

# THE LOST PIONEERS OF HEAVY METAL



Forget Sabbath, Cream and Led Zep; heavy metal was invented by bands now lost in the mists of time. *Classic Rock* tracks down members of **Iron Butterfly**, **Bloodrock**, **Leaf Hound** and the **JPT Scare Band** to get the lowdown on the birth of very loud music...

**WORDS: SLEAZEGRINDER ILLUSTRATION: FIFTYSEVEN DESIGN**

In the beginning, there was love, hope and happiness; there was no 'heavy'. It was the 1960s – nobody particularly needed heavy; they had The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and marijuana. But by the tail-end of the decade things got ugly. Suddenly there was war, sex, drugs, violence, tension, revolution and fighting in the streets. And so heavy came to pass.

Heavy metal, that immortal hoary beast of lust, power and violence, was born in those murky last moments of the 1960s. The debate over who coined the term and what band was the first to bash out the initial fuzzed-out power chord will likely rage on forever, but one thing we know for certain is that metal's first five years laid the diabolical groundwork for everything that would come later. Doom rock, stoner-metal, power-prog, slam-boogie... every hard, mean, gutbucket form of heavy rock'n'roll you can think of originated in that brief but fertile period between 1968 and 1973 when innocence and optimism was suddenly yesterday's news, and rock was ready for some darkness.

"Cream was the first definable heavy band," claims Joe S. Harrington, a full-contact rock journalist from Portland, Maine in the USA. Currently he edits *Kapital Ink* magazine. He is also the author of the mammoth, and quite brilliant, *Sonic Cool: The Birth & Death Of Rock N'Roll*, which is arguably the most complete and thorough examination of rock music ever penned.

In the book, he traced the beginnings of metal back to the power-blues of Cream's *Disraeli Gears* album: "They had heavy solos, serious musicianship and Druidic imagery, all things that would become trademarks of

metal years later. And this was still in 1966. However, metal didn't start until two years later. By 1968, you had four bands that could definably be called heavy metal. MC5, Steppenwolf, Iron Butterfly and Blue Cheer. All four left big footprints on the heavy rock trail. But only one of them can play the same song for an entire show.

Formed in San Diego in 1966, Iron Butterfly began life as a psychedelic band, but achieved a spectacular metamorphosis just two years later when bassist Lee Dorman joined the band and they recorded the legendary 17-minute proto-metal classic *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*, a swirling acid attack of incessant twin guitars and gorilla-fingered organ plunking.

Lee remembers its creation well: "That song was actually only about a minute-and-a-half long when it started. I'd just joined and the guitar player had just joined in August, so we kind of experimented with that song to kind of get the band together. The song took on a life of its own, it just kept going and going. The engineer just left the tape rolling, the producer wasn't even there when we recorded it.

"The other miracle was that we played it all the way through without any mistakes. Except for a couple of guitar and vocal overdubs, what you hear is what we played. If we had to do that in pieces, we might still be there."

Lee cites free-form FM radio shows for the song's inexplicable success. *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* stayed on American charts for two years. As to Iron Butterfly's status as metal pioneers, Dorman is diplomatic about it. "I've heard it said that Iron Butterfly are the

fathers of heavy metal, but we were certainly not alone in that."

With the success of Iron Butterfly, the music industry scrambled to find similar veins to plunder. "The record companies were all owned by old men until The Beatles," Joe Harrington explains. "As it progressed, they hired hippies to run the labels. Suddenly, everything goes, because they have no idea what's going to hit. Everybody was caught off guard by the revolution. It was a time of wild experimentation. Heavy metal went into a bunch of directions."

One of the first offshoots of early metal was 'downer rock', a term coined by Black Sabbath drummer Bill Ward. Sabbath's minor chords, apocalyptic worldview and relentless gloom struck a nerve in a generation haunted by the draft, by the end of the peace and love era, by the encroaching funk of political and financial instability. And, then, as Harrington explains, there were the drugs...

"Downer rock was all about Quaaludes.

