?

Early on, we always thought we’d be lucky if we got past the first week!

There was a defining moment in April 1974 when AC/DC appeared at an open-air concert in Sydney’s Victoria Park, and you wore your old school uniform on stage for the first time.

That was the most frightened I’ve ever been on stage. but I had no time to think. I just went straight out there. The crowd’s first reaction to the shorts was like a bunch of fish at feeding time – mouths open. I had just one thing on my mind: I didn’t want to be a target for bottles. I thought if I stand still I’m a target. So I never stopped moving. I reckoned if I stood still I’d be dead.





Riff raff: AC/DC with late, great singer Bon Scott (second left).

"Bon Scott called himself a toilet wall graffitist. He was full of compliments about himself!"

The band earned its spurs on the Aussie pub circuit, where audiences were notoriously tough. How scary was it?

Some of the places we played were worse than toilets, let me tell you, and there was that much scrapping going on, you were behind the amps! When I was at school and there was a dance with a band, it was always a band like Van Halen, with the guy with the long blond hair wiggling his hips. In the pubs we played in, in front of that hot, sweaty, beer-swilling crowd, you couldn't even hope to do that. This was the kind of audience you couldn't even tune your guitar to. If you bust a string, that was it. Sometimes you finished with just two strings, because there was no way they were going to put up with a couple of minutes of you fixing the guitar.

I remember one night I said to the rest of the band, 'I'm not going out there.' The police couldn't get in the place. There was some madman running around inside the hall with a meat cleaver, chopping into the people! And the front row was all bikers. I said, 'They just want blood!' You looked out and it was just like murderers' row, and the look on their faces is like, 'Send us the little guy in the shorts!'

Is it true that Malcolm once had to 'assist' you in getting on stage?

Yeah. Suddenly I just felt a boot and I was on. And there's this deathly silence. All you can do is play – and pray! You put your head down and hope a bottle doesn't come your way. That became part of my stage act. I learnt to duck and keep moving.

When Bon Scott became AC/DC's singer in 1974, he'd already been around the block a few times with various bands, and had a taste for the rock'n'roll lifestyle. What did you make of him back then?

Bon joined us pretty late in his life, but that guy had more youth in him than people half his age. That was how he thought, and I learned from him. Bon used to say to me, 'Whatever I do, you don't.' Oh, I had a few wild nights over the years, but most of the time everyone else was having them for me. Because of the schoolboy uniform, some women have tried to mother me – they think I'm cute because I'm so short. But playing has always been the thing for me. I never really looked beyond the next gig. In the early days, all my mates used to say to me, 'You must be meeting loads of girls…' Well yeah, I used to meet plenty of girls, but none of them used to want to go home with me. Some women would come up and make… er, bold statements, but I don't know why. There's nothing sexy about a schoolboy, is there?

There are so many legendary stories about Bon. Do you have a favourite?

People used to get a good laugh out of how we arrived at a show in those days. We had an old bus with no brakes. It was always breaking down. One night we were playing a pub, Bon walked in, went up to the mic and said, 'Listen, if you wanna see a show tonight, we need about twelve of you to come and help us push our bus!' Then Bon wanted to iron his jeans. He said his other pair had oil and grease on them. So he got an iron from the bus, went over to the bar, pushed everyone's drinks out of the way, took his jeans off right there in this packed pub and done his jeans. We used to call him Bon The Likeable. We could be somewhere where you'd never expect anyone to know him, and someone would walk up and say 'Bon Scott!' and always have a bottle of beer for him.

In those early days, did you ever think Bon was drinking too much?

“It’s a little bit late for us to do a ballad. Rock is what we do best.”

I’d say to Malcolm sometimes, ‘You know, I don’t think Bon can stand up, let alone sing.’ But he’d surprise you. He’d last the whole night, although he’d fall down at the end.

Malcolm said that it was Bon’s voice, and his witty lyrics, that gave the band its “flavour”.
Bon called himself a toilet wall graffitist. He was full of compliments about himself! But he could conjure a story from anything. *She’s Got Balls* was about his first wife.

One of his funniest lyrics was in AC/DC’s first blues song, The Jack…
That one was written about a night when some woman did some bed-hopping. First she went with Phil (Rudd, AC/DC drummer) and during the night she crawled into Bon’s bed. The next night, this girl had been to see a doctor and she handed a bill to Phil. The doctor had diagnosed a social disease. Phil said, ‘The cheek of it! I got no fucking disease.’ During that night’s show we did a slow blues song and Bon got the lighting guy to turn a spotlight on this girl’s table. Bon said, ‘I’d just like to inform you that you gave the doctor’s bill to the wrong guy.’ Bon had a lot of trouble with diseases on the road. There was a song in the musical West Side Story called Maria. Bon used to take the piss out of it. Instead of singing, ‘I’ve just met a girl named *Maria*’, he’d say, ‘I just got a dose of gonorrhea.’ So that blues song turned into *The Jack*.

Bon also wrote some heavier stuff, such as Jailbreak, a tale of a killer in prison, working on a chain gang and plotting his escape…
He had a great way of telling stories, and *Jailbreak* was a tale of desperation.

In the summer of 1976, when the band first played in the UK, it was during a performance at the Reading Festival that you first treated an audience to something that would become a tradition – a little on-stage striptease. What prompted you to do this at Reading?
Some blonde girl walked real slow across the photo pit right in front of the stage and thirty thousand eyes went with her. It was a real showstopper. Malcolm said to me, ‘You gotta do something to get the crowd’s attention back!’ So I dropped my trousers.

And ever since, you’ve had AC/DC audiences singing ‘Get ’em off!’
I always thought they were singing ‘Get ’im off!’



If the cap fits: Angus and ‘new boy’ Brian Johnson.

There were many great songs in which Bon wrote of his own life – the macho stuff in Rocker, the hard truths in Down Payment Blues, the world-weary sadness in Ride On. Did he ever write one about you?
He did say he wrote *Problem Child* for me, but you now, I never owned a knife like it says in the song. My dad took my knife off me when I was four. Just having a guitar was bad enough, I suppose. But yeah, Bon summed me up in two words!

He could have used one word.
That’s right (laughs). With four letters!

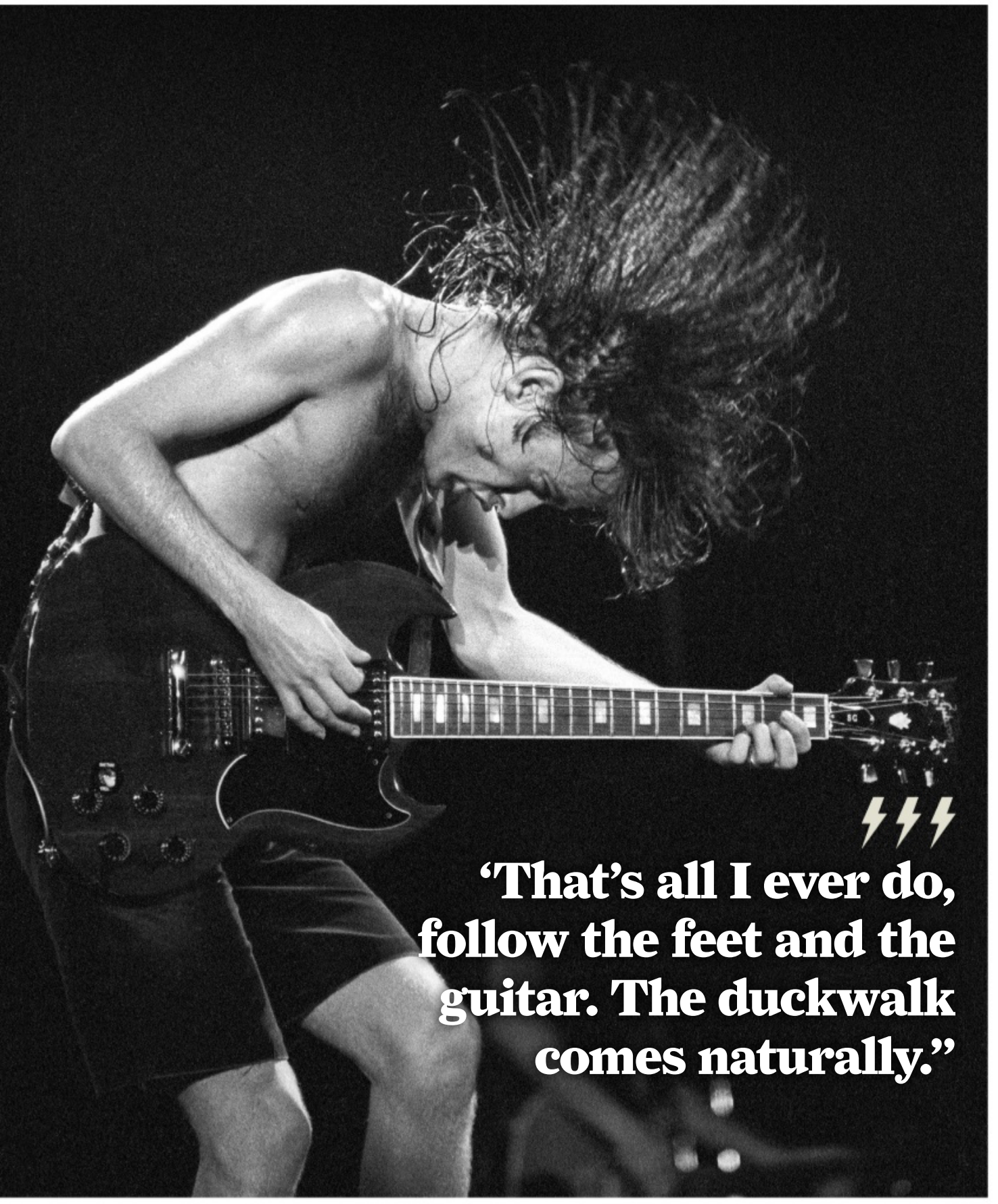
And the most famous story he ever told, written in tribute to a heavyweight groupie in Melbourne with whom he had grappled, was Whole Lotta Rosie…
Rosie was a lady from Tasmania. A big girl. Bon met her one night when he went off on a midnight walk. He went past this sleazy old motel and Rosie stuck her head out of a window and yelled out, ‘Ooh, Bon Scott!’ Now, Bon had had a few drinks that night… He liked a drink, but the drink done a bit of distortion, if you know what I mean. Bon went into the motel and Rosie and her friend dragged him off to bed. Bon done his duty, so to speak. He didn’t remember much of what went on, but he did remember pretending to be asleep and hearing Rosie whispering to her friend, ‘That’s twenty-seven this week!’ She was keeping tabs. Bon liked his women in all shapes and sizes and Rosie wasn’t no skinny little puppy.

On April 30, 1978, AC/DC played at the Apollo theatre in Glasgow, the city where you and Malcolm were born. And from that came one of the greatest live albums ever made: *If You Want Blood You’ve Got It.*

GETTY X3



Angus and renowned AC/DC fan Keith Richards.



‘That’s all I ever do, follow the feet and the guitar. The duckwalk comes naturally.”

It was the magic show. One night, guitars out of tune, feedback, singer farting, whatever…

And that album’s title came from a joke between you and Bon before you went on stage at the Day On The Green festival at Oakland Coliseum in California.
This guy from a film crew got hold of Bon and me and asked what kind of show it was going to be. Bon said, ‘You remember when the Christians went to the lions? Well, we’re the Christians!’ Then the guy asked me and I said, ‘If they want blood they’re gonna get it!’ We were on at ten-thirty in the morning and most of us hadn’t even been to bed, but eighty thousand people turned up.

In 1979, the band had its first million selling album with Highway To Hell.
That was the album that broke us in America.

But the album’s title provoked outrage among America’s so-called ‘moral majority’ – as did the cover, on which you were pictured with devil horns and a forked tail. What did you make of the controversy?
As soon as we called the album *Highway To Hell*, the American record company went into a panic. With religious things, I thought everywhere was like Australia. There, they call them Bible-thumpers, and it’s a limited species! Christianity was never a popular movement. It’s that convict background! But in America you had guys in bed sheets and placards with prayers on, picketing the gigs. I said, ‘Who are they here for?’ And they said, ‘You!’ And we had that thing – that if you play the record backwards you get these Satanic messages. Fucking hell, why play it backwards? It says it right up front: *Highway To Hell*!

After the Highway To Hell tour, you and Malcolm and Bon got together in London to begin working on the album that would become Back In Black. How much of it was written with Bon?
Bon wrote a little of the stuff, a week before he died. We started writing the music with Bon on drums. He was a drummer originally. He’d bang away while me and Malcolm worked out the riffs.

In the last hours of February 19, 1980, after Bon had been out drinking the previous night, he was pronounced dead on arrival at the Kings College Hospital in London. What do you remember about the moment when you got the news?
We were all living in little shoebox flats all over London. One of Bon’s girlfriends called but she was in panic. I told her not to worry, there’s always some rumour going round. Then a Japanese girl rang about it. I got hold of Mal and he’d heard something. Nobody knew for sure. Then our manager told us.

With the way Bon lived his life, did you fear it would end that way?
As a person, Bon stared death in the face a lot. The way he said it was, ‘One day you gotta go. You gotta be a stiff.’ That was just how he talked.

Did you feel, as most AC/DC fans did, that Bon was irreplaceable?
Well, when we started auditioning singers, they’d say, ‘How am I supposed to sing over all this volume?’ We said, ‘We don’t want you to sing – we want you to scream!’

You certainly found the right man for the job in Brian Johnson.
Yeah. I always said he sounds like somebody dropped a truck on his foot. And like Bon, Brian had a good sense of humour.

On the simplest level, Back In Black was a great rock’n’roll record. But on a deeper level it was, as you described it, a memorial.
The whole *Back In Black* album was our dedication to Bon. That’s why the album cover was pure black, and why the album starts with a bell ringing, something sombre and different to anything else we’d done.

Was this album also Brian’s finest hour?
Brian has recorded a lot of strong stuff with the band – the *Back In Black* album, and *For Those About To Rock*, which still gives me goose-bumps.

In 1985, an old song came back to haunt the band, when Night Prowler, from Highway To Hell, was linked to American serial killer Richard Ramirez, named by media as the ‘Night Stalker’.
Some people in America got real mad about the lyrics to *Night Prowler*, and this guy claimed he was influenced by the song. But we didn’t take it so seriously.

Three years later, Malcolm was absent from US dates on the Blow Up Your Video tour after entering rehab for alcoholism. His replacement on that tour was your nephew, Stevie Young.
We were already committed to touring the States, so we got Stevie in. He fitted right in after just ten days’ rehearsal. Over the years, Malcolm had given alcohol a hell of a beating. Finally he decided he wanted to dry out.

You never had that problem.
I’m teetotal. Have been for years. But it’s not a religious thing.

After all that this band has been through, can you explain its longevity?
People have said we’ve hung around long enough! But some bands fade when they try to adapt to what’s current. We play rock music. It’s a little bit



AC/DC in the late 90s: (l-r) Malcolm Young, Brian Johnson, Angus Young, Cilff Williams, Phil Rudd.

GETTY X2

"Some of the places we played were worse than toilets, let me tell you."

late for us to do a ballad. Rock is what we do best. Sometimes I'm asked if I want to play music other than AC/DC. Sure, at home I play a little blues, but after five minutes I'm like, sod this! And I'm playing hard rock again.

From the start, you've played it simple, straight-up hard rock'n'roll, nothing fancy…

You don't go to the butcher for brain surgery. But it's a challenge to keep coming up with songs of the calibre of Let There Be Rock, Highway To Hell and Back In Black. Every song we write has got to stand up. Most of our stuff is just about sex, as is most rock music. It's pretty hard to write a song about your dog. But I've never really found a sexual thing in music. I've never found anything sexy that was meant to be sexy. Now, that's a good Freudian thing. But if you go back to the blues, that's the standard tempo in most of the strip joints, and that's what we rely on too. It has to be earthy.

Have you kept up with modern music?

Nah. When I get in a car, the first thing that goes in is a Muddy Waters tape, even though I've played it four hundred times. I love that and Chuck Berry. Nowadays everything sounds so nice – buzz-free, hiss-free. I like that hiss! I like to hear the valves on the amplifier warming up. It's pure energy. I still spend hours sitting and listening to the sound Chuck Berry's guitar makes. There's not a day that goes by when I don't pick up a guitar. And I'm getting there – I've got two fingers going now!

What you learnt the hard way in the early 70s – to go on stage and keep moving – is something you've done ever since. How do you keep it up?

After a show I just wind down for a couple of hours. I try to hide, just in case somebody grabs me and says, 'Hey, you didn't play this song tonight!' I need time to relax. I wouldn't like to be the 'Angus Young on stage' all the time. I'd be burnt out inside a week. On one American tour my weight went down to ninety-four pounds, and I was a hundred and nine pounds when we started.

Do you still get nervous before a show?

Sometimes it is frightening. But you've got to psych yourself up a bit, give yourself a good kick up the ass. Usually, once I've got the uniform on, I'm okay. I'm on edge, nervous, but I'm not in a panic. At least I don't have to put on make-up. I sport my own pimples. And some nights I'm in stitches when I'm trying to be The Schoolboy. But because of nerves, I've tripped over and even forgotten to do my zipper up a few times. I go for a pee and forget. Last thing before I go on stage, I always go for a piss and then have a cigarette. If you see my shorts smoking, you know I didn't put it out right!

How do you feel when you're up there on stage?

I'm on my own little cloud. Adrenalin takes over. It's like when you take off in an aeroplane. It's exhilarating. When you're firing well, it's the best feeling in the world. And when it goes wrong, it's like someone's shoved a red-hot poker up your backside. But for me, the shows go so quick. You're on and you're off, and then you have to go back to how you are as a person. That's the hard part, because once you go into being The Schoolboy it's pretty hard to come off it. I'm like two different people – sometimes three!

Who's the third?

That's what I'm trying to figure out! I've been up there playing and thinking, what are those feet doing? I'm watching them to see which way they want to go. That's all I ever do, follow the feet and the guitar. The duckwalk comes naturally.

And it's still the best feeling in the world?

Yeah. When I put the uniform on, and the legs start shaking… I'm ready.



Big Generator

Ex-choirboy, bon viveur, prog founding father, CEO of Yes – the late **Chris Squire** was a giant in every sense. *Classic Rock* caught up with him in 2014 to look back on a life well lived.

WORDS
Mark Blake
PORTRAITS
John McMurtrie

In 1968, 19-year-old Chris Squire came round in the geriatric ward of the Chelsea And Westminster Hospital, convinced he was dead. He'd ended up there after taking homemade LSD, and being found, crazed and gibbering, by his girlfriend at the flat they shared in nearby Kensington. "It was like being in God's waiting room," Squire recalls now. "For a while I really didn't know if I was still alive."

When he realised he wasn't dead, Squire returned to the flat – and stayed there for months. "This girl looked after me," he sighs. "She worked all day and I stayed in all day. The most I could manage was a trip to the shops at the end of the road." There was, he insists, one good outcome to all this. "Day after day, I just practised and practised playing the bass."

Squire's drug misadventure was arguably the jumping-off point for a career with Yes that has lasted five decades and amassed around 30 million album sales. Despite those figures, the resolutely unsexy 'prog rock' tag means Yes never attracted the critical acclaim enjoyed by some of their contemporaries. Nor did they split up for any length of time and wait for their stock to rise. Instead, Yes just kept going, with Chris Squire permanently behind the wheel, and sometimes driving without due care and attention.

Yes's line-up has changed with comical frequency, but Squire remains the one constant. His thunderous, acrobatic bass lines and harmony vocals have fired up every Yes album from their 1969 debut to this summer's *Heaven & Earth*. But he remains an enigma: a multi-million-selling rock star who can still go about his business without being accosted for an autograph or selfie every five minutes.



INSET: GETTY

Today there's more of Chris Squire than there once was. But, at well over six feet tall, he carries it well. Dressed from platinum-blond head to toe in black, the 66-year-old moves through the 15th-floor bar of London's Langham Hotel with the unhurried, regal gait of a Tudor king, albeit one with an Alexander McQueen skull-print scarf draped around his neck.

His opening gambit – "Shall we get a glass of wine?" – is quickly followed by "How about a bottle?" And so, as World Cup pundits discuss Germany's chances against France on a nearby plasma screen, Squire settles down with a glass of chilled Chablis.

"My first job was not far from here," he says, casting an eye out of the window. "It was at Boosey And Hawkes, the music publishers. I'd been kicked out of school, and my mum took me to a recruitment agency and said: 'My son likes music. Have you got anything for him?'"

Squire's whole music career seems to have been marked by a series of happy accidents. Raised in the north London suburb of Kingsbury, he was a choirboy at his local church when he joined his first group. The church's choirmaster, Barry Rose, who would go on to conduct St Paul's Cathedral Choir, inspired Squire and friends to form their own choral group. "Barry turned us into the best choir in England," he says. "When King's College or St Paul's went on holiday, we were *the* go-to choir."

All was going swimmingly until 1963 when Squire heard The Beatles. "And I thought, fuck that, I want to be in a group that don't use music stands." Soon, one of his schoolfriends had pointed out "my big hands" and suggested they'd be good for playing the bass. ➔



The original Yes line-up in 1969: "We were strictly a pot and hash band."



Wedding bells ring for Squire and first wife Nikki in 1972.

THIS PANEL: GETTY

> *"Phil Lynott said: 'Do you want a line of coke?' And there was smack in it."*

Squire started playing youth clubs in a group called The Selfs and growing his hair. Before long the headmaster of his upmarket private school had given Squire and his schoolfriend two-and-sixpence to get their hair cut. "It was the last day of term and we wanted to keep our long hair for the summer holidays, so we took his money and walked out."

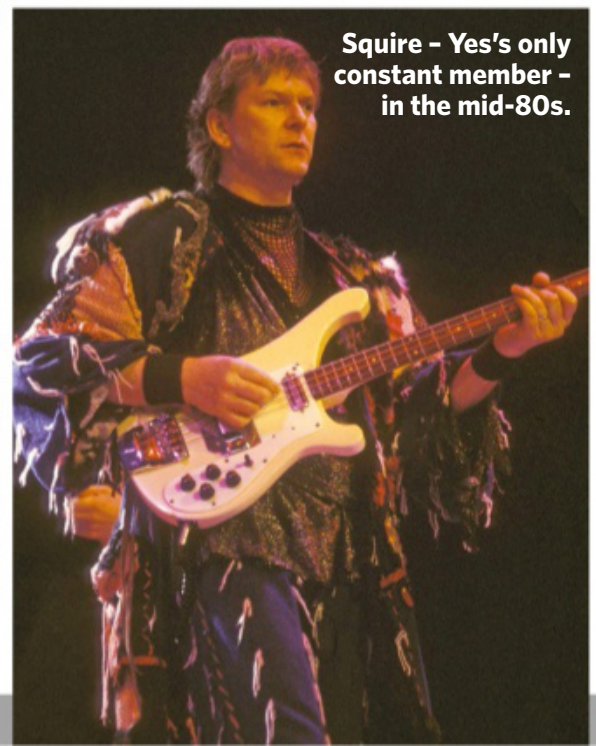
The job at Boosey & Hawkes was only ever a means to an end. Soon The Selfs merged with The Syn, and the band started playing regular gigs at the Marquee. The Syn followed the musical arc of many mid-60s groups. "Like The Who, we started off playing Tamla Motown covers," Squire explains. "But then psychedelia came along and we went a bit silly."

Part of going "a bit silly" involved a weekly pilgrimage to UFO, a club in London's Tottenham Court Road, where the budding Pink Floyd played. "It became a regular weekend thing," Squire says. "Drop acid and go to UFO on Fridays, then the trip carried on through Saturday, and on Sunday you recovered." Which is how Squire ended up sampling a friend's home-made LSD. "I think I had a touch of flu before I took it, so it probably wasn't a good idea…" Squire freaked out in the middle of the night and ended up in hospital. Despite thinking he was near death, he was soon well enough to talk to the police, who wanted to know where he'd acquired the drugs.

Pretending he was still disorientated, Squire gave them a cock-and-bull story about being approached by an Australian he'd never met before in the Earls Court Wimpy bar. And they believed him. In fact, you get the impression Squire has floated through life off the back of a side order of charm, cunning and good fortune, as well as his musical talent. Despite frying his brain cells with DIY hallucinogenics, Squire practised the bass day in, day out, convinced he'd found his vocation. "The Syn had opened for Jimi Hendrix," he says. "So I saw what was possible, and I just had this innate faith that I was going to make it."

The Syn didn't make it, but by summer 1968, Squire had formed Yes with The Syn's ex-guitarist Peter Banks and Lancastrian milkman-turned-lead singer Jon Anderson. Progressive rock fans usually work themselves into a lather about such albums as Yes's *Close To The Edge* ('72), and not without good reason. But Yes had been breaking new ground ever since the jazzy rearrangements of Byrds and Beatles songs on their eponymous first album. "Emotionally intense and imaginatively conceived," was music journalist and future pasta sauce maker Loyd Grossman's assessment of Yes's debut in rock magazine *Fusion*.

There are 13 ex-members of Yes to date, if anyone's still



Squire – Yes's only constant member – in the mid-80s.

counting. Squire isn't, but agrees to offer a potted profile of some of them whenever their names come up. Gifted guitarist Peter Banks (who died last year) was the first to go, replaced by Steve Howe in time for 1970's breakthrough *The Yes Album*. "Pete was always a grey, sad person," Squire says. "And he really didn't like the orchestra on [second album] *Time And A Word*."

With Howe in the band, so began Yes's imperial 70s reign. With it came a public persona: arty, virtuoso, terribly serious…. *Close To The Edge* was inspired by German philosopher Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, *Tales From Topographic Oceans* by a Hindu scripture. On stage – and determined not to be upstaged by glittery cape-wearing keyboard ace Rick Wakeman – Squire sported a billowy blouson decorated with butterfly motifs, and played an extended solo titled *A Bass Odyssey*.

Unlike their hedonistic contemporaries Led Zeppelin or The Who, Yes were relatively clean living – to start with. "We were strictly a pot and hash band at the beginning," says Squire, who'd sworn off LSD after his hospitalisation.

On one occasion, he and Steve Howe found themselves in a pub with *Melody Maker* writer Chris Welch and had no idea what to order: "We barely drank, so I think we asked for two Camparis."

All of the band, barring Wakeman, were also vegetarian for a time. Squire lasted five years. "And then I went back to fish," he says. "And then it wasn't long before someone said: 'Hey, there's this really good steak restaurant I know…'" Only Howe still swears off meat. "Which is why Steve still looks like a fucking stick insect."

In the meantime, Squire had been introduced to a new, less organic perk of life in a touring rock band. On Yes's 1973 US tour, a member of their unknown support act, the Eagles, took him aside and, like the fictitious Australian in the Earls Court Wimpy bar, said, "Try this." Squire dipped into the bag of white powder. "Cocaine," he says, smiling.

At some point Squire also started drinking more than the occasional Campari. "I became very, very involved in wine," he murmurs, peering into his Chablis like a fortune-teller pondering a crystal ball. Squire would go on to install a well-stocked wine and port cellar in the mock-Tudor mansion he shared with first wife Nikki and their three daughters in the rock stars' enclave of Virginia Water, Surrey.

Then again, Squire could afford it. By the end of the 1970s Yes had scored eight consecutive UK and US Top 10 albums, and their bass player had made a solo album, 1975's *Fish Out Of Water*, which featured his old choirmaster Barry Rose on pipe organ. Anyone needing a reminder should seek out a clip from a 1975 edition of *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, where Squire performs his pomp-rock single *Hold Out Your Hand*, backed by a string section and wearing what appears to be a cross between a kimono and a set of Laura Ashley curtains.

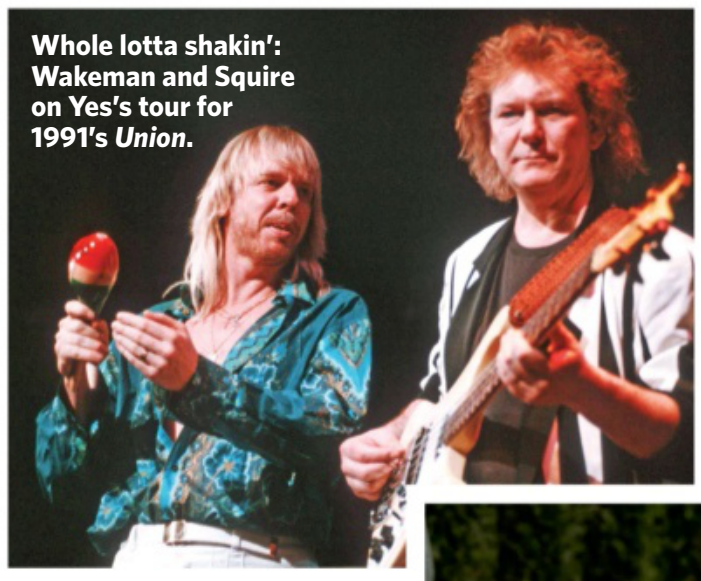
It was all getting "a bit silly" again. Yes's 1974 album *Relayer* included a jazz-prog-fusion workout titled *The Gates Of Delirium*, featuring Wakeman's replacement, Swiss keyboard maestro Patrick Moraz ("The best Hammond player I ever worked with," offers Squire. "But Steve and him didn't have a bond"). Unsurprisingly, *NME* denounced Yes as the "ultimate in Pomposity Rock", and were soon championing the Sex Pistols and The Clash instead.

Not that Yes cared. "Did we notice punk rock? Not at all," insists Squire, who claims that the closest he came to liking punk was when his 12-year-old daughter Carmen got him into The Police's *Outlandos d'Amour* debut album. "We were getting the music papers sent to us in America, and we'd see we were being branded as dinosaurs by these new bands, and we'd think, "Oo are you?' – and then walk out and play to 120,000 people."

Off tour, and back in Virginia Water, though, Squire barely had time to draw breath. There was always another album to write, another tour to plan, another vineyard to investigate… But he now had something to help keep him going.

"I got involved in cocaine," he admits. "Blame the Eagles. But that was it. As far as I know, no one in Yes ever did heroin." Apart from the time he and Nikki were at a party being thrown by Thin Lizzy's Phil Lynott. "Phil was a naughty boy. He said: 'Do you want a line of coke?' And there was smack in it."

Squire drove home from the party – "one did in those days" – in a euphoric haze: "We came to these traffic lights and I just stayed there. After a while Nikki said: 'You do realise the lights have changed from red to green four times since we've been sitting here?' I was just sat behind the wheel going: 'Hmmm, this is good.'"



Whole lotta shakin': Wakeman and Squire on Yes's tour for 1991's *Union*.

Yes had weathered punk, but the wheels were now coming off the band. Spiritually minded Jon Anderson would later grumble about how certain band members' drug habits were putting his chakras out of balance. But Squire insists that drugs weren't the problem, and that by 1978's *Tormato* album, "We were all sick of each other and needed a break."

Anderson and Wakeman walked out after aborted sessions with producer Roy Thomas Baker. Another band might have thrown in the towel. Once again, though, Squire's innate faith carried him through. Anderson and Wakeman were quickly replaced by vocalist Trevor Horn and keyboard player Geoff Downes, aka The Buggles, whose *Video Killed The Radio Star* had just been a huge hit. "They were huge Yes fans," says Squire. Another happy accident, then.

Downes, who is back in the current line-up, described what it was like joining Yes in 1979: "They all had their own limos, and were buried in that 'rock star with a big house' image."

The next Yes album seems to have been recorded to a backdrop of screeching Rolls-Royce tyres and urgent phone calls to managers, wives and drug dealers. It had the appropriate title *Drama*. "We'd sold out four Madison Square Garden shows in advance," recalls Squire, "so we had five weeks in which to get the album done before then. That's where the cocaine was useful. Because it was night after night of sixteen-hour sessions."

Released in 1980, *Drama* fizzled with Class A's, but its urgency and energy were preferable to the over-ripe *Tormato*.

Yet the line-up didn't last, and Squire soon found himself at a Christmas party swapping numbers with Jimmy Page. "John Bonham had died, and Jimmy wanted to start playing again." Squire roped in Yes drummer Alan White and the three met up at a studio in Maidenhead. Page was on a health kick. "Jimmy was really behaving himself," says Squire now. "Only smoking cigarettes through a holder."

The trio demo'd four instrumental tracks, and Squire's dad suggested a name for the blossoming supergroup: XYZ. According to Chris, though, Zeppelin's over-protective manager, Peter Grant, objected to the Y for Yes coming before the Z for Zeppelin. It was the first big problem. The second was that they didn't have a singer, and despite Page's promises, Robert Plant never showed up. "For that reason it just fizzled out," he says.

In the meantime, Steve Howe and Geoff Downes went on to enjoy a US No.1 album in 1982 with their new group, Asia. Squire must have been just a bit jealous and hungry for revenge? ↔



Chris Squire, London, July 2014.

JOHN MCMURTRIE INSET: GETTY



Yes 2014: (l-r) Chris Squire, Alan White, Steve Howe, Jon Davison, Geoff Downes.

KEVIN NIXON/FUTURE

> *"We'd be branded as dinosaurs by these new bands, and then walk out and play to 120,000 people."*

"No, not *jealous*," he insists, as I refill his glass. "I did think, though, that Asia was a bit corporate American rock and sounded as if it had been assembled by radio programmers."

A year later, Jon Anderson had rejoined Yes, and Trevor Horn was ensconced as producer. Yes emerged, as if from cryogenic storage, with a hotshot young guitarist, Trevor Rabin, and a state-of-the-art Fairlight sampling synthesiser. The subsequent album, 1983's *90125*, become Yes's biggest-seller ever, and delivered a UK and US hit with *Owner Of A Lonely Heart*. A harsher critic might call that album corporate American rock. But what saved *90125* was that Yes again broke new ground by using sampled sounds left over from Horn's last production gig, punk svengali Malcolm McLaren's *Duck Rock* album. "Nobody had heard those sounds before," says Squire, proudly. "It was all very new."

By now, though, Squire's marriage had broken up and he'd moved to Los Angeles where he began his blurry Hollywood phase: "There was a party every night." Meanwhile, the redux Yes could be seen performing on MTV and disguising their forty-something wrinkles behind *Dynasty*-style hairdos. It couldn't last. And it didn't. Anderson walked out after 1987's *Big Generator*.

"I never wanted to call that version of the band Yes," Squire insists. "But it was [Atlantic Records executive] Phil Carson who said: 'Why try a new brand when the old one has been so successful?'"

You suspect that Squire has been adhering to that maxim ever since.

"I know I'm the only member of Yes to have been in the band the whole time, but it's not by design but by default," he insists. "I've always been the one left holding the baby, and what happens is new people come along to help me hold it."

Current members Steve Howe and Geoff Downes have been in and out more than once. Jon Anderson is currently out, due to ill health, and their new album *Heaven & Earth* has American vocalist Jon Davison helping to hold the baby – and sounding remarkably like Anderson.

"I spoke to Jon Anderson not long ago," reveals Squire, who gives the impression that some ex-Yes members are sitting on a substitutes' bench just waiting for the nod. "We had a nice chat. I think we will do something together again – it's just that he may not be up for full-scale touring."

As for Rick Wakeman – a fully paid-up member of the 'No Jon Anderson, No Yes' club, and King Rat of the showbiz charity organisation The Grand Order Of Water Rats – Squire's not so sure. "I don't think Rick's interested," he sniffs. "He's in his own world, working his way towards his knighthood."

