



Judas Priest: Bassist Ian Hill, guitarist K.K. Downing, guitarist Glenn Tipton, vocalist Rob Halford, and drummer Dave Holland (from left), 1984

JUDAS PRIEST

THE INNOVATIVE AND ENDURING BRITISH GROUP IS THE MOST “METAL” HEAVY-METAL BAND IN ROCK HISTORY.

BY LAINA DAWES

Judas Priest are thriving — with nearly fifty years under their belt, fifty million albums sold, including eighteen studio albums, seven live albums, ten compilations, and several decades of international touring. The induction of the British band into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame celebrates its longevity as well as its contributions in making the complex, sometimes controversial, multidimensional, often maligned heavy-metal genre into a vibrant and innovative global phenomenon.

As we celebrate this honor, a look back at the 1992 documentary *Dream Deceivers* is in order. It centered on the 1990 court case surrounding the suicide death of a teenager and a related suicide pact. The band and its principal songwriters, vocalist Rob Halford and guitarists Glenn Tipton and Ken “K.K.” Downing, were accused of putting subliminal messages into the single “Better by You, Better Than Me” on the album *Stained Class* (1978). Judas Priest were eventually absolved of any responsibility for Robert Belknap’s suicide and the permanent disfigurement of James Vance, who survived their mutual suicide pact (but eventually died of an overdose). *Dream Deceivers* includes interviews with Judas Priest band members who voice empathy for the reasons behind the tragedy that unfolded in a Nevada community park. Because of its working-class background, the band understood the alienation that both Belknap and

Vance felt. Instead of encouraging the violence they were accused of, Judas Priest had already cultivated a loyal community of like-minded male and female metalheads — who chose the music as a way not just to acknowledge their own youthful alienation but to reach others who also found solace in heavy metal.

“I think that’s why there are so many good bands from Birmingham, why heavy metal came from the Midlands,” Halford told *Creem* magazine in 1986. “If you live in a council house on a bleak estate — where I’m from — and you look out of the window every morning, you think, ‘God, there must be something better than this!’ And you just take whatever God-given talents and abilities you’ve got, and you use them to get out.”

It was in the West Midlands where Judas Priest were born. In 1973, Sue Halford, Rob’s younger sister, started dating bassist Ian Hill, who was in a band called Judas Priest. The name had been taken from the group that then-singer Al Atkins had previously fronted, inspired by Bob Dylan’s “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest” (on 1967’s *John Wesley Harding*). Atkins, then-drummer John Ellis, Downing, and Hill had kept the name and obtained a recording contract, only to have it fall through. When Atkins left the band, Sue suggested that her brother, an erstwhile frontman, jam with the group. The next year, Rob Halford and Downing, wishing for a “twin guitar attack,” recruited Glenn Tipton, veteran of a Birmingham



THIS PAGE: Downing, Halford, Tipton, drummer Les Binks, and Hill (from left), 1979. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP: Live, 1979; Halford with the motorcycle he'd drive onstage, 1981.

hard-rock trio. “I remember really seeing the benefits of having two guitars playing a tight heavy riff in stereo,” writes Downing in his autobiography, *Heavy Duty: Days and Nights in Judas Priest*. Following more personnel changes, drummer Les Binks would join in 1977.

The band’s debut album, *Rocka Rolla*, was hastily issued in 1974. In Halford’s memoir, *Confess*, he admits that everything about its release – except for the music itself – was a disappointment. He didn’t like the album title, the cover (“a spoof of the Coca-Cola logo on a bottle top. It looked like shit, and not at all heavy metal”), or the production, which was the worst slight of all. He thought it sounded weak, diluted, and even tepid.

Despite Halford’s misgivings, *Rocka Rolla* set the musical standard for future heavy-metal bands, specifically those within the New Wave of British Heavy Metal category. Halford’s four-octave range and vibrato, which could bring you to tears, is clean, crisp, and shocking in its dexterity. The first album to showcase the interplay between Hill, Tipton, and Downing provides delicate interludes that, while not sonically heavy, offer listeners a glimpse of the symmetry of music and raw emotion that have attracted legions of dedicated fans.

It’s surprisingly funky, too. In the 1960s, African American blues musicians regularly stopped in Bir-

mingham to play small venues, giving locals a taste of the music that would eventually serve as a foundation to many of Birmingham’s rock and heavy-metal artists. While Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin first come to mind when thinking about the musical elements of Delta blues within their compositions, *Rocka Rolla* also embodies soul-infected guitar stylings and pulsating bass tones. As Downing is a die-hard Jimi Hendrix fan, this makes perfect sense; he channels Hendrix’s raw “electric blues” style in his leads, making the album apt for its time.

The early albums vary in terms of sonic heaviness. “Delivering the Goods,” the first track on *Killing Machine* (1978), employs a smooth, sexy groove that overrides sharp razor-blade riffs. The simply gorgeous “Epitaph” off *Sad Wings of Destiny* (1976) displays Halford’s Queen fandom (via a Bernie Taupin/Elton John-esque song structure) with its sweeping harmonies, prominent piano with emphasized chords, and a beautiful group chorus.

