


Duff McKagan, Axl Rose, Izzy Stradlin,
Steven Adler, and Slash (clockwise from
top left), 1987





GUNS N' ROSES

D A V I D F R I C K E

THE BAND LEFT A DEEP, OUTRAGEOUS MARK ON ROCK & ROLL LEGEND

On June 8, 1985, two days after they made their official live debut at the bottom of a bill at the Troubadour in Los Angeles, a group of hard-rock wildcats calling themselves Guns N' Roses hit the road for the first time. Guitarists Saul "Slash" Hudson and Jeffrey Isbell (a.k.a. Izzy Stradlin), bassist Michael "Duff" McKagan, drummer Steven Adler, and singer W. Axl Rose and two roadie friends crammed into a Buick LeSabre, towing a trailer full of instruments and amps, and headed for a gig in McKagan's hometown of Seattle.

It was a rough baptism. The Buick soon broke down—outside Bakersfield—but the Gunners kept moving. It took them four days to hitch north with their guitars but they made it in time for the show, playing on borrowed gear for a crowd of twelve. Then the club owner stiffed them for the \$200 guarantee. Rose and McKagan tried to burn down the club in return, throw-

ing matches into a garbage can—to no effect.

As the band cooled its heels under the sun, stranded along the way in Sacramento, it hit McKagan like a sweet rocket: "These are my fucking boys—they're willing to fight through anything," the bassist wrote in his 2011 memoir, *It's So Easy (and Other Lies)*. "This trip had set a benchmark for what we were capable of, what we could do and would put ourselves through to achieve our goals." They had been together less than two weeks. But that day, McKagan claimed, "the band became a brotherhood."

It was Guns N' Roses' first giant step on their way to induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The classic five would achieve massive and enduring success, jumping overnight from club dates to packed arenas and stadium spectacles, and ultimately selling more than 28 million copies worldwide of their full-length bow, the 1987 prophetically titled *Appetite for Destruction*. It is still the best-

selling U.S. debut album of all time, and reason enough for G N' R to be in the Hall: a wall-to-wall, outlaw-rock masterpiece of lethal challenge ("Welcome to the Jungle"), seething paranoia ("Out Ta Get Me"), drug-life hell ("Mr. Brownstone"), and titanic-riff romance (the Number One hit "Sweet Child o' Mine").

Guns N' Roses also left a deep, outrageous mark on rock & roll legend, with train-wreck behavior and nonstop warring with the outside world that rivaled even their idols in guitar action and trouble lore: the Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, and the Sex Pistols. The daily dramas at the height of the band's commercial and confrontational power, in the late eighties and early nineties, included addiction, alcoholism, lawsuits, and chronically late shows that, on occasion, descended into full-scale riots. There was constant feuding with the record label, the rock press, and other bands, compounded by the hair-trigger tensions within G N' R itself.

The lineup that bonded on that Seattle adventure peaked on *Appetite*, then cracked in 1990. Adler was fired, and a new expanded band—with drummer Matt Sorum (formerly of the Cult) and keyboard player Dizzy Reed, both deservedly inducted tonight as well—made the

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1991 tour de force *Use Your Illusion I and II*. It was thirty tracks spread across two simultaneous releases, the audacious equivalent of a jam-packed, four-LP set. The albums debuted at Numbers Two and One respectively in *Billboard*, but it was a volatile resurrection. Stradlin left in late 1991. *The Spaghetti Incident?*, a 1993 Christmas cracker of spunky covers, went platinum, but was made by a band in deepening crisis. It would be the last studio album under the Guns N' Roses name for the next fifteen years.

It was as if Guns N' Roses understood and accepted the high price of extreme rock life from the start. "Our attitude epitomizes what rock & roll is all about—at least what I think it's all about, which is all that matters," Slash declared, with cocky flair, in the group's first *Rolling Stone* cover story in 1988. "We fuckin' bleed and sweat for it, you know? We do a lot of things where other bands will be, like, 'Get the stunt guys to do it.'"