Life for Chris Squire seems more sedate now. These days he lives in Phoenix, Arizona with third wife Scotland and their five-year-old daughter Xilan. "It's been good for me to have a young kid again," says this father-of-five, "especially one that's had an iPad since she was two."

For Yes, the days of limousines, mock-Tudor mansions, 120,000-seaters and the Eagles' marching powder are a distant memory. So too, though, are the brave new sounds that typified the likes of *Drama* and *90125* in the 80s. Yes albums nowadays sound like old Yes albums but without what Loyd Grossman might call the "emotional intensity". When Squire spends five minutes dissecting the shortcomings of Yes's current label, Frontier Records, there's a sense that he misses those good old bad old days.

Nevertheless, Yes are still in demand. By the time you read this they'll be deep into a US tour. Just don't expect to hear much from *Heaven & Earth*. "The tour had been sold as 'Yes does *Close To The Edge* and [their 1971 album] *Fragile*,'" admits Squire.

Which is fine, except *Fragile* contains solo compositions by three ex-band members, some of which could be described as 'challenging'. Right now drummer Alan White is tackling his predecessor Bill Bruford's atonal solo workout *Five Per Cent For Nothing*. "It's some sort of exercise in drum logistics," Squire laughs. "We've rehearsed and rehearsed it."

However, as Squire drains the last of his Chablis and prepares to toddle off, you know he'll weather this storm like he has every other storm in the band's history. "I still enjoy it," he says. "It's part of me. It's what I do." From lapsed choirboy and would-be acid casualty to CEO of Brand Yes, it's not been a bad life for Chris Squire.

"...is a marriage multiplied by five"

Producer Roy Thomas Baker on working with prog's most dysfunctional band.

Yes's new album, *Heaven & Earth*, was produced by Roy Thomas Baker, whose past console credits include Queen, Journey, The Cars and very nearly Yes in 1979. Baker had been booked to oversee the follow-up to 1978's *Tormato*. Unfortunately, by the time he'd arrived in Paris, where the band had started recording, the group had almost broken up.

Squire recalls that Jon Anderson and Rick Wakeman had been writing songs together, and that he and the rest of the group [Alan White and Steve Howe] weren't overly impressed with the results: "We got as far as four backing tracks." Then disaster struck when White went to a roller-disco and broke his ankle. "Without a drummer we couldn't do any more, so we shelved it."

"And I buggered off back to the States," adds Baker (below, third right).

So it was a pleasant surprise when Baker took a call from the band last year "suggesting that we try again. I'd been a Yes fan since the *Roundabout* days," says the producer. "And I'm pleased to say that their standards are still as high."

Baker has always been known for expressing strong opinions in the studio.

"Yes took my criticism and suggestions well," he insists, "as long as they didn't completely alter the framework or the direction of the song. But it's like a marriage – there are always arguments. But with Yes it's a marriage multiplied by five."

The album bears Baker's production hallmark, but he wasn't responsible for the final mix. "We had problems with certain studios, nothing was getting done and we'd already missed our deadline," explains Squire. "It wasn't Roy's fault." In the end, Squire called on engineer, producer, multi-instrumentalist and ex-member of Yes Billy Sherwood to oversee the mix.

Baker, meanwhile, remains effusive in his praise for Yes and the album, especially after his first collaboration went so wrong.

"I remember meetings with [Yes manager] Brian Lane and [Atlantic Records head] Ahmet Ertegun in 1979, and they were trying to do everything they could to keep Yes together. But it didn't work. It was nice to get the chance to make it work this time."



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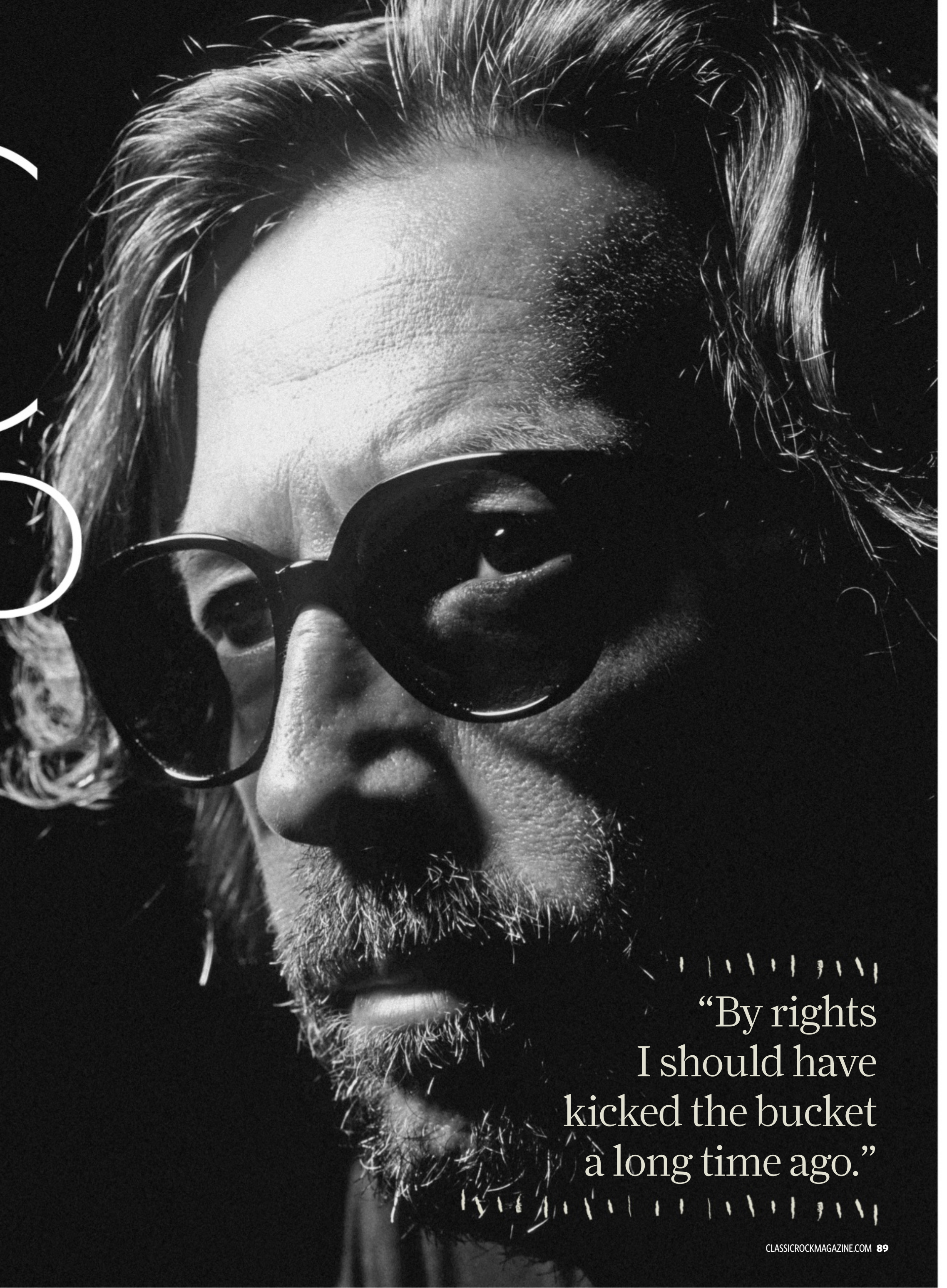
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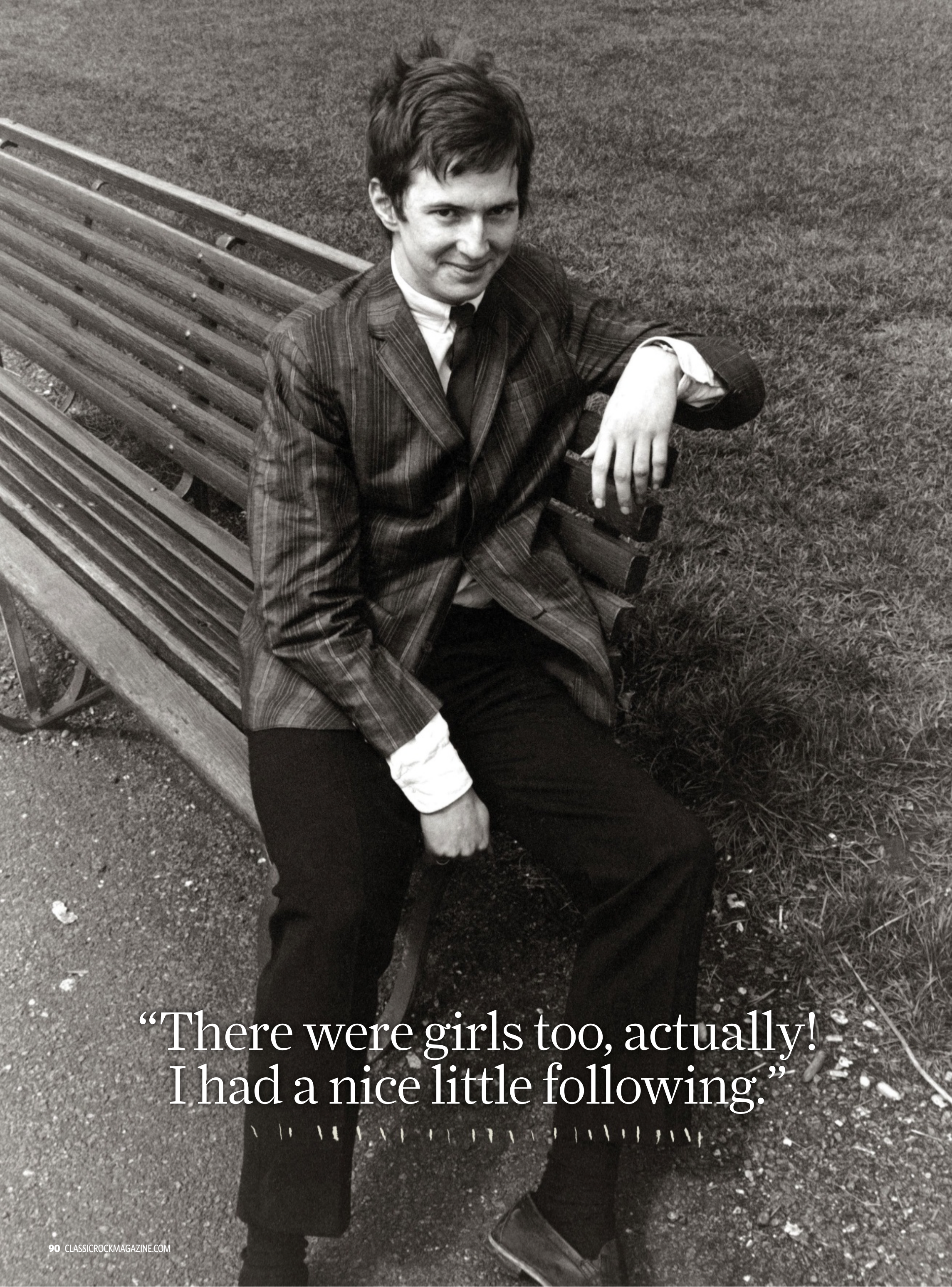
ERIC CLAPTON

The greatest British guitarist of his generation, a drug-addled mess, God – Eric Clapton has been called all three and more. In this frank 2016 interview, Slowhand talks about 50 years of highs, lows and surviving against the odds.

Words: **Paul Lester**



“By rights
I should have
kicked the bucket
a long time ago.”



“There were girls too, actually! I had a nice little following.”

Ask a rock musician how they're doing, and usually you get a courteous but cursory "Fine, thanks". Not Eric Clapton.

No, he is rather more forthcoming than that. Surprisingly so, perhaps, although his lyrical, often torrentially emotional playing these past 50 or so years may have provided a clue as to why.

Classic Rock has been granted an exclusive interview with the guitar legend to coincide with the release of *I Still Do*, his 23rd solo album. And in answering the enquiry about his health he takes the opportunity to detail some of his recent travails.

"I've had quite a lot of pain over the last year," reveals Clapton, now aged 71. "It started with lower back pain and turned into what they call peripheral neuropathy, which is where you feel like you have electric shocks going down your leg. And I've had to figure out how to deal with some other things from getting old."

If this is starting to sound like an encounter with a moaning pensioner at the bus stop, it's probably worth remembering that Clapton is not just one of the most fêted instrumentalists in rock history, he's also in the record books as one of its epic caners.

"Because I'm in recovery from alcoholism and addiction to substances, I consider it a great thing to be alive at all," he declares. "By rights I should have kicked the bucket a long time ago. For some reason I was plucked from the jaws of hell and given another chance."

Given Clapton's candour barely minutes into the conversation, initial fears that he would prove to be an unaccommodating interviewee have been allayed. I had been warned that he might be resistant to trawling through his back pages – which any sentient music lover, faced with an artist of his stature, is surely going to want to do – and prefer to focus on his new album. So when I tentatively propose a full overview of his incredible, albeit turbulent, journey, taking in all his ch-ch-changes, from The Yardbirds to The Bluesbreakers to Cream to Blind Faith to Derek & The Dominos and beyond, I was prepared for a polite but firm negative. Which makes his response all the more pleasing.

"You do what you like," he says, breezily.

Buckle up.



"I was channelling music"

In October 1963, Anthony Topham quit The Yardbirds and was replaced by 18-year-old art student and guitarist Eric Clapton, fresh from The Roosters. With Clapton on board, The Yardbirds would become one of the most accomplished rhythm and blues bands in the UK, and serious rivals to the Rolling Stones.

Is it true you would stand in for Mick Jagger at Ken Colyer's 51 Club on London's Charing Cross Road in the early days whenever he got a sore throat?

Not there. But the Stones used to play at a place called The Ealing Club, and it was in Ealing, opposite a pub called the Feathers, I think, that I did that. They played there almost every Saturday night, in a period when Brian Jones was with them, obviously, and when I'm not even sure they had a bass player.

How good were The Yardbirds compared to the Rolling Stones at that point?

About the same. I think Keith [Relf, vocalist] had difficulty because he only had one lung and he had asthma. His ability to give it his all was limited. But the Stones were a bit older than us and a little bit further down the road in terms of confidence and experience. So The Yardbirds followed on. We were never going to catch up. But I think for a while, while we were playing the clubs and before they decided to go for stardom, we were on an equal footing.

What was the first song you did with The Yardbirds where you were able to cut loose and put your signature on it?

We used to do an instrumental [by Memphis Slim] called *Steppin' Out*, or we'd do funny stuff like play [Howlin' Wolf's] *Smokestack Lightning* next to [pop song] *Hang On Sloopy*! And it was often about creating these artificial crescendos, and that would prompt a lot of pseudo-virtuoso lead guitar playing.

In 1964 The Yardbirds, their reputation growing as fast as Clapton's, were invited on tour as support to bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson. A prestigious slot, perhaps, although an unimpressed Clapton, with his in-depth knowledge of the blues, knew that he wasn't the *real* Sonny Boy who had written *Good Morning, School Girl* and been killed with an ice-pick, but a surrogate whose real name was Rice Miller and, to avoid confusion, became known as Sonny Boy Williamson II.

Do you think Sonny Boy Williamson II was as stunned as audiences were by your guitar playing?

I don't think so, no. I don't think he was stunned by any of it. I think he was seriously disappointed. I found out when I sat down and talked with Robbie Robertson [later of The Band], who knew Sonny Boy very well, and he said Sonny Boy would come back to the States from working with us and say some pretty disparaging things about what we were doing and who we were. He wasn't impressed at all.

ALAMY PREVIOUS PAGE: GETTY

Nevertheless, there must have been legions of young male admirers coming to see you play as much as they were there to see frontman Keith Relf, which was surely unusual: an instrumentalist with his own following?

There were girls too, actually! I had a nice little following, until I quit [in 1965]. There was a grey period when I had 'retired' at the age of nineteen, or whatever I was, and then I joined John Mayall and those people followed me there. I was very fortunate. I mean, I think those people responded to what I was channelling, the same as I did, which was the blues.

Were you channelling emotion but also a desire to be technically great?

No, I was channelling music. I was channelling what I heard on record by people that I was following, trying to learn from; I was channelling Freddie King, BB King, Buddy Guy. I was melding all those guys into some new shape. And I think people liked that. Maybe people projected stuff onto that. But for me I was purely trying to turn people on to what I loved: old music.

One of those you 'turned on' was Ronnie Spector, wasn't she? You'd been touring with The Ronettes and, according to your autobiography, one night she "made a move" on you. You say you were besotted with her, "the most sexual creature I had ever laid eyes on".

Yes! Well that was interesting, wasn't it? And I think she said to me… Cos we went on tour up and down England on a coach for three months. Can you imagine? Playing in every cinema and theatre all over the country, with Billy J Kramer and all kinds of people. Anyway, she said that I reminded her of Phil [Spector]. He's a chinless wonder as well. And we do look – or did look – quite similar back then. But it was [a] very short-lived [romance], believe me."



First flight: Clapton (second-right) with The Yardbirds.

REX

JOHN MAYALL AND THE BLUESBREAKERS

"I was in the perfect environment"

Annoyed by The Yardbirds' shift towards pop with their single *For Your Love*, in March 1965 Clapton left the band. Within a month the blues purist had found the ideal vehicle for his playing.

What did the Blues Breakers allow you to do that The Yardbirds didn't?

John [Mayall] was a blues archivist. He had the best collection of blues forty-fives – Chicago blues, everything – I'd ever seen in my life. He was a scholar. When he offered me the job [in his band] he offered me a place to live too, in Lee Green. So I stayed with him almost the entire time that I was working with him. And during the day I would just have all these records out on the floor, putting them on the turntable, learning, learning, learning. And that was all I did. I just studied. Because I realised right away that I was in the perfect environment. He only wanted to play blues. Sometimes it would get a bit jazzy. But he wasn't impressed by rock'n'roll, he didn't want to be famous, he just wanted to play clubs and have it be 'real'. And I thought, this is heaven. I can use all this time now just to study my craft. And that's what I did for almost three years. I just listened and played and listened and played.



And could you tell straight away that people were loving what you were doing?

Yes, I think so. We were playing in some tough environments – the Marquee club, or the all-nighter at the Flamingo where there was some serious music going on: Georgie Fame, Geno Washington… We were quite lightweight compared to them. There was some powerful stuff. I was just starting to find myself. I found myself entirely during that period, I think, in terms of where my limits were. And actually they're still in the same place. I got as good as I was ever going to get while I was with John. And I think even with the amount of freedom that we had in Cream, I didn't really learn much more. Because what I was learning was the actual route from Chicago blues and country blues, and it was all there in John's record collection.

John Mayall's second album, **Blues Breakers With Eric Clapton** *(1966). Was that the showcase for your work that you'd always dreamed of?*

It was, actually. It was the perfect recording session. The great thing was, Mike Vernon, who was producing it and had arranged it with John, had no agenda. There was no one there saying: "We need a single" or "We need a fast one" or "It needs variety" or any of that. We just went into the studio and played our set. And we played the set that we'd been playing every night for the past year, and so it was comfortable. There was nothing spectacular about it, we did one take on everything. The assistant engineer tried to put a microphone in front of my amp and I told him to take it away; I only wanted to be recorded through the room mic. They didn't understand that. I said: "That's the way I like it." And that's still the same. So that was done in a day, and it was simple, and from my experience simple is always the best.

Who would have been your competition in that period just before Jimi Hendrix came along – Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, Mick Green, Mick Taylor?

I didn't see it that way. I didn't see anybody as competition. Actually, the only person I was really conscious of – and in a way it was because he was really serious – was Albert Lee. Albert was playing with Chris Farlowe. And Albert to me was a very interesting guy, because he was a devotee – and he still is – of the Everly Brothers, and therefore of rockabilly. Also Jimmy Bright and Speedy West were his heroes, and that's serious country virtuoso playing. Those guys played with Tennessee Ernie Ford. And yet he was playing in an R&B band with a soul singer. So I found all of that really, really interesting and attractive. He just had a great touch. So if there was anyone I was really keen on then it was him. I didn't even know about… Jeff Beck, when I left The Yardbirds, I went to see him play in a club with The Tridents, I think he was with, and it was great. No doubt about it, he was – is – a pioneer. But it didn't move me deep down. I didn't like the way The Yardbirds went off, in that weird kind of pop thing that they did. It was another direction from where I wanted to go, that's for sure."

There's a lot of self-deprecation in your autobiography, so I wondered how that squared with the emergence of the 'CLAPTON IS GOD' graffiti on walls in London?

I think that was a put-up job.

Really?

Oh yeah. When was it done? Was it supposedly done during the Yardbirds, or John Mayall period?

I think it was circa Mayall, 1965.

Then I could be wrong. But when we played with The Yardbirds at the

Crawdaddy club, there was a guy worked for [Yardbirds manager] Giorgio Gomelsky, and his name was Hamish Grimes. A very sweet guy. It was his job before we came on to stand on the stage and work up the crowd. And we just thought, I don't know why we need this, we can wind up the crowd. But the management thought it was necessary. So this guy would get them all clapping or yelling. And I've always suspected that he was the one who went out there with a pot of paint and a brush and painted that on the wall. I really doubt that it was a genuine fan.



Fresh Cream, 1966.



Dedicated follower of fahsion: Clapton in the late 60s.

2X GETTY

Nevertheless, that was your reputation. There was some serious worship going on, wasn't there?

Well, not in my presence, no. I mean [laughs], I never felt it. I think it was picked up on by the media. It might have been genuine, but then it became a kind of label and I didn't see it relating to what I did at all. At the same time, I'm very grateful for it because it got the music I was trying to push, which was blues and country and gospel, underneath the radar instead of pop music. But it gave me a real cross to bear, and I didn't really want that.

In the sixties you were a bit like Bowie in the seventies: every year a new image, a new approach, a rethink, a radical overhaul… Did you feel like the changingman?

It was moving fast. And I think because I was curious and I wasn't insecure about my capabilities, I put myself into a lot of different opportunities. I would see something I liked and get in it right away. I wouldn't just watch or think, "Oh, this wouldn't work for you", I'd give it a go. I was always fairly courageous about taking chances, so I moved a lot more than maybe the average guy. And then the other stuff caught up with me and I got stuck. All through the seventies I was really in a mess and I didn't know what was going on, let alone be curious. Which is sad. I kind of regret losing an awful lot of time to just being a vegetable – pickled.

CREAM

"We were really just having the time of our lives"

Shortly after *Blues Breakers With Eric Clapton* was released, Clapton went to see Buddy Guy in concert. Impressed by the trio format, he got the idea of forming one himself. Drummer Ginger Baker had a similar idea, and asked Clapton if he wanted to join the new group he was putting together. He did. When Jack Bruce also accepted the invitation, the supergroup The Cream, as they were initially known, was born.

Just months separate the **Blues Breakers** *album and the first Cream album,* **Fresh Cream**. *That's quite a quantum leap. How do you think* **Fresh Cream** *compares to the other 1966 landmarks, such as* **Blonde On Blonde, Revolver, Pet Sounds, Aftermath, Fifth Dimension?**

Oof [mimes being winded by disappointment]. I thought the John Mayall album was better than the Cream stuff. I thought we were really weak, to be honest, on record. There were only a few things that I really was proud of – then and now. Most of those were on the farewell album [*Goodbye*, 1969]. I don't know. I think we got lost quite quickly with Cream. It was all just smoke and mirrors. We were just trying to keep the thing rolling. We didn't really have a leader. I think that was part of the problem. The leadership would change in the blink of an eye. One minute it would be me, the next minute it would be Jack, the next it would be Ginger. It wasn't cohesive. Before we got very far we became a supergroup. It was that thing of trying to catch up with your own, er, myth.



There was a lot of mythologising going on. There was even that one about you doing a Robert Johnson-style pact with the devil. What do you think of all that mythologising about you? Do you take any pleasure in it?

No, I don't really take it too seriously. I think it's interesting at best, but I've lived on the other side of that. I must admit, I'm guilty of doing it, too, so I have to be fairly non-judgmental about it because I mythologise myself, as I have done with Robert Johnson. I've never really subscribed to that particular myth about him selling his soul, but there's something akin to that in… not selling your soul, but just devoting yourself to something. That could be a better explanation for all of these things.

What do you mean when you say you mythologise yourself? Do you mean you talk up your own past?

No, other people, other heroes that I have.

You're in an unusual position – you're the super-fan and the subject of devotion simultaneously.

Yeah. Yeah, I'm trying to think. I do it about Dylan to a certain extent. He manages to create that ethos about himself; he's a fantastic mysterioso… I like the way he keeps that going, and I will follow that. I'm as guilty as anyone of falling for that.

Cream may have been guilty of excessive instrumental pyrotechnics, but is there anything you'd hold on to? Were Cream the bridge between blues and psychedelia? A compelling hybrid of jazz, blues, hard rock and psych?

We were doing a lot of psychedelic drugs, a lot of hallucinatory stuff. I think that gave us permission to do things that we might have been frightened to do otherwise. And we had fun.

That seems to counter the received idea that it was all tension and aggro within the band.

No. Looking back, the best thing about Cream, for me, was the amount of fun we had, while other people were taking it extremely seriously. And

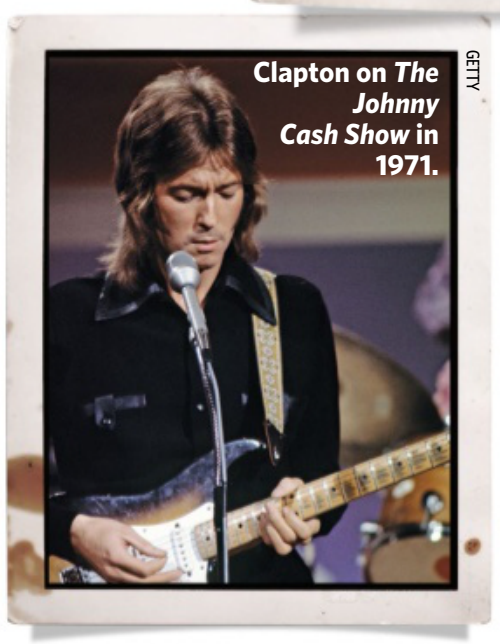
we weren't! We were really just having the time of our lives, driving around America, playing three songs in two hours. It was crazy! And yet people lapped it up. So we thought, well, they like it, we like it, we don't know what it is and we don't care, so let them call it whatever they like.

BLIND FAITH

"We just panicked"

Again demonstrating an impressive lack of regard for commercial prudence, Clapton left the multimillion-selling Cream in late 1968 (all three members decided they'd had enough), after which he formed another supergroup, Blind Faith, with Steve Winwood, Ric Grech and Ginger Baker. They debuted at a free concert in London's Hyde Park on June 7, 1969, but lasted just one album (with *that* pre-Yewtree sleeve) before dissolving barely months later. A lack of material plus excessive, unwarranted adulation were among the problems for Clapton this time. Possibly no band since has ever risen then faded away so fast.


The very short-lived Blind Faith: (l-r) Steve Winwood, Ric Grech, Ginger Baker, Clapton.
ALAMY


Clapton on *The Johnny Cash Show* in 1971.
GETTY

What are your memories of the Blind Faith experience? Has hindsight made you more favourable towards it?
I wish I could say so, but… In its infancy it was extremely good, when we were rehearsing and recording, but once we hit the road we all got just, like, rabbit-in-the-headlights syndrome. We just panicked. I panicked. We got the same thing [as Cream]: it was 'Supergroup II' – and I think that's the kiss of death. If you really want to kill a band, call it a supergroup and watch it disappear up its own arsehole.

As Blind Faith fell apart, in a sense so did the sixties: Brian Jones died; there were the Manson killings in LA; Altamont… Did it feel like you were living at the end of an era and something was about to give?
Yes, I think it did. It seemed like the sixties was burning out and there wasn't anything to replace it. I wasn't suffering from that in terms of the culture, because I was still quietly listening to blues – music for me has always been very strong in the past; I tap into it whenever I need to and it's never changed. I go back to dance music or blues music or hillbilly music or country music or classical music, and it gives me a safe place to watch the culture go by. The sixties for me were very philosophical and tender and gentle and innocent. But then it became really indulgent. I managed to stay out of the way. And I think quite deliberately I've done that culturally, while I've been fairly conscientious about making music."

Derek & the Dominos

"One of the most powerful bands I've ever been anywhere near"

As producer Glyn Johns puts it, Clapton "never let the grass grow under his feet". True enough. Because by early 1970 he had formed a new band with keyboard player and singer Bobby Whitlock, bassist Carl Radle and drummer Jim Gordon, and got lashings of help from guitarist Duane Allman.

This phase is memorable for at least three reasons: the double album *Layla And Other Assorted Love Songs* (1970), arguably the finest work of Clapton's mercurial career; Clapton's unrequited love for George Harrison's wife Pattie; and the band's gargantuan consumption of hard drugs.

You were just talking about the blues. An ultimate example of you extrapolating the blues was with Derek & The Dominos. What a fantastic album* Layla And Other Assorted Love Songs *was and still is.
Thank you.

It's four sides of astonishing music, and yet it's tied up with all sorts of troubles in your personal life. Even the ballads are intense, and you get a sense from it of the behind-the-scenes drama. So do you have mixed feelings about it now?
Oh no. The stuff that was going on – I was a bachelor when I made that album, really. I had various optimisms about becoming embroiled with Pattie – Pattie Harrison – but we weren't at that moment in a relationship. It was just something I was trying to write on the wall. And so *Layla* was that – a proclamation. But it was as anonymous as can be, so she was Layla, I was Derek.

What I really loved about that album was nobody knew who we were. We even did a tour of England playing little clubs and there would be nobody there, because nobody knew who we were so they didn't come! And yet there was this quartet that was one of the most powerful bands I've ever been anywhere near – and I was in it! The rhythm section on its own I would have watched all night. And it was a funny time, cos it worked by word of mouth. As we began touring, bit by bit people were talking about us and saying: "Who is this?" "What is this band?" They kind of figured it out. It was the most pure experience I've ever had in terms of making an album and then promoting it anonymously. It's almost unheard of.

Eric Clapton THE 70s

"I don't know how I survived"

Clapton's self-titled debut solo album was released in 1970, a few months before *Layla*. It would be four years before he released the follow-up, *461 Ocean Boulevard*, after which four came in fairly quick succession: *There's One In Every Crowd* (1975), *No Reason To Cry* (1976), *Slowhand* (1977) and *Backless* (1978), the latter two produced by Glyn Johns. While Clapton enjoyed success with all of these, behind the scenes it was

largely mayhem of a drugs-and-alcohol-influenced kind. By the late-70s, Clapton was running scared of punk ("I felt threatened because I was frightened. I thought these guys were scary, you know?") and making unpopular pronouncements in the press about Enoch Powell. From the personal to the political, it was all played out in public.

You're a private person, and yet so much of your life – your trials and tribulations – has been available for all to see. Your narrative – the rise and fall and rise again – is as gripping as any in rock. But it must be weird to have had it all out there because you've actually been living it.

[Laughs] I don't know how I survived, the seventies especially. There was one point there where they were flying me to hospital in St Paul [Minnesota] and I was *dying*, apparently – I had three ulcers and one of them was bleeding. I was drinking three bottles of brandy and taking handfuls of codeine and I was close to checking out. And I don't even remember. It's amazing that I'm still here, really.

With heroin, you weren't injecting you were snorting, because that enabled you to have more?

Yeah. That was quite wasteful, actually. Financially that's the last way [you should do it] unless you can really afford it. But it saved my bacon, because doing it intravenously is much more dangerous, obviously, with dirty needles or overdosing.

You once estimated that were spending a grand a week on heroin – the equivalent of eight grand a week now?

Yeah. I was close to running out [of money]. I was running on empty, financially. But I think management was very shrewd – it was Robert Stigwood who was keeping an eye on it. But I think his optimism, and I suppose his hope, was that there would be light at the end of the tunnel. They didn't police me that much. I was out on a long leash. And I think it was his hope that I would see sense eventually. Which of course I did. But I nearly… I don't know how close I got… And the people around me too – I was taking people with me. That's always the worst part about an addict or an alcoholic: people are dragged along, and sometimes they go down before the principal character.

(Clapton's then-girlfriend) Alice Ormsby-Gore, you mean?

Yeah.

I guess it was a strangely alluring lifestyle, one that was hard to resist?

Yeah. And what saved me was music. Before I was introduced to the twelve-step philosophy, which is a community of people meeting to share their identities and their difficulties, before that I just thought: "Well, as long as I can play… I'll just stay alive long enough to play." Alice didn't have the same kind of anchor. You know, I didn't see her for a long time, till near the end of her life [in 1995], until a group of people tried to instil some hope into her, but it was too late.

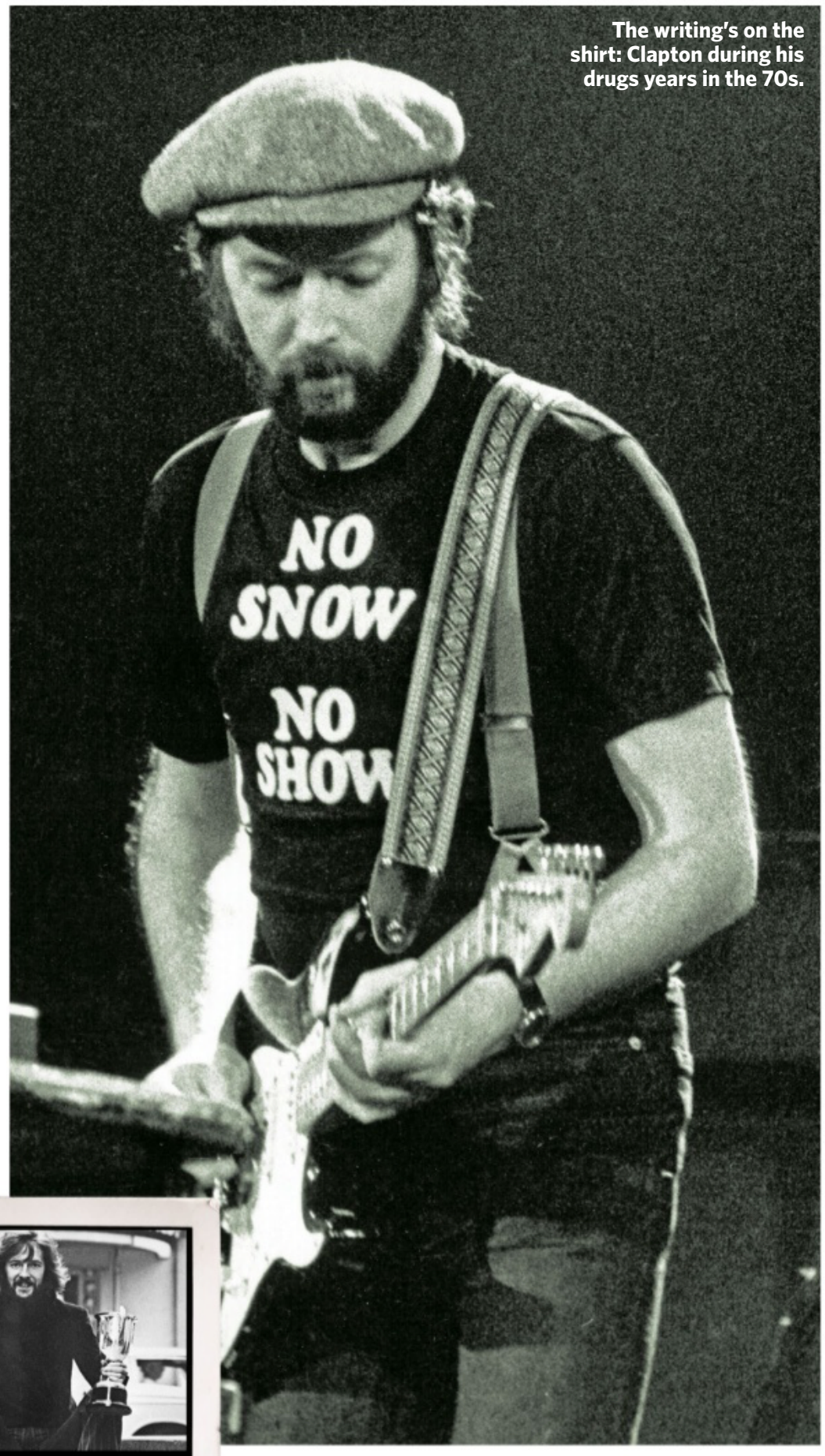
Actually, I wasn't talking about her specifically, but you nailed it . It's interesting that you read that really quickly. But there were others. I have a dear friend who lives in America called Nigel [Carroll, personal assistant] who works for me, and he worked for me back then, and I would make him drink and stay on the same level with me. He didn't like drinking, you know what I mean? Awful. I'd fire him – awful stuff – then rehire him the next day. I'd treat him… It was abuse, you know?

