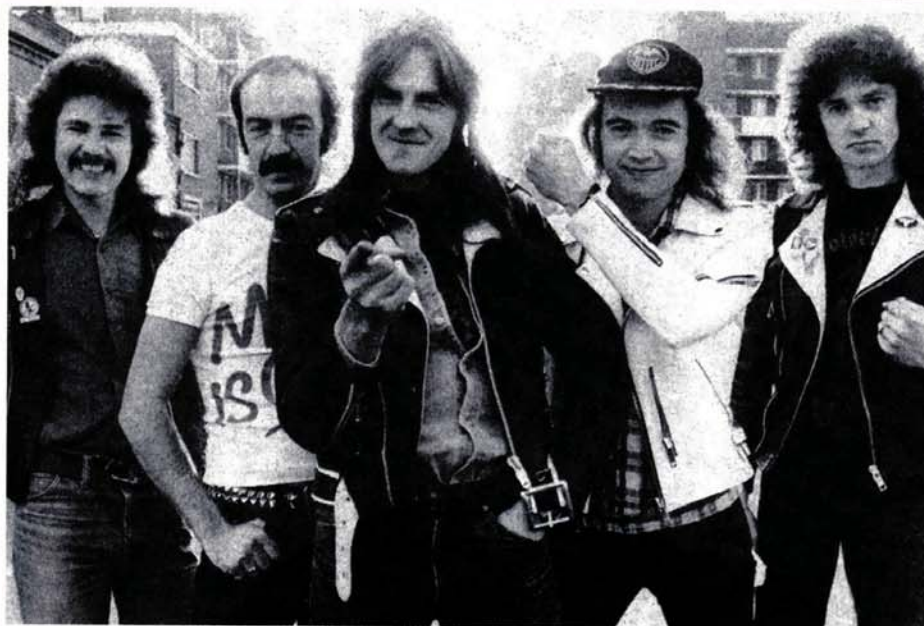


**What was it like leading up to *Wheels of Steel*? I understand the debut didn't do too well.**

**BIFF BYFORD:** I think it's been us against the wall all the time. The first album, *Saxon*, was a mixture of Paul's and my songs from our band before. A couple of ideas came from the other guys. Then, we had a few songs we wrote together. It's a bit of mix 'n' match of styles, really. They, Graham [Oliver] and Steve [Dawson], were more of a blues band. We were more of a prog rock band. We were called Coast. But back to your question, we did have our backs to the wall. We were told by the label, Carrere, that if it didn't sell, they were dropping us. I remember our delusions of a big album on our first album and touring the world with it were quickly dispelled. That being said, we were quite prepared for *Wheels of Steel*.

**GRAHAM OLIVER:** Well, we had done the first album, *Saxon*, and that was a bit of a learning curve of all our influences. We were very much writing during the punk period. We were more influenced by Deep Purple, Rainbow, Free, Black Sabbath, Jimi Hendrix and bands like that. So, we did the album, and it didn't do well. But there was a guy named Neal Kay, and he started an alternative heavy metal chart in *Sounds*. He picked up on "Stallions of the Highway." The song eventually became Top 10 on his chart. That's what really started the buzz around Saxon. And the transition from punk to heavy metal. We were playing gigs with bands like Iron Maiden before they were famous. And we were playing some of the songs that would eventually appear on *Wheels of Steel*. Like "Freeway Mad" was just called "Freeway." "Freeway" was from SOB. That went into Son of a Bitch, which then morphed into Saxon. When Biff did the vocals, he altered the title, and then renamed it "Freeway Mad." So, it was a bit like a snowball. Saxon just kept getting bigger, but it's hard to articulate how, really. It happened so fast. When we got on Motörhead's *Bomber* tour, we were already playing songs like "See the Light Shining" before we even recorded it. So, you can see how it all blurs together.

