

Jim Kirtz's REV-O-LECTIONS ALL THAT METAL IS... AND WAS

Aside from a couple notable exceptions, you would've thought we were still a British colony when it came to the state of heavy metal at the onset of the '80s. The '70s had done little to further the cause and if it weren't for the likes of Van Halen, Montrose and a few others, American metal would've been virtually nonexistent, (Aerosmith, Ted Nugent and Grand Funk Railroad weren't really metal, so they don't count). This would all be reversed a few years later with the rise of the LA pop-metal scene and the Bay Area thrash contingent, but for metal's first big renaissance, it was all about our tea-swilling friends across the pond.



UFO was one band from over there that every American stoner kid with a guitar and bell-bottoms wished he could join. These cats came armed with a passel of classic songs; timeless stuff you're still likely to hear on rock radio stations. "Too Hot To Handle," "Lights Out," "Cherry," "Love To Love," "Rock Bottom" and several others are still circulating and have worn

extremely well over the past 30 years or so. Formed in the late '60s by vocalist Phil Mogg, bassist Pete Way and drummer Andy Parker, the band started out playing hazy, prog-tinged space metal, releasing three moderately received albums. After losing guitar player Mick Bolton, UFO band hooked up with

teenage guitar prodigy Michael Schenker from the Scorpions, younger brother of that band's own Rudolph Schenker.

With the key lineup solidified, the band seemingly had it all: talent, personality, loads of finely crafted material and just enough debauchery to make it swing. Just like the rock gods who came before—Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and Black Sabbath—UFO had all the right components: the strong, commanding front man, the lunatic rock star on bass, the powerhouse drummer, and the secret weapon—the fiercely melodic Michael Schenker.

This lineup's first three albums have just been reissued through Caroline Records, while a new greatest-hits compilation has also hit the shelves (EMI). With *Phenomenon* (1974), the band's sound got an instant injection of energy courtesy of Schenker's powerful playing, but the overall execution is still a bit reserved. It's as if the band were still finding their feet, but there's definitely something about to kick in melodic hard-rock numbers "Too Young To Know" and "Doctor Doctor." The latter would go on to become a live favorite and get cranked up a thousand notches on the band's influential live album *Strangers in the Night*. The album's high point is "Rock Bottom," a riff-fest of the highest order, showcasing the band's heavier side, not to mention Schenker's ample fingers.

Force It (1975) found the band loosening up and kicking out the jams on numbers like "Let It Roll" and "Shoot Shoot." Mogg, Way and Schenker had found their collective voice and produced a state-of-the-art heavy rock record with slick production and attitude to burn. Schenker's solos on "Mother Mary" and "This Kid's" are further standouts. Semi-ballad "Out in the Street" is a sweeping epic—understated while teetering on the edge of coming unglued.

Due to the success of *Phenomenon* and *Force It*, UFO was now a top-tier English band, conquering Europe and Japan and making serious headway in these parts. *No Heavy Petting* was released in 1976. While not as effective as the prior offerings, it





benefits in spots from the added keyboards of new member Danny Peyronnel. Opening track “Natural Thing” is a driving number with a killer chorus, while “I’m A Loser” features one of Schenker’s most riveting solos ever committed to tape.

Each reissue comes remastered with expanded

artwork and a slew of bonus tracks. It’s nice to see these three unearthed gems getting their proper due. For the uninitiated, EMI has also just released *The Best of UFO (1974-1983)* boasting 19 remastered

tracks, including latter, less-obvious gems like “Young Blood” and “Chains Chains.” For added listening, pick up copies of the band’s masterpiece *Lights Out* (1977) and *Strangers In The Night* (1979)—one of the most potent live documents you’re likely to experience.

After said live album, Schenker would quit and form his own band (Michael Schenker Group, or “MSG”) and UFO would eventually splinter with Way leaving to form Waysted. While the band still put out a few decent offerings, the magic that

had carried them through the ’70s on into the NWOBHM (New Wave Of British Heavy Metal) movement of the early ’80s had all but dimmed. But the band’s prior accomplishments would continue to resonate with fans and fellow



musicians alike.

