

Black Sabbath



By Deborah Frost



Black Sabbath never intended to appeal to, never mind be understood by, rock critics. Nor were they designed for screaming teens, swooning debs, your mom, industry suits, or anyone else who eventually embraced prior demonstrations of peculiarly British loudness as rendered by the Stones, say, or Zeppelin. There was nothing remotely cute or cuddly about Black Sabbath (Ozzy's recent incarnation notwithstanding). Black Sabbath simply oozed upon us, unfeigned by any pretense of art, peace, love, understanding, or mushroom embroidery, and immediately defined heavy metal with no less certainty, fortitude, or foofaraw than that betwixt the chicken and the egg.

They pulled it off without the sheer virtuosity of predecessors like Cream and Led Zeppelin or sheer utilitarianism of peers Deep Purple, Uriah Heep, Grand Funk, and Blue Cheer. And yet Black Sabbath's legacy is more alive, direct, and undistilled in both the most important (Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, Soundgarden, Pixies, Audioslave, Korn) and most mundane (any given night, any legit rock dive anywhere in the world) of succeeding generations than that of all of the above combined. Grunge, goth, metal in all its myriad modern permutations – no matter if it has made its own history, is currently climbing

the charts, or is percolating just beneath the radar – not a glob of it could or would exist if Black Sabbath had not. Black Sabbath was just the first band to provide a viable alternative for people who had previously never been given a single thing in life to bang their heads to or against other than a cold, hard wall.

That's just how it was in Aston, on the north side of Birmingham, England, where Anthony Frank "Tony" Iommi (born February 19, 1948), William "Bill" Ward (May 5, 1948), John Michael "Ozzy" Osbourne (December 3, 1948), and Terence Michael "Geezer" Butler (July 17, 1949) were spawned amid the rubble to which the German blitz had reduced an already bleak industrial landscape. It was a place where boys entertained themselves by marching one another through sewers, gangs were plentiful, money was scarce, and fourteen-year-olds met the future in sheet-metal factories like the one where Tony Iommi lost parts of two fingers.

Come Saturday night, according to Bill Ward, "any Astonian worth his salt would turn around and smack the crap out of you." Ozzy describes it even more succinctly: a miserable shit hole. It was a place without either a literal or a figurative horizon – he never saw an ocean, nor could he envision a future beyond the dreary factory jobs that kept his parents too consumed with survival to demonstrate any affection for their brood of

Black Sabbath: Bassist Geezer Butler, drummer Bill Ward, vocalist Ozzy Osbourne, guitarist Tony Iommi (from left), 1969



ABOVE: Butler, Ward, Iommi, Osbourne (from left) in San Francisco, 1971. BELOW: Black Sabbath's second album.

six. There was nothing for a school-leaving petty thief, as he fast became, if only to procure the mohair Mod suits his father could not, to aspire to other than bank robbery, maybe, and even that was a long shot. Then the Beatles arrived.

"They took me away, those four guys," Osbourne told Mat Snow in 1991. It wasn't simply the soaring melodies – merely one of the hallmarks that immediately distinguished Black Sabbath's oeuvre – but the very idea that anyone from a background not dissimilar from his own might possibly escape it. "Theirs was docks, mine was factories," he explained to Snow, and he loved them all equally and at once. When he didn't dream of becoming a Beatle, he prayed that at least one of his sisters might marry one.

This understanding is fundamental to the real magic Black Sabbath created out of boiling black-magic lyrics and the blues

right down to a big bare white bone stewed in Iommi's Django-does-Stonehenge riffs, drums of doom, then-radical down-tuning and the exploration of space rather than notes. Above it all bubbled Ozzy's persuasive howl, encouraging one and all to join a merry singalong eviscerating the major torments of Western man.

Bear in mind, too, that when these lads began developing both their noble theories and their musical rudiments, they were no older than the Quarrymen. Ward, the progeny of a slightly more cheerful household than the Osbournes – if only because his parents were jazzers who celebrated the end of WWII every weekend with kegs of booze and the drummer next door – and Iommi were local-band veterans by the time they began jamming together at age fifteen. Osbourne and Butler were the same age when they landed in Rare Breed, whose guitar player objected to Ozzy's moving onstage. By the time they were eighteen, Geezer (originally a rhythm guitarist who took a crash course in Jack Bruce after encountering Iommi), Bill, and Tony's Mythology was broken up by a cannabis bust, and they recruited Ozzy. The result also contained evidence of Butler's jazz-prog infatuation with the Mothers of Invention, a saxophonist, and a bottleneck slide player. The Polka Tulk band set out as a six-piece to its first gig on the Cambrian hotel-ballroom circuit and returned as four.

