

DEF LEPPARD

Joe Elliot Interview

In July Def Leppard play their first ever New Zealand concert. Vocalist Joe Elliot recently spoke to *RipItUp* from a Melbourne hotel — speaking frankly about the tragic death of guitarist Steve Clark, their new album *Adrenalize*, the significance of Slade, life as Britain's biggest rock export and the ideal new guitarist.

Joe is his usual affable self and very pleased to be bearing the good news that the band will soon play their first ever New Zealand concert.

So the questions begin:

In the last few years Def Leppard seems to have had more than its share of bad luck. Have you ever wanted to walk away and start again?

Not really. I think things happen to you no matter what you do in life.

There comes a point where everything isn't sweetness and light all the time. We've been recording for 12 years and we've had two massive tragedies — most bands don't even get to be around 12 years. Much more good has happened to Def Leppard than bad, but when it's been bad, it's been written about because we're a more newsworthy item when your guitarist dies or your drummer loses an arm in a car crash. It's happened to other bands, the Rolling Stones had a guitarist die and many bands have suffered similar tragedies. I don't think it ever encourages you to quit. We enjoy what we're doing too much to knock it on the head right now.

Did Steve Clark's death come as a shock to you?

Yes and no. Obviously the initial phone call was a shock, but when you sit down and analyse the situation, knowing what he was like, I can't say I was too surprised.

That possibility of misfortune did always exist?

Absolutely, Steve was an alcoholic and had been for about five or six years before he died. There was very little we could do about it. We were on the fringes of it and we were witnessing it but there was nothing we could do. It was really sad.

Yet it did not inhibit you as a touring act?

When we had a routine to stick to Steve was fine. When he had to get up at a certain time or be somewhere for soundcheck and then for a gig at nine o'clock, he would be able to avoid alcohol. But it was when we were in a studio situation trying to write songs where you're sitting around a lot, on flexi-time as it were, you can't just say we'll write one at 11 and another at two. There's a lot of free time and he would drink when he had nothing to do, consequently it effected his playing, and when it

effected his playing he was aware of it, so to cheer himself up he'd go out and have a drink. It's a big vicious circle, that he got himself into.

Did Phil Collen choose to duplicate Steve's demo parts?

All we had was guide guitars of Steve on six songs we wrote with him. It was quite easy physically for Phil to play both parts, the hardest thing to deal with was knowing that his best mate was dead, and he wished Steve was there doing it.

I read that you were seeking an on-tour guitarist, not a full-time replacement.

That's absolutely not correct. We want a full-time member not an us and him situation — the hired hand on a wage. We've always been a band and you can't do that if there's four of us and then him. I fly back to London today and we have a few people on a short list that we think we'd enjoy playing with. We have to make a decision, not a rash one. We've played with most of these people as far back as January.

Did I read that the new guitarist has to be an Englishman?

That's right, yeah. Well, British.

Could be Irish or Scottish?

Yeah, or Welsh. We've been a British band all the time and we would like to retain that. We'd be uncomfortable saying we were a British band if we had an American guitarist player. We're limiting our options, because there are some wonderful American or even Australian or New Zealand guitarists, probably.

We want to retain the British vibe the band's got, that is a prime concern, as is the fact that he's a nice guy. If he can play the guitar a bit, it helps. We don't want some egomaniac, axe-wielding bastard that can play at 800 miles an hour. We just want somebody that can fit in, sing a little bit, play a little bit, be one of the boys.

Are you uptight about touring with a different line-up?

Not really, if anything quite the opposite. It's 14 months since Steve died, we're pretty much over it now. When you have to get on with your life, all it's gonna be is Def Leppard Mark III. This was Mark II that's just finished and I'm very much looking forward to the tour. We haven't played live since 1988 and it's about time we got out there and did it again.

Last time I spoke to you, you

were about to fly to Toronto to check out the old boys of British rock, the Rolling Stones. How were they?

I thought it was absolutely unbelievable. They had the best stage set I've ever seen — 84 feet wide and 180 feet high. It was over-the-top like *Star Wars*. They played 27 songs and if I had been asked to put their set together they played 23 of the songs I would have picked. I thought they were great. It's very encouraging for us, the Rolling Stones are about 15 or 20 years older than we are, and they're still good.

Britain's produced some of the biggest bands in the world. Why in the last five years hasn't Britain produced one significant rock band while America is turning them out, one a month?