**STEVE DAWSON:** It was quite traumatic, actually. Our managers Norman Sheffield and Dave Thomas—both of whom were from Trident—did the deal with Carrere records. They got the advance and basically, by the time we had made the first record, took their share. They had taken all the money. So, they got us into their offices in London one day and said, "Thank you very much, but goodbye!" They dropped us right then and there. We were in a strange position that hadn't done what they expected. There wasn't enough money in our band to make it worth their while. We didn't know what to do. We were just a band playing clubs and bars to having a record to being



"We'd tour in American cars. Like the Oldsmobile Delta 88. Or the Lincoln Town Car four-door that we drove. After that we bought a Chevy G20 van. It had chrome exhaust pipes on the side. We looked like the A-Team."

## STEVE DAWSON

told, "You're back on your own." When we told Freddie [Cannon; Carrere's managing director] about it he said, "Well, let's make another record. We'll show them bastards!" We got two new managers, David Poxon and Ron Blechner, to organize things. We were pretty angry.

**PAUL QUINN:** We were finding our territory with the first album. It wasn't until we were getting DJ play in the clubs and pieces that were reader-oriented in the press that we realized what our strengths were, which were "Stallions of the Highway" and "Backs to the Wall." That gave us a clue that our future didn't lay in prog after all. I mean, we were the sum of our influences like any band. Some know who they are and some don't. We were influenced by U.S. and U.K. bands that made us sound like Saxon. I'm talking about the Doors, Montrose, in my case Chicago—I'm a huge fan—Bad Company, Free, Sabbath, UFO, Led Zeppelin. We had a lot of influences coming into Saxon.

**PETE GILL:** When we got together, we felt and played great as a unit. We put out the debut, and it did hardly anything. It got us recognized for our live playing. So, not only did it not really sell that well, there was also heavy competition, at the time, for bands like us to get into the heavy metal charts, never mind the national charts—bands like Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Wrathchild, us and all the other bands that'd play at Soundhouse, which was a heavy metal club.

**What were the songwriting sessions like for *Wheels of Steel*?**

**BYFORD:** Our managers sent us up in the mountains—really out of the way—to have us write the album. And only because it was very cheap. So, this place was on a mountain in Snowdonia in Wales. It was a farmhouse. And here's how the sessions went. We wrote about five songs in the first session. It was very collaborative. We were all mates. I had a two-track studio and a little desk, which was mine, and I ran it [the two-track studio] through the desk. We had one mic in front of the kit. And we mic-ed up the guitars and bass after that. Then, I sang it straight down. It was like making an album in your bedroom then like you can now. That's how we demoed our stuff, though. I still remember the manager came along and said, "This is brilliant!" He sent it to the record company and the rest is history.

**OLIVER:** The songwriting was mostly done on a farm in Wales. It belonged to a guy who used to be in Hawkwind. They lived not like peasants, but very frugal and isolated and minimalistic. They would rent out their barn and farmhouse to bands to rehearse in. So, we were there in January. It's on top of a mountain. And it's freezing cold. We had half the album ready before we went to this farmhouse—songs like "See the Light Shining" and "Freeway Mad." So, there we were in this farmhouse in January, trying to

write the other half to *Wheels of Steel*. I remember we'd open the cutlery drawer in the morning for breakfast and it was full of mouse droppings. It was really gross. But we made the most of it by playing jokes on one another. Pete [Gill] was staying on the ground floor. One night while he was watching TV, I cracked the window on him. There was no wind—still as anything—but it was 20 below. So, when he went to bed, I went outside and opened the window wide. In the morning, I got up early to close the window. When he came to breakfast, he said, "Fuck me! I had my knees under me chin. I couldn't get warm." [Laughs] But back to your original question. At the time, Saxon were very much a collective. We wrote together. "747" was written this way, together.

**QUINN:** The writing sessions were a continuation of what we had before on the *Saxon* album. For example, "Freeway Mad" was an earlier song from Dawson and Oliver. We incorporated it into more of the style of the lineup on the album. We were six songs short, in fact, when we were touring with Motörhead. During this tour, we found a good forming ground for the style that we wanted to continue in. So, we went to a "studio" in Wales. It was very sleepy and run by hippies. There, we came up with "Suzie Hold On," "747" and "Wheels of Steel." The song "747" just had a great groove.