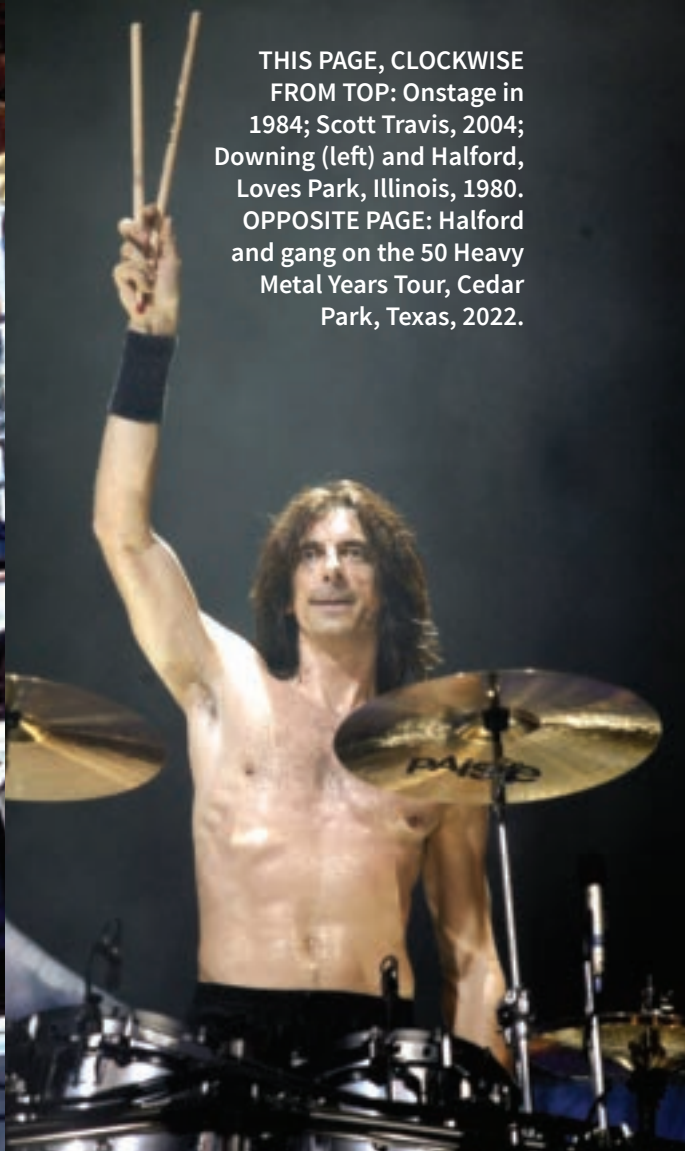
After Downing and Halford convinced their bandmates that a more lean and mean aesthetic would match the aggressive music, the band introduced a new look, veering from its glam-era flared jeans, flowy blouses, and floppy hats to leather shirts, pants, and jackets. The fascination with Halford’s leather-studded biker gear

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THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Onstage in 1984; Scott Travis, 2004; Downing (left) and Halford, Loves Park, Illinois, 1980. OPPOSITE PAGE: Halford and gang on the 50 Heavy Metal Years Tour, Cedar Park, Texas, 2022.



(including the Harley motorcycle he drives onstage during concerts) invoked hyper-masculine power, cementing the already established branding of Judas Priest as the most “metal” heavy-metal band to ever exist.

In 1979, Dave Holland joined the band to replace Les Binks on drums, bringing in a more rhythmically aggressive bottom-end sound, which correlated with the band’s general transition to even heavier sonics. He stayed with Judas Priest until the end of the 1980s, which proved to be their most commercially successful decade. Subsequent albums released during those years benefited from MTV’s signature hard rock and heavy-metal programming: *Screaming for Vengeance* (1982), *Defenders of the Faith* (1984), *Turbo* (1986), and *Ram It Down* (1988) made an immediate impact in North America.

When Holland left the band in 1989, he was replaced by Scott Travis, who would also work with Halford on his solo recordings. With Travis’s blast beat pummeling, the band gained an even harder, leaner, stripped-down sound on *Painkiller* (1990), reflective of the heavy-metal and grunge trends of the nineties. The presence of this new and younger drummer symbolized the first of many changes, including the band’s first conceptual album, the

epic *Nostradamus* (2008), and recent recordings that sound even heavier than younger metal bands.

The year 1998 was a turning point for Halford: He made it public that he was a proud gay man. During an MTV interview to promote his solo album, *Two*, he spontaneously brought up his sexuality. In reaction, heavy-metal fans did anything but reject him: They celebrated Halford’s announcement, confirming that his sexual preference would never be a deterrent to their passion for him and the band.

Judas Priest’s induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame is not just an overdue recognition for the legendary heavy-metal band. It confirms that society’s underdogs will always prevail. Outside of their impressive discography, innovative virtuosity, and refusal to ever become musically stagnant, Judas Priest always have been dedicated to a legion of metalheads like myself – a sad Black adopted kid who found enough aggression and power in their music to escape my own tumultuous childhood. They have cultivated a community for sensitive, inquisitive dreamers who, just like their friends and family in the West Midlands, are searching for something more than the world’s willing to offer. For that, I owe them my life.

All hail to the Metal Gods.