Speaking of the new wave, a few reissues from the era have recently hit the street, courtesy of Metal Mind Productions. Two bands from the period both had promising starts, but would soon find that nothing is guaranteed.

Diamond Head caused quite a stir when it released its first album *Lightning To The Nations* in 1981. The self-financed offering packaged in a plain-white sleeve was available through mail order and sent to members of the British press. In spite of its youthful bliss and relative inexperience the band possessed a big sound steeped in guitarist Brian Tatler's massive Sabbath-esque riffs and vocalist Sean Harris' smooth, soulful vocals. The emerging metal press compared the band to Led Zeppelin, and with powerhouse numbers like "Am I Evil," "Lightening To The Nations" and "Shoot Out The Lights" the band was truly onto something big. But, if only it were all that simple...

Bolstered by their newfound status in the emerging scene, the band quickly signed a deal with MCA and released



KING KOBRA

Diamond Head songs and praised the band in interviews.

1983's *Canterbury* saw Tatler and Harris dispense with the rhythm section of Duncan Scott and Colin Kimberly and go it alone. In an abrupt shift of style, *Canterbury* eschews

of the two major-label offerings, the band called it quits for nearly a decade before reforming briefly in the early '90s for the *Death and Progress* album.

Ironically, Diamond Head became far more renowned after its demise with people like Lars Ulrich and Dave Mustaine singing its praises and contributing to compilations and the comeback album. Legend has it that Mustaine tapped Harris to sing for Megadeth at one point, which

would've been interesting. Both of

the MCA-era albums have been meticulously reissued by Metal Mind, and are presented in plush digipacks with expanded artwork, bonus tracks, interviews and remastered sound.

Tank. The name sounds heavy enough, doesn't it? But, this stripped-down trio from South London was actually comprised of former punks, one of which, the gravel-throated vocalist and bassist Algy Ward, had been a member of The Damned

and The Saints. Digressing for a second, When punk imploded at the dawn of the '80s, some punk kids got into the experimental, art-school movement, some became pop stars and some like Tank and Warfare, grew their hair, stopped showering, bought Motörhead albums and



Power Of The Hunter

two accomplished, yet unfocused albums for the major label. *Borrowed Time* (1982) featured re-recorded versions of "Am I Evil" and "Lightning" which lack the spark of the originals. The balance of the album is a hodge-podge ranging from heavy epics ("To The Devil His Due") to commercial pop metal ("Call Me"). While the album still stands as a major force in the movement, momentum began to wane as the band found itself pressured to write hits while it was clearly more qualified in creating massive riffs. This would eventually be vindicated when Metallica and other early thrash bands covered

towering riffs and soaring vocals for a more organic-sounding melodic sound. While it still wasn't particularly commercially oriented, it was far from the proto-metal the band had cut its teeth on. Songs like "Makin' Music" and "Out Of Phase" are excellent, progressive-pop songs, but are too offbeat for mass consumption. After the commercial failures



formed metal bands. While not the greatest musicians nor the most commercially viable, the band's sound was gritty, but still somewhat melodic, making them more accessible than many of their NWOBHM peers.

A succession of albums appeared throughout the decade beginning with the band's best, 1982's cleverly named *Filth Hounds of Hades*. A solid but primitive metal affair, it features head-knockers like "Shellshock," "Heavy Artillery" and the inexplicable "(He Fell in Love with A) Stormtrooper." The more hard-rockish *Power of the Hunter* (also in '82) kept the momentum going featuring the noisy "Walking Barefoot Over Glass" and the humorous "Used Leather (Hanging Loose)." Algy and Co. would go on to release a few more records of varying quality before moving to the States and reforming to little notice. Then, in 2002 Tank reemerged with *Still At War*.

New box set *Filth Hounds Of Hades: Dogs Of War 1981-2002* (Metal Mind) is a treat for Tank completists. With eight CDs plus a DVD, it contains all of the band's albums, plus loads of live footage. Each album comes remastered with bonus tracks and an insert, and comes housed in Metal Mind's signature digipacks. The DVD is a bit sketchy in spots, but I imagine there's not a lot of source material out there. It's still interesting to see the band doing its thing without a hint of self-consciousness or pretension. The set also has a book full of notes and bits on this early metal band that eventually got lost in the shuffle.