**DAWSON:** I just talked about us being angry about the management situation, right? Well, this made us angrier. It was in the middle of winter in Wales on a mountain. There were no distractions there. None of the band drank alcohol at the time, either. We just drank loads of tea. We didn't even have girls to bother us. [Laughs] So, we got on with it, and worked as though we were in a factory. We started at 10 a.m. and ended at 5 p.m. We did this every day for about a month.

**Do you feel *Wheels of Steel* gave Saxon direction, both musically and aesthetically?**

**OLIVER:** I think it did. We were two different bands in one—one blues-based and one prog—as we were writing the debut. By the time we were writing for *Wheels of Steel*, we were an operating band. We were writing together. We had done gigs together. We had done the Motörhead tour. The direction became more straightforward. It just came out of us. "Wheels of Steel" itself was inspired by "Cat Scratch Fever." I thought, "What a great riff!" I just turned the riff around and came up with the main riff to "Wheels of Steel." Same with "See the Light Shining." I was listening to "Highway Star" from *Made in Japan* and that intro with [Ritchie] Blackmore striking his guitar. I thought it was great. I was so inspired I went into a room, picked up my guitar and wrote the intro. The rest of the band then put their spin on it. We were bringing out the best in each other. Remember, the music we were writing wasn't made to be as heavy metal, it was just coming out of us as heavy metal. We weren't thinking, "Oh, let's make a heavy metal song for the charts."

**BYFORD:** We're essentially a blues-based band. The punk side of us is what turned us to metal, so to speak. Songs like "Motorcycle Man" and "Heavy Metal Thunder" and "20,000 Ft." from *Strong Arm of the Law* are what made us metal. Songs with ridiculously fast riffs. All these songs came from a specific period in our history. That's what Metallica took and turned it into something else, which is thrash metal. I don't think they took "Wheels of Steel" and turned it into thrash metal. They were into the faster songs. I mean, we were influenced by Motörhead to play faster. In turn, Metallica were influenced by us and Motörhead to play much faster. [Laughs] Of course, we were, don't forget, also under the influence of Judas Priest and Black Sabbath, as well.

**How long did songs take to write back then? Between the debut and *Strong Arm of the Law* you were writing almost two albums a year.**

**BYFORD:** Not long, actually. We'd have a verse or a chorus and the songs would mature from there. For the vocals, I'd sing whatever came into my head. It was usually a melody, but lyrically it was mostly gobbledygook to get the phrasing right. The melody and the music were main. I also liked to have a great title. I'd often have the title before the song and I'd slip the title into whatever riff fit the best. "Princess of the Night" [off *Denim and Leather*] is a good example of this. I still do this, actually. But we were quite prolific. And we wrote in different styles, too. One minute, we'd write "747" or "And the Bands Played On," which are quite melodic, and the next we'd write "Freeway Mad" or "Heavy Metal Thunder," which just tear your head off. We've always had our feet in both camps: blues-based rock 'n' roll and metal.

**GILL:** The thing with Saxon is there are no drugs and hardly any drinking at all. We just lived for playing. We loved every opportunity to play. When we started writing—and it all came quickly—we didn't need much guidance. So, when management would put us in a run-down farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, like Wales, they didn't worry. They knew we'd come out with finished songs.

**OLIVER:** We were really in a writing mode back then. Also, there were no rules. Or, we threw the rulebook out the window. We just played what came out. "Street Fighting Gang," for example, was a really old track, even before the debut. We played this song when we were doing gigs with the Clash in '78. I think it's important to remember that me and Paul Quinn are two different guitar players. He's more technical. I'm more basic. We had a really good chemistry, though. Our differences were complementary.

**DAWSON:** Looking back, it was a big mistake on our behalf. We were only in our mid-20s when we signed to Carrere. We had this fear that it'd all finish unexpectedly, to suddenly go away. We didn't want to go back to day jobs. We liked playing music too much. We liked saying, "This song is

off our newest album." The label and the managers suggested for us to repeat the success of *Wheels of Steel*, even though we had few ideas for songs. So, we did it. It was part of the job, we thought.

