

# Jim Kirtz's REV-O-LECTIONS

## ALL THAT METAL IS... AND WAS

It's funny how much perception plays into how we gauge our musical tastes. Rob Halford is the perfect case in point. As a kid, neither my friends nor I had any inkling he was gay. We were just too young to understand the whole leather-and-studs element in gay culture. Though we were based in the San Francisco Bay Area, it never even dawned on us. Looking back on those days, it's beyond me how we didn't see it, and I'd like to think that it wouldn't have made any difference. But it probably would've, especially in the eyes of several small-minded dirt-heads I knew. Halford was probably wise to wait as long as he did to officially come out. When he finally did during the later '90s, metal was largely in the dumps, but the alternative world had opened minds in many ways, and being gay *and* heavy was no longer a dichotomy. That's a funny contradiction in itself. On one hand, the alternative movement sounded the death-knell for many metal bands, heaping scorn and disdain on its casualties. But, it was that very same culture that probably paved the way for the Metal God to truly be himself. All the same, it makes no difference. Halford is in possession of one of metal's greatest voices, and the music he created during the heady days of the '80s metal boom is beyond compare.

Aside from his return back to Judas Priest and one helluva fine comeback record, Halford's launched his own label Metal God Entertainment, to re-market his solo catalog. While initially selling mp3s online, he's recently been promoting actual disc releases—the preferred choice. First up, Fight's *K5: War of Words Demos*. Fight was initially meant to be a solo venture while in between Judas Priest releases, but Halford decided to leave his longtime band mates to pursue it full force. With an obvious affinity for the new guard, stuff like Pantera and Prong, Halford quickly assembled a band of Americans and began working on numbers he'd been composing on Priest's *Painkiller* tour. What's strange to me is the exact reason why Halford left. *Painkiller* was a triumphant return to form for the band, who were previously chasing the



Def Leppard dream of global pop superstardom. That formula could never in a million years work for Birmingham's second-favorite sons, and it was obvious they'd come to their stylistic senses upon the lackluster showings of pop-metal albums



**ROB HALFORD**

*Turbo* and *Ram It Down*. *Painkiller* took the classic Priest sound and modernized it, making it faster, bolder and heavier, easily as good or better than the current crop of thrash/speed bands of the period. Although *Painkiller* was kick-ass, Halford still felt the need to wander and he did so on two decent albums with Fight.

Back to this new disc, let's start with the name...what the hell is "K5?" That's actually a code the band had for labeling its gear and master tapes while in the studio. Astutely sensing that passers-by would mess with their things had they been labeled accurately, Halford picked a label with no obvious meaning. *The War of Words Demos* contains versions the band put down during those early



sessions. While it's heavy as all hell the material is occasionally spotty. But Halford's vocals are manic, unrestrained and miraculously in key, and there's a sense of hunger in stuff like that comes across in spades the thrashing "Nailed To The Gun" and the sledgehammer wallop of "Into The Pit."



the proceedings that you're not likely to find with other bands of the day. His keen sense of melody harkens back to power-pop masters Cheap Trick at times, exceeding that of many of his contemporaries. Steve Blaze's tasteful licks further spice up tracks like "Inside Out" and "Vision In The Night." That's not to say there aren't some corny moments. There are a few lackluster screams, hokey keyboards and silly lyrics, but hey, it was the late '80s—the height of cock rock, so a little cliché won't do too much harm.

Second album *Love + War* (1989) adds a little grit to the formula with crunchier guitars and touch more swagger in the vocal department. Opening number "All's Fair In Love and War" is a bizarre, but brilliant number, adding a dark,

symphonic feel to the mix, all while keeping the pop-metal elements in place. Lyrically, there's more to "She Likes It On Top" than the title implies, and major hooks abound in the pseudo power ballad "Diana."

Lillian Axe would soon be dropped by MCA and score a new deal with IRS Records, releasing the rock-solid *Poetic Justice* and a

Besides the CD, there's a feature-length DVD of the same name with documentary footage and a live set. It's interesting to see Halford in this novel, post-Priest phase. There are also three Fight promo videos. The concert scenes are riveting, but unless you're a Halford completist, there's nothing earth shattering about the documentary. There's a limited-edition numbered 2-disc version that also features the first Fight album in pummeling, remastered sound.