Renamed Earth, the group played subsequent engagements that were largely the result of going down to Henry's Blues House and, in Osbourne's words, "hoping the scheduled band wouldn't show up." They signed with a local booker and manager, Jim Simpson, flush with the success of the now long derailed Locomotive, and were signed to a new label, Vertigo. Black Sabbath evolved as they were writing "bits and pieces" and rehearsing across the road from a movie theater showing horror films. Amazed that people would line up and pay to, as Ozzy says, "get the shit scared out of 'em," someone – no one



really remembers who actually ended up writing the lyrics, maybe Tony, maybe Geezer, though the publishing credits were generally shared by all – said, “Wouldn’t it be great to do it with music?”

And thus Black Sabbath was born.

Before catching the ferry to a gig in a Zurich hooker bar (a specialty of their manager), they stopped at Regent Sound, where Tom Allom engineered and Roger Bain produced what was essentially their live set, except for the double-tracked guitar. It took all of two days and cost six hundred quid. It was the end of 1969. Ozzy sent his mum a postcard from the studio saying he’d be home at Christmas.

The first single, a cover of Crow’s U.S. hit “Evil Woman (Don’t Play Your Games With Me),” was released in January 1970 and flopped unequivocally. The next month, the album *Black Sabbath* reached the Top Ten and remained on the charts for more than twelve months. Later that year, Warner Bros. released the album in the States.

Black Sabbath sounded like the soundtrack for a pilgrimage to the Inferno, each song like an announcement for the next rung of hell, from the opening track’s depiction of Satan choosing a victim to “My name is Lucifer, please take my hand,” the invitation proffered by “N.I.B.” (the actual title, “Nativity in Black,” having been deemed either too sacrilegious or too ridiculous to be properly spelled out).

But what was really so scary about Black Sabbath? Perhaps that lower-class, uneducated boys should dare question their place or the few things that had been drilled into them (certainly not by their schools, which no one expected them to



Ozzy Osbourne belts one out, c. 1971.



Happy days: Osbourne, Butler, Iommi, and Ward (from left) during the early seventies



Iommi and Osbourne inciting a riot in San Francisco, 1978

attend past the onset of puberty) but notably within the specter of the Church, the only institution – and certainly not the dominant one in their native England – that might have desired a longer-term investment in them, if only for the sake of their souls.

“I was brought up an incredibly strict Catholic,” Butler told *The Rocket* in 1994, “and believed in Hell and the devil. But though I’d been taught about God and Jesus, no one ever went into what the devil was all about, so when I was sixteen or seventeen, I went trying to find out.” The prolific lyricist also suspected that eschewing traditional boy-girl themes would make for a more personally satisfying writing experience.

Things got really interesting for Sabbath with the sophomore effort, *Paranoid*, released September 1970 in the U.K. and in February 1971 in the States. When Black Sabbath arrived on the shores of San Francisco, in a country torn apart by the escalating tragedy of Vietnam, bearing songs like “War

Pigs” (actually a rewrite of the originally titled and much bootlegged “Walpurgis,” which Osbourne eventually recorded legally on *The Ozzman Cometh*), “it took off,” according to the frontman, “and never stopped.”

“We had no idea about Vietnam!” Ozzy protested to Mat Snow. “It coulda been Mars! Roger Bain suggested ‘War Pigs.’ We were just kids fuckin’ around. We didn’t understand what we were doing; we were kids playing with toys, scaring people.”

“Iron Man” and “Paranoid” alone might have sealed Sabbath’s place in the pantheon even if this lineup had never come up with the subsequent blasts of brilliance “Sweet Leaf,” “Children of the Grave,” and “Wheels of Confusion,” all of which are to the mere concept of “riff” as Arnold Schwarzenegger is to bodybuilding, and bona fide masterpieces like *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath* (heavy metal’s *Sgt. Pepper?*).

“How the fuck did we do it?” Osbourne still pondered “Paranoid” some two decades later. “Tony had the riff, we jammed this thing out at the last minute – one of the all-time classic songs!” Damned if anyone else could come up with any better or more honest explanation.