**There's a strong motorcycle theme, obviously.**

**BYFORD:** Uh, well, the other guys couldn't give a shit about motorcycles. That was all me. So, if we're talking motorcycles it would have to be Triumph, 'cause there's no way I could afford a Harley at the time. You have to remember, this album (and the others that followed) are very British. They're written from a British standpoint. The mentality was for the music to be hard, loud and fast. Bands like Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet weren't. Saxon was the other side of the coin. The song itself, "Wheels of Steel," was inspired by a '68 Chevy Malibu.

**GILL:** There was a motorcycle theme to it, yes, but I don't recall anyone being into motorbikes except Rob Halford, who rode one across the stage. [Laughs]

**DAWSON:** In England, we had two types of people called mods and rockers. Mods rode scooters, Lambrettas and Vespas. Rockers rode Triumph, Royal Enfield and Norton. We had an interest in American cars, though. I remember, when we were able to buy a truck, we bought a truck for the crew, and we'd tour in American cars. Like the Oldsmobile Delta 88. Or the Lincoln Town Car four-door that we drove. After that we bought a Chevy G20 van. It had chrome exhaust pipes on the side. We looked like the A-Team. [Laughs] So, really, the song "Wheels of Steel" is about a car, but originally it had a different type of steel wheel. The original idea was a locomotive. But because that was a bit geeky—trainspotting and liking railways—we figured we'd incorporate American cars. The '57 Chevy is the ultimate American car, from an English point of view. So, instead of being about a locomotive it's about a motorcar. It's like writing about a woman. [Laughs]

***Wheels of Steel* has been described as a building block of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal. What were those times like, as far as making genre-defining music?**

**DAWSON:** The term was created by journalists but we welcomed it, 'cause it represented what we were doing. Remember, the bands didn't call themselves heavy metal at the time. We didn't think we were any different from Iron Maiden or Jimi Hendrix or Cream. Then, when this invention came along, we got tagged. It was great to have our own terminology. What was also important at that time, in England—there was only one popular radio station across the country. If you were played on that, everybody in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland knew who you were. It also became a fashion statement, as well. The patches sewn onto a denim jacket, which was over a leather jacket. That's where the idea for *Denim and Leather* came from. It was like punk. Music and fashion [▶]

came together. If you were walking down the street with a denim cut-off with loads of patches, everyone knew immediately you liked heavy metal. It was mainly men. Females eventually started to wear it, but it was first a male thing. Before this, if a guy had a leather jacket on, you'd cross to the other side of the street for fear of a beating. [Laughs] This was also the time when *Kerrang!* came out, sometime in '81.

**QUINN:** Well, the New Wave of Heavy Metal is parlance moved over from film. From what I recall, it was Geoff Barton from *Sounds* music newspaper who coined the term. It stuck, 'cause there were a lot of bands that sounded different from one another, but were all connected in similar ways. They were, I think, heavy, so it made sense. It worked like the term Liverpool Invasion. But after a while it felt like a competition. Bands were fighting to be faster and louder. Of course, everybody lost out to Motörhead. [Laughs] We weren't interested in that, though. We just wanted to be Saxon.

**GILL:** Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple had songs that were quite long. They could go up and down in tempo and were often quite complex. Just by means of playing, most of us got off on "Bad Motor Scooter" by Montrose. That was straight-ahead song that we really loved. I suppose that was a big influence on our way of writing. Then again, Saxon had a gentler side. The singles weren't that representative of the band. They were more promotional, to get us on *Top of the Pops*. The only other bands like us on *Top of the Pops* were Motörhead and Judas Priest. So, we were on *Top of the Pops* more than any other band like us. But those singles didn't really represent us. We were more to-the-throat, if you like. Played with conviction, those songs, however, like "Wheels of Steel" and "747" were heavy and full of energy. The heads-down Saxon way.

