



## Def Thru Misadventure

Def Leppard are like the Lion Red of rock bands. Many consider them uncouth, unsophisticated, and void of any palatable quality. To others, well, it's the only music we play around here mate.

From humble beginnings in Sheffield, England, Def Leppard spent a large part of the 80s, and the early 90s, becoming one of the biggest rock phenomenons in the world. Two of their albums, 1987's *Hysteria* and 1992's *Adrenalize* can be found among the top 10 best-selling albums of all time, and Def Leppard fans must be considered among the rock world's most loyal. During their ascent, Def Leppard survived and surfed numerous musical trends and fads, while simultaneously cheating all manner of personal demons; in December 1984, drummer Rick Allen lost an arm in a car crash; also that year, frontman Joe Elliott lost his voice for a period of months; later a long-time Leppard roadie suffered a brain haemorrhage and died on stage; and in 1990 guitarist Steve Clark died after mixing alcohol and painkillers. Marry these with lesser incidents within the extended Leppard camp, including arrests for drug possession and armed robbery, and you'd be hard pressed to name a band who've celebrated or endured the momentous ups and downs of Def Leppard.

Late last year Def Leppard released *Vault*, a greatest hits compilation that documents their career from the 1981 album *High and Dry*, to 1993's *Retroactive* b-sides collection. Their eighth album, *Slang*, is scheduled for release in May. From his home in Dublin, Ireland, Joe Elliott looks back on the events of the past 15 years, and forward to the new millennium.

"I think the most astonishing thing is the fact that we're still doing it after 15 years, and that it doesn't even feel like 15 years — this is what I do for a living, so I don't expect it to go away tomorrow. There's an old programme called *Logan's Run*; on it, when you reached the age of 32 you were dead. I looked on rock 'n' roll like that, but the longer it exists, the less you have to focus on things like that. Aerosmith are 15 years older than we are, and the Stones are five, six, seven years older than them, we're babies in comparison. Rick Allen's just had his thirty-second birthday; he's been in the band 17 years. The fact that we're here and still doing it is probably what I think about most."

**Who or what got you interested in being in a band?**

"I got in a band 'cause I saw Marc Bolan on *Top Of The Pops* playing in front of people, and that's what I wanted to do. We get a lot of slagging — people like the Chili Peppers have a real go at us for being what we are, but they don't understand. They grew up in LA where they had rock 'n' roll radio 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I grew up in England where we had a Top

40 station and that was it. If we were lucky we got a decent pop group on *Top Of The Pops* like Slade or Bowie, T Rex or Mott the Hoople, which were like rock/pop. When you're 12 and your brain is a sponge, that's what soaks in. We didn't get *Paranoid*, or *Demons and Wizards* by Uriah Heep, or Led Zeppelin rammed down our throats on the radio because they didn't play it. The rock show in England was on two hours a week at 10 until midnight, when either you were out or you were in bed asleep. So, we grew up on pop/rock, and by the time you get in a band, you're mixing your Slades and your Bowies, and your Sweets and your T Rexes, with your Zeppelins and your UFOs, and your Thin Lizzy's and your Queens, and you get a Def Leppard out of it."

**Is there one Def Leppard song that blends all of those influences best?**

"Probably 'Pour Some Sugar on Me', because it's got everything. It's got the nonsensical lyrics, but they kinda make sense, it's sexy but it's not unplayable, it's got the vibe of a rap-meets-rock thing, it's got a nice slow groove to it. That's my 'Stairway to Heaven' for Def Leppard, or 'All the Young Dudes', or whatever. That one sums it all up for me, but it's grown into that. In 1987, when it came out, we all liked it, but we didn't like it any more than, say, 'Let's Get Rocked' in 1992; but it's lasted longer than 'Let's Get Rocked', which is five years younger. Certain songs get to a stage and they feel dated. 'Pour Some Sugar on Me' has never dated."