They began exploring a softer, acoustic side, occasionally featuring an Iommi flute solo and using keyboards (first contributed by Yes’s Rick Wakeman on record and played live, though usually offstage, for eons by Sabbath’s Ian Stewart manqué, Geoff Nicholls). Unfortunately, the height of Black Sabbath’s divine experimentation and sonic creativity coincided with the band members’ dependence upon increasing pharmacopeias (at one point, Osbourne and Ward were reportedly taking LSD daily on top of prodigious loads of other substances) and business disputes.

By *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*, the innocence, as Ozzy saw it, was over. “We were being royally fucking raped,” he told Mat Snow. “The manager was always in control. I never received a royalty check, never had a bank account.” Meanwhile, the manager was moving to fancier offices and driving a Rolls.



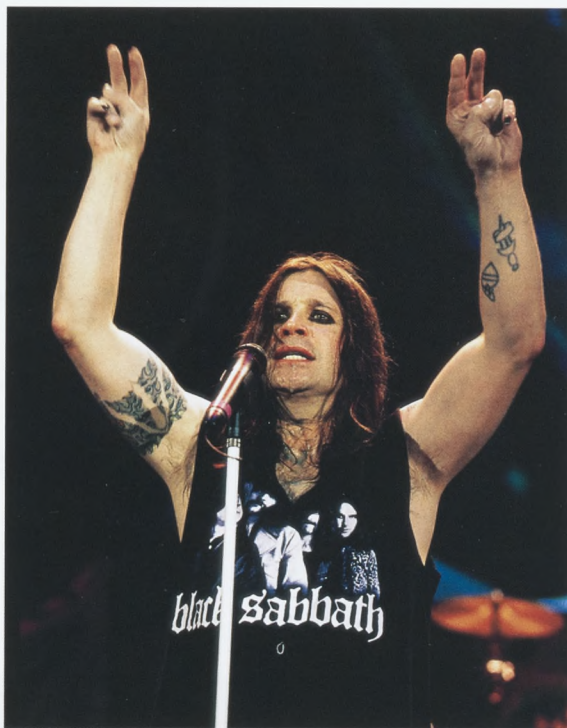
Heavy-metal thunder: Bill Ward

"We came from nothing, backstreet kids with a taste of success. We were so used to fighting people, it just disintegrated. We were making records to pay lawyers' bills."

The experienced pro Don Arden salvaged the band from the contracts they'd signed before some of them were old enough to do so without parental permission. But soon they were fighting with one another. When Osbourne was too strung out to bother showing up for *Heaven and Hell* sessions in 1979, Ward (who obviously showed up but, due to copious alcohol consumption, apparently doesn't remember) was directed to fire the man he still calls his best friend. Add to this the Freudian conflict between Don Arden and his daughter Sharon, who began managing and, as the entire television-loving world knows, eventually married Ozzy, and the chances for any of these people sitting civilly at the same table, never mind recapturing the spirit, promise, or genius of their youthful collaboration, appeared microscopic at best.

Black Sabbath continued to tour successfully, remaining an arena attraction for the better part of the next three decades and making at least one classic album, *Heaven and Hell*, with Osbourne's immediate successor, Ronnie James Dio (perhaps because the material was written with Ozzy fresh in memory and in mind?). To date, thirty-odd musicians have toured or recorded with Black Sabbath, with Iommi at times being the only member of the original core upon which both Black Sabbath's live set and reputation will always depend. Geezer's self-named band is a perennial favorite of fans and the hard-rock press. Between Sabbath reunions and solo projects, Ward has channeled his energies into sobriety, as well as helping others to achieve the same.

Ozzy, of course, is one of the most successful solo artists not just in heavy metal but in rock, period. He has set countless precedents – from being the rare veteran who has consistently discovered and developed new talent (Randy Rhoads being just the first example) to kick him in the ass and come up with new material that's as viable as anything he or anyone else has ever done to giving younger bands their first big break (just ask Metallica) to establishing Ozzfest, a festival brand that will continue as long as he wants to lend it his name. He is some-



ABOVE: Rock superstar Ozzy makes a point, 1997. BELOW: Together again: Ward, Butler, Osbourne, and Iommi, 1998.

thing that few people in any sphere, particularly entertainment, ever achieve – a phenomenon who transcends both his personal and public origins completely.