**OLIVER:** I think it had to do with what punk was in general. In London, it was more fashion and music. But outside of London, like in Sheffield and Leeds, if you weren't good, you were bottled up pretty fast. They don't tolerate stuff like that. You can't kid a Northern audience. In addition, we were playing gigs with the Clash and Motörhead. I think what happened with punk was kids liked the energy but the music wasn't fulfilling. It phased out on its own as a result.

**Lyricaly, what were you guys after? The lyrics offered more than the usual cliché of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.**

**BYFORD:** A lot of it was anti-establishment stuff. Like "Stand Up and Be Counted" and "Never Surrender." Songs to smash yourself out. What was happening in the '80s in the U.K. wasn't happy stuff. There were bombs going off all the time. In general, they were uncertain times. So,

we had a very unique style to our lyrics. One side was anti-establishment. The other side was more historical, like "747" and "Wheels of Steel" and "Dallas 1 PM."

**OLIVER:** We weren't the normal rock 'n' roll lyric writers. You know, "Baby, you've got big tits" kind of stuff. We were more into factual or historical topics. Like "Wheels of Steel" and "747."

**DAWSON:** I must say we left the typical rock 'n' roll topics to Whitesnake. [Laughs] I remember, the press thought "Suzie Hold On" was about a girl dying. National newspapers were calling us up. They made a big stink about it. But they're really just words that fit together.

**How did "747 (Strangers in the Night)" come up as a lyrical topic?**

**BYFORD:** I'm a bit of an amateur historian. So, I like to write about things that interested me when I was younger. They all come from my experiences and my interest in history. For example, "Strong Arm of the Law" is about the police planting drugs on you and arresting you for it. "747" was an interesting story, as well. That actually happened. But "747" is actually two songs put together. The chorus I had an idea on first. I wrote the arpeggio. It's really about people meeting in an airport. The James Burke documentary about the SAS flight galvanized the idea. A plane is coming over and is getting ready to land, but suddenly the runway lights go out, which it did. The "Strangers in the Night" part is a nod to Frank Sinatra. I love the early crooners.

**OLIVER:** Well, I'll tell you how we found out about this. We were writing at the farmhouse in Wales. On the TV, there's a program by a famous British science historian named James Burke. He talked about how a substation in New York tripped out and as a result it blacked out most of New York City and the airport. It was a chain effect. It just kept blowing all the substations. So, the airport blacked out just as this Scandinavian airlines flight was coming in to land.

**Why did you decide to use Pete Hinton as producer?**

**BYFORD:** He jammed his way into the job. [Laughs] He was A&R at Carrere. And the engineer, Will Reid Dick, was his mate. They did a great job. They actually sped up the album a bit on the multitrack, with or without us knowing. If you listen to the vocals and the guitars, they're a little high. But they're not that quite high off the recording. Pete wanted a hit. That's all he wanted. A big album. He was working towards that. We would've liked the recordings to be a bit more hi-fi. It was quite punky in the end.

**GILL:** Total record label deal. We had no idea about producers or producing. That being said, we could've worked with any half-decent producer and come out the other side with the goods. If you listen to Planet Rock [a U.K. radio station], they play Saxon songs. You can hear on

the radio the resonance of the intro guitar part to "Wheels of Steel." It's pretty amazing. The way they captured "Motorcycle Man" is Saxon at their best. The production of the album is great, even all these years later.

**OLIVER:** Pete [Hinton] and Freddie Cannon were together at EMI. While at EMI, they got our demo tape. So, Pete went up to see us at Talk of the Town in Bradford. There were about 16 people there. Pete came up to us and said that he liked us. He was aware there was a movement rumbling, with Neal Kay. So, he reported back to Freddie, but by that point Freddie had been head-hunted by Carrere and was leaving. That's how we ended up on Carrere. Freddie had taken our demo to Claude Carrere. If Freddie had stayed, we would've been on EMI to start with, along with Iron Maiden. Carrere were good at some things, but they were a dance label. In the States, they signed a deal for *Wheels of Steel* with ATCO. Then six months later he was trying to get them to take Sheila and B. Devotion, Dollar and other shit they didn't want. That's why *Wheels of Steel* never did much in the States.