**You mentioned nonsensical lyrics. A major criticism of Def Leppard throughout your career is that your lyrics are almost always banal.**

"Mostly they have been, and I'll be the first to admit that. I was 12 when I heard 'Come on Feel the Noise', and I mean, what is 'a hub cap down the star halo'. Who cares? It sounds great and Marc Bolan sang it well, and I've taken that attitude when I've needed to. The only annoying thing is when we've done a 'Walls Came Tumbling Down', or 'Billy's Got a Gun', or 'Dogs of War', or even from the *Retroactive* album, 'From the Inside', which is about drug abuse from the drug's point of view. 'Desert Song', which is about Mick Ronson dying of cancer, whenever we've done anything serious, it's just gone over everybody's head like a fucking aeroplane. So, I'm not going to sit and justify my great lyrics, and I'm not going to justify stuff that's nonsensical. It's the nonsensical stuff that people pick up on because it has a common ground with common people, which is what we are."

**Is there a specific Def Leppard 'formula' used in your songwriting?**

"To a point there is. We always went for the big production and it was like, 'get to the chorus'. It's like watching a game of soccer, there might be a nice big build-up, but you just want the ball in the box and then in the back of the goal. We'd write a verse that got us to the bridge, and we'd write the bridge so it got us to the chorus, and the chorus was the thing we worked our asses off on, so people could go: 'Whoah! This is great.' If everything that had got you to the chorus was good to, then you had a wonderful song. It's not so much formula, it's just a really cool thing, it's what the Beatles did and it's what the Stones did."

**From the back catalogue, is there anything you can't listen to today?**

"I don't dislike anything we've done, except the first album, and I don't even *really* dislike that. When we made our first album we were 17-, 18-year-old kids, and we were drunk all the time. The only time that album sounds good to me is when I'm as drunk as I was when I made it. To justify anything we've ever done, I don't really need to, I think the amount of people who have bought it, or like it, or are even aware of it, is justification enough for me."

**You've always said you dislike making albums but like touring them. What album has been the most enjoyable to promote?**

"It changes. It would be dead easy to say the *Hysteria* period because that was the most successful, but in actual fact the tour I enjoyed the most was the *Adrenalize* tour, because we were playing songs that had by then become established rather than songs that had to be current. When we were doing songs like 'Armageddon', 'Sugar' and 'Love Bites', it was almost like Zeppelin doing 'Stairway To Heaven'. When a song gets into people's psyche, it makes you more focussed on making sure you did the songs justice when you played them live, so people can go home and think: 'Fuck, they were great!' But that last tour was the most enjoyable so far, that's basically the last constructive thing we did in the public eye."

**John Aizlewood wrote in Q magazine that it was almost as if 'Jackie Collins had scripted Def Leppard's career'. What do you make of that?**

"Well, I think we've had the equivalent amount of ups and downs of any band. Our ups have been higher than most, and our downs have been lower than most, and that's probably because they've just been focussed on more so than other people's because we're press worthy in that respect. We're not the only band that's lost a member to drink or drugs, or whatever. Jesus! I think the Grateful Dead lost three keyboard players. The Stones, nobody goes on about Brian Jones because they've been around a lot longer and there was other things to focus on. With us, people either want to focus in on Rick's accident, Steve's death, or the amount of records we've sold, not so much the music we make."

**Steve Clark appeared to be hell-bent on self destruction for a long time. Did you view his death as inevitable, or was it still a shock and a wake up call?**

"You know, it was and it wasn't. It made us realise that too much is too much, but I didn't stop drinking and neither did Sav [Rick Savage, bass] or Rick, because we didn't have the drink problem that Steve had — and Phil [Collen, guitar] was teetotal anyway. The reason Phil stopped drinking was because him and Steve would drink equal amounts, they used to be the terror twins, then Phil woke up one day and said: 'I'm going to kill myself,' but Steve didn't... and that's how people are different. It made us realise that if you do what Steve does, it's going to do you in eventually. I've seen other musicians the same as Steve, and I've wanted to take them to one side and say: 'Look, I know you think you're being very cool, but it killed my best friend,' but you can't make people do anything they don't want to do. With Steve, you couldn't say: 'You've had enough,' 'cause he'd turn around and say: 'I'm going to have one more and there's nothing you can do to stop me.' A lot of people put Steve's death down to a 'rock 'n' roll lifestyle', but I'll tell you this much, that 'rock 'n' roll lifestyle' kept Steve alive for a time 'cause it gave him a routine. He had to be on stage at a certain time, or he had to be up in the morning to catch a bus or a plane. It was when we were in the studio or trying to write, when you can't force anything to happen, when Steve would fall apart. Steve was an alcoholic before he joined this band, and he would have died three or four years earlier if he hadn't been in Def Leppard, the mundane lifestyle would have killed him quicker. At least he had excitement in his life, being in the band."