**"We had fun, we made love to beautiful women, we travelled to the edge of the Cosmic Universe and returned semi-intact." – Jeff Lintrell, JPT Scare Band**

I mean, they were called downers. The drugs went along with it. Drink wine, do some Quaaludes, listen to Black Sabbath. The downer rock movement was the last drug movement based in some kind of spiritual quest, just in this case it was a dark, Satanic quest. It was a dark buzz, fueled by Altamont and Manson."

While Harrington cites Sabbath as the undisputed pioneers of downer rock, he believes it is Texan band Bloodrock that defines the genre. "Bloodrock were the all-time champions of negativity," he claims.

Okay, let's find out if that's true – and get it straight from the horse's mouth. John Nitzinger is a legend in Texas rock. ➡➡➡

His long and storied history includes a brief but eventful solo career in the early 70s that spawned the gritty hits *Louisiana Cockfight* and *LA Texas Boy*, as well as stints with Carl Palmer and Alice Cooper. But he is most well-known as the man who orchestrated the career of Bloodrock, one of the most nihilistic proto-metal bands to ever pen a seven-minute song about bleeding to death.

From his home in Lake Worth, Nitzinger explains how he got blood from the rock: "Jim Rutledge came up to me when I was playing at the Cellar and asked if I would write some songs for his band. So I said sure and I got with 'em. I tutored them all in how to play the songs and their instruments."

Vocalist Rutledge and his band were hand-picked in 1969 by Grand Funk Railroad manager Terry Knight, who imagined his scruffy young hires as the meanest, loudest heavy metal band possible, a sort of Sex Pistols for the freak generation. "I taught them how to play the songs, and we went out to a lakehouse here in Fort Worth every weekend and jammed for months and months, putting it all together," Nitzinger says.

Eventually the band released eight albums throughout the 70s and have recently re-formed, but they are most remembered for *DOA*, a song from their 1970 album *Bloodrock 2*, which became an enduring, and highly unlikely hit on FM radio. *DOA* is seven minutes of pure pain, a doomy, funeral organ-fuelled creepy-crawler complete with a bleating ambulance siren and hopeless lyrics like: *The sheets are red and moist where I'm lying/God in heaven, teach me how to die.*

If you are looking for the darkest moment of 70s rock, look no further. Nitzinger remembers how the song came to be: "Jim came to me one day and said: 'I'm gonna write the sickest, most twisted song I can think of.' And I'll be damned if he didn't write *DOA*, and it became a hit."

As to why such a nihilistic song could ever catch on, Nitzinger has his theories: "It came out on Halloween, which was good, and it got banned, because it had the sirens in it. And when you're driving down the street and you hear sirens on the radio, well, cars started pulling over. The song became a traffic hazard. So they banned it, which made people want it all the more."

As to *Bloodrock's* reputation as the mood-killers of early metal, Nitzinger admits that the band courted the dark side on occasion, but is quick to point out that their mysterious image was largely a fan creation.

"There is some dark, tongue-in-cheek stuff in there," he says about the early *Bloodrock* albums. "At the time, we were very serious. We wanted to get down to the nitty gritty and really look at the dark side of things. We didn't want to be a sunshine band," he laughs. "This band always was mysterious. But it was the fans that made them that way. The fans built up this image. We didn't know we were on the dark side really, we were just young guys doing our thing. It was the crowd that defined us that way."

As to chemical influences, well, that's a story left untold. "Drugs? Quaaludes?" Nitzinger bristles at the question. "I don't talk about drugs. Hell, this band has been clean and sober for years now."



Get your wings: Iron Butterfly.

**"We had to be the first band to use shotguns on stage. Loud music and smoke. That was the theme of the band." – Tony D'Lorio, Bang**



Twin-neck pioneer: Erik Braunn, who played guitar on Iron Butterfly's epic *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*.

Downer rock was not the only direction metal went in. By 1971, it had fractured into dozens of different micro-genres, and had become a worldwide phenomenon.

Suddenly, the record bins were filled with wild new bands. As Joe Harrington put it: "The crazier, the more controversial, the more off-the-wall the music was, the better."