**DAWSON:** Pete wasn't really the producer. The engineer, Will Reid Dick, did most of the work. He had worked with Thin Lizzy. I would put the producer credit more on the band than Pete. So, it was Saxon and Will Reid Dick who produced *Wheels of Steel*. Pete was just in the room. He had input, but he wasn't the producer.

**What were those studio sessions at Rampart Studios like?**

**BYFORD:** We booked the studio for about two weeks. We recorded live, sometimes with one guitar, sometimes with two. We'd just do take after take until we got one people liked. Then, we'd do the overdubs.

**QUINN:** We were used to amateur or less expensive studios. When we went to Rampart Studios, it had all this expensive gear and a ghost. I never met the ghost, but it was pretty famous. Anyway, they had these incredible JBL speakers in a very small control room. They blew our heads off. We needed that, 'cause we were used to big Marshall stacks. Sometimes they'd [the JBLs] blow you out the door like Cheech & Chong. [Laughs]

**OLIVER:** Rampart Studios belonged to the Who. It was a very important studio in London at the time. Of course, members of the Who were in and out all the time. But back then, when we were in the studio, we had to be very aware of album length on each side [of the vinyl]. It's not like CDs, where it's one length. So, songs that didn't make *Wheels of Steel* or songs that were half finished made it onto *Strong Arm of the Law*. The two albums are very much connected like that. I do remember right before recording *Wheels of Steel*, Paul had caught a tummy bug. So, his mom phoned up and says, "Paul's got a tummy bug. He can't come." So, we recorded many of the tracks with bass and drums first with a guide

guitar. We recorded it all live. It was me, Pete and Steve. Biff did the guide vocals. Eventually, Paul came in and recorded his guitars. I also recall while we were recording the drum tracks for "Suzie Hold On"—during the drum break in the middle—Pete was going animal bananas. Pete swears when he was playing that drum track he was feeling the presence of Keith Moon. Most don't know this, but Rampart Studio was an old chapel. The original pulpit was still there, so when the lights went down inside, the studio was really eerie.

#### Did Carrere know what they had with Saxon or were you just another signing?

**BYFORD:** I don't think so. They thought the first album would sell more. We sold 12,000 copies. I think Warner-Elektra-Atlantic [WEA] knew what they had with the album. The record company thought we'd be big for a brief moment and then people would forget about us. I don't think they realized how big the movement was in 1980. There were a lot of disenfranchised youngsters around at that time. They were turning to Motörhead, Maiden and us.

**QUINN:** Well, they, the label, and the distributor, WEA, both believed in us. So, I'm not sure if they knew what Saxon would become, but they understood that we were a hardworking band and we had the songs. We just needed a little luck and better management. [Laughs]

**OLIVER:** Remember, Carrere were a dance label, so I don't think so. But I do know that Claude signed us on the solo from "Frozen Rainbow." He told me that himself.

#### The label released three singles throughout 1980. What was the response like?

**BYFORD:** We had just toured with Motörhead in '79. We had already written *Wheels of Steel*, so we played a few songs on that tour. That was a massive tour. Then, we went out on tour with Nazareth, so when the album came out, we were very topical. Geoff Barton came out to do a massive review, a two-page spread. We were happening. The single went in at 36 or 40, I can't remember. We were thinking it's going to up, and it did. The next week, the "Wheels of Steel" single went Top 30. From that point, we took off. After that we did Castle Donington, which was a great point in our career. That was 60–70,000 people.

**GILL:** Because we didn't have a lot of exposure up to the Motörhead and Nazareth tours, Carrere weren't sure what to expect. But then we got a blistering review for Donington—YouTube the video, really—and it all changed. We were fantastic. We went out and delivered. We had a pledge, "No messing about. It's got to sound like the record." And it did. It was so powerful that people thought, "Christ almighty! What is this?!" Mind you, after performing for one and a half hours, we'd shower up, towel off, and go out and sign anything the fans wanted.

We'd sign everything. It didn't matter. That's what we wanted to do. I look back and I have fond memories of Donington. So, when the singles came out, they took off.