You're very open about your abusive periods. In your book you describe Pattie as a "slave-cum-partner".

Well it's true. Honesty is just telling the truth. I try to be honest as long as I don't hurt somebody else; I'm not really worried about hurting myself. And I quite like who I am. I like my own company. I've got an idea of who I am. And I'm self-deprecating only to keep myself from running away with the idea of how fucking great I am! It's kind of useful. It's a practical way of me staying right-side-up.

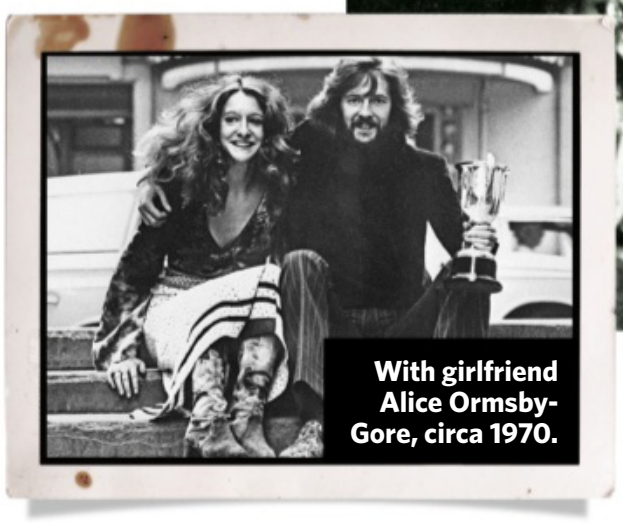
Total ego meets extreme self-loathing: is it a dangerous cocktail?

It can be. But I think that's why I think if I lived alone, if I was a recluse, I would be prey to that kind of… syndrome. But I do meet with other people, and my family is very… they're very consistent. The love in my family is very consistent.



The writing's on the shirt: Clapton during his drugs years in the 70s.

2 X GETTY


With girlfriend Alice Ormsby-Gore, circa 1970.

You did once say: "I don't see a glimmer of hope for the future… I have a death wish… I don't like life." Would you still be in touch with those feelings had you not met your wife?

Oh, I don't know. That's pretty extreme. When did that quote come from?

Nineteen-seventy-three.

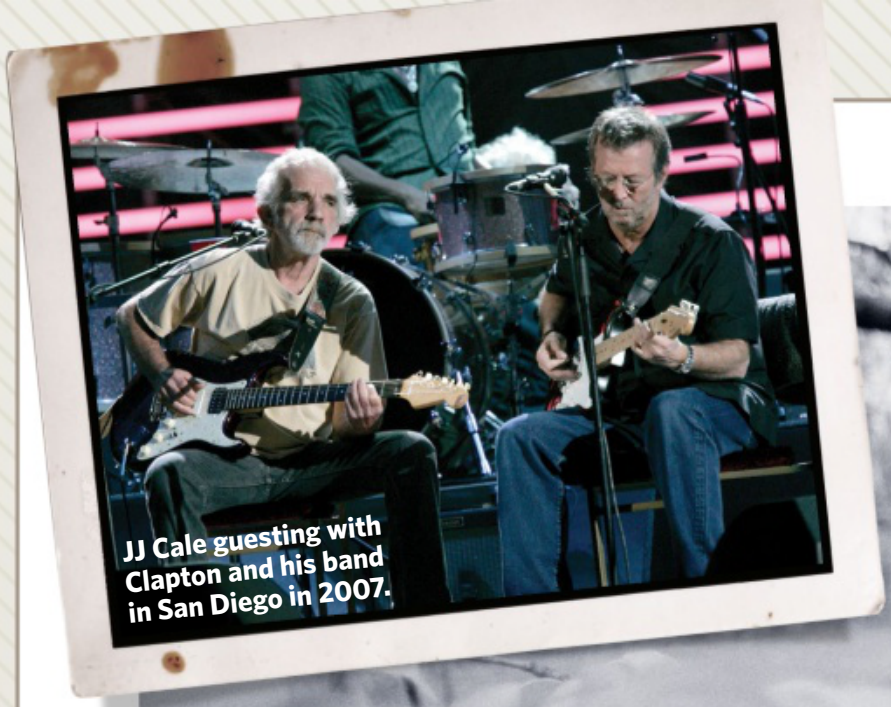
Ha ha. It's quite typical of the sort of thing a twenty-seven-year-old man would say. Actually it's more typical of maybe a twenty-five-year-old man, don't you think?

To quote Meryl Streep on Woody Allen in the film* Manhattan*, you raised self-loathing to narcissistic extremes?

It's dilettantish, almost foppish. Kind of: "Save me, somebody!"

You seemed to have needed saving the night in 1977 in Honolulu when you decided to give your band's drummer a fright by turning up at his hotel room wielding a Samurai sword, prompting the police to arrive brandishing guns.

I can't believe it was me. Only because I'm not capable of that kind of



JJ Cale guesting with Clapton and his band in San Diego in 2007.



Dedicated follower of fashion: 'Armani man' in 1986.

thing now. But at the time I was capable of that. And I'm not surprised, really. All it needed was a bottle of vodka to make it happen."

ERIC CLAPTON

THE 80s / 90s

"I was starting to think of myself as being an interesting person"

Throughout the next two decades, Clapton was the Armani-clad journeyman and elder statesman, veering from team-ups with Roger Waters and Phil Collins to appearing at Live Aid. But behind the polished superstar veneer all, as ever, was turbulence and strife. He had an affair with Italian model Lory Del Santo, who gave birth to their son, Conor, in 1986. Tragically the child died in 1991 when he fell out of an open bedroom window on the 53rd floor of a Manhattan apartment building. His death was the inspiration for the song *Tears in Heaven*. In 1998, Clapton founded the Crossroads Centre in Antigua to help users overcome their addictions to drugs and alcohol. He ended the decade with *Pilgrim*, his intention "to make the saddest record of all time".

In the seventies it was heroin and booze. By the eighties and nineties you'd swapped horses, and women were proving as dangerously all-consuming as drugs and drink, weren't they?

Yes. Women and fashion. I'd always loved clothes, and that became a huge interest for me. I was really interested in Italian stuff. I met and loved this lovely Italian lady, we had a child, and I met Giorgio Armani and I met Gianni Versace. And these were really interesting people to me, incredibly gifted, so I was attracted to that. English culture, and fashion, was always much more tweedy and introverted, so when I finally got to Italy in the mid-eighties I was overwhelmed by the vivacity of it all, and the colours and the flamboyance of everything, and I was sucked in, I really loved it. It was part of being gregarious, I suppose, and I was starting to think of myself as being an interesting person. It took me all that time to get a kind of value for myself.

There's always a dual edge to what you do, so that at the same time as you're having what you've referred to as "crazy sexual liaisons" you also feel suicidal with regard to your relationship with Pattie – both at the same time.

Yeah. Well, I was coming to the end of a drinking career. The highs and the lows are extreme – or they were in my case. It would be a daily occurrence to feel a hundred-and-eighty-degree shift.

And yet you turned a corner in the late eighties and have been making music ever since. Was the brief you had with* Pilgrim *really to make the ultimate sad album?

Yes. Well, that was my brief to the other musicians. I don't know if it was the brief to myself. I was trying to give them a map [laughs]. Did I achieve it? Almost.

I STILL DO

"My life is really blessed"

Clapton's new album, *I Still Do*, which has a Peter Blake-designed sleeve, is an engagingly diverse mix of blues songs, JJ Cale covers, oddities and originals, with the occasional blistering solo to satisfy diehards. It finds the old roué perhaps less tormented – he has been happily married to Melia McEnery since 2002 and they have three children – but still in touch with his muse.

Where did the title come from?

It actually came from something a relative – my old aunty – said shortly before she passed away. I was talking to her about when I was a kid and thanking her for being kind, and she said: "I liked you. And I still do." And I thought, well, that's as good as it gets. So I kind of made a mental note and thought: "I'll use that."

Was it good to be back in the studio with producer Glyn Johns again?

Yes it was. It was a forty-year anniversary, really, from the first time – *Slowhand*. And I honestly hadn't seen him for most of that time. I was aware of him moving around and doing different things, but we didn't bump into each other very much during that time.

Did you have to do any apologising to him for the 1977 sessions?

[Pauses] I'm not sure if I did, you know? I'm not sure if I did. And I don't think he was expecting it. I'm not even sure if I needed to. As much as I was an unpleasant character, I did actually do the work. In fact I don't think I got

the rough edge of his tongue, either, during the years that we worked together. I saw it happen to other people, and I thought, I don't really want that coming in my direction, so I'll just get on with it [chuckles to himself]. So I did. No, I wouldn't have had much to apologise for. My personality was not good, but my work ethic wasn't too bad.



Presumably, accessing the deep feelings that enable you to properly sing the blues – say, on the new album's cover of Robert Johnson's* Stones In My Passway *– doesn't take much effort?

[Laughs a lot] No! I mean, I've had to deal with a lot of physical pain this last year, and I'm starting to come to terms with it. One thing I had to realise was that this particular condition I'm living with isn't necessarily going to get better. Like sometimes things do – you might catch something, and it will get better. Not this. So I've had to acknowledge it and accommodate it. And I've found that to be quite enlightening, too, because I've learned a lot about my ability to tolerate things, and the human spirit in general has tremendous capacity for that. So to sing about these things is very real for me.

You've sort of 'found God' twice in your life, at two low ebbs: once in 1970 and again in 1987 where you find yourself praying, at your alcoholic nadir. Is* Catch The Blues *the latest expression of your religious beliefs?

Well, I find it easy to talk about that, so it's not difficult to put it in a song. One of the first songs I ever wrote was *In The Presence Of The Lord* [recorded for the *Blind Faith* album]. And I was a bit embarrassed about that, to be honest with you, which is one of the reasons why I made Steve Winwood sing it when we were in Blind Faith. Not only because I was embarrassed that I couldn't sing in front of Winwood – I didn't have the nerve – but I'd come from a very relaxed upbringing around religion or God. It's not like when you hear about really strict Catholic upbringings when people get put off or get burned by doctrine or over-zealous religious practices. I was at Sunday School and had a fairly general religious education, so I came to the understanding of God through loving music and through finding it. It was actually a spiritual experience and I would have actual physical responses when I was listening to it. It could be Indian, classical, blues, rock'n'roll, jazz, anything. Sometimes I would feel like the hairs on the back of my neck would stand up. I started to make the connection early on in my life that music was a spiritual experience.

Is the cover of 1940s standard* I'll Be Seeing You *meant to be a farewell to your audience and career?

No, no. It's just a lovely song. A lot of people dropped off over the last couple of years, and I'm kind of singing to them. And it's not me saying goodbye to everyone who's still alive, I'm saying goodbye in that song to the people that I've had to let go. Not just famous people, but close family and friends and colleagues. This last couple of years have been extraordinary; maybe because I'm reaching that age where funerals become a weekly event. So I'm singing to them, really.

Finally, do you ever play your old records to remind yourself of the journey you've been on?

Yes, I do.

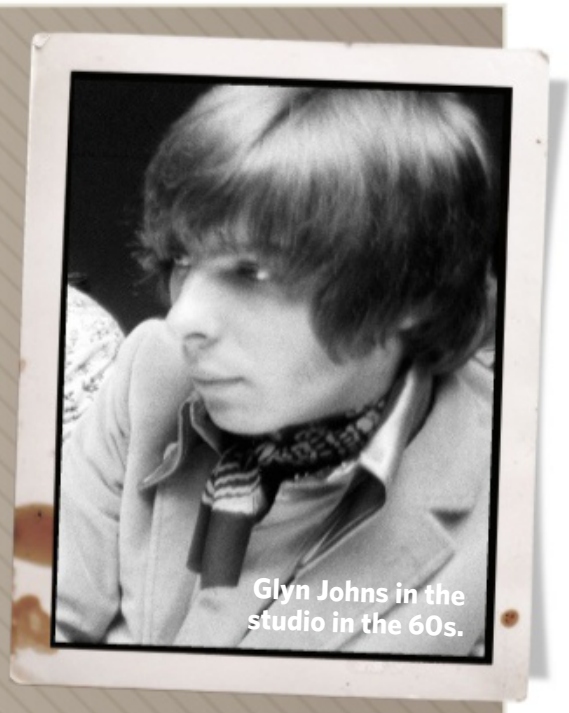
Do you wince at some of it, and take pleasure at others?

Exactly that. But I like to see how they look in the period that they were set in, too. Because that's interesting to me: where they fit into the culture. And where I've gone off-piste, as it were. Or I've been narcissistic or I've lost my way or I haven't been true to my compass.

But it's been a good ride. And I'm still here. At the moment it's going along fine. My life is really blessed. I've got a wonderful family, a fantastically beautiful wife, in every way, great kids, and I can still play. I mean, it's hard work sometimes, the physical side of it – just getting old, man, is hard. But I love to play, still. I sit in the corner of our front room with a guitar, and I play in the morning and I rest in the afternoon… Life is good.

"Eric rang me and said: 'Of course I'm still your mate!'"

PRODUCER GLYN JOHNS ON WORKING WITH CLAPTON AGAIN, ON NEW ALBUM *I STILL DO*.



Glyn Johns in the studio in the 60s.

"The sessions for *I Still Do* were completely different to the ones for *Slowhand* and *Backless*. Eric is far more in control now of everything [laughs]. There was a lot of drinking back then – nothing too unpleasant. He didn't like working much, he was quite lazy. However, once he sat down with a guitar the amount of time it took him to do it melted away into nothing because he could do everything in one or two takes.

"These days, before he goes anywhere near the studio he has a completely clear picture about what he wants to do: the material he wants to record, the manner he wants to do it, the musicians he wants to play it... Really, he produced this record far more than I did.

"He approached me about doing the record. I wrote a book [*Sound Man*] a couple of years ago in which I stated how I missed him as a pal – because when he stopped drinking he stopped seeing all the people he'd hang out with, which is a normal thing for alcoholics. And whereas I completely understood the reasons, selfishly I missed him as a mate. So he rang me and said: "What are you talking about? Of course I'm still your mate!" And we had lunch a couple of times and he said: "Let's make a record." So we did.

"I wouldn't say it's a blues album. There are three traditional blues songs on the record. It's an extremely eclectic mix. There's *Catch The Blues* which is Latin American, a couple of JJ Cale numbers, a very early gospel song, and *I'll Be Seeing You* which is not bluesy in the least. But of course he tips his hat to the blues, because that's what he is – a bluesman.

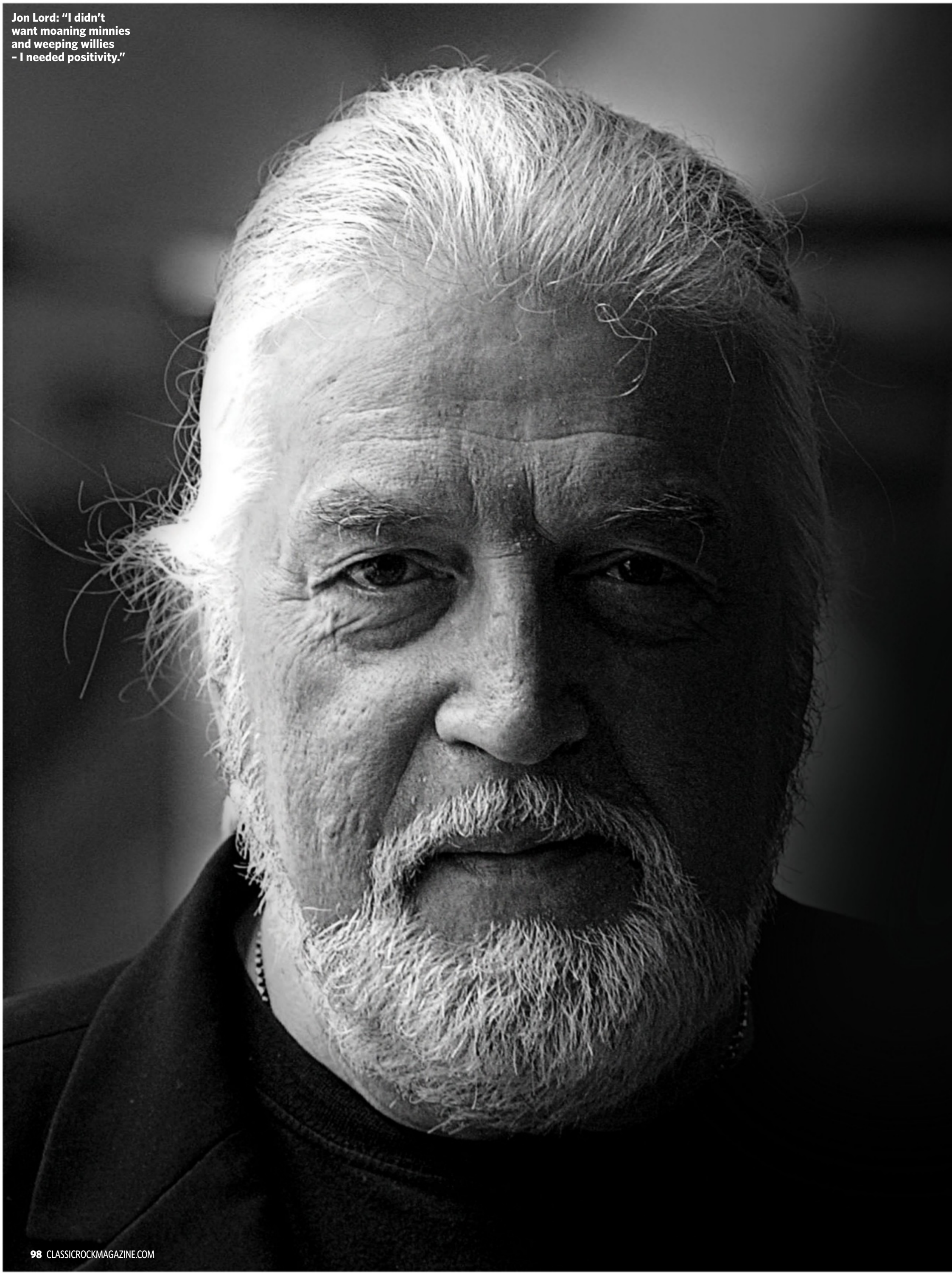
"I got lucky with the *Slowhand* period. I walked into that. That band had just finished a tour, they'd been playing a lot together, and the spirit and the sound were exceptional – like this new one. That record was incredibly easy to make. And the sessions for this one were astonishingly easy and the quality of musicianship was astounding.

"We didn't have to break any ice, good Lord no. Although I stopped working with him after *Backless* we've been mates forever. We started recording at the beginning of October [2015] and finished it just before Christmas. The only problem we had was that Eric wasn't terribly well, which was exceedingly frustrating for everybody and particularly unpleasant for him. But he refused to not turn up and he refused to not play when he should have done. His major problem is that, as a result of the treatment for his other ailments, he got eczema. And that would have been alright except that it went to his hands, and so he found it incredibly difficult to play because the skin was shredding off them. It drove him nuts not to be able to play. But that's why there's bottleneck/slide on the record, because on some days he couldn't play any other way.

"One of the things I didn't think about till this record is that Eric never let the grass grow under his feet, from The Yardbirds on. He got pissed off with them and left to join Blues Breakers, but he never sat back on his laurels. Whichever band he was in they were invariably incredibly successful, but he was never frightened to walk away if they started getting away from what he wanted to do. It's very courageous.

"I saw him play a blues set in LA about ten years ago, about two-and-a-half hours long, and it was probably the best concert I've ever seen. It was astonishing. His voice had improved dramatically from when I worked with him, and his guitar playing just blew me away. I don't think I've ever met anyone with the same unfettered wear-it-on-your-sleeve enthusiasm for playing. And he's still got it."

CALE: ALAMY; 2 X GETTY



Jon Lord: "I didn't want moaning minnies and weeping willies – I needed positivity."

JON LORD'S LAST STAND

On July 16, 2012, Deep Purple keyboard legend **Jon Lord** died. Just a week earlier, he spoke with *Classic Rock* about his battle with cancer. The piece was handed in the day he passed away and is preserved here out of tribute to the man himself and the positivity he displayed right up until the very end.

Words: **Lee Marlow** Portrait: **Bob King**

"Helloo old son," he said – finally – when he picked up the phone on Monday night. "How the devil are you?"

It had taken what seemed like an age to get to this point. Dates had been arranged and then cancelled. Phone calls made, calls gone unanswered. It was excruciating. Yet this was Jon Lord. And he was suffering from cancer. So what do you do? I tell you what you do. You swallow your indignation and you hang on.

"Sorry about all that," he said, when it eventually came together. "When you rang the other afternoon, I was asleep." A tough day after another tough day. There'd been a few of those, he said.

He apologised again and hoped I understood. I did. I felt bad for nearly waking him up. It would be fanciful to pretend we were buddies, but I'd interviewed him a few times over the years and I liked him. I liked interviewing him. He was smart. He was funny. He was honest. And he could tell a story.

We had a long old chat which lead to this long old piece before you. I sent it over a week later – Monday morning, July 16. Four hours later, he was dead.

There have all been all sorts of discussions about what we should do with this piece. Some of it, you could argue, looks slightly incongruous now.

But when he said he would beat it, I believed him.

"If you take one thing from this piece," he said, "be positive."

That's how he was. We could have taken that out but, frankly, that seemed worse than leaving it in. It would have been a betrayal of who he was and how he fought the disease.

So here it is. All of it.

"God bless you," he said when the interview ended. "I'm sure we will speak again." I was sure we would, too.

God bless you, Jon Lord. We will all miss you x – Lee Marlow, Leicester

A summer's day, 2011, and Jon Lord is on stage at the De Montfort Hall in his home town of Leicester. He is not playing. He is not perched, stage left, hammering away behind a tilting column of Hammond organs. He is receiving an Honorary Doctorate in Music from the University of Leicester. If there is a prouder man in the East Midlands on this day, you'd be hard pressed to find him.

He stands – in his royal red gown, holding his mortar board – addressing the audience, recounting what it means, what this place means and how utterly humbled he is by it. Several times, he looks close to tears. He used to watch his dad, Reg, play saxophone here in this very hall. He saw Buddy Holly here when he was 17. He played here, in this lovely Edwardian-era venue, with Deep Purple and Whitesnake, more times than he cares to remember.

His voice quivers slightly when he pays tribute to his parents who would be "dancing in the street if they could see this now. I only hope they are dancing somewhere far more pleasant. Thank you. God bless. And good luck." He leaves the stage to the familiar sound of applause.

He's just turned 70, Jon Lord, but he looks well. He's lost a bit of weight, he says, probably because he's been so relentlessly busy: playing, touring, even though he's supposed to be touring less and slowing down, and he's just re-recorded his *Concerto For Group And Orchestra*, his baby, to be released some time in 2012. He wondered what life would be like when he left Purple in 2002. Ten years on, he never dared dream it would be this good.

We sit in a cafe in Leicester on the afternoon of his homecoming, drinking coffee and chatting, about anything and everything: home, away, rock, roll, playing, retiring. He is, as he always is, intelligent but easy company.

What he doesn't mention is the dull ache he's feeling in his stomach. He noticed it a few weeks ago. It's nothing, really. He knows that. Inconvenient, rather than worrying. It's hard to ignore it, though, because it's there all the time.

He knows it's nothing because his doctor told him it was nothing. He saw his GP a few weeks earlier. He had an ultrasound scan and it was clear. If there was something wrong, anything, then surely the scan would have picked it up. Wouldn't it? Of course it would. No need to worry.

In the days after he receives his honorary degree, the pains continue. They're not any worse. They are, though, more insistent. "I wouldn't say it was a pain," says Lord today, looking back, "it was a kind of low level discomfort, that's all. But just enough for you to notice it."

In the days after the graduation ceremony, he sees his doctor again. Still, they find nothing. The doc is concerned enough, however, to refer him higher up the medical chain. Another specialist. More tests.

And still nothing. That day, by chance, there's a cancellation in the CAT scan clinic. "We may as well have a quick look," says the specialist, unaware he is about to save the life of rock's most famous keyboard player. They did the scan. It took 20 minutes. Jon Lord sat in a waiting room, flicking through a magazine waiting for the results. He wasn't nervous. He was expecting good news. "I was utterly unprepared for what happened next," he says.

"The doctor appeared and said: 'You'd better come with me.' He didn't look happy, which was a surprise. A little bit worrying. I followed him to his office and he said: 'Please, sit down… I'm afraid it's not good news.'"

And that's when the specialist told Jon Lord he had cancer. ➔

GETTY



"If you take one thing from this, be positive."

Jon Douglas Lord became a different man that day. Everything changed, he says. "I realised, as I walked out of the hospital and down the street to my car that something mighty had happened. That my life, as I knew it, would never be the same again. It was a heck of a blow."

He'd reached the age of 70 without any significant health problems or scares. He'd been in rock and roll for nearly 50 years – not always, it should be said, living an archetypal rock and roll lifestyle – and the worst thing that had happened was a bout of appendicitis in 1975. "That was it. Nothing any worse than that.

"So I wasn't expecting it *at all*. There wasn't even a fleeting thought it might be cancer, that it might be something that serious. I'd felt… blessed, I suppose. The life I had lived, this working class kid from Leicester, a wonderful career, Purple, Whitesnake, Purple again, family, friends.

"And then all this kind of slightly off-centre stuff I'd been doing since I left Purple, which I know, from a promotional point of view, is awkward. It's not an easy sell and yet it *had* been selling. We were filling seats. Selling out concert halls. I was a lucky man."

He sat in his car, started the engine and put the vehicle in first gear. He remembers thinking that he shouldn't be driving, as he pulled away, first to second, third to fourth, reeling from the shock, struggling with his emotions.

And yet it felt good, driving, something he didn't have to think about as the real world flashed by outside, the grey tarmac, the green fields, this strange new world he would now face as a man with cancer.

"I had a surprising equanimity, really, as I drove back," he says. "In fact, I remember laughing to myself at one point."

Laughing?

"Yes, laughing. I remember saying to myself: 'Well, there's a turn up for the books, lad.' Lad. My father used to call me 'lad'. I catch myself, sometimes, in times of emotion saying things that sound just like my father. And I started to laugh. An incredulous laugh, really, but a laugh nonetheless. It was a strange thing."

The laughter was short-lived. He arrived home, walked through the door, embraced his wife, Vicky, and cried. He wept, on and off, all night. The shock, the sorrow, the self-pity, the 'what-ifs', all those things he still wanted to do, left undone.

He needed medication to sleep that night, he says. But the maudlin and sorrow lasted one day. He told his daughters, he told his friends – that wasn't easy, he says – and his mind was set. He would beat it.

"All the advice I received, from friends who were doctors or in the medical profession, was essentially: be positive. You have to remain positive. Cancer thrives on pessimism. It loves despair."

So that's what he did, from that day on. He was a fairy cheery, good-natured, optimistic bloke anyway. A few minor tweeks to his character would help him tackle this disease head on. It made perfect sense, he says. And yet this wasn't any old run-of-the-mill cancer. This was pancreatic cancer. Cancer of the pancreas has the highest fatality rates of all cancers. Survival rates over five years are poor.

A statement was released via Jon's website later that summer. Jon had cancer, the short statement said. He would continue to write music but he would not be touring. See you soon. God bless.

It was deliberately vague, he says. "I'd got my head around it. I knew what it was. I knew I was going to be positive. I also knew from the advice I'd been given that pancreatic cancer is not the death sentence it once was, that some people still assumed it was. I didn't want all these… moaning minnies and weeping willies. I needed positivity, people's support."

By and large, that's what he got. Letters and emails and cards flooded in from around the world. The response, the kindness of perfect strangers, was overwhelming, he says. "I think I read every one, every message." They made him cry when he was determined to cry no more.

"The stories people sent me – 'My brother had this five years ago, Jon, and you should see him today. He's still here, he's still fighting, we're all thinking of you, you can do it…' It was tremendous. I remain and always will remain utterly astounded by and grateful for that level of support.

"It nourished my attitude. It is the biggest weapon you have in your armoury. The rest – the treatment, the advice – comes from outside. The attitude, the positivity, comes from within. I used to stand in front of my bathroom mirror every morning and I'd say: 'I am going to beat this. *I am going to beat this.*'"

If you take one thing from this article, let it be that, he says. Be positive. It costs nothing. It means everything.

Three weeks after diagnosis he started treatment; 12 weeks of chemotherapy at a specialist oncology centre in London. The chemo was as bad as people say it is. "I came through it reasonably well. It didn't make me sick, they controlled that, and I only lost a small amount of hair." The loss of appetite and the obliteration of his digestive system were the worst parts. The hair went from the back of his head, not the front, persuading him

to part with something he'd possessed for the best part of 25 years: his ponytail.

"I'd had it, on and off, since I left Whitesnake in '84, and pretty much full-time since around 1990."

It was less of a big deal than he expected. "It was actually quite liberating. I look a bit more like Donald Sutherland without it. So, no, I didn't mind."

Treatment curtailed the re-working of Purple's *Concerto For Group And Orchestra*, the 1969 opus which had been re-recorded with the Liverpool Philharmonic in June 2011, featuring Lord and assorted friends. (More on this, later.)

The chemo ended, but the treatment continued. This time – Israel, four separate visits, two to three weeks at time. It's a little known fact that Israel leads the world in its treatment of cancer.

He'd been to Israel only once before, during the ill-fated Joe Lynn Turner era of Purple for two shows; in Tel Aviv, and on the shores of Lake Galilee.

They injected him with the bird flu virus. In Britain, thanks to an almost annual media-fuelled panic, the words 'bird', 'flu' and 'virus' are enough to send even sane people into a sweaty panic. "The bird flu virus is only harmful to humans when it mutates," explains Lord. "The virus itself is benign – and it also eats cancer cells."

He doesn't know why or how this happens, only that it does. "They injected a small dose of this virus into me, which gave me a mild dose of the flu every time I had it, but, medically, it was so much better than chemotherapy.

"Then they gave me a tailor-made cancer vaccine, based specifically on my cancer, which they then deliberately mutated so it was slightly mis-matched to fight my cancer cells." His body, his beleaguered pancreas, became the proving ground for pioneering medical treatment. Rather than chemotherapy – a nuclear bomb-like approach, which obliterates every cell, good and bad, in the battle against cancer – this more targeted approach, with fewer side effects, seems to be a more effective and less unpleasant way of combatting the disease.

The results were good. "When you get to my age, the cancer is very slow moving. It's containable. My oncologist has had patients who were diagnosed with pancreatic cancer 15 or 16 years ago. They still have treatment and they still have cancer – but, crucially, they're still here. They found my cancer early and the size of the tumour has reduced."

The plan is to keep it that way. They might not be able to cure him – it would be nice if they did – but that's an after-thought, almost. The aim is containment. So far, it's working.



With Joe Bonamassa at Abbey Road, October 2011.

"I'd like to get to my father's age. He was in his late 80s and he'd led a good life. I don't want to limp to that milestone. I don't want to drag myself over that line. I want to be active and well."

Is he well today? "I am, yes. I have lost weight – I have lost too much weight, to be honest. I can get into trousers I last wore in Deep Purple Mk I."

He is down to below 11 stone and a size 31" waist. He is 6ft 1ins tall. "I've not been that size, I don't think, since 1967. I am like a beanpole."

Eating is a challenge. Red meat is banned. Green-leafed vegetables are the dish of the day, everyday. It's a small price to pay, he says. "I can still eat fish. I can eat chicken. It's not so bad.

"It's a year now since I was diagnosed. Apart from the weight loss and a touch of sciatica, I'm pretty well. I've had three recent scans. The cancer is still there, but it's smaller and it's under control. There is every reason to feel optimistic. I am back at work, I am in a good space."

The chemotherapy is over – for now. The trips to Israel are over – for now. "I may have to go back. I may have to have more chemotherapy. I don't know. Right now, we are casting around for the best way forward from here."

He has found a new spirituality, he says – not religion as such, but a sense that something, whatever it is, is looking after him and that there's something else, something bigger than this which lies at the end of the journey here. It was a comforting thought, he says.

"It has changed me," he says. "I am a better man for it."

After a lengthy hiatus, he's back at work. The *Concerto For Group And Orchestra* was performed and recorded by Lord and a stellar cast of very carefully chosen



Early sessions with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra.

"The doctor said: 'You'd better come with me.' He didn't look happy. I followed him to his office and he said: 'I'm afraid it's not good news.'"

JON LORD

PRESS X3



At the Sunflower Jam, 2011: virtuoso, entertainer and all-round gent. RIP.

"I lost my ponytail. It was actually quite liberating. I look a bit more like Donald Sutherland without it."
JON LORD

friends before he was diagnosed last summer. It will be released in September.

It features Joe Bonamassa, Maiden singer Bruce Dickinson, Steve Morse, former Pink Floyd and one-time Page and Coverdale bassist Guy Pratt, and the massed ranks of the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Paul Mann. It sounds – finally – like he always wanted it to sound, when he lay on his bedroom floor in Parson's Green, Fulham in 1968 when he first concocted it, when everyone said it was madness to try to fuse this loud, hairy-arsed rock band and a full-size orchestra.

"We recorded it over two days in June last year – orchestra, bass, drums, organ – and it produced the most wonderful results. I used different guitar players for different movements. I auditioned a few and, mentioning no names, I didn't think some players were quite right. Steve Morse does the final movement. A brilliant player and he gets it, where some others didn't.

"Joe Bonamassa is so good, with so much feel, and I also used an unknown guitar player called Darin Vasilez, from Bulgaria, who I have worked with a few times. He's an astounding guitar player and he blows me away. I flew him in to London and got him in to Abbey Road. He did a fantastic job on the first movement."

Dickinson and two singers he has been touring with – Steve Balsamo and Kasia Łaska – take care of all vocals. "It's not quite finished. I have the final mastered copy and I'm listening to it now. It sounds tremendous. You can hear every note, every little nuance. Finally, we have that perfect balance between the instruments, which we didn't really capture – we didn't have the technology to capture – in 1969. I wrote it for a group of musicians that would all sound the same, but of course, it wasn't like that. We lost the bloom of the orchestra. It gladdens my heart to hear it now. It is a beautiful, exciting, visceral recording."