Britain's most successful export from the NWOBHM scene aside from Def Leppard (yeah, they were part of it) is arguably Iron Maiden. We've been hearing lots about 'em the past couple years so there's no need to go on further here except to pay tribute to the long-overdue DVD release of the band's seminal *Live After Death* concert video (Universal). Up until now, this concert has only been available via shoddy old VHS copies, but now we can relive the two live shows from 1985 in all of their Eddified glory. Filmed in Beach on the *World Slavery* tour, it captures the band at its zenith. The *Slavery* stage is mammoth, so what you get is an excessive '80s metal production with all the bells and whistles. The only downsides are Dickinson's vocals in numbers like "Flight of Icarus" and "Aces High" as he clearly struggles to hit the notes he'd amazingly laid down on

tape. But beyond that, the music is brimming with energy and it's great to see the band at the absolute top of its game. This 2-disc set also features a documentary on the era with interviews from several Maiden players including the band's management and producer. There's also a featurette of the band letting loose in Texas, concert footage from 1985's Rock in Rio festival and lots more. For fans, this one's a keeper.

I can't wrap this up and let the Brits get all the glory, can I? As part of an extensive reissue campaign Caroline Records has been

releasing a slew of American-made '80s metal offerings from a few prime players (Exodus) and lesser knowns like Hurricane, Aletrazz and King Kobra, all once affiliated with Capitol Records back in the day. It goes to show you the lengths major labels would go to foster a healthy metal roster—that's how hot it was at the time. The aforementioned King Kobra was a particularly fascinating bunch.

The band was basically assembled around superstar drummer Carmine Appice (formerly of proto-metal thugs Cactus and Vanilla Fudge) when he was shopping demos of a nameless project featuring the vocals of blonde belter Mark Free during the mid '80s. After scoring a deal Appice set out to find three more bleach-blond musicians from the LA scene to round out the lineup (Appice had dark hair). So in essence, it's the hair that King Kobra is most famous for. But, there's actually one more thing that I'll get to in a little bit. Despite the emphasis on image, the band's debut *Ready To Strike* (1985) stands as a solid, red-blooded, American pop-metal offering, and still sounds decent some 20 years later. Although, that's not to say there aren't some corny moments, just check out some of the

videos on You Tube. As for the actual songs, it's pretty standard mid '80s pop-metal fair—think Ratt with a stronger singer. The two best tracks, the infectious "Hunger" and the bold "Piece Of The Rock" were loaned to the band by Canadian pop-metalists Kick Axe, who also worked with KK's producer Spencer Proffer—a key architect of many successful pop-metal records like Quiet Riot's massive *Metal Health*. Other standouts include "Shadow Rider," the shuffling "Attention" and the driving title track. The solid musicianship, great vocals and dual-harmony guitars elevate this album above most of its

competition and it was very crowded field at the time. In spite of its fancy packaging, King Kobra could deliver when it came to ballsy, flashy metal.

Next album *Thrill Of A Lifetime* is a completely watered-down, commercial AOR affair, lacking any of the swagger of the first album. Its only stake in the pop-metal arena was the limp title song to the *Top Gun* rip-off *Iron Eagle*. Other than that, the band would splinter and quietly disappear off the radar. These two reissues come packaged in mini-LP replica jackets that even include facsimiles of the original inner sleeves. Nice.

Oh yeah, before I forget, the other thing the band is probably best known for is singer Mark Free, who's now goes by "Marcie." Years after leaving the band, he became a she after undergoing extensive gender-transformation surgery. Maybe that explains the racy jumpsuit he wore in the "Hunger" video. Nevertheless, hat's off to Ms. Free for going with her gut. For reals.

Look out for other interesting reissues next issue—I've got a few things up my sleeve. For questions, comments or something you'd like to see, drop me a note at Retrohead77@yahoo.com. Cheers, JK. ☪