England doesn't churn that many out because the outlets for rock music are limited. You have to be a real dedicated guy to try and get any airplay or credibility through touring. In America it's easier because there's dime a dozen nightclubs where a band's always playing. In England there's less and less venues to play and there's only one national station and it plays Top 40, except for five hours a week of hard rock specialist programmes. In America there's a station in every city that plays rock all day, every day, 365 days a year and that just breeds rock bands. Whereas in England Top 40 formats breed more Top 40 type solo artists and pop stuff.

There's only a few of us who say "stuff all that nonsense, where's the guitars gone?" We're like that because I remember what it was like back in the 70s when I was 10 or 12 and on Top 40 radio between Donny Osmond and David Cassidy you had Slade doing 'Come On Feel the Noise'. Today's Osmond and Cassidy would be Jason and George Michael, but today's Slade would unfortunately be the Pet Shop Boys or something like that, until we put a single out every few years and we're Slade for a week.

There's not a rock band a month coming out of England because although there's a lot of up and coming bands, they aren't getting any airplay.

The most exciting rock band I've heard out of England is Kiss of the Gypsy, who are very Bad Company blues-based, so chances are they're not really going to have much commercial success.

You can't ignore the fact that there's 260 million Americans and 50 million British, so consequently, per capita, it's a lot easier for an American band to exist.



You've had massive success in the USA and toured there extensively, do you still feel you retain an English quality to your music?

More so now than ever before. On this album we've blatantly gone back to the British glam rock era. We can't ignore the fact that this has been a major influence on our songwriting. It's not just Led Zeppelin, Queen, Deep Purple and Hendrix. Those bands we did listen to and still do, but there was always the Glam Rock / Pop thing which gave us our commercial kind of "pop sensibility," I guess you'd call it. Bands like Slade, T-Rex, Sweet, Mott the Hoople, early Bowie, we all used to listen to them and buy their records as well as the rock stuff. We're a little less in-bred than most rock bands around.

A lot of the bands on their way up or doing very well, are fans who just listened to hard rock and sound like a poor imitation of the generation before them. Whereas with us it's more a mixture, we take in any form of influence from Kate Bush to Mott the Hoople. I think Chin and Chapman were the great songwriters of the 70s. Pop music had guitars in the 70s, if it came out now we'd all be calling it hard rock.

Prior to recording *Adrenalize* you said you seeking a less sophisticated production. Did you

change your mind as the album appears to echo Mutt Lange's sophisticated style.

The sounds are big, but I think if you listen to the album it's a lot more simplistic in its approach than the last album — in terms of song structure, arrangement, layering of instruments etc. What we wanted to do was make an album that was a bit more straight forward, more uptempo, guitars cranked up a bit more, less emphasis on polished vocals but we wanted to retain the size of the sound, because we like the fact that our albums sound big, but production wise it is a lot more simplistic. I understand what you're saying as regards to sound wise, it may not be a million miles away from *Hysteria*, but I think its energy is a lot more immediate than the last album. From day one of recording the approach was that it was to be more raunchy than the last album, but we wanted the sound and the energy to be just as big.

In the bio, Rick Savage uses the phrase "stuck with it," as though Def Leppard's sound is defined and you have to keep to it?

I think he was joking — he means that in a positive way. We've created a monster that we actually like very much. We know exactly how to get those big sounds. It's not the same for every band but for us bigger is better,

we like the fact that the album sounds like an arena rather than a club, in a nutshell, that's our philosophy.

Do you anticipate a complete break with Mutt Lange, your songwriting collaborator and former producer?

No, he's part of the team. It's not done out of necessity, we actually like working with the guy. What a lot of bands refuse to accept is a neutral ear. We all write a lot and he's always great at picking out which are the best bits to use.

It's not just the work aspect, when we have a dinner break it's always a good laugh or if soccer comes on the TV, everything stops and we sit there watching football.

A complete break from him is always possible but we've always learnt from him, we're constantly learning when we work with him, it's good for us — it's an education really.

As the conversation degenerates into small talk, Joe Elliot is very down to earth as to why he still does interviews, while many big-selling artists ignore music magazines.

It's a very important thing. It's got to be done, otherwise people don't know what the fuck's going on. MURRAY CAMMICK

Thanks for a great year
all the best
Brian

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THANKS # CHOICE, HARRY

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