That's it now, he says. No more tinkering. No more coming back to it. "It's about as close to perfect as I think we will ever get it."

He will perform it, all being well, at various venues in the months to come. Those details have yet to be arranged. "It will be tricky," he says, "a logistical nightmare, there's a lot to arrange there – but we will do it, I'm sure." The deal, he says, is that everyone leaves their egos at the stage door. He left his behind, he says, somewhere in 1974.

The record company wanted him to fly across Europe to promote the album, sit through countless interviews and press conferences. He's told them that's not going to happen. "I'll do a couple of interviews, but they'll be phoners," he says. "I think that's best."

One day he plans to return to the biography he was penning, which, inevitably, has taken something of a backseat in the past 12 months. He has a tale to tell there, he says, if not the time to tell it properly.

And somewhere, buried in the mountain of cards and emails and get-well messages, was one from a long-lost friend now living in Long Island, New York: a certain guitar player called Richard Blackmore.

"He sent me a very nice letter and it was lovely to hear from him.

"My life and Ritchie's life have departed from each other so radically in the past 20 years. He's gone his way and I've gone mine. But we went through a lot together. We will always have that.

"Would I like to play with him again? I'd love to – there's a legion of people out there who want him to pull on that white Strat again – but I'm not holding my breath. Besides, I know more than most you should do what you want to do. Ritchie is doing that. Good luck to him."

And Jon Lord laughs. "All of this and you finish with a question about Ritchie Blackmore. Ha, ha, ha. Bloody typical."

GETTY

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"Rock stars make more money, take more drugs. Blues guys mostly drink, smoke a little pot"

Rock'n'roll loves its survivors, and Aerosmith's **Joe Perry** and blues icon **Johnny Winter** are two of them. In 2014, the pair sat down to talk hell-raising, music-making and the price of fame.

He may have just entered his eighth decade, but Johnny Winter is having a moment. One of rock's great survivors, the grizzled Texan blues-rock pioneer is as busy now, at the age of 70, as he's ever been. As well as a career-spanning new box set – the aptly titled *True To The Blues: The Johnny Winter Story* – there's a warts'n'all documentary on the horizon: *Down & Dirty*, which covers both his lengthy music career and the battles with booze and drugs that have accompanied it.

No less intriguing is *Step Back*, the second in a series of covers albums – Winter calls them 'tributes' – that find the singer and guitarist recording songs by some of his influences from the 50s and 60s, accompanied by friends and contemporaries, such as Eric Clapton, ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons and, on a version of Lightnin' Hopkins's *Mojo Hand*, Joe Perry.

Not entirely coincidentally, Perry is currently perched on the edge of a sofa in Winter's trailer parked outside LA's Saban Theatre, a couple of hours before the latter is due to take the stage. *Classic Rock* has engineered a meeting between these two icons, who, despite similarly lengthy careers and a shared love of the blues, have never met before…

Indeed, the Aerosmith guitarist is especially enthused to meet the more laconic Winter. Back in the late 60s, Perry was one of those hungry Young Turks who soaked up such groundbreaking Winter albums as *The Progressive Blues Experiment* and *Second Winter*, taking cues from Winter's soulful playing that he would later incorporate into Aerosmith's arena-wrecking mega-hits. "I've been influenced by Johnny probably since I was about seventeen or eighteen," says an uncharacteristically effusive Perry. "I've always loved his music." ➔

WORDS
Ken McIntyre
PHOTOS
Travis Shinn


Les Paul
Gibson

And is this really the first time your paths have crossed?

Joe Perry: This one time, many years ago, at the Academy of Music in New York in 1972 – this was before we had a manager – [Winter's former manager] Steve Paul had heard of us and said: "I've got this show with Humble Pie and Edgar and Johnny Winter, and I'll give you twenty minutes so I can check you out." So we played that show, did our twenty minutes, and he passed on us. Johnny and I might have passed each other in the hall that day, but that was probably it.

But I remember going to see him at a club called the Boston Tea Party in Boston in 1969. That was Johnny and Rick Derringer, and it was a really kick-ass rock band. That show got me to put a slide on my finger. And I haven't put it down since.

I think you're both bluesmen, at the core.

JP: I am as much as I can be, really. Johnny's got the credentials and he's played with a lot of the greats. I was more the next generation. Just like Johnny, I'm just another link in the chain. The thing with the blues is, you can play the same song every night, and every time it's a different song. At least for me it is. We carried that over into rock'n'roll. I mean, we've done some songs that were pop hits, they weren't the blues, but I tried to carry over that feeling, to make them a new song every night. It's not the blues per se, but you're giving it that platform, you're giving it some guts. That's what I got from Johnny, watching him pour his heart and soul into it.

Johnny, when did you first realise that you were going to be a blues player?

Johnny Winter: When I was twelve, hearing the blues on the radio. I thought: "I have to learn how to play this, this is cool." It was just more emotional, it had more feeling, than any other kind of music I ever heard. It just makes you feel good. I still love hearing it, and I still love playing it.

Which is better – being successful, or being hungry?

JW: I like being successful a lot better [laughs].

JP: I like to have a comfortable bed, and I like to eat once in a while. But I have to say, some of my best times were back when we were struggling.

JW: That was very fun, when you're still trying to make it.

JP: It's that time when people you don't know start showing up at your shows. At first you're just calling up all your friends to come to the club so the owner thinks you've got something going on. But then there's that night when there's new faces in the audience, and you realise you've got something that they want to hear. That's a great feeling.

Johnny, when you were coming up, were you on a different circuit to bands like Aerosmith?

JW: Not at first. I was playing rock and R&B for a long time before I started playing the blues. Until the British bands came around, white people didn't even want to hear the blues. It wasn't until the Rolling Stones and John Mayall and people like that, when white people started caring about the blues. So I didn't really get to start playing it until about 1967. I never wanted to be a rock star, it's just that Steve Paul wouldn't let me play the blues.

How did audiences react when you first started playing the blues?

JW: There were only a couple of places to even play it. There was a club called the Love Street Light Circus in Houston, and a place called the Vulcan Gas Company in Austin. I wasn't making nearly as much money playing the blues. It was really my drummer 'Uncle' John Turner's idea. I didn't know if we could make any money off of it. And for about a year we didn't. They paid us fifty dollars a week. We were really struggling, sleeping on floors and stuff. And then a *Rolling Stone* article came out about us and everything changed overnight. Suddenly we were playing big festivals. The week before, we were playing to a hundred people.

Was there one show where you realised you were a success?

JW: I'd say Woodstock. That's when I thought we'd pretty much made it. There were so many people there. There was mud everywhere and nobody knew who was going on when. It was a big fuckin' mess. We had to take a helicopter out of there, you couldn't drive at all. I remember flying over the crowd, just thinking: "Look at all these fuckin' people." It was really something else.

JP: You look at the careers of the bands that played Woodstock, and that was the show that put most of them on a national level. I mean, Ten Years After were kind of a one-trick pony, they didn't have much backing them up, but the bands that had the stuff, Woodstock made 'em.

Did you go to Woodstock, Joe?

JP: I'm not really a mud person. I heard about it, I knew it was going on, but I stayed in New Hampshire that weekend. But we were asked to play the anniversary show. Steven [Tyler, Aerosmith singer] and Joey [Kramer, drummer] were both there, and they were talking about tripping and getting muddy, and I was like, just get me in and out without any mud. It was really crazy. There was a little of the vibe of the first one, I think – a lot of people showed up with knapsacks and tents – but there was also a lot of Coca-Cola signs all over the place. That put a crimp in the vibe, for sure.

Corporate sponsorship wrecked rock'n'roll.

JP: The way the business has gone, I think you're seeing the end of a really cool era. I think we were fortunate to be able to see it, to see bands of real quality playing in clubs and theatres in the sixties and seventies, and you got to see that all grow and grow. It didn't used to be about money, at least not for the musicians. In the beginning, nobody made money making records. You put out a record to advertise your tour, and you toured to sell records. The guys that made the money were the lawyers and the managers. We got to go out and play and party and get laid, and that was it.

Johnny, is the lifestyle of a bluesman the same as the lifestyle of a rock'n'roll star?

JW: Pretty much. Rock stars make more money, they take more drugs. Blues guys mostly drink, smoke a little pot. They don't do a lot of coke or heroin.

Would you rather hang out with blues guys?

JW: Oh yeah. They're a lot friendlier, a lot more willing to help you out.

JP: Blues players are a little closer to the road, a little closer to their audience, a little less concerned about the charts and all that stuff. Those are the kinds of guys I'd like to hang out with.

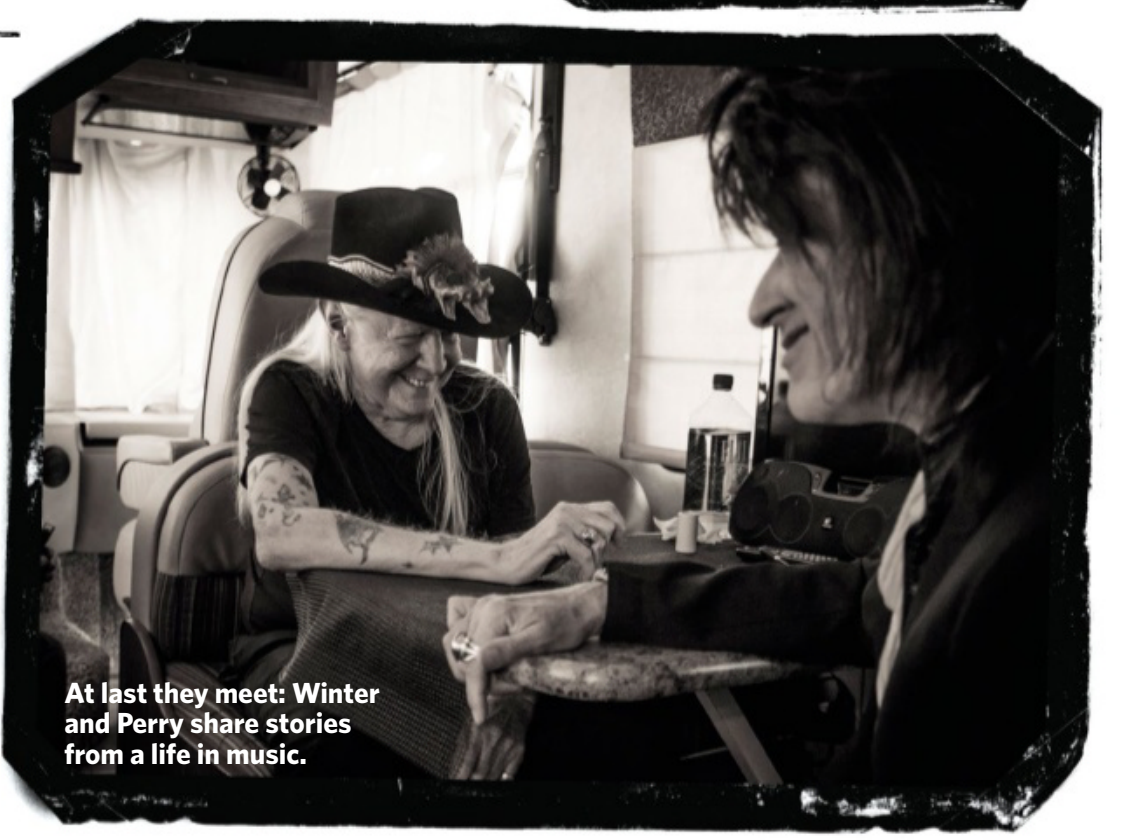
When was the 'golden age' for seeing live music?

JW: The 1950s, for sure. It was ➔

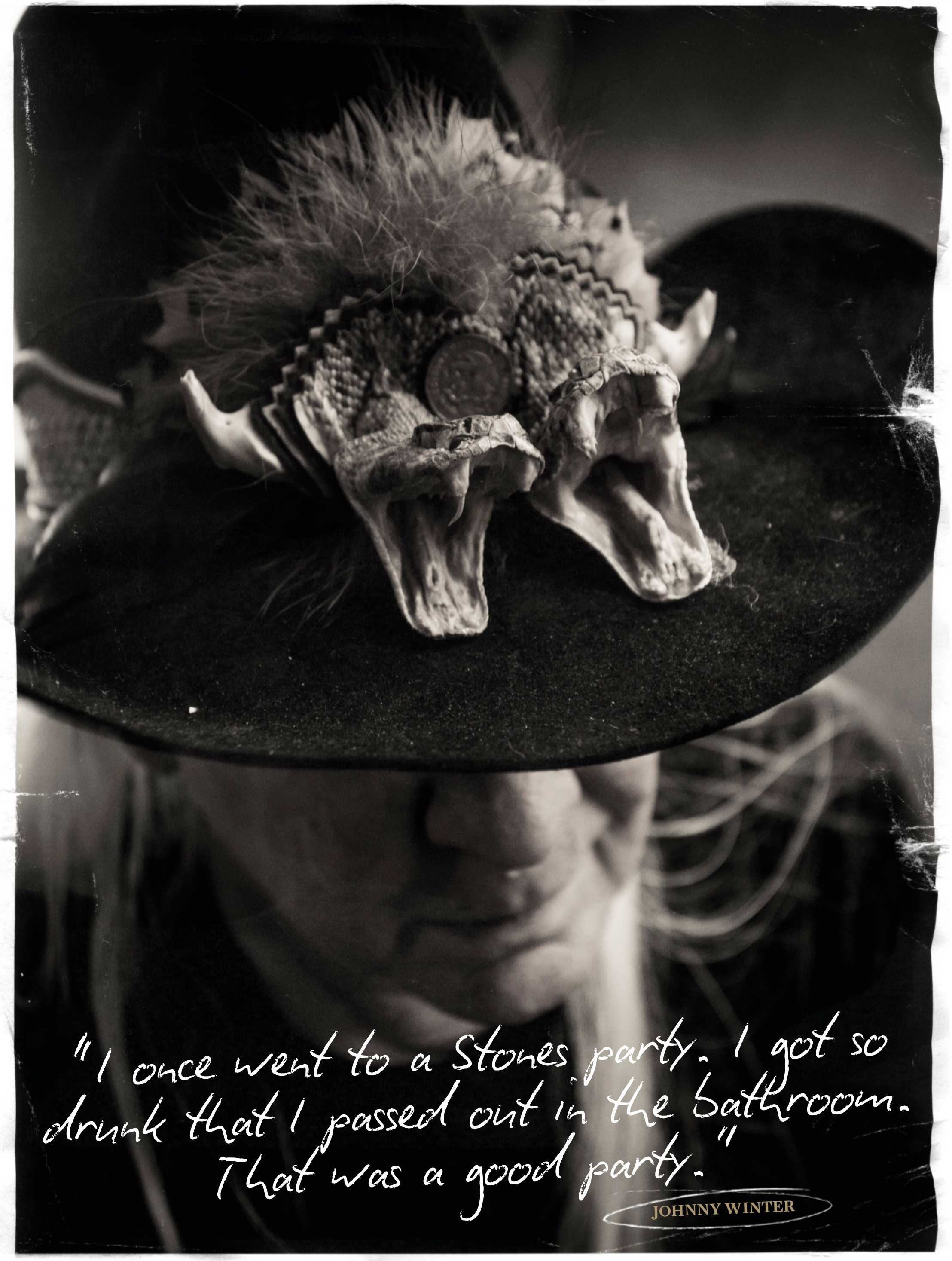


"I couldn't tell you Justin Bieber from Lady Godiva or whatever her name is."

JOE PERRY



At last they meet: Winter and Perry share stories from a life in music.


"I once went to a Stones party. I got so drunk that I passed out in the bathroom. That was a good party."
JOHNNY WINTER

Winter's Tale

Ten definitive Johnny Winter tracks...

SCHOOL DAY BLUES
Johnny's very first single (by Johnny And The Jammers), when he was just 15, is a proto-punk blast of reckless teenage energy.

MEAN TOWN BLUES
Liberated from schmaltzy rock'n'roll for the first time, this is the sound of Johnny discovering who he really was: a blues demon.

BIRD CAN'T ROW BOATS
Recorded before his grand blues experiment, this is Johnny's uniquely Texan take on the trippy acid rock that bled out of SF in the late 60s.

JOHNNY B. GOODE
Johnny never forgot the simple pleasures of a catchy rock'n'roll tune. In '69 he redefined the Chuck Berry hit as a snarling riff monster.

HUSTLED DOWN IN TEXAS
By 1969, Johnny had become a master bluesman. This scorching space-age blues track from his *Second Winter* album shows him at his peak.

ROCK AND ROLL, HOOCHIE KOO
Rick Derringer's solo '73 remake might be best-remembered by most people, but he recorded it with Johnny first – and it belches fire.

STILL ALIVE AND WELL
Imagine having to convince people you're still alive at 29. This is what death-defiance sounds like: a chest-thumping, wolf-howling ode to beating the odds, delivered with a swashbuckling, cocksure strut.

CHEAP TEQUILA
This acoustic track from his '73 comeback record finds Johnny warning the next wave of boozy rock stars: '*Live just for today/Drown in cheap tequila and flush yourself away.*'

MASTER MECHANIC
Johnny spent the 80s exploring his roots. This is his take on raw Delta blues: nasty, sex-charged, primal, essential.

HIGHWAY 61 REVISITED
Johnny first covered Dylan's '65 hit on his second album, but this version, played live with an all-star backing band at Dylan's 30th anniversary concert, is thoroughly raging.

a great decade for music. There was a lot of great blues, and rock'n'roll had just come out. It was some of the best music I've ever heard and some of the best shows I've ever seen – stuff like early Elvis, Fats Domino, Little Richard. I loved it.

JP: For me, I think it was the education I got when the English guys came over and turned Americans on to American music. I have to say it was the Stones. They really stuck to their guns. They were really surprised when they came over here and turned on the radio. They expected to hear the blues. They couldn't believe we weren't listening to the blues in our own country. When they would come on a TV show here, they wouldn't come on unless they also had, like, Howlin' Wolf on. I remember seeing that on *Shindig*.

JW: He would've never gotten on without those guys. They did a lot for the blues.

JP: And they gave credit to people. I mean, I love Jimmy Page and everything, but he put his name under a lot of things that he shouldn't have, let's put it that way. But the Stones always gave credit where it was due. After they got bored with being pop stars, they really got into their roots. *Exile On Main St* is a hardcore blues record. And it turned a whole generation of white kids on to the blues. Johnny covered a lot of Stones over the years – *Silver Train* is one of my favourites.



Did you know the Stones, Johnny?

JW: Yeah, I knew Mick and Keith. I once went to a party they were having, and I got so drunk that I went into the bathroom and passed out. My wife had to drag me out. That was a good party.

Given all the rehabilitation involved, is the rock'n'roll lifestyle really worth it?

JP: After a while, you realise how much it's taken out of you.

JW: I would've died if I didn't stop. I'm sure of that. The kind of stuff I was doing, there's no way I'd still be here if I didn't quit.

JP: Your body's only got so many drinks in it. It's only got so many hits of blow, so many pills it can take. When you're born, there's a set amount that you're going to be able to take before it turns around and bites you on the ass. Some people can do it forever and they've learned to control it. Other people, within a year they're dead. And you don't know that when you're drinking your first drink or taking your first hit. It's playing with fire. At first you're just having a few drinks, maybe nursing a hangover the next day, but eventually it affects your playing, and you end up not caring as much, and if you let it get that far, your body starts falling apart.

Of course the mythology is that drugs and alcohol fuel the music, that you wouldn't have been able to make it without them.

JP: Well, it helps you bear the road. But one of the things that got me sober was I realised it was the music that got me high in the first place. The first time I heard the music that inspired me, I was stone-cold sober. So I think back to those times and I realise it was already in there.

Does the blues work as well stone-cold sober?

JW: I know it does. I like it a lot better, actually. I know I play better.

JP: For sure. You want to hear what your rhythm section's doing, you want to react to that. If you're out there sober, you can do things you never thought you could do.

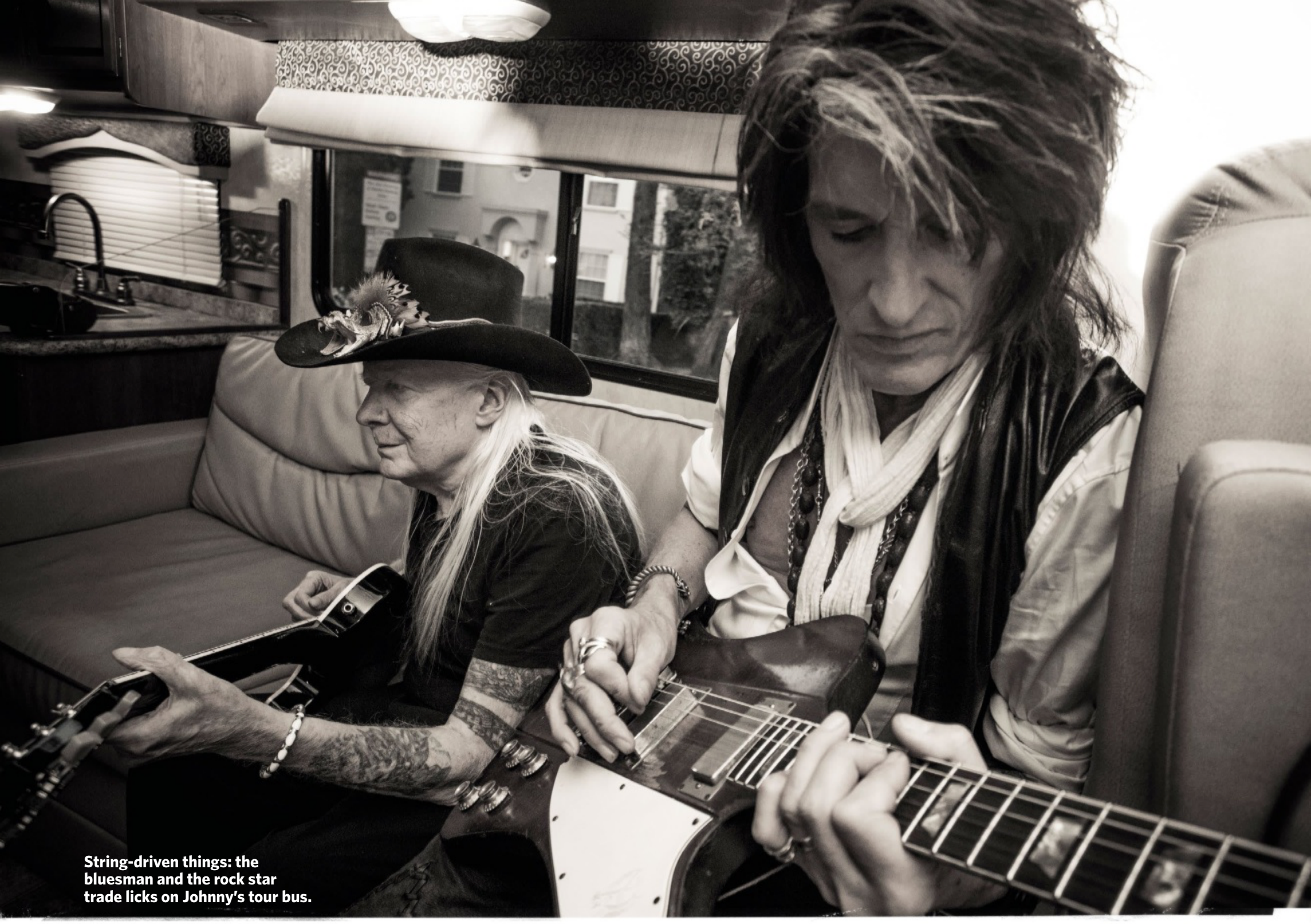
Johnny, what's your favourite show that you've ever played?

JW: That's a tough question. There's

> "The lawyers and managers made the money. We got to play, party and get laid."
>
> JOE PERRY



Johnny Winter: still alive and well. Surprisingly, given the things he's done.



String-driven things: the bluesman and the rock star trade licks on Johnny's tour bus.

> "The way the business has gone, I think you're seeing the end of a really cool era."
>
> JOE PERRY

been a lot of great ones. Probably Woodstock, though.

JP: There's different reasons why a gig can be good. But one that got me down deep in my soul was a show we did last year. When Aerosmith first got together there were five of us living in an apartment together. I rented the apartment. We were five guys, all struggling to make it. Forty years later they wanted to put a sign on the building as a historic site. So we did a gig on a flatbed truck, right out in front of the building, and forty-thousand people showed up. Just standing there and looking at all those people, and turning around and seeing where my old bedroom was, forty-two years ago, that one really hit me. I don't know if we played great. All I know is that forty-thousand people showed up and it was really an amazing thing.

Johnny, you have a documentary coming out, *Down & Dirty*. What was it like making it?

JW: It was a lot of fun. They followed us all over, from Japan to Europe, everywhere. It covers my whole life story, good and bad. Joe's in it.

JP: I am?

JW: Yeah. And you look good [laughs]. I saw it a few months ago, at the premiere at South By Southwest. I really loved it.

Does it have everything you've always wanted to know about Johnny Winter?

JW: Yeah. Probably more than you'd want to know.

How do you guys feel about the state of rock'n'roll these days?

JP: Everything is so compartmentalised these days. So specialised and industrialised. I couldn't tell you Justin Bieber from Lady Godiva or Lady Goo-Goo or whatever her name is. I mean, more power to them, they're the latest thing, but I just don't hear that stuff.

One thing's for sure: when you guys stop playing, it's all over – the whole notion of 'classic rock'.

JP: That's what I was saying earlier – it's the end of an era. The Stones are still out there doing it. I'd like to be the last one standing, but with those guys, who knows?

Seeing this whole thing go from basically a cottage industry in the fifties and sixties, through the punk thing, then the MTV era. That was a crazy time. The record companies were pouring out money like it was water. Then Napster came and killed the record industry. That was fine for us, because we make our living playing live, but it knocked off a lot of people who made a living selling records but didn't do well playing live. Guys like Johnny and I were fortunate enough to come up in a time when you had to be good at playing live to make it. But the era that we've all known and loved is over. When a guy like Billy Joel says he's not going to write any new songs because it's a waste of time, that all anybody wants to hear are his hits from way back when, that's when you know it's really over.

Johnny, are you ever going to quit?

JW: I don't think so. Not unless I'm no longer physically able. Otherwise I'm gonna keep going.

Joe, do you have a favourite Johnny Winter song?

JP: *TV Mama*. I love the lyrics, I love the feel of that song. But of course there's so many that I like, and I might really love the solo on a particular song, so it's hard to pin down just one. But I think that album [*Nothin' But The Blues*, 1977] is the best of them. Johnny's records are part of that lexicon of music that I have to keep with me at all times for when I need that kick in the ass.

Johnny, do you have a favourite Aerosmith song?

JW: Probably *Walk This Way*.

JP: [Laughs] I'm surprised that he even knew who we were, to be honest. I mean, give me a break. We're from different worlds.

He was a mentor to ***Eric Clapton****,* ***Lynyrd Skynyrd*** *covered his songs and he's one of* ***Neil Young****'s favourite guitarists. So why did* ***JJ Cale*** *remain one of blues rock's best-kept secrets? In 2009, Classic Rock sat down with him to find out...*

Words: **Max Bell** Portrait: **Michael Putland**

John Weldon Cale is sitting in the kitchen of his rural ranch-style bungalow with the blinds drawn against the sun, staring at the wall. He lives in Southern California, in San Diego County, outside of Escondido – which is Spanish for 'hidden', and that's just the way he likes it; nice and quiet, as befits the undisputed king of minimal southern rock, the epitome of laid-back, but a sonic architect just the same. His old Airstream motor home parked out front may be re-commissioned: Cale is about to go back on the road to promote new album, *Roll On*.

Ever since his companion, an English Springer called Buddy, passed on, Cale has been on his lonesome. "Life without an animal is terrible," he sighs. "I loved that old dawg. And Foley before him. Keep meaning to get me a new one." His nearest neighbours are three acres away – unless you count his close friends, the squirrels, racoons, rabbits and birds running round his modest estate. "It's like a Disney cartoon out here," he chuckles.

The 70-year old Oklahoman, or Okie, with a long drawl is weather-beaten, with a grey beard, looking not so much unshaven as unshaveable. Dressed in ancient Lee jeans and a work shirt, and pulling on a Kool, Cale admits to being a hypochondriac. "I'm gettin' by okay for an old man, though since the rain came and ended the drought I got flu. Still alive though. At my age that's a good deal," he chuckles. "Any day above ground…"

Forever typecast as a recluse, *Roll On* is ol' JJ's sixteenth record. And it's terrific, on a par with his early 70s albums – *Naturally, Really* and *Okie* – which turned him from a 32-year-old late developer into an American legend, albeit of the best-kept secret kind. It's safe to say that without his influence Eric Clapton and Mark Knopfler would not be where they are today, while Neil Young says: "When I think of great guitarists I think of Jimi Hendrix and JJ Cale. There is no one better than him."

Clapton's cover of Cale's *After Midnight* on the former's 1970 debut solo album gave his mentor a weird career, though he still reckons "my songs are way more famous than I am. My bass-playing friend, the late Carl Radle, played him [Clapton] the tune." When he later heard that Clapton had covered it, he thought it was a wind-up. "Then Delaney Bramlett [of Delaney And Bonnie] talked me up. That was like discovering oil in your backyard. But I just do it and move on. Hell, I can't tell one of my albums from the next. I try not to make 'em sound like anything else, but everything I do sounds like me. It is what it is."

Roll On features Clapton on the title track, a song that Cale has been playing live for more than 20 years. The two men have combined before, for the *The Road To Escondido* album [2006], a mutual admiration project which won Cale his one and only Grammy – much to Clapton's delight and embarrassment.

"Originally I asked him if he'd consider making an album with me," Clapton recalls. " I really wanted him to produce me, because I'm a fan of his recorded sound. His minimalism is the way I want to go. He has a unique approach, and I wanted to avail myself of that.

"So I moved in with him for a week, to go over material and to get to know each other. Not a lot of work got done, but that wasn't the point. His idea was to bring in the musicians and record 'live'. I thought we might have a problem capturing the 'groove' I heard on his demos, usually created with drum machines etc and such an important part of his sound. Eventually the *Road…* album became a duet thing, which improved it and made the experience more memorable for me.

"Hanging out with John is one of my favourite pastimes. He's got a great sense of humour, and has been misunderstood by most people, referring to him as a recluse when he's very sociable, open and charismatic. He just prefers his own company. JJ has never even been nominated for the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame, ➔

GETTY

JJ Cale: "Hell, I can't tell one of my albums from the next..."

"I'm getting by okay for an old man. Still alive. At my age that's a good deal."

while I've been inducted three times. In my opinion he's one of the most important artists in the history of rock, representing the greatest asset his country has ever had. Yet a lot of people have never even heard of him."

Clapton's involvement changed that to an extent, although the Grammy didn't faze Cale. "That is still in the box. I may put it on the mantle but I probably won't. My domestic duties are kinda slow. It didn't really change my life, 'cept it was a nice pat on the back. Good for my ego. Me and Eric laughed about it, but I have to thank him for boosting my bank balance by recording *After Midnight* on his first solo record, then cutting *Cocaine* and *I'll Make Love To You Anytime*. Same with Lynyrd Skynyrd, who cut *They Call Me The Breeze*. Man, they rocked that up! They cut it so hard it astonished me! I wasn't aware they were even listening to me. Then those kids all died. That was too bad."

Cale hasn't had a hit himself since 1972, when a Little Rock DJ flipped his *Magnolia* single and hammered the B-side, *Crazy Mama*, which eventually reached No.22 on the *Billboard* chart.

Top Nashville guitarist Mac Gayden, of Area Code 615/Barefoot Jerry fame, who played the distinctive wah-wah slide on that track, recalls the session: "Cale's producer, Audie Ashworth, hired me for the studio at Bradley's Barn, outside Nashville. We ran through it one time only, then Cale gets on the talkback and says: 'Come on in, Mac, and sign the time card, you're done.' I said: 'I can do it better.' He said: 'No, you can't.' I swear it only took seven minutes – first take.

"That cut launched the career of one of America's most emulated guitarists. John was a total joy, very loosey-goosey with a don't-sweat-the-small-stuff vibe. In a business packed with people trying to be hip and cool, he is a rare personality."

Shortly afterwards, Gayden joined Cale's band for a tour supporting Black Oak Arkansas whose teenage audience started throwing bottles and booing them in Baton Rouge, LA. "So we turned our amps to full throttle and let rip – and it worked. Next night we played the Warehouse in New Orleans with Quicksilver Messenger Service. JJ still played on a stool with his back on the crowd, but they got it."

Gayden also witnessed a rare flash of Cale temper. "The last time I saw John was in LA a few years ago, at his house. We talked about 'old friends', and then suddenly John started to 'rag' on Mark Knopfler. He mentioned how much he didn't appreciate him ripping off his guitar style and his singing. Just as John was reaching a fever pitch, guess who calls? None other than Mark Knopfler himself, inviting JJ to go on the road and open for his upcoming tour. John was nice, but hung up and started to 'rag' him again. I left in total agreement. A few weeks later I read that he was opening for Mark on his US tour. I guess imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

Cale – who Clapton calls "a superior musician… one of the masters" – runs in a straight line. In the late 50s and early 60s he cut a sequence of rockabilly and rock'n'roll sides with his own Quintette and helped create the Tulsa Sound with fellow Oklahomans David Gates and Leon Russell (Bridges). In 1965 he moved to Los Angeles when pop producer Snuff Garrett told him that psychedelia was a-happening. Cale migrated and hung out with members of Ronnie Hawkins And The Hawks (the nascent Band), before making the one-off album *A Trip Down The Sunset Strip* in 1967 with old Okie pals he christened The Leathercoated Minds. The LP contained super-fast acid takes on the Yardbirds' *Over Under Sideways Down*, the Byrds' *Eight Miles High*, Donovan's *Sunshine Superman*, and a few originals composed under the influence of LSD and plenty of pot.

"I hate that album," Cale says. "I've tried to burn it whenever I see one. We bought into the psychedelic scene but it was a bad imitation. You guys might like it, but you're nuts! I enjoyed LA though. I played at all the East LA bars. We supported Johnny Rivers when he was hot, and I saw Love and The Doors. I also saw Otis Redding, who was better.
I think I was only the third act ever to perform at the Whisky. Club owner Elmer Valentine gave me the JJ handle. Said it would look good on the marquee. Smartest thing I ever did."

While the hierarchy of young, long-haired LA groups thrived, Cale found he'd outworn his welcome. He had a spell as an engineer, working on Blue Cheer's debut *Vincebus Eruptum*, but felt out of place among the acid crowd. "I spent too much time drinking and got real poor, real fast," he recalls. "LA ain't a good place to be hungry. So I came home and got a job in a country band and lived in motels, earning 10 bucks a night and all the beer you wanted. I really thought
I was finished and would end up selling shoes, until Eric cut *After Midnight*. I was going to be a construction worker, or an insurance man. I was that down on luck."

One day, Audie Ashworth, Cale's future business partner, told him that Clapton had covered his song. He didn't believe it until the first royalty cheque hit the mat. "Audie got me to Nashville around 1971 and we made *Naturally* for $3,000-$4,000. This is when the south was gonna rise again, like Charlie Daniels sang. Nashville, Muscle Shoals, Alabama, Memphis – suddenly they became hip towns. The players were real good and people like Bob Dylan and Steve Miller were recording in our neck of the woods. It was good timing because rock folks discovered country. The studios were good and professional and the guitarists could play a lick. Like the Lovin' Spoonful song [*Nashville Cats*] says about the 1,352 pickers in Nashville."