Dorman split from Iron Butterfly and formed the groundbreaking psychedelic-boogie band Captain Beyond. Sir Lord Baltimore, often cited as the godfathers of 'stoner rock', started up in New York. In Washington DC, Pentagram out-Sabbathed Sabbath and laid the groundwork for American doom metal. From Germany, Tiger B. Smith mixed bone-crunching hard rock with psychotic glam. South Africa spawned the acidpunk metal of Suck. Japan's Flower Travelin' Band mixed Middle Eastern rhythms with crushing Blue Cheer power-rock. Many bands released a single album or two and then disappeared into the ether, bands with sinister names and screaming guitars like Antrobus, Iron Claw, Josefus, Necromandus, The Firebirds, Warhorse,

Armededdon, Mourning Sun, Epitath, Jamul, Primevil, Savage Grace and Black Merder.

These are the forgotten pioneers of heavy metal. With little label support and spotty distribution, it's a wonder they were heard at all. As Joe Harrington points out: "There was no heavy metal section at the record store in 1972. You just had to look at the record and figure it out."

While most proto-metal bands succumbed to disco, punk, obscurity or James Taylor by the mid-70s, a few of them managed to endure. Some were even rediscovered by new audiences 30 years later. Three such bands are JPT Scare Band, Leaf Hound and Bang.

JPT Scare Band was the death metal of early-70s hard rock. Formed in Kansas City, Missouri in 1973, their nearly free-form psyche-metal went further than any bands before them. The aptly named band constructed towering walls of terrifying, evocative, druggy guitar noise, but played mostly for like-minded stoners in their rehearsal space, leaving them one of the most obscure proto-metal innovators.

As Scare Band drummer Jeff Litrell recalls "We played live almost every night, it was just that we did it down in the basement with only a few tripped-out freaks in attendance."

Like their forebears in Sabbath and Bloodrock, the Scare Band were not afraid to explore the dark side in their music. Their first album, *Sleeping Sickness*, sounds like the death of the American dream at 150 decibel.

But as Litrell tells me, the idea was not to bum the audience out. "Nah, we just weren't eating regularly," he laughs. "We lived in a war zone of gunfire and stake-outs, pimps and hoers. When you had to walk somewhere you walked with purpose. It was right toward the end of the Vietnam débacle and the times were somewhat oppressed. Believe it or not, we thought we were really up and just psychedelic. We never purposely intended to scare people out. We definitely wanted to scare them, though."

The JPT Scare Band reunited after 25 years apart, and are currently shopping for labels to release a new album.

Peter French is legend in the annals of proto-metal, having fronted three seminal bands from 1970-'74: Cactus, Atomic Rooster and his own creation, Leaf Hound. The latter's sole album, 1970's *Growers Of Mushroom*, is now acknowledged as an undisputed classic of heavy riff'n'roll, and has gone on to influence countless bands, including nearly every major player in the stoner rock movement, from Kyuss to Monster Magnet. But as French explains, the band's leafy green imagery was more horrorshow than dope show.

"The name Leaf Hound was not what some people have presumed it to be," he says. "The idea of the name coming from a short horror story by Ray Bradbury called *The Emissary*, about a dog that had returned from the dead covered in mud and leaves."

Furthermore, French says, the band's image, like Bloodrock's, was largely the figment of revisionist imaginations. "The drug scene of course was around, but we never really took to it. The drug-crazed image of Leaf Hound that some people seem to have assumed couldn't be further from the truth, as the band was as straight as a dye when we wrote and played and recorded our album."

Through a series of murky circumstances, Leaf Hound was dropped from their label on the eve of their first album's release. "We found out much to our complete and utter dismay that our album was not now going to be released after all," French remembers. "The band broke up after hearing this, and ironically about a year after the band had finished, the record appeared, but of course now there was no band to promote it."

French went on to play in Big Bertha with Cozy Powell, as well as Atomic Rooster and Cactus, but still felt Leaf Hound never got their due. Then in 1993, the band finally got the recognition they deserved. "*Record Collector* magazine rang me out of the blue to my surprise to tell me what a fantastic band they thought Leaf Hound was, and invited me to do what was to become quite a major interview for their magazine."