#### What was *Top of the Pops* like?

**DAWSON:** A lot of things that are on the TV are smoke and mirrors. You couldn't play live. They wouldn't let you back then. I think Iron Maiden did once. You played to a backing track. As serious musicians, we treated it as a joke, really. Ginger Baker played on *Top of the Pops* with two plastic fish! [Laughs] Remember, it wasn't a live program. So, someone would yell out, "Start!" We were just jiggling about to a backing track. It wasn't even loud. They had these little shit speakers. We felt stupid doing it. We had to do it for Carrere, though. The more we did it, the more contempt we had for it.

"I lost the tip of my finger in an accident in '76. I went to Tony Iommi for help. He gave me words of wisdom. I ended up trying all his fingertips, but none of them worked with my finger, so I was stuck with it."

### GRAHAM OLIVER

**QUINN:** It was made to look like there were hundreds of people in the audience, but there were maybe 20–30 maximum. Later, bands did have a go at real live performances, but it never sounded right. I do remember they had just polished the stage and we were skating on it. We were sliding off the stage. I think they did it as a joke. [Laughs]

**OLIVER:** We were dead broke and on *Top of the Pops*. It couldn't get any stranger. I remember, we were staying at a pretty run-down hotel in Kensington and we got the radio on. The radio was playing the charts, and the album went straight to Number Five on the charts. It was fantastic! In those days, you'd sell a lot of albums at Top Five. So, when we released the "Wheels of Steel" single, it went into the charts, but then it dropped the next week. You can only be on *Top of the Pops* when your single was going up in the charts. Even if you had a high chart position, if you were at Number Five one week and then Number Six the following week, you couldn't be on *Top of the Pops*. That happened to us, unfortunately. Then, it

started going up the charts, so eventually we got to be on *Top of the Pops*. If you watch "Wheels of Steel" and then watch Judas Priest's "Living After Midnight" and then watch Def Leppard's appearance, the stage props are the same.

#### Can you describe the U.S. tour for *Wheels of Steel*?

**BYFORD:** We thought we should've toured more on *Wheels of Steel*, especially in America. The management pulled us off because the record label wanted another album. So, looking back on it, they wanted a new album every six months. Pretty crazy, really. To this day, I think the record label thought we were a flash in the pan. They felt we were a one-album wonder, so, in their minds, they wanted a follow-up album quickly to keep up the momentum. In the end, they were greedy bastards. But we really love Rush. They're one of our favorite bands. It was the *Permanent Waves* tour. We got on that tour through our U.S. agent, 'cause British agents—back then—didn't book America. Rush liked the band and the album, but the audience wasn't ours. When we did the Mötley Crüe tour in '84, it wasn't our audience. We had some very strange tours in America.

**GILL:** We did the Motörhead tour in '79 and right after that we had a support slot for Nazareth, which was pretty amazing. I was a big fan, and they blew me away. When we did Donington, we got to be support on the Rainbow tour in Europe. The Judas Priest tour followed almost right after. So, that's when the Rush tour happened. The *Permanent Waves* tour. But they had already written *Moving Pictures*, so they did three songs from *Moving Pictures* at soundcheck every day. So, we got to hear *Moving Pictures* before anybody else, which was amazing.

**OLIVER:** The shows were fantastic. We landed in Boston. We had to clear customs there, and everybody was mad taking photos of buses and cars. Then, we got on a plane to New York, where we spent a few days' worth of press at Rockefeller Plaza. The only thing that clouded over the excitement was the announcement that John Bonham had died. It put a real negative over an otherwise upbeat situation. We got through it, though. We drove down to Charlotte for our first gig with Rush. We didn't know what to expect. We thought they'd be tough with all these rules. No, they were the sweetest guys you could ever meet. They made sure we ate well. They were accommodating. I remember, every night we'd close with "Machine Gun" and we'd do something to make a lot of noise or some kind of stunt. Rush had this massive guy they called Lurch. Every night, he'd say to us, "Don't let me see you do that again." By the time we got to Florida, I was doing all kinds of stunts. I even took down my pants and shagged the guitar. There was Lurch on the side of the stage shaking his head. He never said a word to me again. [▶]

**When did you know you had a breakthrough album?**

**BYFORD:** We didn't know what we were doing. [Laughs] That was kind of the point. We just wanted to write music with catchy, anthemic choruses. With more intelligent lyrics. More than traditional rock 'n' roll.