The stoned, sexy calm of Cale's albums gave him instant cult status among discerning record buyers. "Yeah, but I didn't put Nashville on the map. Perhaps to Europeans I helped, but the Grand Ole Opry was famous since the 40s. My heroes remained the same: Charlie Parker, Elvis 'fore he got too operatic, Chuck Berry, Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown and Mose Allison. I loved The Beatles' *Rubber Soul* and that song *We Can Work It Out*. I loved Dylan's folk stuff, Randy Newman, Nilsson. I don't mind stealing a lick or borrowing a technique off them. I'm a musician, that's what we do."

Naturally was an easy album to make for

THE BEST OF JJ

Picking the gems from JJ Cale's 50-plus years of recording.

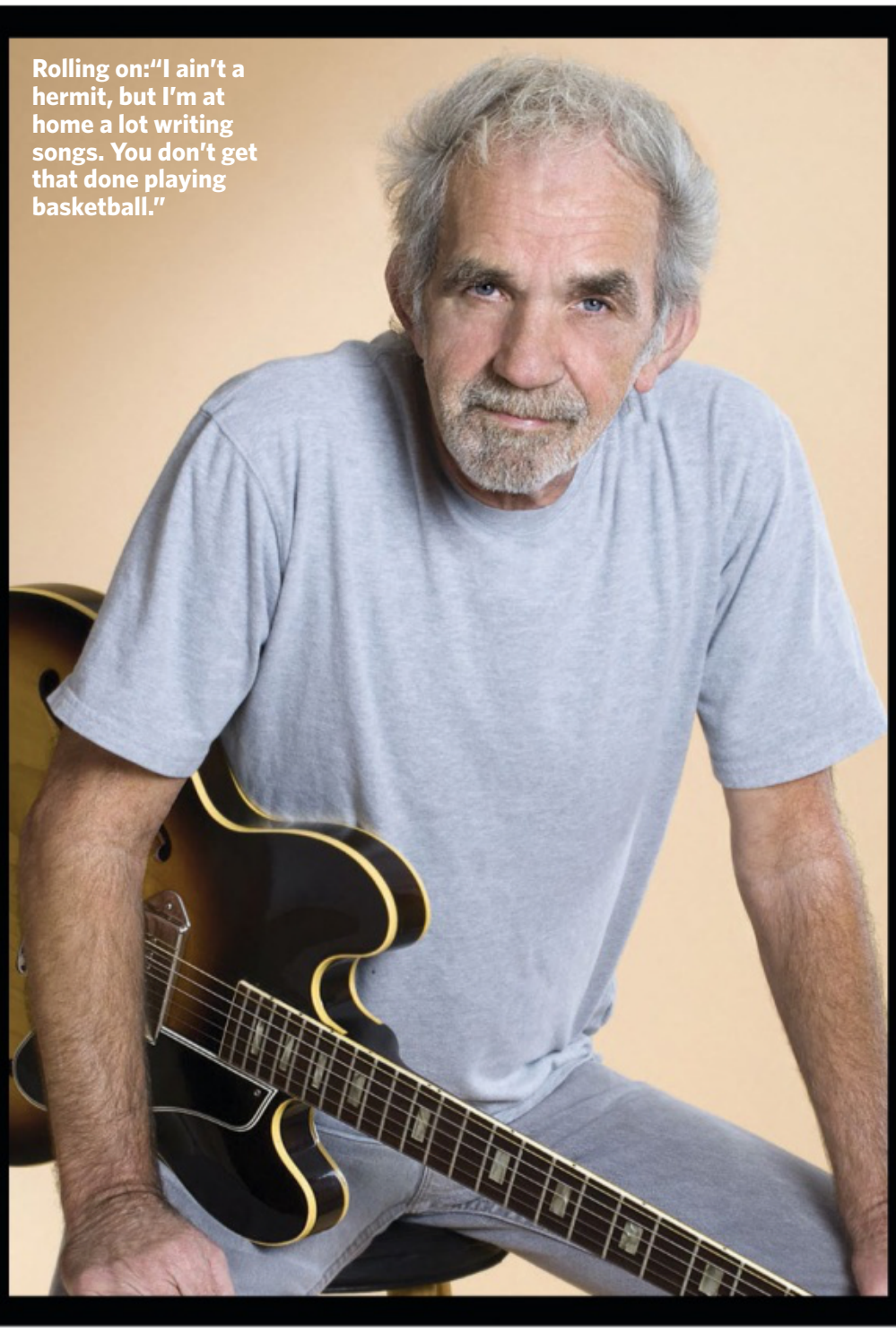


Cale has been recording since the late 1950s. Outside of the obvious tracks already mentioned elsewhere in this feature, it's worth searching out his 1965 version of *After Midnight*, complete with funky horns, then try The Leathercoated Minds' instrumental *Sunset And Clark* (1968).

Cale's best-known solo output commences with his spell with Shelter Records. Beyond the obvious 'hits' stuff, you need to hear the dope-smuggling-from-Mexico masterpiece *Bringing It Back*, the porch blues of *Clyde* and *River Runs Deep* (from 1972's *Naturally* – pictured). His *Really* album (1972) is all essential, while *Okie* (1974) contains the autobiographical epics *Rock And Roll Records* and *I Got The Same Old Blues*. The European smash hit *Troubadour* (1976) contains down-and-dirty lovers rockers like *Let Me Do It To You* and *You Got Me On So Bad*, while the album 5 (1979) includes the road-weary classic *Thirteen Days*.

Following some agreeable coasting came *#8* (1983) – his only political record: witness *Losers, Hard Times* and *Unemployment*. In recent times, the anthology *Anyway The Wind Blows* is essential, while *Rewind – Unreleased Recordings* is a delight.

Stick that lot on your MP3 player, along with Cale's new *Roll On*, on which the old dawg teaches us a few new tricks. Difficult not to enjoy. Really.



Rolling on: "I ain't a hermit, but I'm at home a lot writing songs. You don't get that done playing basketball."



Cale, since he had hundreds of unrecorded songs in his locker. The albums *Really* and *Okie* followed in short order, the former written on the way to Shelter Studios and finished in six days.

"Audie and the label owners, Leon Russell and Denny Cordell, phoned every six months: 'When's the next one ready?'" says Cale. "My attitude was always: 'What was wrong with the last one?' But I got sucked in."

In 1976 Cale embarked on his first of two European jaunts, promoting his most successful album, *Troubadour*. I saw him play at Hammersmith Odeon. It's an indelible, dope-crazed memory. "I don't remember it myself," Cale laughs. "It was a blur of VW vans and big cities. The fish and chips were good in London. Eric sat in with us, unannounced. I've spoken to people who didn't know he played!

"Am I laid back? I guess. I call my music 'humming mud', and my singing, if you can call it singing, is craggy and baggy. My range is kinda limited. One and a half notes – on a good day."

Troubadour included the candid drug song *Cocaine*, while in Cale's touring band was guitarist Christine Lakeland, who many have taken to be JJ's muse. It's thought that Cale has never married, but may have several 'wives'. "Hmm… I don't mind a bit of innuendo and sensuality but I don't discuss my private life," he says. He once filled out a *Guardian* newspaper questionnaire and omitted to answer anything remotely personal other than 'What vehicle do you own?' (truck and motor home), 'Object always carried' (pocket knife), 'Motto' (do unto others before they do unto you) and 'How would you like to die?' (a very old man). 'Significant others' didn't use up any ink from his pen.

"Nobody likes to be followed to the bedroom. Well, maybe some people do," he smiles. "Christine is a very old friend. She's way more of a recluse than I am." It's true. Lakeland's website contains one page: a photograph of her holding an electric guitar. Marvellous.

The thing about JJ Cale is that he doesn't change and doesn't need to. He was good when he started and he's good now. Like his song says: *'They call me the breeze/I keep blowing down the road.'* He ain't broke, he don't need fixing. "I've always been rock'n'roll and country; then again I'm more jazz than your average Britney Spears. But I ain't a hermit. I'm home a lot writing songs cos that's what I am. You don't get that done by playing basketball…"

Five years ago Cale returned to his roots when he recorded the album *To Tulsa And Back*, hooking up with his old cronies Lakeland, Bill Boatman and Jimmy Karstein, and resolving his fall-out with Ashworth, who became exasperated every time Cale told him: "Send me the money and let the younger guys have the fame." It was going to be called *To Nashville And Back*, but Ashworth died before the tapes were loaded.

New album *Roll On* closes with a song called *Bring Down The Curtain*, which says: *'Enough is enough/Can't do it no more.'* Is that it? Adios, amigos? "I don't know. I wouldn't have put that on but it is a good ending. Didn't mean to depress ya. I'm at an age where I am looking at the end of the clock. Intimations of mortality? I guess. Mind, Willie Nelson is older an' me and he's still going. So don't take it too literally. I'm not only a reality writer, I'm a fictitious writer. I like to amaze myself with a cute twist and turn."

Perhaps that's the ultimate self-analysis from an artist who doesn't do 'projects' and only signs one-off deals. "I don't ever think I'm making a record," Cale says. "I just do it, and when it falls into place, 75 per cent cohesive, I'm always surprised. I listen to it and think: 'Is it any good?' 'Are the songs any good?' 'Is it a concept?' I don't have a clue. It's just natural evolution. Everything I do is an accident. But it's my accident."

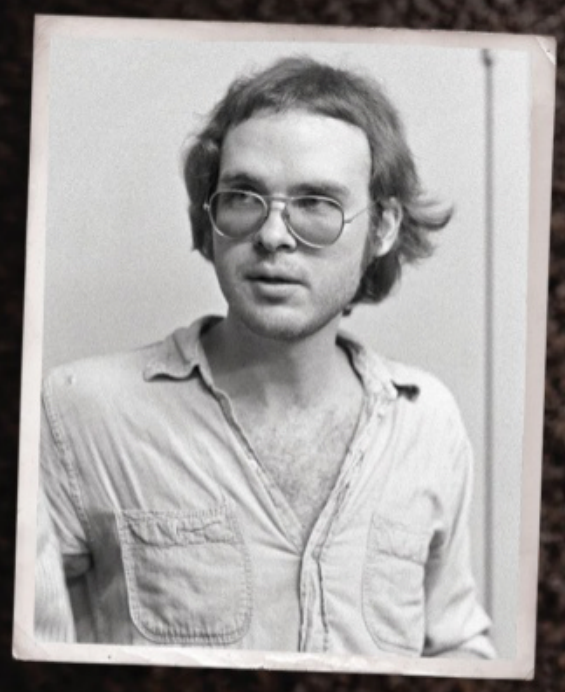
And, he points out. "No one tells me what to do. There's no one at my door. I'm famous for *Cocaine, Call Me The Breeze* and, hell, they might even make *After Midnight* the Oklahoma State Song soon. It don't bug me if that's all the average guy knows. I don't make music most young people would like. Some do. I isn't no rapper, though I like rap now they made the lyrics more interesting."

Suddenly Cale gets a fax confirming the bitter-sweet news that he's booked to tour California and beyond. "Oh Lord," he sighs. "I'd better watch my voice. I've got to play well enough so people don't throw tomatoes at me. If I'm healthy enough I might even get on an aeroplane and see you. Maybe."

THE TAO OF BILLY GIBBONS

Inspired by the blues, the Texan guitarist was given the Papal blessing by Jimi Hendrix in his first band The Moving Sidewalks, before finding global fame with **ZZ Top**. In 2018, the Reverend William F Gibbons sat down with *Classic Rock* to look back on the whole crazy ride.

Words: **Paul Elliott**



JOBY SESSIONS



The Moving Sidewalks with Jimi Hendrix when they opened for him at the Municipal Auditorium, San Antonio, on February 15, 1968.

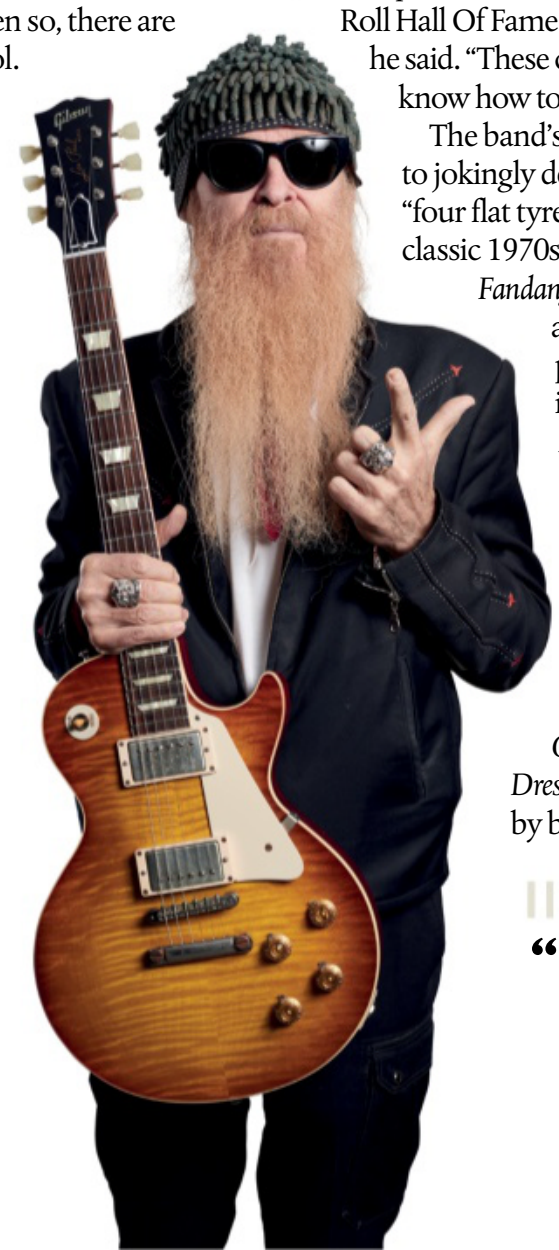


Gibbons (second left) with The Moving Sidewalks in the 60s.

GETTY x2 / JOBY SESSIONS

Billy Gibbons has been playing it cool for a long, long time. In 2019 the guitarist will be celebrating 50 years of ZZ Top, the band he formed in Houston, Texas with bassist Dusty Hill and drummer Frank Beard. In that time, the trio, masters of blues and boogie, have sold more than 50 million records, and made it all look so easy. On stage, cooking on a high heat, these dudes never seem to break sweat. Their image has a unique sense of style and an in-built punchline: Gibbons and Hill with their famous foot-long beards, drummer Beard having one in name only.

The way Gibbons talks, in a Texan drawl that begins somewhere around his boots, is laid-back to the point of horizontal. Even so, there are some things that rattle his cool. "The hands-free faucet," he says, apropos of nothing. "Those damn things don't work. You find yourself waving your hands in thin air, waiting for the water. I'd like to find that guy that invented that contraption and wring his neck…"



Gibbons is talking to *Classic Rock* ahead of ZZ Top's performance at a winery in Woodinville, a small town in Washington State. He also has a new solo album about to be released: *The Big Bad Blues*, a collection of original material and old standards, on which he's backed by a group of veteran session musicians, and ex-Guns N' Roses drummer Matt Sorum. Unlike his 2015 solo album *Perfectamundo*, an adventure in Afro-Cuban-influenced rhythm, *The Big Bad Blues* is business as usual for a man who has spent so much of his 68 years in thrall to that particular idiom.

William Frederick Gibbons, born in Houston on December 15, 1949, had music in his blood. His father Freddie was an orchestra conductor and concert pianist. As a teenager, Billy played in various groups, the most notable being acid rock combo The Moving Sidewalks, who opened for The Jimi Hendrix Experience in 1968. The following year Gibbons teamed up with Hill and Beard, both from rival Houston band American Blues, and the three of them have stuck together, as ZZ Top, ever since.

It was Keith Richards who defined the essence of ZZ Top when he inducted them into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in 2004. "This is a solid band," he said. "These cats know their blues and they know how to dress it up."

The band's boogie power led Gibbons to jokingly describe their sound as like "four flat tyres on a muddy road", but on classic 1970s albums such as *Tres Hombres*, *Fandango!* and *Degüello*, they stirred a little soul and funk into the pot, adding a surreal humour in loony tunes such as *Manic Mechanic* and *Ten Foot Pole*.

With 1983's *Eliminator* album they pulled off the smartest trick of their whole career, cleverly updating their signature sound with synthesisers and sequencers and creating huge hits with *Gimme All Your Lovin'*, *Sharp Dressed Man* and *Legs*, all powered by brilliant videos which, in an era when MTV was king, transformed the self-styled 'little ol' band from Texas' to global superstars.

In conversation, Billy Gibbons employs the dry wit and smooth delivery of a seasoned raconteur. Telling the story of his life's work, he discusses the past, present and future of ZZ Top. He speaks of the inspiration he found in Hendrix, the Stones and Elvis, and in punk rock and hip-hop. He recalls with affection his experiences with consciousness-expanding drugs and the girls from the bordello immortalised in the ZZ Top classic *La Grange*. He begins by going back to the 50s, when as a young boy he had his mind blown by a blues legend.

What do you remember of the moment when you first sensed the power of the blues?

I grew up in a house where music was a constant. My dad, a rather interesting all-round entertainer, provided a tremendous sonic background to my childhood. We also had a housekeeper and she loved listening to the rhythm-and-blues stations.

One day, when I was about seven years old, my dad took me to ACA Studios in Houston, where he had some business to do. There was a recording session in progress, and my dad put me in there, sat me on a chair and said: "I'll come back for you in a little while." It turned out that the session was by none other than BB King. And what BB was doing with the guitar, I remember thinking: "This is for me…"

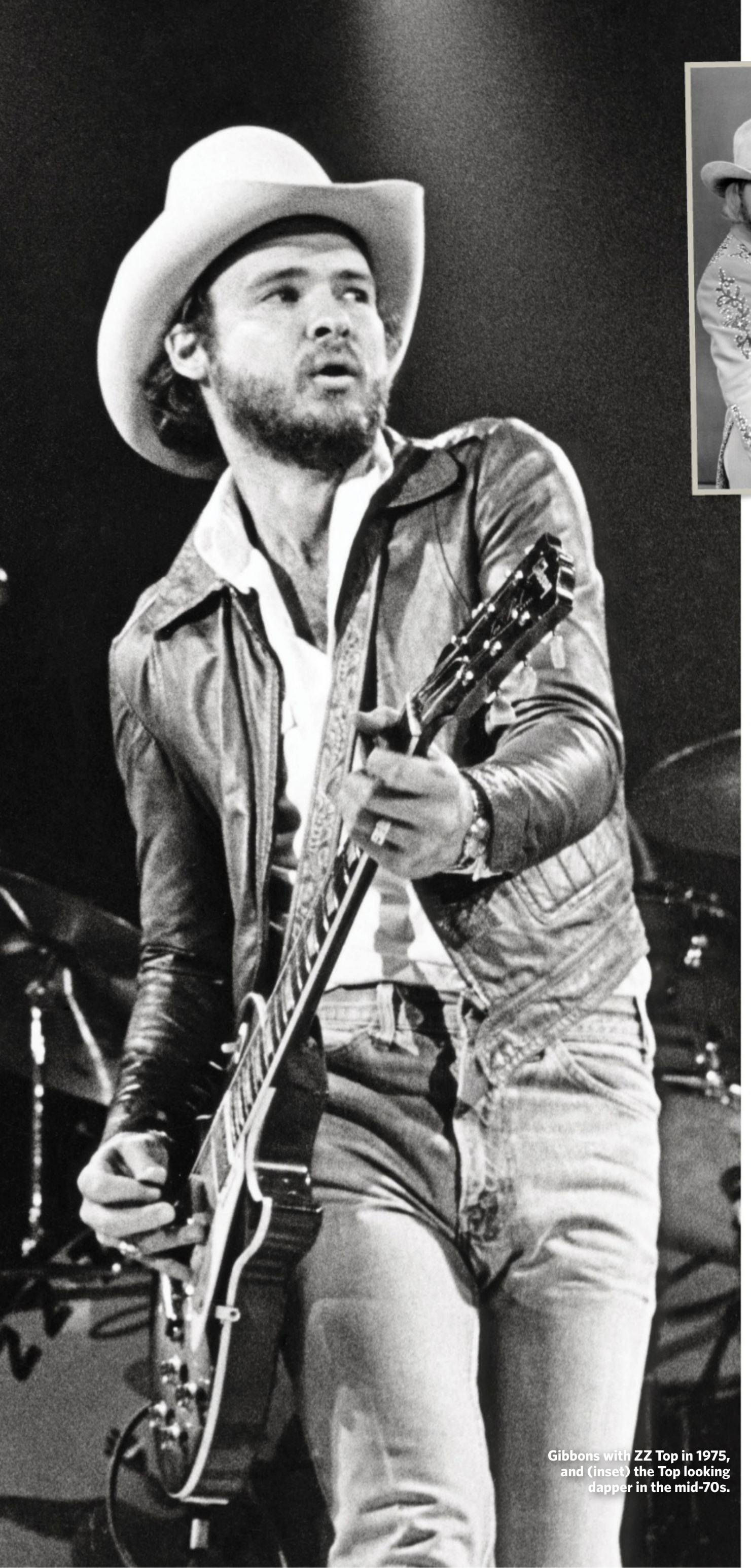
Do you now see that as being a defining point in your life?

It sure was. Also, my younger sister and I got to tag along with my mom to go to see an Elvis Presley concert. And those two events, to this day, loom large in the mind. Those two events were doubly responsible for taking my life in a certain direction; between Elvis and BB King, I was done.

Which other blues artists had the biggest influence on you?

I think it's fair to say that when Muddy Waters left the acoustic guitar by the wayside and finally decided to plug in and power up, that was a rather significant turning point. From that moment – the electrification of the blues – there was no turning back for me. I would also add Jimmy Reed into the mix. Even to this day I find myself returning to his old recordings. And it's somewhat remarkable that after hearing these things over and over again,

"Seeing BB King and Elvis Presley, that was responsible for taking my life in a certain direction."



Gibbons with ZZ Top in 1975, and (inset) the Top looking dapper in the mid-70s.



GETTY x2

there's always something that pops up that I may not have caught before. It's kind of amazing to me that I can still get such a charge out of Jimmy Reed's stuff.

You recorded two Muddy Waters songs for your new album. Where does the emotional depth in your version of *Standing Around Crying* come from?
That really is the keyword – it does become quite emotional for me when I play that song. And I like to extol the virtues of the originators. We're challenged to be successful as interpreters. In those silent moments when you're all alone in a studio and you imagine what it might have been like during those rather captivating moments when many of these great songs were recorded, it's inspirational. I think that's part of the mystery of the magnetic appeal of this rather simplistic art form. I use that word 'simplistic', but it really is rather complex.

The first song on the album, *Missin' Yo' Kissin'*, was written by your wife, Gilly Stillwater.
Yes. I was playing around with the usual suspects – those famous three chords – and I saw her scribbling on a piece of paper. At first I didn't pay too much attention to it, but when she left the room I happened to glance down at what she'd written, and I thought: "Gee whizz, I could do something with this…"

Before ZZ Top, you played psychedelic rock with The Moving Sidewalks.
It was a wonderful time, largely due to the unexpected invitation to join the Jimi Hendrix Experience tour back in 1968. Rock'n'roll was becoming more cerebral. Bands were beginning to experiment with expansion of consciousness. It genuinely was a period of great experimentation.

Is it fair to assume that The Moving Sidewalks, in the spirit of these times, took a lot of drugs?
Initially, no, but as society's values seemed to turn in that direction, we didn't seem to pass anything up. We took whatever was being passed around.

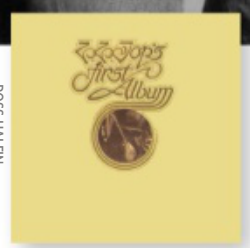
When you reunited with the Sidewalks to play three shows in 2013, was it as much fun as you hoped it would be?
Shocking is what it was. The other three guys

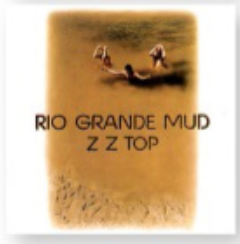


Probably not-so-cheap sunglasses. Dusty Hill, Frank Beard, Billy Gibbons.

had regrouped once the bass player and organ player returned from their duty with armed services in Vietnam. So their chops continued to develop, they became real players, and as soon as we started rehearsing again, within thirty seconds it was back to what it was in 1968 . We were all grinning, remembering crazy shenanigans on the road. Music has that power to dredge up recollections from the distant past.

ROSS HALFIN





When ZZ Top formed in '69, what kind of band did you envisage it would be?
We touched upon The Moving Sidewalks and the psychedelic surroundings of that excursion, but at the same time things were swinging back to a bluesier influence, particularly from bands from the UK. It's no secret that the British revived the art form in no small terms. We were rediscovering that which had been left by the wayside, all thanks to the Rolling Stones and Eric Burdon and The Animals and the Pretty Things – so many influential arrivals on these shores, allowing us to get back into the blues thing. And I shared quite a number of the same influences that struck both Dusty Hill and Frank Beard, so it was quite natural to take the ball and run with it.

I inherited such a great rhythm section. Dusty and Frank had been in a band together for years before I even met them, so I stepped on to this ready-made platform to take it straight ahead. We haven't looked back since.

"Music has that power to dredge up recollections from the distant past."





How did you come up with the name of the band?
We had a collection of posters for upcoming blues artists that were swinging through town. We'd go around and yank these posters off the telephone poles. And I kept noticing the repetition of initials in the names: BB King, OV Wright, ZZ Hill… We were going to call ourselves ZZ King, but it was too much like BB King. Then I said: "King is at the top, maybe it should be 'ZZ Top'." And we went with it.

The band made so many great records in the seventies, from *ZZ Top's First Album* in 1971 to *Degüello* in 1979. Many fans consider *Tres Hombres*, from 1973, to be the band's best. How do you see it?
The first album has its own special quality, and of course *Tres Hombres* was our first Top Ten record. *La Grange* popped out of that album, and for that reason it's remained a long-standing favourite.

The bordello eulogised in *La Grange* – surely you must have visited the place?
We certainly did. It was kind of an unsung rite of passage, especially if you're lucky enough to be born in Texas. It was down near the Mexican border line and it was named The Chicken Ranch.

How were the girls there?
Oh, they were quite charming! I guess that place was not such a well-kept secret. And nobody seemed to care.

In 1976, the Worldwide Texas Tour saw the band perform all across America on a stage in the shape of the Lone Star State, along with a Texan menagerie including a buffalo, a longhorn steer, vultures and rattlesnakes. What the hell were you thinking?
It was setting the stage for ZZ Top to bring a taste of Texas out with us. It was kind of an ambitious plan, but we decided, "Yeah, let's give it a go." It was such a costly endeavour, and the logistics behind it were extreme. We learned very quickly: we may call ourselves a trio, but we had a hundred and fifty-six people travelling with us. In fact, at some point I think that the animals were travelling in grander style than the band. The longhorn steer


Not yet sharp-dressed men: pre-*Eliminator* ZZ rocking the grease monkey look.

ROSS HALFIN / JOBY SESSIONS

and the buffalo were placed on these scissor lifts that were actually intended for use in construction sites. It was really wild, and a singular challenge, but we certainly had a good time doing it.

What did that experience teach you?
We learned that you can take the venom out of a rattlesnake, but it's restored within a matter of days.

Some of the greatest ZZ Top songs of the 1970s were straight blues: *Sure Got Cold After The Rain Fell* from *Rio Grande Mud*, *Jesus Just Left Chicago* from *Tres Hombres*, *Blue Jean Blues* from *Fandango!*, *A Fool For Your Stockings* from *Degüello*…
Blue Jean Blues and *A Fool For Your Stockings* are two of the blues numbers that we still perform today. Many of ZZ Top's songs started out from picking up a catchphrase, just something off the cuff, and that was certainly true of *A Fool For Your Stockings*. I remember overhearing one of our buddies recollecting why he fell for a certain girl. When he uttered the phrase: "Man, I was a fool for her stockings," it was so honest and so unexpected. I wrote it down immediately and it served us well.

Interestingly, when we recorded that song, I was playing the Fender Strat that Jimi Hendrix gave me when we were travelling together, and for some reason the guitar wasn't working through the amp. We wound up plugging the guitar straight into the board, and that's why it's such a clean tone on that track.

As a guitar player, you've always had such a distinctive sound. Brian May says it's all in the fingers. What do you think?
I'll tend to agree with Brian's assessment, although in the case of ZZ Top we count









largely on the dramatic performance from our famous 1969 sunburst Les Paul, the one we call Pearly Gates. Even today that instrument is fascinating. It came together on one of those lucky days when it was the right combination of wood, the right amount of glue, the right amount of paint. It's kind of crazy. I've passed it around and players of all sorts have all come to the same conclusion – there is something magic in that instrument.

The first ZZ Top album of the 80s, *El Loco*, was aptly named. A couple of tunes on it – *Ten Foot Pole* and *Heaven, Hell Or Houston* – were really out there.
It's certainly true that *Heaven, Hell Or Houston* comes out of a very strange place. It's a resonant theme within this band, that element of weird. And with *Ten Foot Pole*, once the tape was rolling I just started mumbling, and we all thought: "This is working!" They asked for a lyric sheet for that record, and I said: "Yeah, gimme another ten years…"

It was a rather playful time. We had *Party On The Patio*, which was inspired by The B-52's. And once again the Brits had turned things upside-down with the punk scene. It was anti-everything – more than a style, it was a statement, and it was not far off our radar at a time when we were getting rather rambunctious.

After all that craziness, you had the biggest hit of the band's career with *Eliminator*, and suddenly everyone knew who ZZ Top were. What was the secret to that album's success?
There was a dramatic shift in the approach when entering the recording studio. We placed a great amount of importance on timing and tuning. Those two elements are so much the backbone of making appealing sounds. This was also a period when a new style of synthesisers had started to become readily accessible, and we were not afraid of them. We were laying hands on these crazy contraptions with total disregard for reading the manual. It was: twist the knobs and keep twisting the knobs until you find something that sounds just right.

We were stretching the limits of rock'n'roll. That was quite a shift. The blues elements are still to be found if you listen close enough, but there was this strident adherence to good timing and good tone and tuning. And it worked out nicely for us.

In the thirty-five years since *Eliminator*, the band have made just seven more studio albums. Arguably the finest of those was the most recent, 2012's *La Futura*, produced by Rick Rubin. What led you to him?
Rick and I had been friends for quite some time. He had been patiently waiting in the wings for the opportunity to work with ZZ Top. But I must say the process of making that record was rather lengthy. From the day we joined forces with Rick to the day it came out, it took four years.

AC/DC fell out with Rubin when he produced their album *Ballbreaker*. His painstaking methodology was not to the band's taste. Was that also a problem for ZZ Top?
I know some artists complain that they don't like working with Rick because he's constantly asking for songs to be played again and again. That's one of the peculiar qualities of Rick's production technique. But the bottom line is that ZZ Top really enjoy playing, and when you work with Rick, playing is the name of the game.

It was kind of funny. We'd play long into the night, these jam sessions. I remember one night Frank said to me: "Is Rick serious? We've been playing this song for about five hours!" I said: "Rick. You think we should take a break?" And he goes: "Oh yeah, we got it on tape three hours ago – we just like hearing you guys play!"

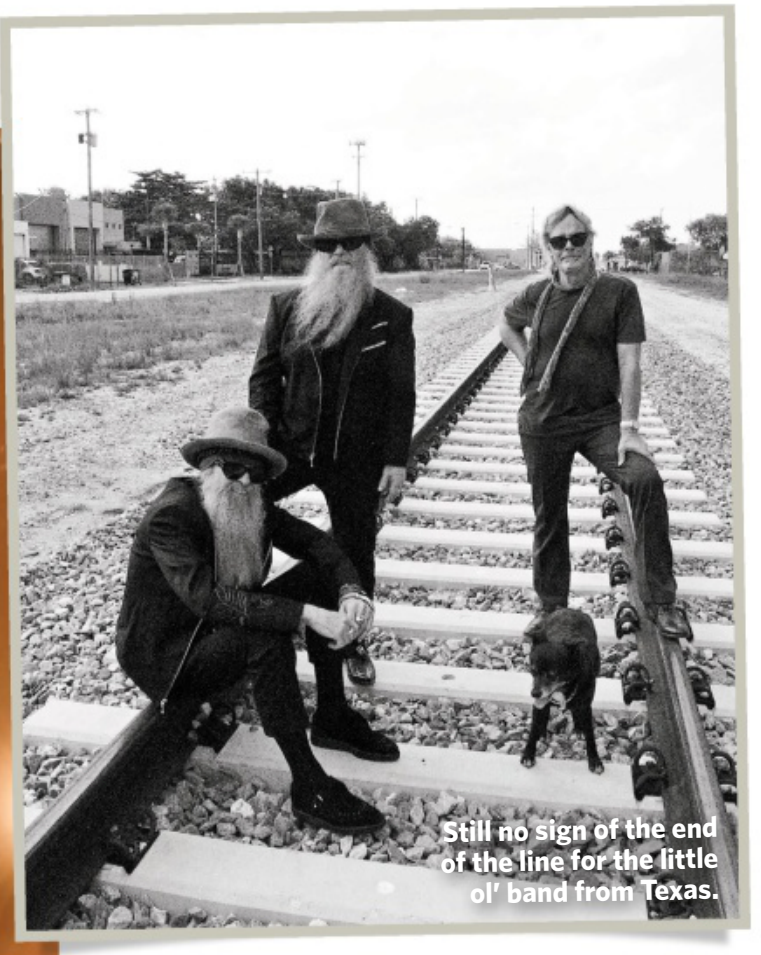
"With *Eliminator* we were stretching the limits of rock'n'roll. That was quite a shift."



***La Futura* includes one of the best songs ZZ Top have ever recorded – *I Gotsta Get Paid*,**



ROSS HALFIN x2



Still no sign of the end of the line for the little ol' band from Texas.

which was derived from the 1996 hip-hop anthem *25 Lighters* by Houston-based DJ DMD and rappers Fat Pat and Lil' Keke. What was the thinking behind doing that song?
It's an interesting point. We'd been working in Malibu at Rick's studio, and then he turned the reins over and said: "Why don't you get back to Texas and see what you come up with?" And that's when I got thinking about *25 Lighters*.

The title of that song was a ghetto slang term that the crack dealers used. They would buy those little cigarette lighters, twenty-five in a box, take them home, disassemble them, take the guts out, repack them, and sell them on the street corner. So you got this catchphrase: 'Hey man, you got a lighter?' That was less conspicuous.

I kept going over that particular song, and my instinct said, you know, ZZ Top is a far cry from being a rap band. But then one day while I was in the studio control room I heard the sound of Lightnin' Hopkins coming through the doorway. Our second engineer, Mister Gary Moon, was in the lounge, playing YouTube videos of old Lightnin' Hopkins songs. I said: "Let's try and bluesify *25 Lighters*." And that turned into *I Gotsta Get Paid*.

It's ironic that you should reinvent a hip-hop song while Rick Rubin was absent, given that he produced some of the big rap records of the 80s (LL Cool J, the Beastie Boys, Run DMC).
Rick flipped when he heard it. He said: "It sounds like something from another planet." Then he asked me: "What does 25 lighters mean?' I said: "You got to do your homework – it's ghetto slang!" But Rick loved what we did with it, and by the time we turned that song inside out, it was classified as a derivative work, which is quite different to a cover song. A derivative work means you've changed it significantly.