And after years of speculation, rumors, innuendos, acrimony, and aborted reunions like 1985's Live Aid experience, on any given day, he may very well be a member of Black Sabbath, a band that truly belongs in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Tony Iommi probably said it all a little more than a year ago: "One minute we are broken up, and the next minute we are getting back together doing an album. You just never know what is going to happen!" ←



The Big Bang

Heavy Metal's Early Days



By Parke Puterbaugh

Going on four decades now, heavy-metal music is still blowing minds and eardrums. Musical archeologists generally concur that its emergence can be dated to the release of Black Sabbath's first album in 1970. This somber, murky slog through realms of devilry and distemper became an instant sensation on both sides of the Atlantic, to the bafflement of rock critics and the music industry. Each entity had overlooked a large and growing pool of working-class rock fans whose hardscrabble young lives had thus far not led them to conclude that "all you need is love." The countervailing point of view, offered by the Sabs and others, struck a nerve with this disenchanting horde, and the music's doomy power provided a means of addressing and exorcising the darker side.

That much it has in common with the blues, both being downbeat music forms about doubt and betrayal, hellhounds and devils, evil wenches and conniving enemies. Through some alchemical transformation, each genre leaves its audience feeling better able to cope with their troubled lives. It's a bit like treating a hangover with a shot of whiskey – a strategy known as "hair of the dog." That phrase, perhaps not coincidentally, was the title of the best-selling album by Nazareth, a hard-rocking Scottish quartet who were contemporaries of Black Sabbath. If you were feeling poorly about your lot in life, a raft of hard 'n' heavy bands – Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Alice Cooper, Rush, Blue Öyster Cult, Judas Priest, AC/DC, Nazareth, and, of course, Black Sabbath – were available on record and at the local enormodome to admin-

ister megadoses of hair of the dog. All you had to do was show up with a bellyful of cheap wine and 'ludes, ready to wreak havoc on your hapless synapses.

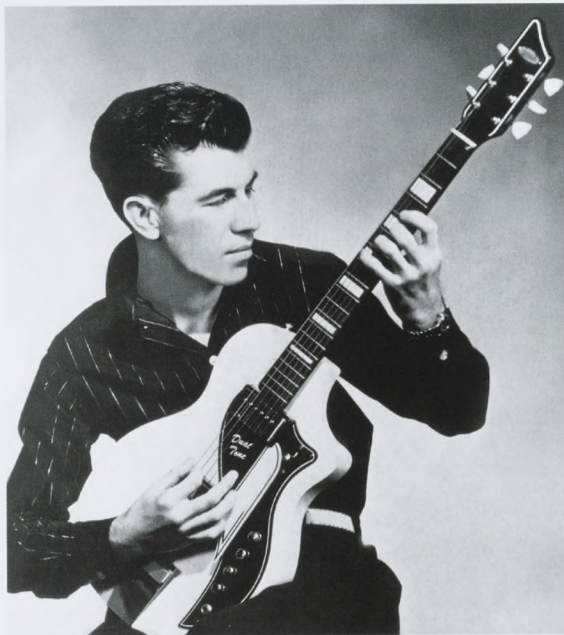
Metal touched on areas where rock & roll dared not venture. That's not to say elements of the form had not been heard prior to Black Sabbath – just that they hadn't been combined and distilled into a distinctive style until then. Precursors of metal can be unearthed from the gravel beds of rock history. Scattered throughout the fifties and sixties are instances of bedrock riffs; overdriven, assaultive guitar noise; sluggish tempos that did not lend themselves to dancing; malcontented lyrics about subjects other than teenage love travails; howling, declamatory vocals poised halfway 'twixt the opera house and the dog pound; ripping, mock-classical elocution; and a fundamental de-emphasis of melody in favor of brute force.

For starters, we can backtrack to the late, great North Carolina-born Link Wray's crudely powerful "Rumble," a 1958 instrumental whose knife-edged riff evoked the menacing aura of a gang fight. About the same time, California's Dick Dale invented surf guitar, a forerunner of heavy metal, when he adapted a Middle Eastern folk melody ("Miserlou") to his thick-stringed Fender Stratocaster and jacked the amps to eleven. His adroit, modal riffing foreshadowed the lead-guitar virtuosos who'd populate metal in the seventies and beyond. Moreover, Dale had the shredding, take-no-prisoners attitude that would come to define metal's aggressive stance.

Another pioneer in the glorious realm of noise for noise's sake is guitarist Dave Davies, who stuck pins in his amp's speaker cones, creating a prototypical form

Nazareth, the Scottish band signed to A&M in America, helped pave heavy metal's way.