Onstage one night in 1991, Rose put it another way. "What we are doing is something that is *dying* in America," he told a packed, manic audience in Dallas. "Guns N' Roses is just a prime fucking example of freedom of expression."

All L.A. émigrés, barely into their twenties, Rose, Izzy, Duff, Slash, and Adler were, in the summer of 1985, a weird mix of old friends and recent allies. They were bonded by reckless mutual tastes in drugs and drinking, and hardened by stone-broke years of haunting the Sunset Strip in previous fruitless combos: L.A. Guns, Hollywood Rose, Black Sheep, Road Crew. Born in London, Slash had a genuine rock & roll pedigree—his African-American mother was a clothing designer who had worked for David Bowie; his British father was an artist who created the cover art for Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*. And Rose and Izzy had been fellow teenage tearaways back in Lafayette, Indiana.

Raised as William Bailey (his stepfather's surname) in a severe Pentecostal household, Rose was 17 when he discovered the name of his biological father. He combined

it with that of one of his Indiana bands to come up with Axl Rose. He later boasted that he had been arrested "over twenty times," and spent three months in jail, before arriving in L.A. in late 1982. "David Lee Roth said something about how every time you get on stage, you're dancing someone into the dirt that didn't want you to get up there, that tried to stop you in some way or another," Rose said, looking back in vengeance, in 1988. (In a subsequent explosive *Rolling Stone* interview in 1992, he revealed a history of childhood traumas, including sexual abuse.)

By the time of their Troubadour debut, Rose and his band mates had much experience in the adolescent and rock & roll battle. And they were ready to win, arrogantly firm in their belief that the music needed *them*; needed their lust for transgression and absolute hatred for authority. "Rock & roll in general has just sucked a big fucking dick since the [Sex] Pistols," Stradlin said bluntly in 1988. His band admired and desired the party, propulsion, and true-rebel yell of the Stones, the New York Dolls, and the Clash. On half of its first release, the 1986 EP, *Live !*@ Like a Suicide*, the band acknowledged its influences, covering Aerosmith as well as the hell-raising Australian band Rose Tattoo. Rose once claimed he'd watched the Rolling Stones' 1969-tour-mayhem documentary, *Gimme Shelter*; "about a hundred times."

Guns N' Roses were also determined to be even bigger and better than their heroes. Slash and Izzy conjured up a seventies-era Stones guitar racket lathered in Black



Sabbath fuzz and Johnny Thunders' battered-blues decadence. McKagan and Adler combined R&B swagger and hardcore punk zoom in their buoyant rhythmic grip, while Rose was an unprecedented force of vocal nature: a rusted righteous howler with police-siren sustain and operatic range, who could break into bleak poignance with startling effect. He was glamorous, erotic, moving, and feral—Freddie Mercury, Steven Tyler, Elton John, and Johnny Rotten, often in the same song.

"The chemistry was immediate, thunderous, and soulful," McKagan wrote in his book of the first rehearsals. They shared instant empathy as songwriters, too. It was at those initial practices that the band came up with *Appetite's* "Paradise City," a burly ironic anthem about fishing glory from the gutter, embodying the squalor and spine of L.A. rock-rat living.

"They were like a three-headed monster—part [New York] Dolls, part Stooges, part Aerosmith—and the music was about total impulse," recalled Stone Temple Pilots singer Scott Weiland. Weiland, who worked with Duff, Slash, and Sorum in the post-G N' R band Velvet Revolver, was just getting STP off the ground in Southern California as *Appetite* was blowing up American rock radio. The songs and sounds on that album, Weiland raved, "were all about 'I'm gonna take what I want, use it for fuel to get where I want to go and fuck anybody who gets in my way.'"

Adler confirmed that. As he told *Rolling Stone* years later, on the occasion of *Appetite's* twentieth anniversary:



OPPOSITE PAGE At the Troubadour, 1985. **THIS PAGE** On the Use Your Illusion Tour, Mexico City, 1992; McKagan, Slash, Matt Sorum, Rose, Stradlin, and Dizzy Reed.