"We still enjoy getting to do what we get to do. That's part of the magic – that we still dig it."

It's been six years since *La Futura*, in which time you've made two albums without Dusty and Frank. Why was that?
I can say that Dusty and Frank were delighted to see me take off in a solo direction because they get a nice holiday. But they're standing by – they're not wasting their time. We're actually fortunate in that we have two recording rooms, and while I was working solo on the left side, they were writing some new ZZ starters on the right side, which I think is going to pay off in the long run. We don't feel very comfortable sitting around doing nothing.

What is it that has kept you, Dusty and Frank together for so long?
We've actually addressed it face-to-face. The somewhat unusual happenstance is we keep stumbling into the unexpected, which has kept it fresh for nearly five decades. We're just months away from celebrating that remarkable number [50 years], which is kind of unbelievable, but we still enjoy getting to do what we get to do. It's not really a challenge. It's not even a task. We call it our long-running surprise. That's part of the magic – that we still dig it.

While the Stones are still going, many other veteran rock bands are winding down their career – Deep Purple, Kiss, Rush. How long have ZZ Top got?
Well, I like the reference to the Stones because Keith Richards said rather famously: "With luck, we can follow in the footsteps of Muddy Waters, who did it till the day he died." And I think that's an admirable place to shoot for.

After all these years in this band, is there anything you dislike about it?
Touring is quite demanding. Being away from home, living on this big bread box with four wheels… it gets kind of nutty. We still like it – it's a platform for doing what we enjoy most. The process of streamlining touring has eliminated some of the ghastly downsides from previous years, but the one thing they haven't figured out is how to shorten a mile from A to B. You've still got to travel that distance.

Can you envisage life without ZZ Top?
Somebody just asked Dusty that very question. He said he'd probably prefer to be a pharmacist. I'll go with that.

And when ZZ Top comes to an end, how would you want the band to be remembered?
They were three guys who enjoyed spanking the plank and making a loud noise.

Billy Gibbons in London, July 4, 2018, shot exclusively for *Classic Rock*.

WILL IRELAND

SOME KIND OF MONSTER

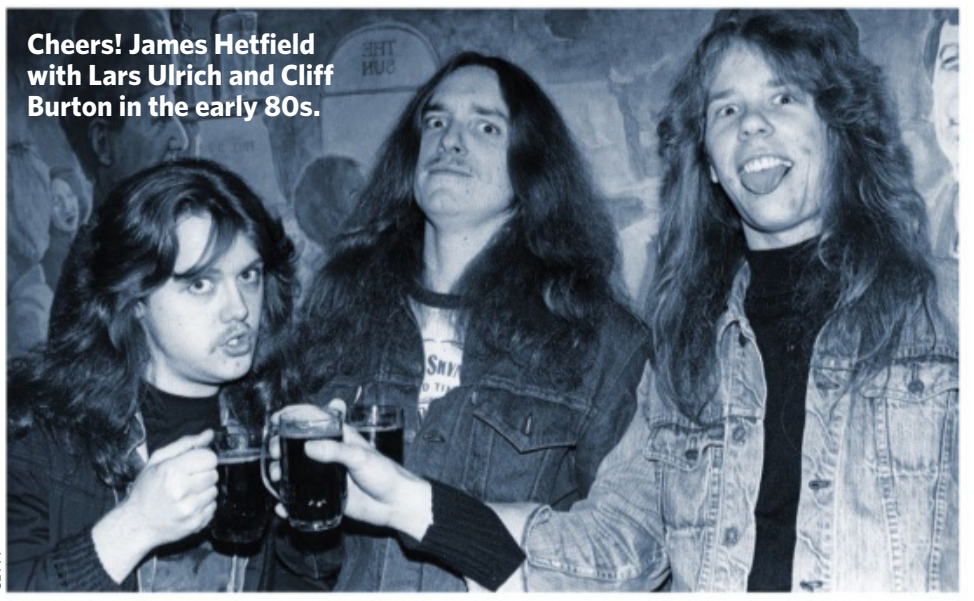
Words: **Mick Wall** Portrait: **Mick Hutson at Getty**

For nearly 40 years, James Hetfield has been the voice of **Metallica**. In 2009, he sat down with *Metal Hammer* to look back over the rise and rise of metal's biggest band.

When they come to carve the faces on rock's own Mount Rushmore, James Hetfield will take pride of place. The Metallica frontman's 40-year journey has taken him from callow youth to bona fide icon, a man whose voice, presence and rhythm guitar playing have shaped the sound and look of heavy metal over the last four decades.

The irony was that Hetfield never wanted to be a frontman. Born and raised in the Christian Science faith, he was a quiet and shy teen – a world away from the exuberant character of Lars Ulrich, the extroverted Danish motormouth with whom he formed Metallica in Los Angeles in 1981. But he gradually settled into the role, helping turn the band into the single biggest metal band on the planet – their self-titled 1991 masterpiece (aka the Black album) alone has sold more than 25 million copies.

But it hasn't been smooth sailing. The booze-fuelled exuberance of Metallica's early years spilled over into full-blown alcoholism for Hetfield, a situation that reached a head in the early 90s – a period captured in 2004's documentary *Some Kind Of Monster*, a warts-and-all film that portrayed a band on the edge of falling apart.



Cheers! James Hetfield with Lars Ulrich and Cliff Burton in the early 80s.

GETTY

But Hetfield and Metallica pulled through their rough patch, and today are bigger than ever, selling out arenas and stadiums around the world. And this is how James Hetfield did it.

You were born James Alan Hetfield on August 3, 1963, in Los Angeles, California. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

"Yes, two older half-brothers, Chris and Dave, and a younger sister, Deanna. My mom's second husband was my dad. It was pretty difficult. My younger sister, we would fight like cats and dogs and then when [my] parents came home we'd help each other clean up the mess, and cover for each other. But my older brothers, they were pretty much a generation apart and unfortunately it wasn't as bonding. They were not quite old enough to tell me what to do and not young enough to understand what I wanted to hear, so it was kind of an awkward middle position there."

Were you a good student at school?

"I was a pretty average student. Just pretty quietand pretty reserved, just kind of get it done and then go home and have fun and play. I loved sports."

Because of your parents' strong Christian Science faith, did that impact in terms of the school you went to or the way you were treated as a child?

"It didn't impact on the school. It wasn't like going to a Catholic school. It certainly did affect me though – more than my sister and my brothers, I took it a little more personally. Our parents didn't take us to the doctor. We were basically relying on the spiritual power of the religion to heal us or to

Back in black: Hetfield on stage in 1991.

“I’m not gonna start writing about picking flowers.”

JAMES HETFIELD

shield us from being sick or injured. And so at school I wasn't allowed to sit through health class, to learn about the body, to learn about illnesses and things like that. And, say, I'm trying out for the football team [and] you have to get a physical, to get a doctor's note, I'd have to go and explain to the coach that, you know, our religion says this. So I felt really like an outcast, and, you know, kids would laugh about it. When the health class would begin, I would be standing out in the hallway on my own, which was basically a form of punishment in other aspects. Everyone who walked by would look at me like I'd been some criminal of sorts, you know?"

That must have been tough.
"It was but it helped mould who I was, you know? When you're young you want to be like everyone else, you don't want to be unique. But I see the uniqueness in it now and it's helped me to, uh, you know, accept and embrace the uniqueness of me."

Do you think it was those experiences that, long-term, gave you the ability to say, 'No, I'm not gonna run with the gang'?
"Yeah, I believe so. It helped me carve my own path, and even the spiritual part of it, when you're a kid you can't really grasp the concept of spirituality, and for me not going to the doctor was strange. All I saw was the people in the church that had broken bones and they were healing wrong. It didn't make any sense to me. But also it helped me embrace the spiritual concept later on, you know, and actually see the power in that, along with the knowledge of doctors these days, so it did help me with my concept of spirituality."

You first studied piano at the age of nine, and then later got interested in your brother David's drums. Were the piano lessons in classical music?
"Yeah. My mom had seen me over at a friend's house just kind of start bashing on the piano, and she thought, 'Oh, he's gonna be a musician. OK, we'll sign him up for piano.' I did that for a couple of years and it was really a bit of a turn-off because it was learning classical pieces, stuff that I wasn't listening to on the radio, you know? I remember it was at an older woman's house and the cookies at the end was the big deal. But I am so glad it was somewhat forced upon me, because the act of the left and right hand doing different things, and also singing at the same time, it gave me some inkling of what I do now. Singing and playing is somewhat easier than it probably would have been if I hadn't had piano [lessons]."


The four horsemen: Hetfield and Ulrich with guitarist Kirk Hammett and bassist Jason Newsted.

GETTY X3

By the time you met Metallica drummer and co-founder Lars Ulrich, you were a teenager, playing guitar, and had been through your first high school bands – Obsession, Phantom Lord, etc. Did any of them sound anything like what Metallica became?
"No. Obsession was a high school band and we would basically just jam in my friend's garage, doing cover songs. We'd do Thin Lizzy, Black Sabbath, some Robin Trower, some Led Zeppelin… And we'd do a couple of parties; that was pretty much it. I don't remember learning guitar, ha ha ha! I just remember picking up a guitar for the first time and going, 'How do they make all these noises?'"


Two of a kind: Hetfield with Metallica fan Lady Gaga.

When you and Lars first got together, was it as teenage buddies or was it specifically about playing in a band together?
"It was definitely about music. I had never seen him or heard of him before that. I had been in this band, Obsession, [and] I had brought an original song to play and none of them liked it so that's when I basically kind of said goodbye to them. When I met Lars I was jamming with this other guy in high school, forming this band, Phantom Lord. [Lars was into] some of the bands we had gotten turned on to at the time – Saxon, Judas Priest, things like the Scorpions. Some of the more popular metal bands that had made it over into the States."

So, basically, it was about music. Yet the two of you have maintained an incredible partnership. A lot of marriages don't last as long as the relationship you've had with Lars. Is it still primarily about music or is there a friendship there now too?
"We're pretty much the opposite at everything – except when we play music together. You know, whenever we take a break, we'll go away for six months from each other and come back together and start talking about where our lives have taken us, and it's, 'Oh, I've been listening to this and discovered this.' 'Wow, me too!' So it's kind of… parallels, in one way and then complete opposites in the other. That is the beauty of it. That has helped us battle through a lot of things together but given the extreme differences there's lots of different viewpoints you can learn and take from."

When Cliff Burton came into the band he was obviously a very big influence, not just musically, but as a human being…
"Absolutely correct. Besides introducing us to more music theory, he was the most schooled of any of us, he had gone to junior college to learn some things about music, and taught us quite a few things. When Lars and I had seen him play with [Cliff's previous band] Trauma, our jaws fell onto the floor, and we said, 'We've got to get this guy.' He and I aligned a lot closer as friends, as far as our activities, music styles that we liked, bands that we liked, politically, views on the world, we were pretty parallel on that wavelength. But, yeah, he had such a character to himself, and it was a very strong personality, he did creep into all of us

“My family relied on the spiritual power of healing. At school I was an outcast.”

JAMES HETFIELD

eventually. And he’s missed greatly by this guy sitting here now.”

What would Cliff have made of some of the directions the band went in the 1990s? Beginning with the Black album in 1991 up to the time of St. Anger in 2005?

“Well, I certainly would have thought there would have been some resistance, for sure. I just think that the Black album was a great album and I appreciate the fact that we did have the balls to do that and have [producer] Bob Rock to work with us. It had to be, it really did. You know, when I go back and I listen to [previous album] …*And Justice For All*, it couldn’t have stayed on that path. We needed to bring in another set of trusted ears. [But] I think Cliff would have probably interjected some different stuff, getting his bass heard and he would have done some more musically challenging things, probably. I would certainly think that the *Load* and *Re-Load* [era], I would have had an ally that was very against it all – the reinvention, or the U2 version of Metallica.”

When you say ‘an ally’, you mean that you personally were not comfortable with that mid-90s period of the band’s story?

“No, no, not at all. There’s some great, great songs on there but my opinion is that all of the imagery and stuff like that was not necessary. And the amount of songs that were written was… it diluted the potency of the poison of Metallica. And I think Cliff would have agreed with that.”

So by the time you got to St. Anger, was that a new start for you or is that the end of the period you’ve just been describing?

“Well, I’m not sure. For me, *St. Anger* kind of stands alone. It’s more of a statement than an album. It’s more of the soundtrack to the movie, in a way. There’s some really interesting and cool riffs, some great songs on there. But sonically it sounds fragmented, which is exactly where we were at the point. But in that fragmentation it brought us together. So it was a very necessary piece of the puzzle to get us where we are today.”

How much of Death Magnetic was to do with the fact that Beastie Boys/Johnny Cash super-producer Rick Rubin was involved, rather than longtime Metallica associate Bob Rock?

“I think it’s a combination of all that. I think Bob… we had gotten too comfortable with each other, especially going through all of the emotional draining of *St. Anger*. It was good to move on. Rick Rubin is the exact opposite of Bob Rock. And the fact that we were able to sit down and write ourselves, do things for ourselves without Rick Rubin babysitting, that was where we were able to try our wings out again and fly as a band. So it was the right thing at the right time. Not to talk bad about Bob whatsoever, because he’s taken us places that we never would have gone before. We’ve learned so much from him.”

You were very open in the Some Kind Of Monster movie about coming to terms with your anger issues. Is it necessary to retain a certain anger in order to feed your creativity as a songwriter?

“Ha ha ha! Well, that’s a great question. I think every person that goes through something like what I’ve gone through very much worries about that. But the creativity, it will come from where it has to come from. Anything can be digested and be spit out Metallica-like. I’m not gonna start writing about picking flowers now. When I’m happy I’m writing the heaviest riff possible. Being happy is not overrated. But also, there will always be anger issues with me, no matter what. My 40s have been the best [years] so far for me, and it’s amazing how much better it could be from here. There always seems to be another cool piece of the puzzle revealed.”



Hetfield in 2019: ready to take prime spot on rock’s Mount Rushmore.

GETTY

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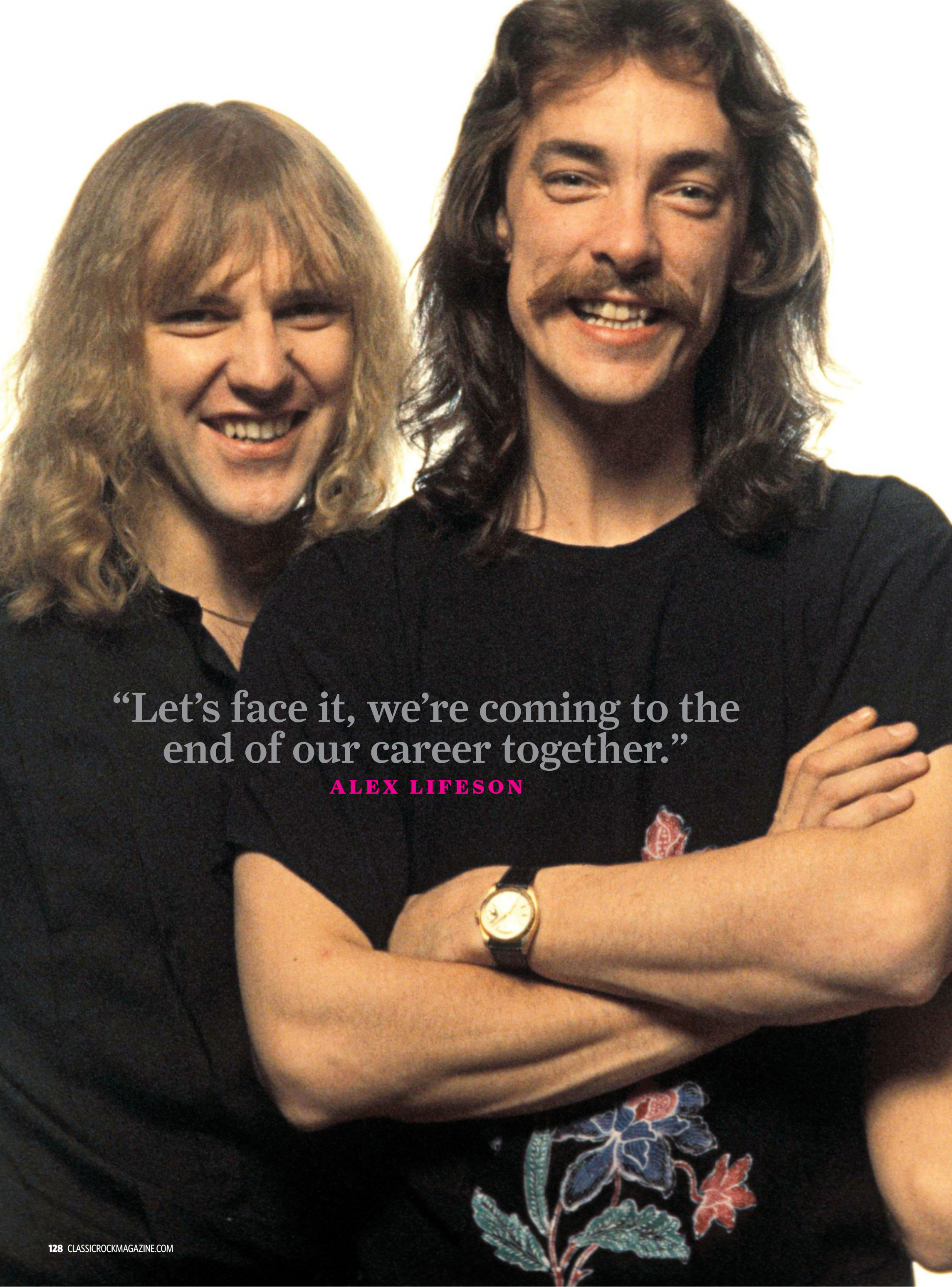
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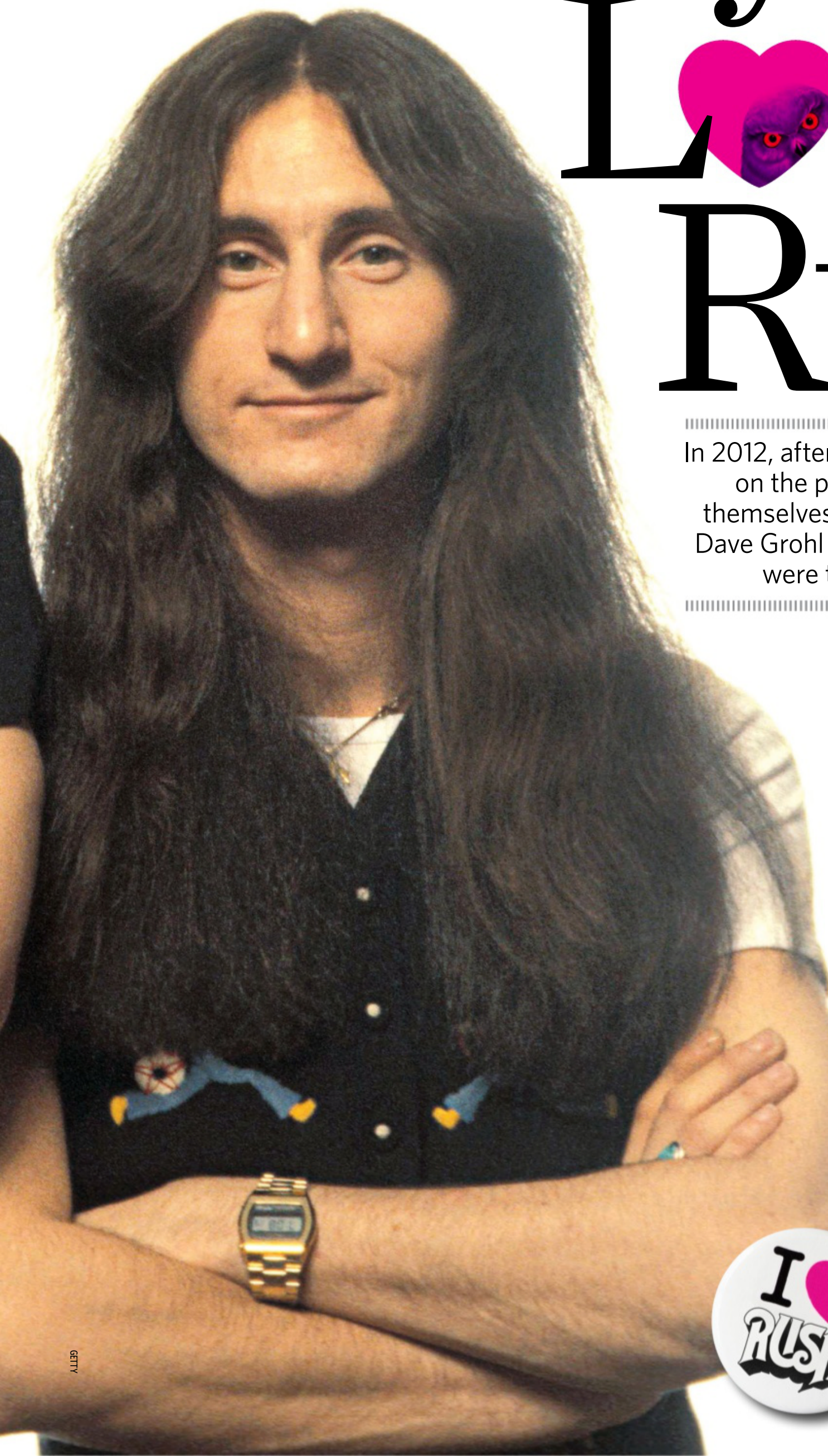
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“Let’s face it, we’re coming to the end of our career together.”

ALEX LIFESON

Everyone Loves Rush



GETTY

In 2012, after decades as the uncoolest band on the planet, **Rush** suddenly found themselves being féted by everyone from Dave Grohl to Hollywood A-listers. So why were they planning on retiring?

Words: **Paul Elliott**

It's in the last couple of years that he's noticed it happening: he's been a famous rock star for decades, but in these past two years he's found himself being recognised in public more frequently. Now it's a little easier, he says, to get a table in a fancy restaurant. Even so, Alex Lifeson is not entirely sure he likes this new level of fame: "It is a little uncomfortable for me."

As the guitarist in Rush, Lifeson is part of one of the most successful rock bands of all time. Since their formation in Toronto in 1968 they've sold more than 40 million albums. And yet, for much of the band's career, they have existed, as Lifeson puts it, "under the radar".

The three members of Rush – Lifeson, bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee and drummer/lyricist Neil Peart – have been playing together for 41 years now. Their brand of progressive hard rock and virtuoso musicianship – defined on breakthrough 1976 album *2112* and modernised on 1981 best-seller *Moving Pictures* – earned them a devoted following that has sustained them through the passing of punk rock and grunge and all that has followed. For many years, Rush have been known as The Biggest Cult Band In The World. Then the strangest thing happened: they got bigger. Rush were always a big band, but they are now bigger in a broader cultural context.

It started with the 2009 movie *I Love You, Man*, Lifeson says. In this "bromantic comedy" there's a scene in which its leading characters are seen

Fight club: (l-r) Neil Peart, Alex Lifeson & Geddy Lee.

rocking out at a Rush show and embarrassing a girlfriend with their word-perfect lip-synching and air drumming: so very Rush and their fans. Then in 2010 came the band's documentary *Beyond The Lighted Stage*, in which a cast of modern rock heroes such as Billy Corgan and Trent Reznor revealed themselves as Rush nerds.

And then, in 2013, came the induction of Rush into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame – at which their live performance was prefaced by the Foo Fighters playing the *2112 Overture* in wigs and the kind of white satin robes that their heroes wore back in '76. And for Alex Lifeson, that was the clincher. "The Hall Of Fame changed things," he says. "It's really given us a much higher profile."

The irony in all of this is that Rush have become more famous at the very point at which their career is in the first stages of winding down. The band's 2012 album *Clockwork Angels* was a huge success: No.1 in Canada, No.2 in the US, and widely acclaimed as a late-career masterpiece. This month, Rush head out on a 30-date US tour. But Peart has repeatedly stated that he is no longer willing to tour on a regular basis. He has a young daughter, and his priority is his family. He is also suffering from tendonitis. And he's not alone in feeling the wear and tear of age; Lifeson has arthritis. He says simply: "Let's face it, we're coming to the end of our career together."

On the eve of the US tour, it's Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee who speak to *Classic Rock* about the present, the past and the future of Rush.

Neil Peart is unavailable for interview. He has rarely spoken publicly in the past 20 years, and the reason for this is well documented. In the late 90s, Peart's daughter Selena was killed in a road accident, and his first wife Jacqueline succumbed to cancer. In the aftermath, the band remained on hiatus for five years. Peart returned to Rush for the 2002 album *Vapor Trails* after he had remarried, but relinquished his role as the band's chief spokesman in order to protect his privacy.

Lifeson and Lee have a small window in which to talk. After four weeks of rehearsals in Los Angeles, where Peart now lives, Lifeson and Lee are at their homes in Toronto ahead of a week of full production rehearsals back in LA.

Lifeson speaks first, and for the most part he is in typically upbeat mood. He is a frank and funny interviewee. Speaking to *Classic Rock* in 2014, he revealed that he had used ecstasy during the 90s, and he is similarly candid when discussing the complex dynamic within Rush in 2015. He admits that in recent months he has considered leaving the band, but when he talks about this US tour he's buzzing. "The ticket sales went crazy right from the start," he says. "Some dates sold out in minutes, and it sent a message to us that something's going on."

Could this tour be the last for Rush?

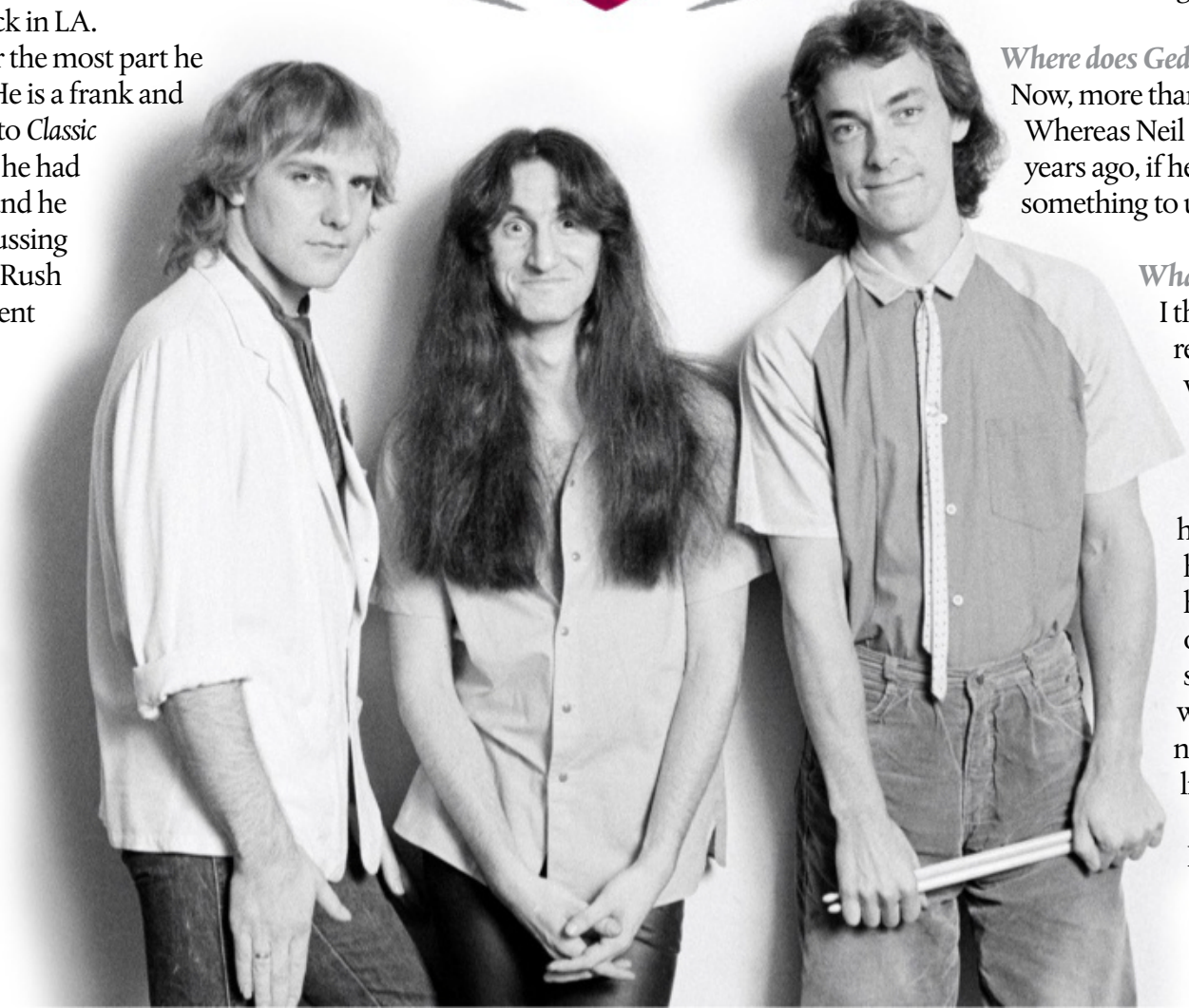
We'll see. Right now the tour is what it is. Whether we add more dates, I think it all boils down to Neil, really. It's a very athletic endeavour for him to go on tour. He's sixty-two years old. Physically it's difficult. And it's the same for me.



"I'm as fit as a fiddle. But for Alex, his arthritis is not a small thing."

GEDDY LEE





3 X GETTY

Your arthritis – how bad is it?

I've had it for ten years, and this is the first time I'm really feeling it in my hands and my feet. That's the way it goes. But it's a lot harder for Neil. He's got tendonitis in his arm. To be honest, I don't know how he gets through playing the way he does, being in that sort of discomfort and pain. But he's a very stoic guy. He never complains.

But there's more to it than that. Neil has said many times that his first priority is his family, his young daughter.

I don't think that's something he even needs to talk about. I don't know if sometimes he says these things because he doesn't know how to come out and say it face-to-face to us that he doesn't want to do it any more, that he's tired of it, that he feels after forty years that's a pretty good run and that he shouldn't have to feel bad about not wanting to do it any more. He wants to spend more time at home and with his family. I get it. He's never been keen about touring. It's always a difficult thing for him.

Is Neil unhappy about doing this tour?

He was resistant to it until he started prepping and realised: hey, I can still play my drums pretty good! And then getting into rehearsals with us, there's that whole camaraderie that he really adores. So when he's back into the stream, he loves the swim.

Do you have similarly conflicting feelings?

The *Clockwork Angels* tour was pretty gruelling, as they're all becoming more gruelling as we're getting older. And then we had a year-and-a-half off. Having the time at home and disconnecting from being in a band, just being Al, hanging out with my grandkids, seeing my friends, all the things that people take for granted, it got me thinking: am I ready now to give it up? Can I be happy being away from it? And it really felt like I could be. Until we started to zero in on a tour. Once the machine got rolling I got swept up in it.

Where does Geddy stand on this?

Now, more than ever, Geddy wants to play. Whereas Neil probably would have quit years ago, if he didn't feel that he owed something to us.

What do you mean by that?

I think Neil knows that we're not ready for the end, and he doesn't want to ruin that for us. Keep in mind: we're like brothers. And we went through a terrible period with him in his life and supported him and he'll never forget that. I think he feels, as I would too, an obligation to us for having stood by him. So he's not willing to let that go. Maybe now he is. And I get it. It's not like, what a jerk, he doesn't want to do this any more? I get it.



“KISS & Us!”

In the 70s, Rush embarked on an eye-opening tour with the gods of thunder.

In 1975, Rush hit the road in the US for their first major US tour, as the opening act for Kiss. There was a marked contrast between the two bands: Kiss with their larger-than-life cartoon superhero image and ‘rock-and-roll-all-nite’ party-rock anthems; Rush with their intellectual prog-metal and serious muso chops. Also, Kiss were bullish New Yorkers, while the guys in Rush were relatively genteel Canadians.

“We were close with those guys on that tour,” says Alex Lifeson. “It was their first tour, our first tour.”

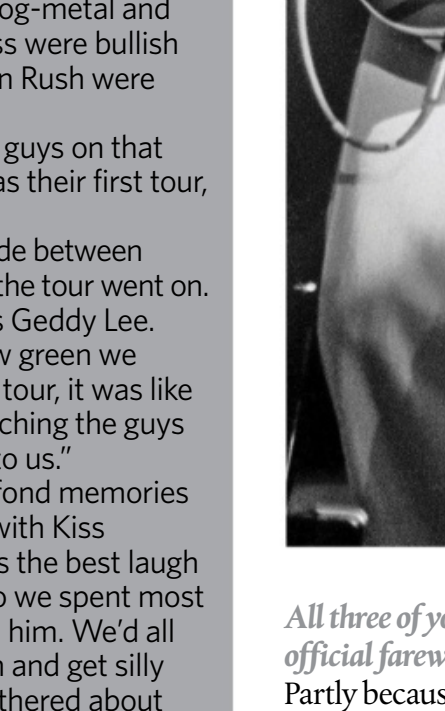
Yet there was a cultural divide between them that became evident as the tour went on.

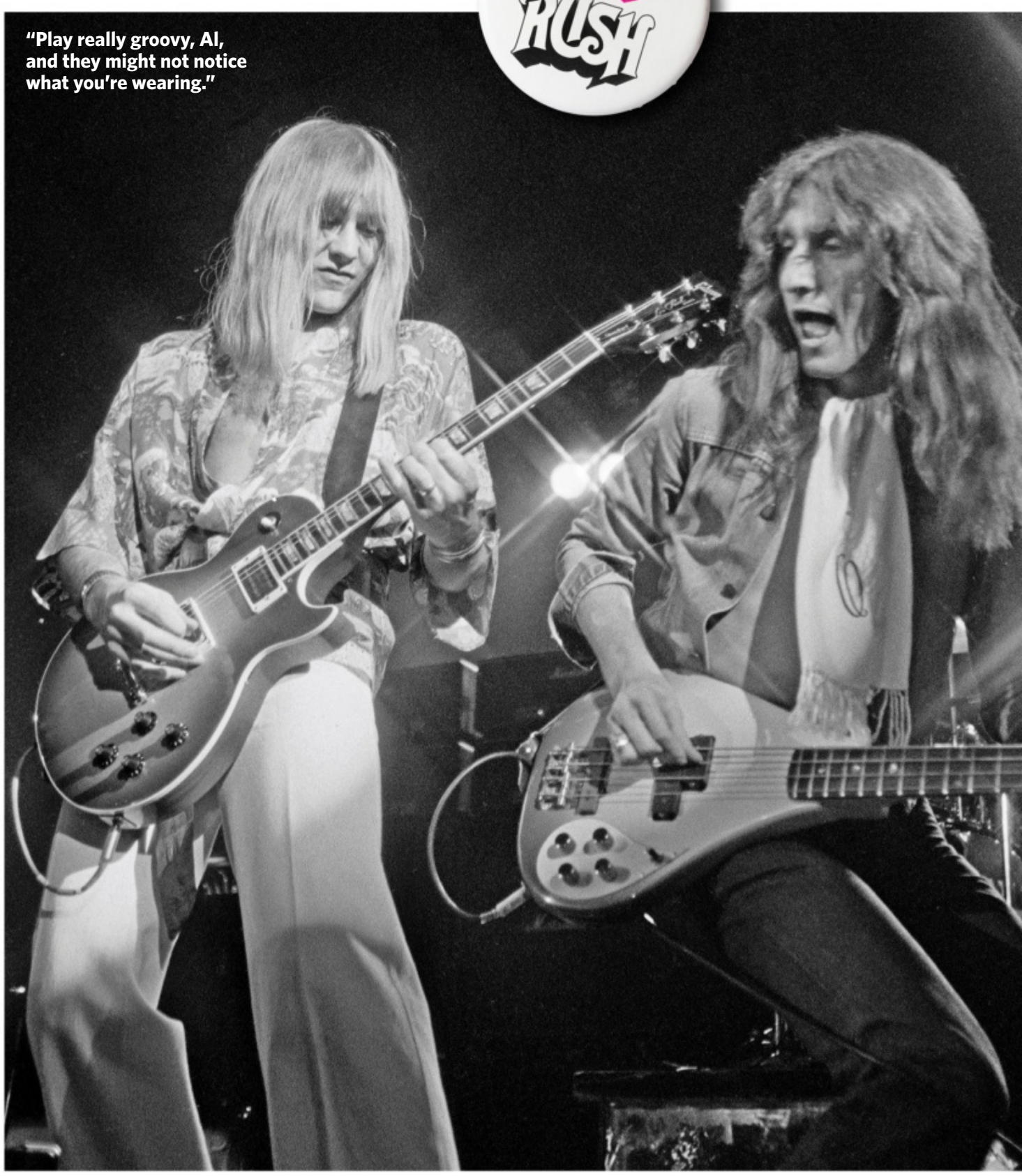
“We were so green,” recalls Geddy Lee. “Really, you can’t imagine how green we were. Being on this rock’n’roll tour, it was like our own personal circus. Watching the guys from Kiss, it was all so funny to us.”