In the 1950s, Link Wray pioneered feedback.



In 1968, the Velvet Underground's second album celebrated noise.



Black Sabbath's debut became a heavy-metal classic.

of distortion on the Kinks' titanic 1964 riff rocker "You Really Got Me." The Who likewise whipped up musical Molotov cocktails with Keith Moon's frantic drum work, John Entwistle's thunder-fingered bass, Roger Daltrey's growly vocals, and Pete Townshend's sluicing chords and guitar-splintering stage antics. Unnerving volume and visuals also rose up from the Velvet Underground, who concocted a discordant metallic din on their second album, *White Light/White Heat*.

As the sixties progressed along its psychedelic trajectory, the harnessing of such effects as fuzztone, feedback, and wah-wah allowed musicians to document trips both good and bad. Some of those who wandered off the yellow brick road of sunny days and good vibes presaged the more dire, downcast tone of Black Sabbath and its like. Many a wayward soul musically wondered, "Where is my mind?" when he didn't land in the same place from which he departed on a hallucinogenic voyage of self-discovery.

The Electric Prunes, for instance, had a pair of harrowing, fuzztone-drenched hits titled "I Had Too Much to Dream (Last Night)" and "Get Me to the World on Time." Inspired by an African "black mass" and armed with a mighty minor-key riff, Iron Butterfly blew millions of minds with its droning, side-long epic "In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida." Vanilla Fudge turned blithe Beatles and Motown confections into extended, agonizing, protometal dirges. Likewise, Deep Purple helped get the whole heavy-rock ball wobbling toward its metal-edged manifest destiny in 1968 when the band brought weight, density, and dynamics to a Top Forty tune – Joe South's "Hush" – and saw its drastic reinvention wind up on the charts. Deep Purple really came into its own with *In Rock*, the venerable group's fifth album, released in 1970, the same year Black Sabbath debuted and an undeniable watershed for hard rock and heavy metal.

With their favored axes and Marshall stacks, Cream and Jimi Hendrix raised the virtuosic ante and the decibel level for rock soloists, all the while peering into more shadowy corners than usual (e.g., Hendrix's "Purple Haze," Cream's "We're Going Wrong") as the rock sensibility began evolving from lightweight AM to serious FM and, correspondingly, from 45s to LPs. Out in San Francisco, the three-man noise factory Blue Cheer performed a grisly, protometal vivisection upon Eddie Cochran's "Summertime Blues." They boasted of being the world's loudest band and even got certified in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for their ear-shattering decibelage. (Subsequent title-holders included the Who, Deep Purple, Motörhead, and Manowar.)

Grand Funk Railroad, a product of Detroit's high-energy scene, used the power-trio format to make people-pleasing blues rock. Spurned by critics, Grand Funk cultivated massive popularity at the grassroots level, much as Black Sabbath would do a few years later. The Motor City also coughed up the MC5 and the Stooges, who made a hard-rock/free-jazz racket and a riffy, animalistic garage-rock rumble, respectively. Detroit is also where Alice Cooper, who brought an element of horror-show theater to the rock stage – remember the guillotine? – got his act together. And don't forget Detroit icons Ted Nugent (a noisemeister supreme) and Hall of Famer Bob Seger, who coined the term "Heavy Music" on a 1967 single of the same name.

What about the term "heavy metal"? Leaving aside the periodic table of elements, the phrase "heavy metal" first appeared in a pop-culture context in William Burroughs's experimental



The Kinks' Dave Davies (second from left) experimented with distortion on "You Really Got Me."

novels *The Soft Machine* (1961) and *The Nova Express* (1964). It then cropped up in the biker-rock anthem "Born to Be Wild," wherein John Kay of Steppenwolf growled, "I like smoke and lightning/Heavy metal thunder." Written by Dennis Edmonton (a.k.a. Mars Bonfire, the brother of Steppenwolf drummer Jerry Edmonton), "Born to Be Wild" hit Number Two in 1968 and provided the name to a genre that's inspired both rapid fandom and critical brickbats ever since.

"As its detractors have always claimed, heavy-metal rock is nothing more than a bunch of noise," Lester Bangs wrote approvingly in 1975. "It's a fast train to nowhere, which may be one reason it seems to feel so good and make so much sense to its fans." ←



Detroit produced heavy metal galore, including Ted Nugent.



Dick Dale unleashes his Strat upon an unsuspecting public.



Today's heavy-metal fans feel the noise.