"Me, Axl, and Slash, we knew what we wanted since we were 11, 12 years old. We went balls out for it, and there was nothing that was going to stand in our way."

It was an erratic unity. The orgasmic sound effects in "Rocket Queen," the roaring song of bawdy hope at the end of *Appetite*, were bona fide: Rose having sex in the studio with Adler's then-girlfriend. And in October 1989, when the band opened four L.A. stadium shows for the Rolling Stones, Rose announced to the crowd on the first night that those gigs would be G N' R's last if particular members didn't stop "dancing with Mr. Brownstone," referring

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to the junkie-grind song on *Appetite*.

The group didn't break up. But the turmoil continued. A song was enough to start a ruckus. "One in a Million," one of four new acoustic tracks on the 1988 release, *G N' R Lies*, got Rose in hot water for its charged reference to blacks and gays. He shot back at the press, citing editors and magazines by name, in "Get in the Ring" on *Illusion II*.

The *Illusion* albums, which sold a combined fourteen million copies in America, were epic bravado, running a mad gamut—just on *I*—from the opening grenade "Right Next Door to Hell" to Rose's last, impossibly held vocal note in the ballad "Don't Cry," to the majestic romance of "November Rain" (with its great, closing Slash solo), to a near-death mini-opera "Coma." Over on *II*, there was a country-thunder cover of Bob Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," the symphonic-metal protest of "Civil War," and even a second, alternate version of "Don't Cry." In fact, there was so much new music that Stradlin couldn't keep track of it all. After the guitarist left the group, he claimed "there was one song on the record that I didn't even know was on it until it came out"—*II*'s closing hymn "My World," written and sung by Rose.

"Imagine *Exile on Main Street*'s epic grunge, the shotgun eclecticism of the Beatles' *White Album*, the lunatic pagan sport of Alice Cooper's *Love It to Death* and *Killer* albums," I wrote in my original *Rolling Stone* review of *Illusion I*, "all whipped together with the junkyard grace of *Rocks-era Aerosmith*." Rose characterized that drive and nerve his own way, quoting Paul McCartney in the *Illusion I* cover of



The G N' R frontline, 1985

Wings' "Live and Let Die": "When ya got a job to do, ya got to do it well/You gotta give the other fella hell!"

He kept doing just that on *Chinese Democracy*. Started as the rest of the original band fell away (Slash in 1996, Duff a year later), the fourth G N' R album would be Rose's blazing obsession—thirteen years of writing, recording, and experimentation—until its release in November 2008. It is a classic Guns N' Roses record in many ways, including Rose's lack of apology. "I bet you think I'm doin' this all for my health," he cracks, through the hard rain of guitars in one song, "I.R.S." In fact, the Rose-led G N' R, which



has been touring over the past decade, is currently getting some of the best live reviews of the group's entire career. Aside from Rose, Reed is now the longest serving member of Guns N' Roses.

Slash and Adler have, like Duff, published autobiographies detailing their high times, addictions, and resurrections. Slash's self-titled book, published in 2007, went Top Ten on the *New York Times* hardcover nonfiction chart. Slash and Duff lead their own solo projects. The latter also went back to school, studying business and economics at Seattle University. Duff is now a sought-after financial advisor,

the cofounder of a wealth-management fund for musicians.

There have been reunions. Stradlin joined Rose on a 2006 European tour and at three G N' R shows last December. McKagan was a surprise guest at a 2010 G N' R show in London, after he and Rose ran into each other at a hotel earlier that day. In its own mercurial way, that brotherhood forged on the way to Seattle back in 1985 has survived. And whatever happens tonight, with whoever shows up to speak and play, be assured of this: There will be a party. There will be propulsion. And there's a good chance of trouble.

In other words, it will be Guns N' Roses, all the way.