**In the months following Steve's death and Rick's car crash, did you ever feel like giving it away?**

"Not really. When you look at it from a logical point of view, in 1984 I got one phone call — 'Rick's lost his arm,'; in 1990 I got one phone call — 'Steve Clark died this morning.' In 17 years that didn't happen, two days out of 17 times 365 days that shit didn't happen. Everything else is like: 'Oh, the album went down today, it went from Number 1 to Number 4.' You're not going to go kill yourself over that. All the other negative things with this band pale into insignificance in comparison, and I think in the 17 years I've been doing this, for maybe 10 minutes I've thought: 'I don't want to do it any more.'"

**Is there anything you'd want to turn back the clock for and do differently?**

"Nothing really. If I'd have done it any differently it would have been not the same trip, and I've enjoyed the trip so far. The only things I would change are Rick's accident and Steve's death. The ups and downs, the fall outs with Pete Willis [original Def Leppard guitarist], the sacking of Jim Steinman [initial *Hysteria* producer], everything was character building as far as I'm concerned. I wouldn't change a thing because we had success out of what we did, but we didn't really do anything wrong, we just went our own route."

**When you played in New Zealand in July 1992, most of the audience were in their very early teens. Do you see a new generation of fans every year?**

"Was that the show in the tent? Yeah, that was a great one. On this *Vault* trip, we've been to a lot of places we'd never travelled to before, and in a lot of those places, especially South East Asia, the audience that we were getting was the mirror image of the audience we got in America in 1983, and they were young and they were into the music. The thing is, with territories like South East Asia which are relatively new to rock 'n' roll, they don't have the word 'credibility' in their vocabulary, so it's not a problem. The audience are just into the music we're making and that was cool."

**You recorded the new album in Spain. How did the sessions compare to those for *Hysteria* and *Adrenalize*?**

"Making the new album has been a labour of love like every album you make, but it has been the most exciting recording period we've had. Making the *Slang* album was painful because you're working your nuts off to try and make something good, but at least all the pain and energy was focussed on making music, not so much whether somebody was going to die, or whether somebody has lost their arm and whether they're going to recover from it. Recording *Adrenalize* was bloody horrible, a lot of it wasn't focussed on the music. Steve was dying on us, and we knew it, and we spent more energy trying to keep the guy alive and focussed on the record, than we were actually focussed on the record ourselves."

**By now it seems inevitable that Def Leppard recording sessions will involve some major traumatic experience.**

"It's no thrill recording. To me making an album is like having a shave, it's something you have to do to go out and look good. If I never had to make another album again I wouldn't, but it's exciting playing the new stuff live, so there's no way round it. We really wanted to make it a really relaxed situation, which is why in Marbella we recorded in a house not in a studio. We took all our own equipment down and threw all the furniture out. We picked a big old villa up on a hill and put Rick's drums in the dining room. It was a very cool experience. Every time we do an album we really work at it, we don't think that because we sold so many records last time it doesn't matter what we do now — that theory doesn't work. REO Speedwagon and Billy Idol, they'll tell you that — their careers went downhill when their records stopped being good."

**Have you severed all ties with Mutt Lange [longtime Def Lep producer]?**

"Phil talks to him about once a week and has played him stuff down the phone, the same way I play my mates stuff down the phone. Mutt's doing Michael Bolton and Bryan Adams at the moment, and we wanted to do this one on our own anyway. We wanted to make a different kind of record than the one that Mutt would've been pushing us to make. This record is very different: the fact that we recorded it in a house not in a studio, the fact that Rick's playing acoustic drums again, and that allows everybody to go back to using Marshalls, and Les Pauls, and wah wah pedals. We're not tied down to technology this time, and that makes songwriting evolve in a different way. *Slang* is a lot more raw, a lot more honest. It kind of sounds like a Def Leppard record played by Van Halen, or U2, or Led Zeppelin. It's got the harmonies, it's got the melodies, it's just the band growing up. This is the next stage of what we want to do."

JOHN RUSSELL