*Growers Of Mushroom* was re-released in 1994 to critical acclaim.

French reformed Leaf Hound with an all-new line-up and is about to release a new album, *Leaf Hound Unleashed*.

Meanwhile, what of the final band in our deadly trio, Bang? We tracked down Tony D'Lorio, drummer for the Philadelphia metal combo, who immediately told us: "We had to be the first band to use shotguns on stage. We had a guy dressed in black shooting a shotgun. Because we're named Bang, see?"

Bang formed two weeks after Woodstock. "We were basically doing Black Sabbath then, trying to figure out what we were all about," Tony reveals. "Loud music and smoke, that was the theme of the band."

After fitfully trying to get somewhere in their hometown and enduring more than their share of strange events, including a singer who "went crazy and ended up in a mental institution", Tony took Bang and a tent on the road, traveling to Miami to find a record distributor to sign his band.

Somewhere along the way, they ran out of pot and pulled over in Daytona. "So we score a bag on the boardwalk, and now we're looking for ravers," he remembers. "So we

Iron Butterfly's Erik Braunn sadly died of a heart attack in 2003, aged just 52.



pass by this record store and there's a sign in the window for a Battle Of The Bands. We go in to talk to the guy. I tell him we want in. He has a real snotty attitude and tells us it was last week, we were too late. And then he says: 'Hey, Rod Stewart is playing over in Atlanta, why don't you go there and play with him?'

"So we're sleeping in a tent, and I say: 'We're going to Atlanta to play with Rod Stewart.' We get to the place where he's playing: it seats 17,000 people. I start knocking on doors until I find this guy who I think is the promoter. I tell him: 'We're Bang from Philly. I'd like you to hear us play. If you like us, we'll play on the show, if not we'll go away.' So we set up, we do our set for the guy, and he loves us. He says: 'Yeah, okay, you can open up the show.' That night it was Rod Stewart & The Faces, Deep Purple, Southern Comfort, and us. We had like six inches at the front of the stage to set up."

After that fateful night, the band began opening for major bands like Steppenwolf and Ike & Tina Turner, and eventually got signed to Capitol records. They released four albums of hard, politically charged rock, but split in 1974, when heavy metal fell out of favour, and the label asked if they could write a song like Helen Reddy's feminist hit *I Am Woman*.

**"The song took on a life of its own. It just kept going and going. The engineer just kept the tape rolling."**

**— Lee Dorman on Iron Butterfly's *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida***

"We couldn't," Tony shrugs resignedly. "Twenty-five years later, we got back together and carried on."

The official history of heavy metal will probably continue to put Black Sabbath, Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin on page one, but there is a rich, secret history of the hard stuff out there, buried under stacks of old, crackling vinyl.

These are the forgotten ghosts of metal. Relics from the dark ages of rock'n'roll. Ancient astronauts floating soundlessly into the void. But bands like Bloodrock, JPT Scare Band, Leaf Hound and Bang remember. And so do a growing cult of fans who are rediscovering the missing links of metal one acid-fried memory at a time.

"We had a ton of fun, we made love to beautiful women, we travelled to the edge of the Cosmic Universe, and returned semi-intact," says JPT Scare Band's Jeff Litrell. "We experienced interesting times, made great music and recorded a lot of it. Terry, Paul and I are still alive, we are still best of friends and we can still play scary music together. A lot of cool cats that we met along the way didn't make it. Everything has turned out just fine, all things considered."

Iron Butterfly's Lee Dorman has similar feelings about the legacy of his band and its epic proto-metal signature song. "It a part of history, it'll never go away. One hundred years from now, someone will pull out *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*, play it too loud, and get thrown in jail."

"Man, I still get emails from people that say: 'I just wanted to tell you that you blew Black Sabbath off the stage that night in Columbia.' Tony D'Lorio remarks as we wind up the Bang story.

And did you?

"Oh, yeah, we definitely blew them off the stage. No doubt about it." ☘