Both Lee and Lifeson have fond memories the times spent hanging out with Kiss guitarist Ace Frehley. “Ace has the best laugh on planet earth,” Lee says. “So we spent most of our time trying to entertain him. We’d all go to Ace’s room and get high and get silly and it was fun. Ace wasn’t bothered about anything other than having a good time and drinking too much. He was the most personable of all those guys.”

But there was less of a connection between Rush and the two leading figures in Kiss – Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons. And it was the latter’s obsession with sex – specifically, banging as many groupies as possible – which Lee and Lifeson found difficult to relate to.

Lifeson also says that in the years that followed, the camaraderie of that first tour together was lost. “With Paul and Gene there was always a distance,” he says, “and that distance grew very quickly as they became more popular. There were times when we tried to reconnect with them, and they really weren’t interested and had moved on. But that was a very long time ago.”





“Play really groovy, Al, and they might not notice what you’re wearing.”

All three of you seem very reluctant to have an official farewell tour. Why?

Partly because it’s a cheesy thing to do, but also it puts you behind the eight ball if you do decide that you’ve made a mistake and you want to go back on the road. And we don’t feel like this is really a farewell. I’d love to make another record. It’s such a fun experience to make a record.

You feel confident there is another album in you?

Yeah, I think there is. I’m sure if we start coming up with some stuff, Neil would be right in there. He’d love that.

Going back to the very beginning, when you listen to the first Rush album what do you hear?

I hear so much promise, so much excitement. I remember those sessions vividly. I hear Led Zeppelin in it – who we adored. And I hear so much hope for the opportunity to do what we’d dreamt about doing for so many years.

When did you first feel like you’d made it?

We opened for the New York Dolls at the Victory Theater in Toronto in seventy-four. It was an old burlesque theatre, pretty run down and crappy, but to us it might as well have been Wembley.

Rush and the New York Dolls seems such a mismatch.

It was. That crowd was excited to see the New York Dolls; not so much a local heavy metal band. But it was exciting being around the Dolls. Watching them backstage it was all what you would expect. They were all drunk before they got on stage. They had girls back there. It was a whole rock’n’roll scene. We were typically Canadian and shy and stayed out of their way. I do recall, though, after that gig I was hitch-hiking home with a friend of mine, I had my guitar with me. This couple picked me up, and we were chatting, and they said they’d been to the Dolls show at the Victory and they said yeah, they were great, but the opening act, God, they sucked. They were chuckling, and the guy’s girlfriend turned back and saw the guitar and saw me and her face just kind of froze. It was silent in the car, and I felt so crestfallen I said: “We’ll get out at the next block, please.” I got out of the car and I wanted to throw my guitar away. That was the first really bad review that we got [laughs].



Neil Peart: the wordsmith in Rush.

Geddy Lee: ace of bass.

3X GETTY

I thought so. Around 1980 I had 'Caress Of Steel' written on my school bag. People laughed at me.
People laughed at us, too. You were in good company.

Are there particular songs you wish you'd never recorded?
Tai Shan was a little corny. We wanted to do something different, but maybe we had too much of a pseudo-Asian flavour to it. Maybe I should listen to it again. I don't think I've listened to it since we recorded it [laughs].

A pseudo-Asian flavour like the borderline racist intro to **A Passage To Bangkok**?
Well, *A Passage To Bangkok* had a bit more of a middle-Eastern, *Kashmir* bent to it. *Tai Shan* was specifically about an experience that Neil had in China, whereas *Bangkok* talks about an experience we had all over the place.

You mean smoking pot?
That certainly influenced those early records. Less so as the years went on, but it was never completely out of the picture. We always made sure the tour bus was well-stocked with potato chips and cakes and things [laughs].

It sounds as if you were smoking a lot up to and including **Hemispheres**.
Yes, right through to *Hemispheres* and a little bit beyond… maybe *Clockwork Angels*.

Really?
Oh, sure. But Geddy gave up all of that a long time ago. He's one of those really militant non-smokers. He leads a very clean lifestyle, although he does love his wine.

Unlike you, who got into ecstasy in the nineties. Did you tell Geddy and Neil they should try it?
I think Neil may have had one or two experiences with it, but I don't think he liked that particular feeling.

What about cocaine?
It's been so long now. There was a period in the late seventies and early eighties when we all sort of dabbled in that thing. But it's such an alienating drug. I remember every time I ever did it I hated it. I loved it for that moment, and then hated everything else about it. It wasn't good for conversation, friendship, anything.

And now you're just a smoker?
I'm a pretty regular smoker of a very small quantity, for therapeutic purposes. I find it helps with inflammation and pain. I have my medical card for my prescription here in Canada, where medical marijuana is legal. And if we get rid of the Conservative government and get the Liberals back in, they have a whole policy about the legalisation of marijuana that is realistic and makes sense.

Might the problem with legalising marijuana be that much of Canada would slow down to the pace of the first Black Sabbath album?
Ha ha. Yeah. But is that such a bad thing?

You've always been characterised as the joker in Rush. How would you describe Geddy and Neil?
They're both very funny guys, clever and smart.

Was Rush always a competitive band?
Maybe in the early days, when you were so full of piss and vinegar and so excited to play. You played with so many different bands on these two- or three-acts shows. Quite often it was competitive. You wanted to blow the other guy off the stage and be that much better. I remember we played with Heart once. This was very early, maybe 1975. It was at the Stanley Warner Theatre in Pittsburgh. There was so much talk about Heart and the Wilson sisters. We were really looking forward to meeting them. We were backstage, and Roger Fisher said to me: "We're gonna blow you guys off the stage tonight, you just watch." And I thought, wow, what a weird thing to say. But I think I played that much harder that night.

And Roger Fisher didn't win that battle?
I guess, in the long run, no.

Are there Rush albums that you look back at and are embarrassed by?
Often people ask me that about *Caress Of Steel*. But I listened to it not too long ago and I felt proud of that record. It sounds to me like a bunch of twenty-two-year-olds trying to make a big statement. And 'Caress Of Steel' is such a great title.

"Neil would probably have quit years ago if he didn't feel he owed something to us."

ALEX LIFESON





Thin Lizzy & Us!”

Rush on touring with Phil Lynott and co.

Out of all the bands that Rush gigged with in the 70s, they had the most fun with Thin Lizzy and UFO. At least that's how they remember it. As Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee admit, it's hard to remember everything that happened out on the road, when most nights ended in a big piss-up.

Lifeson describes UFO as the hardest-drinking band he has ever known. “Their drinking was a lot more chronic than anything we were doing,” he says. “We would never drink before a show, and they were already plastered by soundcheck. That's just the way they operated.”

When Rush first toured with Thin Lizzy, in 1976, both bands were just breaking big: Rush with the *2112* album, Lizzy with *Jailbreak*. They bonded over a whisky-drinking contest instigated by Lizzy's Scottish guitarist Brian Robertson – a challenge that 'Robbo' lost, along with the contents of his stomach.

“Brian was such a nut,” Lifeson says. “But we connected on a deep level. It wasn't just about drinking and partying and being crazy. There were a lot of discussions about literature and lyrics and music. Brian had the biggest heart. We loved to play and we loved to laugh. We were like brothers, Brian and I.”

As for Thin Lizzy's leader, Phil Lynott, it was a rather different story. Geddy Lee remembers Lynott as “an isolated, solitary dude”. Lifeson adds: “Phil was a very sensitive soul, very bright, but there was a mysterious side to him.” It was in 1986, 10 years after Thin Lizzy and Rush toured together, that Lynott died from multiple organ failure caused by heroin addiction.

“It was sad to see Phil go,” Lee says. “To be honest, I had no idea that he was into what he was into. Maybe I'm naïve. I've had people that worked for me that had bad problems over the years, and I always felt like I was the last guy to know. But I find that with so many of those tragic figures. There's not enough people that are aware of how bad off they really are. Otherwise there would be an intervention. And those people that are into drugs so heavily are very good at fooling everyone.”



Lifeson and Grohl trade licks.



All the world's still a stage in 2002.

2 X GETTY



Geddy loves to learn about things, whether it's baseball or wine or vintage bass guitars. He loves to get inside a particular subject. And Neil is a strange cat. He's very bright, obviously, and thoughtful. But he's also very private and inward, very shy. You'd be surprised at how easily embarrassed he becomes in social scenes. He can be great at a dinner party, but in a larger group he'll be very, very, very uncomfortable, and he'll be in a corner, nursing his Scotch, waiting to get out of there.

Was Neil always so withdrawn, even before the events of the late nineties?

In the early years he probably did more interviews than Geddy and I did. In many ways he was the band's spokesman. Since that tragedy, he definitely did become much more private. He carries a lot of deep, deep scars from the things that have happened in his life. Most people who know what happened to him can't even process it. But I think in general our fans do respect his privacy and know where it's coming from. In this day and age, where nothing is private, it is a miracle that he has any privacy at all. A tragedy like that makes him more of a target.

In the late nineties, Neil said he was done with Rush. It was only in 2002 that you reunited and made the Vapor Trails album.

There's so much emotion in that record. That took a big chunk out of our lives – that was a year of, oh, so many difficult things. Every time I listen to that record it takes me back to when we were recording it and how Neil was doing, and how poorly he was playing when he first came in the studio, and how he rose from those ashes – we all did. We were all so tentative and hurting. That album, more than any other album, has left a mark on the three of us individually.

If the band had ended in the late nineties, what would you have done with your life?

It's so hard to speculate. I love art. Maybe I would have become a painter. Only last year I thought about taking a course at the Ontario College Of Art. It's been fantastic to play in this band my whole life, but there is so much more out there.

Had the band ever come close to breaking up before then?

Yes. In 1989 we'd done a long tour and were mixing the live record, *A Show Of Hands*. We were

so deeply exhausted that it just wasn't fun any more. We wanted – all of us – to go our separate ways. It was nothing personal, just the pressure of work. Really, the stress and tension was tearing us apart. Fortunately we took a long break, and we came back renewed.

Being in this band for so long, what has it cost you on a personal level?

We were doing two hundred and fifty shows a year when my kids were young and when I should have been home with them. That's a sacrifice that we've all made. But now my kids are grown up and they're happy and content and proud of their dad. It's worked out okay.

Looking back at your career, what are you most proud of?

I'm going to be sixty-two this year, and I've been playing with these same two guys longer than just about any other band in the world. That's quite an accomplishment.

If you had to choose three albums to sum up the band's career, which ones would they be?

2112, *Moving Pictures* and *Clockwork Angels*. I think that would cap what we're about from beginning to end. Boy, that's two concept records.

Well, Kirk Hammett from Metallica did call you "the high priest of conceptual metal".

He was right! I knew he was a smart kid.

But, joking aside, when the end finally comes, how would you want Rush to be remembered?

Boy, how do you answer that without sounding kind of corny? I guess I want the legacy to be: they did it their way, and they were true to what they believed. We earned our independence from the music industry early on with *2112*, and we've been free to do what we want. We were true to our art. I want to be remembered for that.

For Geddy Lee, being at home in Toronto for a few days between rehearsals is an opportunity to spend time with his family, and in particular his infant granddaughter. "Being grandparents is a new experience for my wife and I," he says. "It took us a month or so to get our heads around that fact. We were sort of in denial."

Currently, he divides his free time between Toronto and London, where he also has a home. When in Toronto, he and Lifeson are in frequent contact even when they're not working. Around once a week, Lee says, they get together for dinner, just the two of them. Lee, a connoisseur, always chooses the wine. In the past they used to play tennis together, but not so much since Lifeson developed arthritis.

It was in Toronto that Lee and Lifeson attended school together. Peart met them for the first time in 1974, when he auditioned for Rush as they sought to replace original drummer John Rutsey. In a sense, Peart has always been the odd man out. After joining Rush, he lived in Toronto for a few years but later moved out to the country. When he relocated to Los Angeles it had little impact on his relationship with Lee and Lifeson.

"Neil was never really accessible," Lee explains. "So the fact that he's in California now is not a huge thing to overcome. When we need to talk, we talk."



Rush in the 80s: the synth years.

GETTY / GROUP: GEORGE CHIN - ICONIPIX

"Some of our early stuff makes me cringe a little. Like, 'What the fk were we doing?'"**

GEDDY LEE

These days it's Lee who is driving Rush forward. He wants to tour more. If he gets his way, the band will return to the UK and mainland Europe in 2016. Whatever happens next, he says, will be dependent on how the other two guys are feeling after the US tour: "If everyone's really digging it, the way I think we will, then we might carry on."

Right now, how are you feeling about the future of Rush?

I prefer to take the optimistic view. That's my nature. But there are a lot of factors that are concerning the band at the moment. I would say that the three of us are in a different head-space about that.

Where do you stand on this?

I feel great about where the band's at. I love playing and I don't have any reason not to continue. Neil has a different view, due to his young daughter and what he has to put his body though in order to do a three-hour show. And Alex also has issues that he's wrestling with. I would say it's an ongoing conversation, about what the future will bring. Obviously there's an elephant in the room. But the elephant is sitting politely in the corner. Sooner or later we'll deal with that elephant head-on [laughs]. I don't like to think of the end. I don't see any reason for us to end until a point where we no longer can play well. But it's clear that the concept of Rush as a massive touring band is fading.

Alex is struggling with arthritis, Neil with tendonitis. How are you holding up?

I'm fit as a fiddle. But for Alex the arthritis is not a small thing. Frankly, I'm a little surprised he talked to you about it. And really, if anything is going to mean that we can't tour any more like we used to, it's more than likely going to be the arthritis. Because that's something that will directly affect his ability to play. And if I was going out on stage and I could not play the way I want to play, or the way I have played in the past, there is no way I would want to do it; I would not want to go out there and be a shadow of my former self.

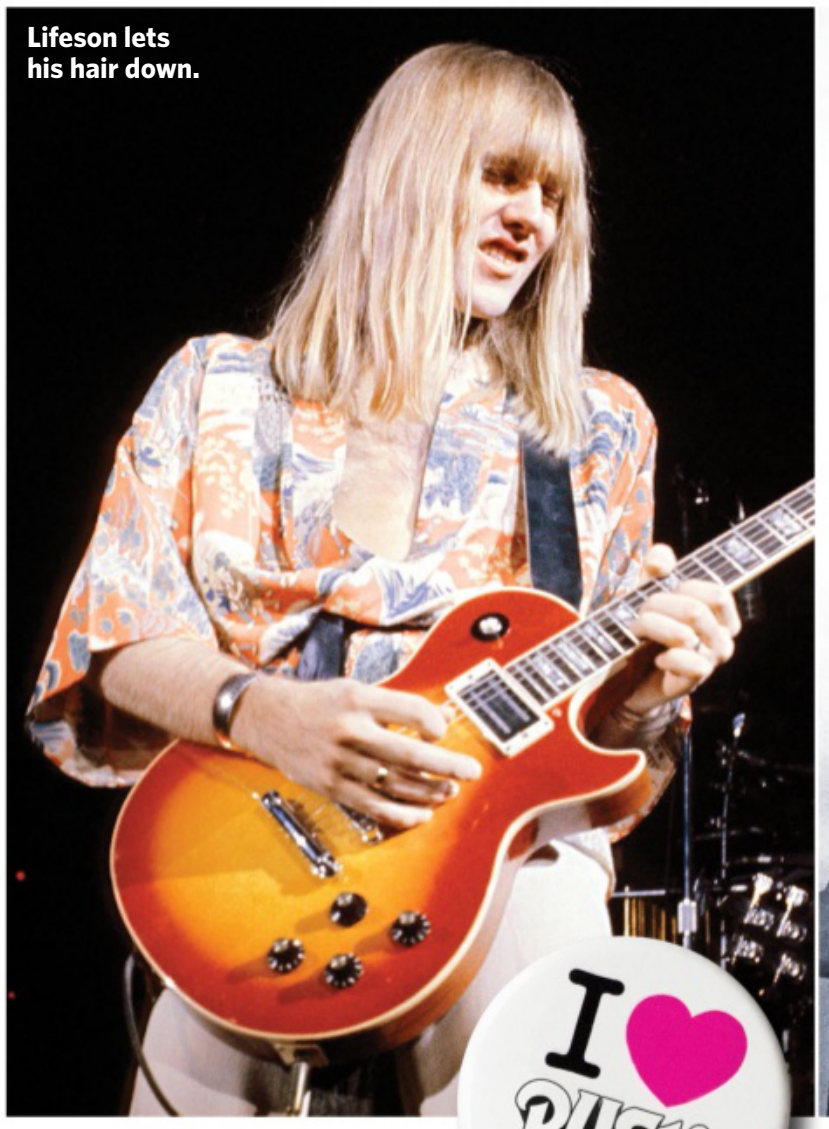
This is clearly something that worries you as much as it does him.

You know, it kind of hurts me to see him when he's having a bad day, physically. He's one of my oldest and dearest friends. And when he's been at rehearsal and he's not playing his best, it's not nice to see your friend suffer like that. This thing is in the back of his mind, and he's afraid of it.

Neil is more vocal about his reluctance to tour.

Well, Neil has a more complicated life than Alex and I do, let's face it. Our kids are grown up, it's much easier for us to tour. When my kids were the age that Neil's daughter is it was a much more difficult decision every time you walked out that door. What you also have to remember is what Neil has been through in the past. He's been to hell and back. And now he's got a second family that he's trying to do the right thing by. There's no one on earth that could blame him for that. It's a matter of him being able to juggle what he can do with the band, and what ➔


Rush with original drummer John Rutsey, centre.





5 X GETTY



his family can deal with, and how he feels in his heart about all that. I completely understand that.

How do you deal with such a delicate issue?
It's an ongoing conversation; a difficult conversation, and one that we kept putting off before we got together for this tour. I think it's hard for Neil to bring up some of this stuff, because he knows that no matter what happens he doesn't want to feel like the guy who's pulling the plug. It's hard for him. And I accept that. But decisions have to be made. We have to get on with our lives. So that conversation was tough. But in the end we decided we would do a tour, and Neil was fine with that. Once he made that decision he was a hundred per cent there. There's one thing I want to make really clear: there is no bad guy in this scenario.

If Clockwork Angels turns out to be the last Rush album, could you live with that?
Oh yeah. I'm very proud of that record. It's certainly among our top three pieces of work.

How confident are you that you could make another?
Do I feel like we have the mojo to do more records? Absolutely. But I can't tell you that the other guys agree. I'm not a hundred per cent sure that Neil agrees, I'm pretty sure Alex agrees.

He does. You should ask him – I did.
Ha ha. Okay. What did he say?

He said he would love to make a new album. So there you go – I've helped you with that one.
Thanks, Paul!

It seems that everyone loves Rush now. Is that a strange feeling?
First of all, it's great. But yes, it is odd. The fact that more fans want to see us, and younger people are getting turned on to our music, that's a very cool thing. It's nice that people like us and feel okay about saying that out loud [laughs]. There's really no negative in this whole new acceptance of us.

Do you have any idea why this has happened?
It's hard to understand. Obviously longevity pays off. And I guess there's an amount of passion and authenticity that we bring to our brand of music that must also mean something in this day and age.

It's not just about the music. The documentary Beyond The Lighted Stage humanised the band.
That's true. The documentary is what Rush is: it's a story about three friends. And a lot of people liked that story. By making that movie, by allowing people in, it's shown a side of our personality that is appealing. The fact that we do get along so well, we do have a lot of fun and we love what we do, that has become kind of 'a thing', for lack of a better descriptor [laughs].

There are the caricatures of Rush: Alex as the joker, you the uber-nerd, Neil the professorial type.
There is certainly truth in all of that. The caricatures are a start.

And on a deep level?
I'd say that Alex is hot-blooded. If I put him in the context of Rush, he's the raw emotion in the band. He's the guy who's going to freak out first, the guy who's going to lose his temper. He's also very sweet and lovable. He's the guy in the band you want to hug most. He's so funny and so considerate, but he can also be very irrational.

And Neil?
Neil is surprisingly goofy. This is the thing most people don't realise about him. He's this big, unwieldy guy, and when he gets in his goofy mood, it's hilarious. The first day he pulled up for his audition, Alex and I thought he was the goofiest guy. We had no idea that lurking behind that goofiness was this professorial, serious man. We're all more than what we appear, obviously. Or less [laughs].

You stopped doing drugs a long time ago. Those two guys did not. Are you comfortable being around them when they're stoned?
If you hang around so long with people that love their weed, you get used to it. I'm just amazed at how good people are at functioning on that stuff.

You couldn't handle that shit?
That's why I stopped – because I became completely dysfunctional when I was high. I just couldn't stop talking. I couldn't stop pretending I was Woody Allen, or trying to take my pants off over my head. I kept trying to make people laugh, and it is easy and hard to make stoned people laugh. You'll say something and they'll laugh, and you'll say something else and the room gets really quiet and it's like, "Okay…"

Classic drug paranoia.
I was always okay when I was with the guys. What was hard for me was I'd go to my bunk on the bus and my brain would be going six hundred miles an hour. My problem is I can't stop over-thinking everything. It doesn't help me to have a stimulant like that. It aids my over-thinking. I prefer a glass of wine or two, that helps chill me out. That puts me in my happy place. I don't need to be high. I feel like I've been blessed with a natural sort of high-ness.

So when Alex told you about trying ecstasy you didn't feel like you were missing out?
Oh my God, I'm way beyond that. And I wouldn't want to be a witness to it. I don't want to be anywhere around that guy in that condition. The thought of it fills me with dread!

Are you embarrassed by any of the music that Rush have made?
Some of the early stuff makes me cringe a little. I hear a song and think: That was so Genesis-influenced. Like, what the fuck were we thinking? It's so derivative. And the long instrumental things that we were doing back in the seventies, some of it seems so pretentious.

Long, instrumental, pretentious songs – that's what I call 'proper Rush'.
Okay [laughs]. I can see that. I have friends, musician guys, who say to me all the time that after *Hemispheres* there was nothing else of interest to them. So when you make that statement it makes total sense to me. In their minds that was proper Rush. And you saw that kind of thing in our documentary. I loved the fact that Trent Reznor got more interested in us post-keyboards, yet Tim Commerford hated anything post-keyboards. That kind of says it all.

***The pretentiousness in those early songs has a lot to do with the lyrics that Neil wrote. Perhaps most pretentious of all was* Xanadu*, its lyrics inspired by the Coleridge poem* Kubla Khan.**
'*I have dined on honeydew*' [laughs]. Try singing that! Try singing about Kubla Khan, for Christ's sake.

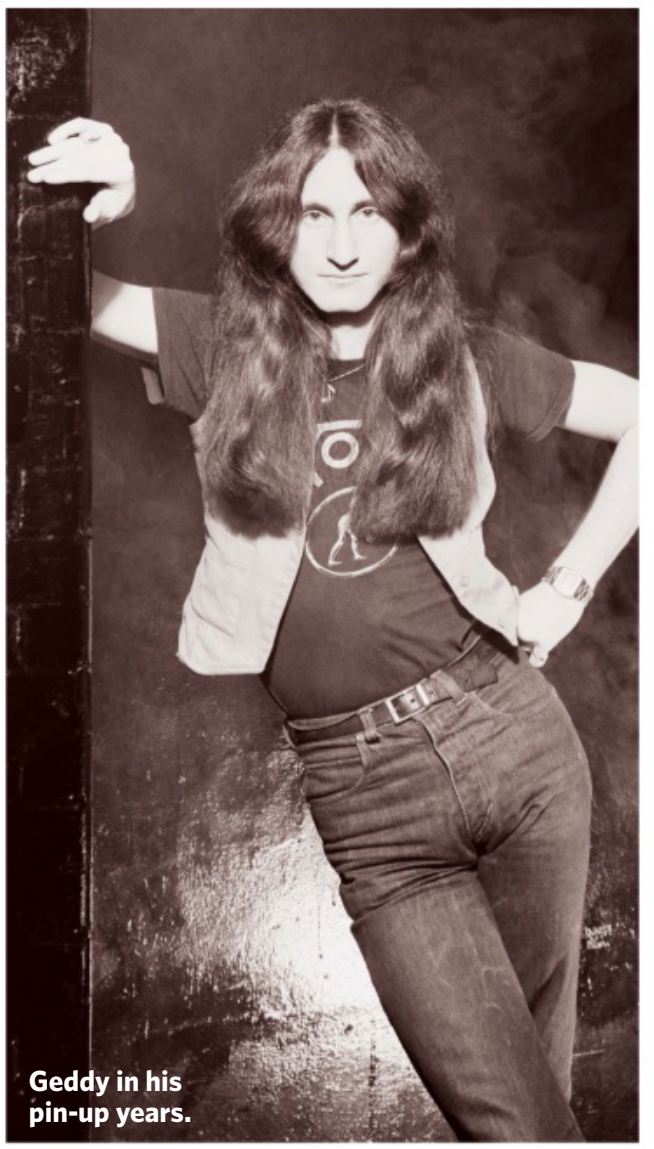
You pulled it off.
Oh yeah. I loved it! I was into it. But after a certain time, I guess you could say I became a little more objective about lyrics.

Were there lyrics of Neil's that you rejected outright?
Oh yeah, absolutely. Sometimes it just doesn't work, and I can't get behind it.

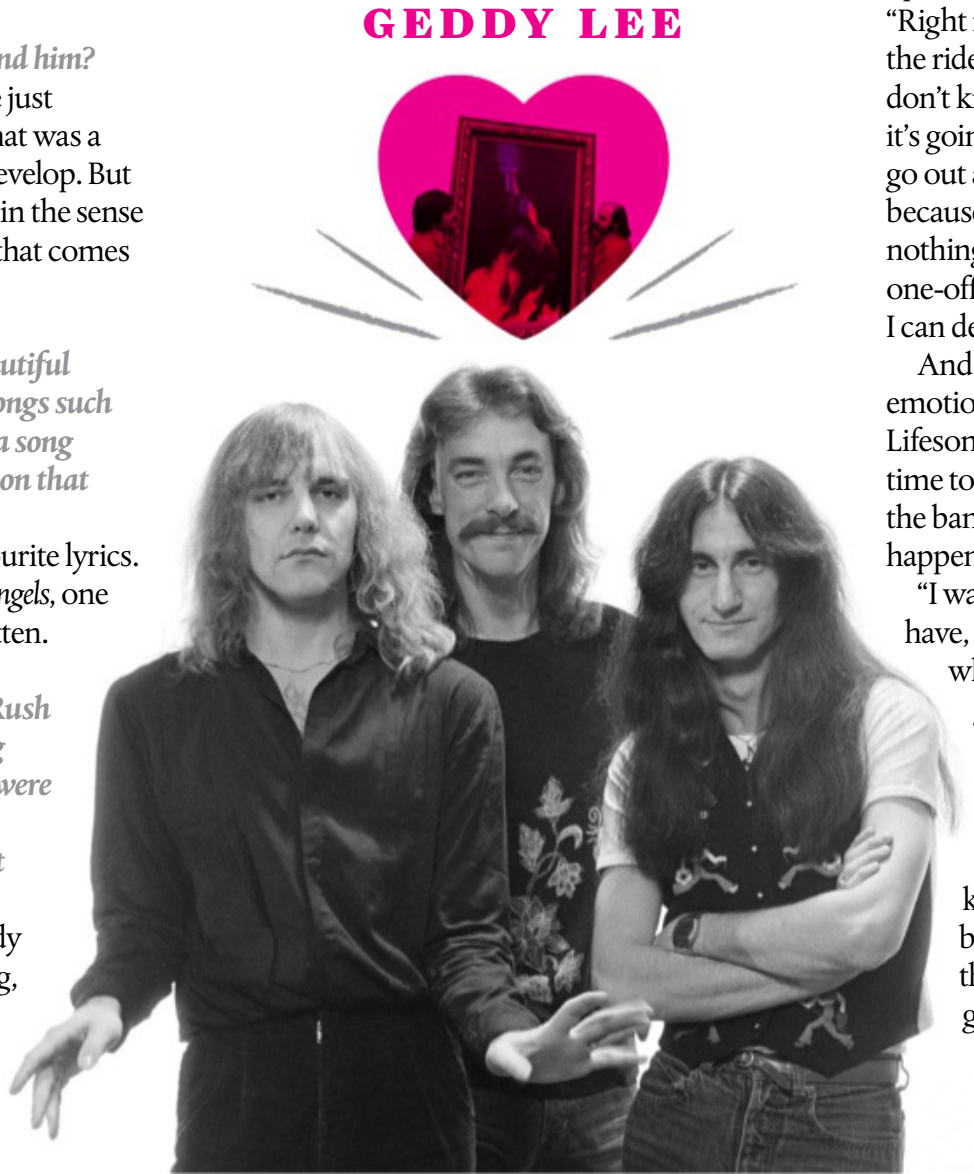
Did that cause problems between you and him?
In the early days it was harder. We were just becoming songwriting partners, and that was a rapport and a trust that took years to develop. But he's a remarkable songwriting partner, in the sense that he does not have the requisite ego that comes with the work.

In later years Neil has written some beautiful lyrics about the human condition, for songs such as* Afterimage *and* The Pass*. Is there a song that speaks to you more than any other on that deep level?
I like *The Pass* as well. It's one of my favourite lyrics. And I find *The Garden*, from *Clockwork Angels*, one of the most beautiful things he has written.

It's now forty-one years since the first Rush album was released. Back then, how big were you dreaming? Did you think you were going to be the new Led Zeppelin, or were you aiming a little lower – the next Budgie, perhaps?
Ha ha. Well, who dreams small? Nobody does that. Especially when you're young, you dream big. You wanna be the next big thing. You want to be the next Deep Purple. But really, you don't ever equate your meagre talent with your favourite bands. Especially with us being Canadians. We're far too modest for that leap of faith.


Geddy in his pin-up years.

"I don't like the idea of it ending. It will be hard to move on to another thing."
GEDDY LEE



In all the years since then, have you ever thought about leaving the band?
No. Never. I can honestly say I have not one day ever thought about quitting.

You've dedicated your entire adult life to this band. Any regrets?
I wish I had not been so obsessed with the band when my son was young. I wish I had been more in the moment for him. So yeah, I do have regrets about the early part of his life. But my son and I are very close now. And when my daughter came around, fourteen years after my son was born, I made myself way more available to her. You live and learn, you know?

And if the band was to end soon – for all the reasons we've talked about – could you accept it with a sense of gratitude for what it has given you?
I'll be honest. I don't like the idea of it ending. But obviously the conversations of the last year have forced me to come to terms with mortality – mortality in the sense of the band. If there is a time when we become a non-functional creative unit, then it will be hard to move on to other things, but move on I will.

August 1, 2015 is the date on which Rush conclude their US tour, at the Forum in Los Angeles. Beyond that, the band's future remains undecided. During this tour the difficult conversations between the three band members will be continued. For now, only this much is certain: they have not yet reached the end of the road, but the end is in sight.

Geddy Lee says it is in his nature to be optimistic. Even so, he remains pragmatic. "Right now," he says, "I'm just trying to enjoy the ride. Can we go on forever? Clearly not. We don't know if this is the end. And if it is the end, it's going to happen in bits and pieces. If we can't go out and do a massive tour in the future because everyone can't agree on that, there's nothing to say we can't do another record or one-off shows here and there. That's the best way I can describe it."

And for Alex Lifeson, there are mixed emotions. After a lifetime spent on the road, Lifeson, like Neil Peart, wishes to devote more time to his family. But he is acutely aware that if the band is going to go out on a high, it has to happen soon.

"I want to know I can play as good as I always have, or at least close to that," he says. "I love it when people say: 'You've got to see these guys, they can really play.' I want Rush to always be that band. That's a legacy that I'd like to keep intact. That's what the essence of Rush is. It's these three guys that have always loved playing together. I know that we're coming close to the end, but I still have so much fun playing with those two guys. When time comes, it's going to be hard letting that go."

“THIS IS ROCK. THERE IS SUPPOSED TO BE A PHYSICAL AND MENTAL REACTION TO THIS. IF YOU DON’T GET THAT, WHAT ARE WE DOING?”

The death of former Velvet Underground leader **Lou Reed** in 2013 robbed music of one its most innovative and iconic figures. Nine years earlier, *Classic Rock*'s Ian Fortnam sat down with a shockingly friendly Reed for his one of his most in-depth interviews ever.

Lou Reed’s reputation preceded him.

Being ushered into his presence in a bare, anonymous meeting room in the offices of London’s Capital Radio on a bleak February day in 2004 was fearfully intimidating. I’d heard all the stories: of tape recorders thrown at walls and hard-nosed hacks reduced to tears. My head was expecting the worst, but my heart was hoping for the best.

Lou Reed was my idol, the measure of all that a catalyst, musician and songwriter could or should be. He’d entranced millions with *Perfect Day*, broadened minds with *Walk On The Wild Side* and expanded rock’s parameters with the Velvet Underground. I knew that I was risking an enormous amount by placing myself in his firing line. If he chose to gleefully tear me to pieces – as received wisdom told me he surely would – I risked never being able to listen to his music again without it being forever tainted.

But I had to interview him. How could I not? After all, it was the critical drubbing accorded his 1973 masterpiece *Berlin* that caused me to first realise the gentlemen of the music press were not only fallible, they needed replacing… by me.

So, like a lamb to the slaughter, I took my seat and prepared to go head to head, across the most insubstantial of trestle tables, with the Rock ’N’ Roll Animal himself.

Opening with a possibly foolhardy question regarding his less than contemporary doo-wop work of the late 1950s, I was gratified that he not only elected to address my question with courtesy but also neglected to offer any indication of withering contempt.

I offered a second cautious question for his perusal and unexpectedly entered the arena of the miraculous.

Lou was aware of my work. He’d read a review I’d written of his *NYC Man* compilation and, unbelievably, had actually liked what he’d read. From that moment on, it became abundantly clear that he was going to answer all of my questions, even the tiresome ones about David Bowie and Andy Warhol that he usually sidestepped.