Also, check out the *Metal God Essentials* compilation featuring several bits from the Metal God's solo canon—the 2-disc version of this also features a bonus DVD with other live bits. With a string of recent reissues and comps, Halford continues to keep himself out there in lieu of a new Priest offering. That's a very good thing.

Lillian Axe was one of many acts I never paid much attention to. The band's self-titled debut hit the streets in 1988 amidst a flurry of hard rock and heavy metal albums. It was a busy period that saw releases from all over the spectrum including Mötley Crüe, Whitesnake, Megadeth and Slayer, plus loads of lesser-knowns and also-rans. On the flashier end of the spectrum a slew of releases came forth from bands that image-wise, tried to emulate—to little success—the street-sleaze of GN'R, while playing pretty standard pop metal in the process. Think Bon Jovi with an attitude problem. Most of these bands seemed very similar, in style and in name—Roughhouse, Jailhouse, House of Lords, Roxx Gang, Southgang, Danger Danger, Tora Tora and many, uh, others. Aside from releasing a few well-received albums, Lillian Axe

got lost in the shuffle, and would disband a few years later. But it wouldn't end there. The band's first two albums in particular, have been the subject of bootleg copies and serious online auctions, lending the band an air of cult status, which I'm not sure they initially envisioned.

Now, those first two albums have been faithfully restored and reissued in plush, numbered digipacks by Metal Mind Productions.

Hailing from New Orleans, the band was formed by guitarist Steve Blaze in the early '80s with vocalist Ron Taylor, guitarist Jon Ster, bassist Rob Stratton and drummer Danny King. For some reason they didn't catch on during the first wave of pop-metal signings, in which they ultimately would've fit in better with. But, they eventually caught the attention of Ratt's management and scored a deal with MCA a few years later. Produced by Ratt guitarist Robbin Crosby, the self-titled debut is a surprisingly solid pop-metal offering. Opening with the single "Dream Of a Lifetime," the album is rife with big hooks, layered harmonies, shredding solos and slick production values. All that sounds typical enough of the era, but this album's a bit different: it's got personality. Taylor's presence is major; it's as if he's right there in the room with you, bringing a sense of authenticity to



couple more before succumbing to the grunge slaughter and disbanding. While this type of AOR-flavored, keyboard-drenched hard rock has never been one of my favorites, these two new reissues, provide new insight into the band and the style, and it isn't half bad. Steve Blaze has a new version of the band, and released an album in 2007. As of this point, he's the only original member. Pity, that.

Before we wrap this one up, there's one last item to attend to. I recently got a press release talking about the induction of Canadian arena rockers Triumph into Canada's version of the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame. While this is fairly meaningless to those of us residing south of our low-key neighbors, I found it to be as good time a time as any to revisit this recently reunited power trio. Triumph was another band that for the most part, eluded my radar. That's probably due to the fact that they had already been around for more than a decade before I even got into music. Plus, as a kid, they just weren't



**TRIUMPH**

heavy enough for me. I preferred Iron Maiden. Nonetheless, you can't go to a used record store and not see a few of their seminal albums in the cheap bins—they sold enough of 'em back in the day. And in looking back, many of the songs were actually pretty rockin'.

While not so much a metal outfit in the conventional sense, the band made a name for itself as an arena-rock force to be reckoned with, playing a commanding combination of melodic hard rock, Rush-style prog and proto-pop metal, all while putting on lavish pyrotechnic productions. Add to this the guitar histrionics of front man Rik Emmett, and it was a pretty unstoppable during the late '70s and early '80s. Albums *Just A Game*, *Allied Forces* and *Never Surrender* were all platinum sellers yielding pristine

melodic hard-rock anthems like "Lay It On The Line," "Magic Power" and "Never Surrender." The band's back catalog was remastered and reissued a couple years back on these shores, and has been recently given ace treatment in pristine Japanese cardboard-sleeve editions, replicating the original album artwork. For those looking for a bit of the oldschool to get into—these are the guys behind the guys, one of the preeminent power trios, albeit one with

a sensitive side. Not surprisingly, this band is still huge in parts of Europe where melodic hard rock never went outta style. The reformed band is one of the headliners at the upcoming



**RIK EMMETT**

Sweden Rock Festival, so its likely those in the metal world—outside of Canada—will be hearing more from these unsung pioneers. And, it's due time.

For questions, comments or something you'd like to see in future columns, drop me a line at [Retrohead77@yahoo.com](mailto:Retrohead77@yahoo.com). Cheers, JK. ☪