When I spoke cobblers he gently corrected me without spite. In fact, all outward indications seemed to suggest that we got on.

In the decade that’s passed since that initial encounter (which only concluded because Lou was determined to buy himself a new watch before the Bond Street shops closed), I spoke with him on four further occasions and it was always a pleasure, never a chore.

His death last month left an irreplaceable void where mainstream, avant-garde and alternative rock’s Venn diagram intersects. Since then I’ve read way too many grudging obituaries written by people who never met him, serially accentuating what a ‘difficult interview’ he was.

All I know is that the Lou Reed I met was neither irascible, curmudgeonly nor aggressive.

He was someone else… someone good.

What can you remember of your first recording?

When I was in high school we had a band and it was originally called The Shades. Me and these two other guys. I wrote the songs and sang in the background. I wasn’t upfront. At the same time there was a group from East Meadow, Long Island, called The Bellnotes and they recorded a song called *I’ve Had It*. *I’ve Had It* became a regional hit; my songs: nothing, zero. So then [radio DJ] Murray the K was supposed to play our song one night, but he was sick and his replacement did. I actually heard my song on the radio when I was 14, my own song, once. That was it. And I received a royalty check for two dollars and 49 cents, and that was that.

When did you first recognise a flair for creative writing, and was writing music initially a vehicle for the written word?

You wrote a really nice review of the compilation, didn’t you? Well, I normally don’t read these things, but I was told: “You have to read this, you have to read this.” And I want to thank you for that. It was very nice of you to put something like that into words, normally people don’t. It’s much easier to be negative.

Anyway, I studied classical piano, and the minute I could play something I started writing new things. And I switched to guitar and did the same thing. And the nice thing about rock is, besides the fact that I was in love with it, anyone can play that. And to this day anyone can play a Lou Reed song. Anybody. It’s the same essential chords, just various ways of looking at them. There is nothing special about it, and it only becomes special when I can’t do it. ➔

Opposite: Lou Reed in 2007, touring the reassessed 1973 album *Berlin*.

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The Velvets at the time of their third album: (l-r) Sterling Morrison, Reed, Moe Tucker, Doug Yule.

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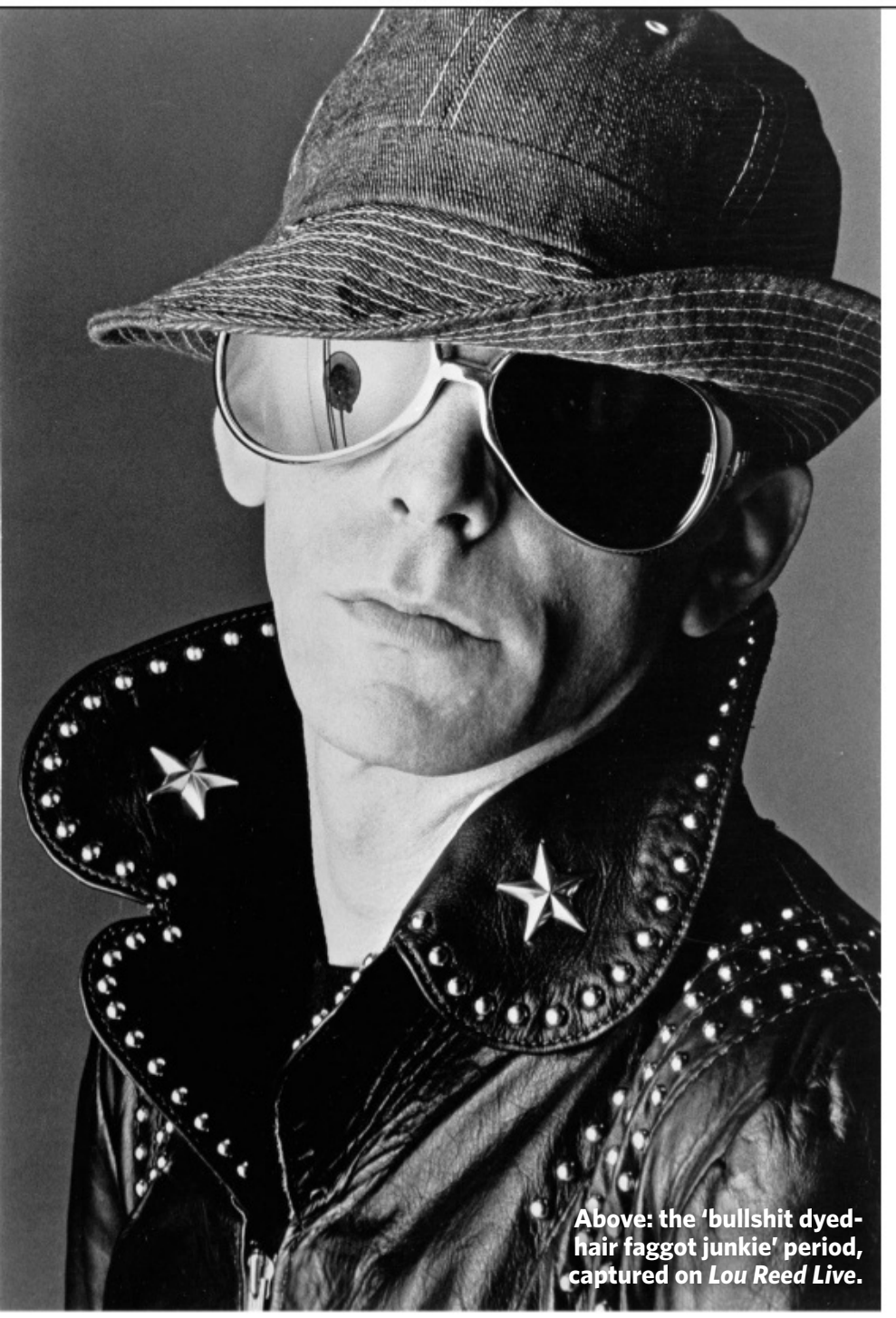
When I can't do it I'm very impressed by the person who can, and when I can do it it means nothing. But I would write new things from the day I could play anything.

How did you become involved with Pickwick Records in 1964, and what do you remember of that period?
I was looking for a job and got a job as a staff songwriter at a real pittance. And it was great experience. It was just me and these three other guys writing essentially what would be called hack stuff. And a lot of that stuff has found its way onto bootlegs, amazingly enough. *Psycle Annie* is an example of that kind of thing. But there was one that I really liked that I wrote with one of those guys called *Love Can Make You Cry*, and I've never been able to find a copy of that. That actually was a good song. *Psycle Annie*, that was one of those hot-rod songs. And I wrote another one: *Let The Wedding Bells Ring*. Have you heard that track? Well, the guy's got a car in high school, she wants to get married, he doesn't have enough money so he enters a race, and gets killed. So, you know, they came in the room and said: "Write us 20 rock'n'roll death songs…" You know, *Tell Laura I Love Her*, those kind of things. So we did. And it was a great experience because you got to record them… The writing is nothing, but it's like training. I've only had two or three real jobs in my life. None of them lasted very long. But one of them was to file the burr off a nut in a factory, and that's what this was.

When you first met John Cale, were you already aware of his work with the Dream Academy?
No. What happened was that I wrote a song called *The Ostrich*, and they decided that they wanted to have a group say they did it. Because it was just me and the other three guys who did it. And I'd taken a guitar and tuned all the strings to the same note. I did that because I saw this guy called Jerry Vance do that. Jerry Vance was not an advanced avant-garde guy, he was just screwing around. And he didn't realise what he had. But I did. And I took that and made it into *The Ostrich*. Then they wanted to have a group to say that they recorded it, called The Primitives. So this guy went out to a party to find people with long hair and he brought in Cale. He brought in Cale, Tony Conrad and Walter De Maria; they were all artists. You got in fights in those days if you had long hair.

How did the Velvet Underground come to the attention of Andy Warhol and what did you make of him when you first met?
[Lou smiles] These are questions that you have dreamed of forever to get a chance to ask… I loved him on sight, he was obviously one of us. He was right.
I didn't know who he was, I wasn't aware of any of that, amazingly enough. But he was obviously a kindred spirit if ever there was one, and so smart with charisma to spare. But really so smart. And for a quote 'passive' guy, he took over everything. He was the leader, which would be very surprising for a lot of people to work out. He was in charge of us, everyone. You look towards Andy, the least likely person, but in fact the most likely. He was so smart, so talented and 24 hours a day going at it.
Plus he had a vision. He was driven and he had a vision to fulfil. And I fit in like a hand in a glove. Bingo. Interest? The same. Vision? Equivalent. Different world, and he just incorporated us. It was amazing. I mean, if you think in retrospect, how does something like that happen? It's unbelievable. I went from being with Delmore Schwartz, who taught me so much about writing, and then I'm there with Andy where you get all the rest of it.

"The Velvet Underground were really, really smart and the other stuff was really, really stupid."



Above: the 'bullshit dyed-hair faggot junkie' period, captured on *Lou Reed Live*.

Right place, right time, on two occasions, both within a very short space of time.
Very hard to believe. I mean, you know, it's not something that you would want to bet on, or plan on. On the other hand, that's where it cast my lot; I would survive on making things. So, in that sense, I was there. I was available. Did anyone notice? No. Did anyone care about us? No. And then who walks in? There you go. Opportunity of a lifetime.





Were you initially enthusiastic for Nico to work with the band?
You know, Andy had a vision, and he had this way of looking at it. "Have a *chanteuse*." Why not? That sounds like fun. What, are we hard-core or something? We were very hard-core about the music and the lyrics and the approach, but the rest of it, it was like he was a god-send, just amazing. He did everything. You know, protection; we were so nothing, what was there to criticise with us? No one ever heard of us; you can't criticise a zero, you know. So they criticised him. He could care less. I watched. I watched everything he did, and I studied everything he did, and I really listened to him because he's so smart. But I mean smart and does things, not just theoretical smart, like smart and he's right out there. Pretty

ROCK'N'ROLL ANIMAL

Twelve Lou Reed tracks for the connoisseur, charting his journey from black-clad street poet to ornery elder statesman.

I'm Waiting For The Man
From: *The Velvet Underground & Nico* (1967)
Reed's *vérité* description of copping $26 of Harlem heroin, set against a two-chord riff and an edgy drumbeat that impels the listener to the edge like a clucking junkie. For those who heard it, the 70s started here.

Sister Ray
From: The Velvet Underground's *White Light/White Heat* (1968)
Imagine Booker T. And The M.G.'s forced to play avant-garde jazz in the most tumultuous sub-basement of Hell for 17 and a half minutes, as Lou intones a subterranean tale of sailors, drag queens, smack dealers and death. How was this not a hit?

Sweet Jane
From: The Velvet Underground's *Loaded* (1970)
This Dead Sea Scroll of glam confirmed Lou's position as New York City's poet laureate. An irresistible four-chord riff, so obvious in its perfection that you wonder how The Kinks missed it, is allied to a lyric so street-smart it's virtually picking your pocket.

Satellite Of Love
From: *Transformer* (1972)
The gorgeous follow-up to *Walk On The Wild Side* stiffed as inexplicably as its predecessor hit. Originally recorded but overlooked for the Velvets' *Loaded*, its candy-coated space-age vernacular and cuckold angst was produced by Bowie for *Transformer*.

Sad Song
From *Berlin* (1973)
The exemplification of Bob Ezrin's rarely-understated production genius, *Sad Song* marks the conclusion of Reed's magnum opus. Poorly reviewed by a music press lacking in discernment and vision, *Berlin*'s beautiful tragedy of divided souls in a divided city endures as his defining solo masterpiece.

Kill Your Sons
From: *Sally Can't Dance* (1974)
Personal, vitriolic and damning, *Kill Your Sons* documents Reed's confinement in Creedmore state psychiatric hospital, where he was given electroconvulsive therapy as a teenager at the behest of his parents to 'cure' him of bisexual tendencies. A stinging indictment.

Kicks
From: *Coney Island Baby* (1975)
Coke-fuelled paranoia is realised in this noir vignette, at odds with *Coney Island Baby*'s saccharine mood. Against a loosely focused bed of cocktail-party chat, Lou's pro/antagonist reveals himself as an American psycho who gets his "adrenaline flowing" by murdering casual pick-ups. Genuinely disturbing, rap-presaging genius.

Street Hassle
From: *Street Hassle* (1978)
If one composition encapsulates Reed's art, it's this. An 11-minute piece based on a cello earworm and divided into three parts, it allies Gotham vernacular to situations reminiscent of Selby's *Last Exit To Brooklyn* (hooker, drugs, death).

The Bells
From: *The Bells* (1979)
Working with Ornette Coleman sideman Don Cherry inspired Lou to raise his game on an otherwise unremarkable album. Self-produced to otherworldly effect, *The Bells* builds from climax through crescendo to its payoff, as his vocal coda chills.

The Blue Mask
From: *The Blue Mask* (1982)
If one strand endured throughout Lou's career (from *Venus In Furs* to *Lulu*), it was his fascination with S&M, described in unflinching detail. *The Blue Mask* finds a newly sober Reed and co-guitarist Robert Quine scaling summits of feedback unheard since *White Light/White Heat*.

Strawman
From: *New York* (1989)
No longer speaking for a disenfranchised few, politically-motivated Lou voices the concerns of a disgruntled constituency sick of inequality running rife beneath the 'Statue of Bigotry'. Reed and Mike Rathke's guitars ooze honeyed mercury.

Vanishing Act
From: *The Raven* (2003)
Captured in contemplative mood (exposed by Friedrich Paravicini's minimalist piano arrangement), Lou cogitates on the welcoming oblivion of disappearing into anonymity, before fading into a richly merciless Jane Scarpantoni string arrangement. Soul-crushingly beautiful.

admirable: one idea after another. People were like: "How can he produce the record? He's not a musician." Well, first of all he pulls me aside and he says: "Whatever you do, don't clean it up, don't slick it up. Don't clean it up, don't let them change anything, do it exactly the way you've been doing it." And he made sure that happened, because he was there. I mean, they wouldn't even talk to us. They talked to him. They said: "Mr Warhol…" blah, blah, blah, and he would say: (adopts uncannily accurate Warhol voice) "Oh, that's great." And that would be that. They'd look at him, because however strange they thought us or we were, Andy with a silver wig? Right to the head of the class, you know. And he would be really, really aggressively fey on purpose. You know, really push it at them. And if you look at pictures where everybody posed for pictures, Andy would do something really odd or something, so you look at that picture you have to look at him. And when you were with these people they had to go to him; none of us were wearing a silver wig.

He was his own greatest creation: his own work of art.
He was a magnificent creature, and he really thought about it. Just look at the way he was before he switched over from commercial art. It's one of the great ideas, and boom, he just goes and does it. And he would put his money where his mouth was: all the movies, the this-and-that, were funded by him out of his own money. And he wasn't getting anything back out of it. When I left, I just left. He didn't say, 'Hey, I've done this and that for you, I want 20 per cent forever,' or anything. He was really noble.

In the *NYC Man* sleeve notes you say that "you could have the IQ of a turtle and still play a Lou Reed song", in reference to *Heroin*. Though it is basically three chords, the great drama of its dynamic transcends the recognised constraints of the straightforward rock'n'roll form.
It's actually two chords and I'm being funny. But yeah, the turtle could do a really stupid version of it. But that's like saying that an idiot could say Terry Malloy's speech in *On The Waterfront*; any idiot could say: "Charley, it was you, Charley. Charley, it was you, I could have been somebody, Charley." Anybody could say that. Brando, though, that's another story. So it's the way the artist presents it. That's the defining moment.

You also seem compelled to reinvent your work. On the *Rock'N'Roll Animal* tour you seemed to accentuate *Heroin*'s inherent drama yet further.
Well, I had a lot of time to think after the Velvet Underground broke up and here were these songs of mine. And then I heard Mitch Ryder's Detroit Wheels, produced by Bob 'Wonderboy' Ezrin, doing *Rock And Roll* and I said, "Aha, that's fun." So Ezrin got Alice Cooper's band for me. I can't play that way, I don't wanna play that way, but they were as good at 'that way' as anybody else around. So I said, "Okay, here's the material." They didn't know it from the Velvet Underground, they'd never heard it, so I just taught them the whole thing. Now we'll try it again, see what happens five years later. Duh. Let's see if they [the record-buying public] get it this time around. Change the presentation. I mean, it is not something that I would want to keep doing, but it was probably one of the greatest live records ever made. So there you have it.

And, my God, how it works. It positively sizzles. The first time I heard that version of *Heroin* it was the full hairs-on-the-back-of-the-neck deal. Which is what you want.
Well yeah, this is rock. There is supposed to be a physical and mental reaction to this, and if you don't get that what are we doing? There's all kinds of other music to fall asleep to and relax to, but this is supposed to be visceral. This is really physical music.

The Velvet Underground seemed to be the direct antithesis of the flower-power movement then prevalent in San Francisco and subsequently the world?
Well, we were also really, really smart, and the other stuff was really, really stupid. And as people get older and wiser and can start differentiating, they say: "Woah." That's if they get a chance to, of course. At this stage you've got to know about it to find it, and, at that time, it was purely a matter of brains. I mean, there are people who voted for Bush.

When you returned to the original masters for *NYC Man*, were you finally able to address problems with the sound that you'd previously thought unsolvable? For example, you mention in the sleeve notes how you were able to accentuate John Cale's piano in *I'm Waiting For The Man*. And it does work, it kicks that arse.
Oh yeah. I mean, that is part of the mastering thing. I know how it is supposed to sound, and I know what it is supposed to do. If it doesn't do that on the CD, the mastering hasn't been good. So we went back and I said, "I want it to do this, this, it's in here, and there it is." But along with that, you can bring in a lot of space and air and push. It's very, very interesting, just mastering correctly. I think all artists should, really, before their tapes completely oxidise and disintegrate. Because the record companies don't care, it's not like they're taking care of these tapes. They're not taking care of these tapes, these tapes are sitting in a warehouse, oxidising away. So it behoves an artist, if he can. And in my case, the only reason I could is the guys at BMG had this idea. And it involved two other companies to get them to cooperate, so you had an overall view of things. And I'd like to do a part two, three and four, because this is just one way of looking. And of course it's not chronological, because there was no reason for it to be chronological. I didn't write these things with the idea that they should be trapped into a certain time period by the use of language. Phew! So in the creation of this, *NYC Man*, it's like a new album, as far as I'm concerned. We were very much concerned with the sequencing, and the flow. That's it.



"Without Walk On The Wild Side, maybe I'd be digging a ditch somewhere. So thank God for it."

How did the friction between you and John Cale after *White Light/White Heat* come about?
I would never tell you. That's a secret.

It's worth a shot though.
You can try. You could always ask John.

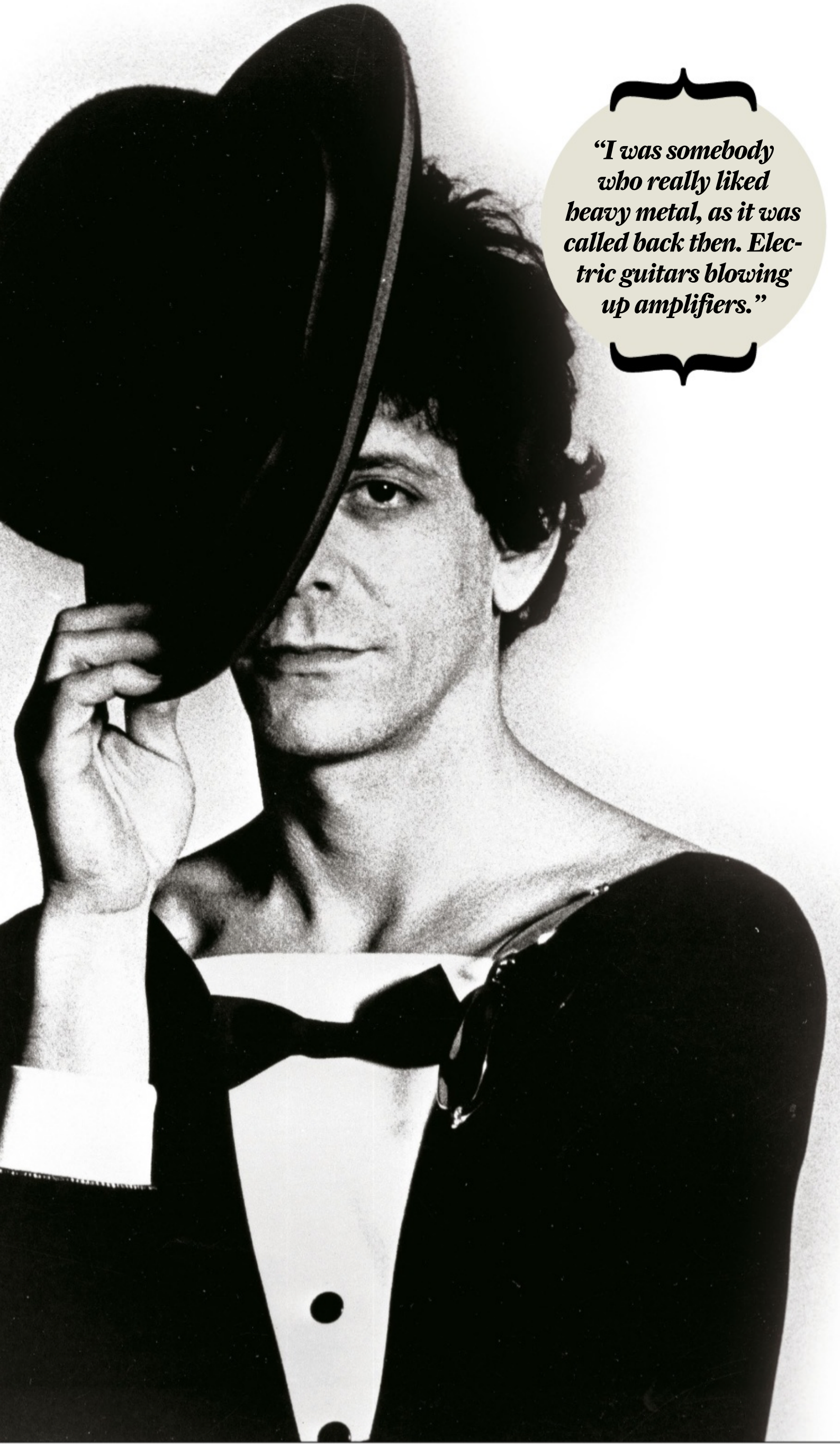
He'd just give me the same treatment, I'm sure.
Probably, I don't know.

Do you consider that Moe Tucker's metronomic drum style was intrinsic to the Velvets' sound?
I think Maureen Tucker is a genius drummer, and it is astonishing that people have not noticed. She started a whole new way of drumming, a different way of drumming, a style of drumming which, later, some of these ideas were incorporated whether they heard her or not. For instance, with electronic drums you remove the tyranny of the high hat. Every one of these drummers comes with a trap kit, he's been taught to drum and he'll play a hi-hat straight through your song. You say to him: "We don't need a high-hat every single note here, don't play it all the time." Well, they can't, because when they're trained they're just doing that. [Drums on table.]

You must have recognised the power of such compositions as *Sweet Jane* and *Rock And Roll*, so was the fact that they were remixed without your knowledge for 1970's *Loaded* the final straw that led you to quit the Velvets?
They didn't remix it, they just finished the mix without me. I left.

Was that the final straw?
No. The final straw was long before that.

Would you care to elucidate on this final straw?
No, it was just a terrible thing with the manager. Where the manager feels that he is more important than the artist, or is in competition with the artist.



"I was somebody who really liked heavy metal, as it was called back then. Electric guitars blowing up amplifiers."

It's always a bad situation. You know, the manager has an apartment and the artist is sleeping on the floor by the fireplace like a sheepdog. Willie Nelson's autobiography is very, very funny, because at the end of the book he's staying in some really nice hotel suite wherever the hell he is. But he's travelling with his Samoan back doctor. The Samoan doctor gets the bed, Willie – because he's got a bad back – is sleeping on the floor. And Willie says something like: "This is kind of a parable for the music industry." Very, very funny.

Around that time, with Moe Tucker retreating into domesticity, Sterling Morrison returning to academia and the Velvets soldiering on with Doug Yule and ultimately Willie Alexander usurping your role, did you ever consider leaving the music business altogether?
No. No. It was still fun, as long as it was fun… You know, Sterling was always threatening to go back, but Maureen just got pregnant. That's the only thing about *Loaded*, she was pregnant. Our drummer was not a lesbian. Old Moe, she's got five kids now, for God's sake. And [her son] Richard is a guitar player.
I gave him one of my custom guitars.

I talked to her two days ago and she didn't tell me any of that. She told me one of her sons was a cook.
You talked to Moe? She's also a brilliant songwriter. *Spam Again*? She's one of the great people. She's one of the greatest drummers. Her style of drumming, that she invented, is amazing, and you still see occasional groups where the guy will be playing standing up. But I'm surprised that the other girl drummers were very obsessed with being like a guy drummer, not with following Maureen's lead, which is standing up, because it adds some strength. But anyway, *Spam Again*, any of those songs of hers. Now she's with some group… The Kapucknicks or whatever the hell it is.

How did the deal with RCA come about, and what drew you to the UK to record your first solo album in 1971?
A friend of mine got me out of Atlantic Records by giving them a cassette that was recorded at Max's Kansas City, which was released as a mono record called *The Velvet Underground Live At Max's*. And then they got me signed to RCA as a solo artist. And then at that time the records in the UK just had a better sound to them. Better engineers, better studios, you know, for non-R&B stuff. So that was the reason to come over here.

What was your first impression of David Bowie, and in retrospect are you pleased with what he and Mick Ronson did with your second solo album, *Transformer*?
How can I remember my first impression ➔

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of David Bowie? That's really… [smiles] Okay… I mean, David and I are friends to this day. He's very smart and very, very talented, and I met him in New York and thought, 'This guy would be a fun guy to work with; we could really bring something to the dance.'

And Mick Ronson's arrangements?
Mick Ronson's arrangements were killer. The thing about Ronno was that I could never understand a word that he said; it's, like, he's from Hull. You had to ask him eight times to say something, and he was like, 'Ouzibuzziwoozy…' Absolutely incomprehensible… I mean, sweet guy, but incomprehensible. Completely. But listen to that arrangement of *Perfect Day*. That's Ronson. But David is no slouch. We were rehearsing, and we're doing *Satellite Of Love* and we were doing the real background part at the end, and the guys were really admiring David and going, "Holy shit, what a part that is." He outdid himself.

"I took acting and directing and film when I was in school... I liked writing monologues for myself, and different parts to play."

Did it amuse you that *Walk On the Wild Side* sailed past the oblivious censors, right into the upper echelons of the UK singles chart?
I'm not amused by the situation at all, but that anyone would… You know, in books you have *Naked Lunch* and Allen Ginsberg. In movies you have God-knows-what. Who could possibly be bothered by the lyrics to *Wild Side*? It's inconceivable. I mean, it is just so offensive that it's not amusing.

Has the song become something of a millstone?
No, because without it, who knows, maybe I'd be digging a ditch somewhere. So thank God for it.

***Berlin* is an incredibly evocative and imaginative work, with not a *Perfect Day* in sight. Had you been working on the concept since the first album [where the original song *Berlin* appeared], and where did all of that darkness come from?**
I have no idea. It was just getting together with [Bob] Ezrin, we wanted to do what we were calling a movie for the mind and it grew out of that idea. But when you say there is no *Perfect Day* on there, don't be too sure about that… Melodically, there certainly is, arrangement-wise, there certainly is. The key to *Perfect Day* is the last line: '*You made me forget myself / I thought I was someone else / Someone good*,' and, '*You're gonna reap what you sow*.' So going from there to *Berlin* is not a big leap. Actually, you could put that right in there without a problem, probably after *Oh Jim*.

It is a dark record, but it's almost like the sum of darkness squared.
Well, it's not, 'Let's sit up and dance and be happy.' I prefer to think of it as a Bergman movie or a Kurosawa movie. You know it's not, 'Hey, hey, hey, yippy-doo,' it's more film noir. Which I guess lets Kurosawa out. But when I say Kurosawa I mean intensity, or in *Rashomon*, depending on how you look at it. That's the reference points for me, if you know what I'm talking about.

It is a great album…
Boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl and then it stops.

'Girl slashes wrists' isn't normally something you'd expect to find in the equation though.
Well of course it's not what you normally expect, but that's the point.

But it is just that bitter pill that makes *Sad Song* so deliciously sad.
With that big choir… I mean, you have so many records that go the other way, and here is a chance to move you emotionally, physically – remember what I was saying – physically move you, and emotionally move you. You know, you're not expecting it. So it's an open shot. He's all alone at the three-point line, ladies and gentleman, will he sink this? No one's near him. You know.

Why did you specifically choose Berlin as the setting for Caroline and Jim's story?
It was simply that Berlin was a divided city, and it was cosmopolitan and a very sophisticated city. It was the home of German film noir and expressionism. And I wanted this to be the city in which this little plot takes place, and it was emblematic that it was a divided city.

For teenagers seduced into Lou's world by *Transformer* and working backwards through the Velvets' albums, especially *White Light/White Heat*, *Metal Machine Music*'s cover image and liner notes were utterly irresistible. You looked exactly as the originator of 'heavy metal rock' should have looked, and the teasing "No instruments? No" line in the album's combative sleeve notes tapped into a nascent punk nihilism that came to define a generation. So was *Metal Machine Music* originally intended as conclusion or catalyst?
I was somebody who really liked heavy metal, as it was called back then, electric guitars blowing up amplifiers, and the sound of broken speakers, and I thought it would be a lot of fun not to have to worry about a drum, and not have anything for anybody to sing so you didn't have to worry about a key. Someone working their way backwards would probably end up with the bootleg of *Metal Machine Music* that was very right-channel heavy, not very accurate. I doubt they would have been able to find vinyl, but there was a CD out that was not very accurate.





La Monte Young's famous experimental technique Dream Music is cited on the album's cover as a progenitor of the direction you were going with *Metal Machine Music*, but where did you first find inspiration to stretch beyond the constraints of the 'song'? There are echoes of Ornette Coleman's *The Shape Of Jazz To Come* in the respect that critical bafflement was followed by enduring influence.
The first thing I was listening to was Ornette Coleman. Ornette Coleman. Ornette Coleman. Ornette Coleman. And then the idea of drones in back of it. But it's Ornette, it's always been Ornette. *Lonely Woman* is one of the greatest songs ever written. Not a day goes by without me coming back to it. It's an amazing album, but that track…

What did you make of the live reinterpretation of *Metal Machine Music*?
Well, it was Walter Krieger who did the transcription and Rheinhold Friedl [the musical director of Berlin's Zeitkratzer ensemble who produced a 2002 live version of *Metal Machine Music*] that got in touch with me saying they wanted to do this, and I said it's impossible. I mean, I've been working on doing a sequel for it forever, and it turned into *Fire Music* from *The Raven*, and I couldn't imagine anyone possibly being able to play it live. But then they sent me an example of it and it was fantastic. I was astonished by it. So I said okay, and it was performed in Berlin at the Opera Halle and I performed in the third part of it. I suddenly come in on guitar, and they disappear and this one mondo guitar replaces all 10 of them, and then they come in and we all play together. And then we went to Venice with it. And then they toured around Europe doing pieces of the whole thing.

Songs like *Coney Island Baby* and *Perfect Day* are incredible hymns to the glory of love. Would you describe yourself as a great romantic?
I would not describe myself. I could not describe myself.

But then there's the other side of the coin; do you bear any resemblance to the central characters of either *Kicks* or *The Blue Mask*?
It's a complete and total personality. I mean, I like acting. I took acting and directing and film when I was in school, and I liked writing monologues for myself, and different parts to play. And I would bet that that's got something to do with the variety going on in there. If I wanted to do a cowboy song, I would write myself a cowboy part. If I wanted to do a Tennessee Williams



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monologue, there is no one there to stop me, I'm going to try to do that.

There is great drama in what you do. For example, *Street Hassle* is an incredibly dramatic and evocative piece. You're right there in the heart of the action, witnessing everything that the narrator describes.
Oh yeah, and it's a great monologue, but there's two monologues going on really. There's the person in part one, the person in part two, and these two couldn't be more polar opposite. The person acting out the first part is one way, and the complete opposite person is on the other side in part two. They're not even vaguely of the same species.

The second character is such an absolute reptile… [Lou laughs] And the 'universal truth' line is so utterly cold it's completely fabulous.
Based on a real incident, as my things inevitably are.

How did Arista Records react to *Live: Take No Prisoners*, possibly the most aggressive, uncooperative and angry performance ever captured on tape?
Clive Davis [Head of Arista] was always very supportive of me. When I first played him the *Street Hassle* album, first it's *I Wanna Be Black*, and then into *Street Hassle* you hear: *'That cunt's not breathing.'* I said: "Clive?" And he said: "You are what you are. I knew that when I got you." And with *Take No Prisoners* it was more of the same. I wasn't a surprise to Clive. He didn't go: "He did what?" That's why he signed me. He didn't object to that. He knew what he was getting, he knew I did things like that. Clive's smart..

And then came *The Bells*. Now there's a drama.
There is a drama. That was constructed in the studio and sung one time and one time only. I'm making those lyrics up on the spot. And it's an amazing lyric. Whatever it is. I've looked back at that lyric, trying to understand it, since it's coming from a different place than usual. Unfettered by anything, it's just going free, and there it was: '*And the actresses relate to the actor who comes home late.*' Wow, this is my kind of… It's like *The Sweet Smell Of Success* and *This Is My Kind Of Town*. That's my kind of lyric. You just don't know where it's going to go.

Have you performed it live since the album's accompanying tour?
No.

I saw you do it in '79, and I seem to remember you dropping to your knees at the climax. Now that was dramatic.
Well, as long as I didn't have them run out with a cape and do the James Brown thing.

Along with creative writing you studied journalism at Syracuse.
For a week.

It is not wholly beyond the realms of possibility that you could have become a critic yourself. Could you live with such a horrifying prospect?
No. It's interesting. I was learning the triangular paragraph, and that was it for me. You're not supposed to have an opinion of the triangular paragraph. So I moved from the triangular paragraph of journalism to the theory of triangular staging in drama – in the sidelines, there is always a triangle going. That's it. So it was easy. What was difficult for me was interviewing Hubert Selby and President Havel. First I was just worried: "Is the battery going to die on me, right in the middle of everything? Should I have a back-up machine just in case?"

Welcome to my world.
It's just too nerve-racking. My God… As if I don't have enough to worry about.

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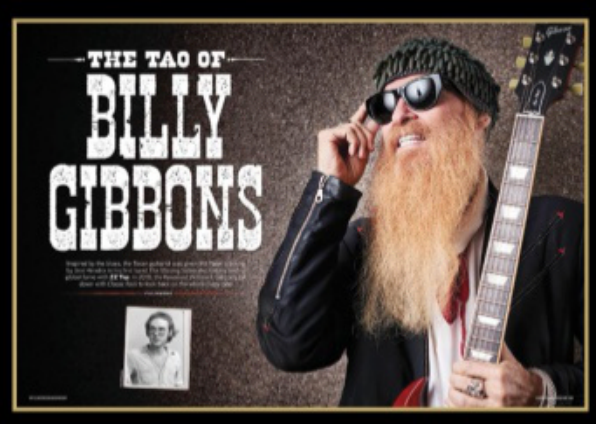
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