**GILL:** Here's the story. We had been screwed by our first manager. We went into the office to collect our salary for the month, which we did every month, and the office manager said, "You've got no money in your account." Our manager had taken all our money. So, we sat there, in London, with nothing at all. So, we went across town to the record label and met with Freddie. We told him everything. He said, "Well, it's going to take some convincing from my bosses, 'cause the first album didn't do very good. Now, you've got no manager, so we'll need a really strong second album." This is how bizarre things were. We said to him, "We've already got eight songs ready to go." He said, "Eight songs?! Ready to go?!" We were like, "Yeah!" He got on the phone, phoned a studio—I think it was Radio Luxembourg—about a mile and a half away and said, "Go to this studio, record your tracks, and if I like them I'll write you a big, fat check." We went there, the studio had all this different gear, but we laid the tracks down one after the other. We immediately got into a cab, back to his office, and he puts the tape into his TEAC. He says, "Holy shit!" He wrote us a check there and then. In about two and a half hours we went from being absolutely broke to having a big check. It's true. I still got the demos here.

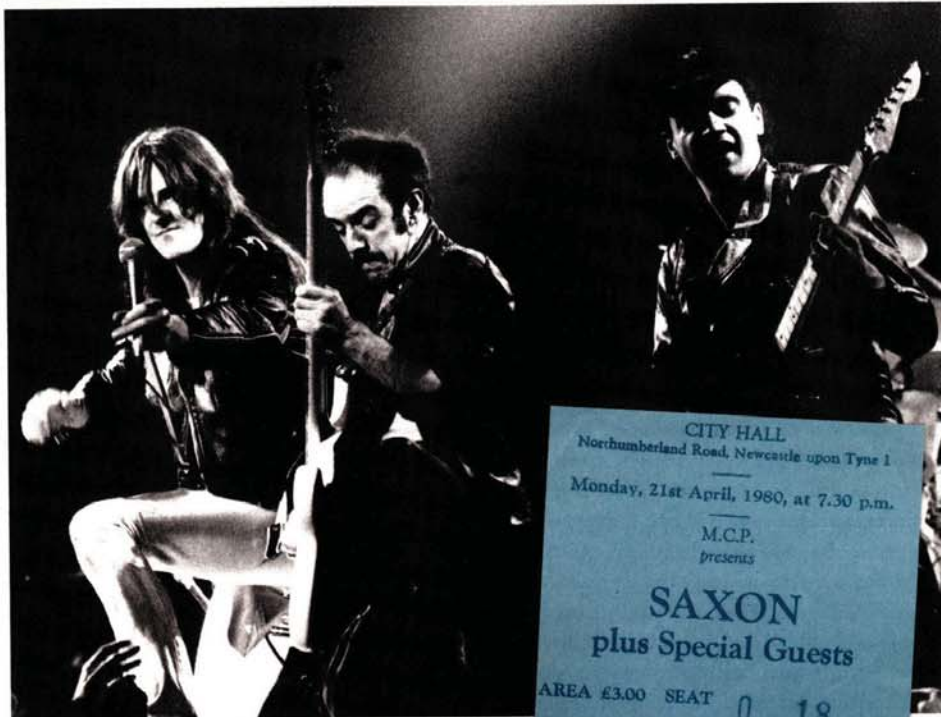
**DAWSON:** The moment I realized we were, let's say, more visible was during a radio show that played rock and hard rock during the middays. The DJ would read out famous people's birthdays. One day, I was in my car and they read my birthday. It was a game-changer, in my mind. I'm recognized?! [Laughs] I'm just a normal guy. I didn't know how to handle it. I remember, I'd go to the supermarket to buy groceries, and there's 10 people following me around for an autograph. It's weird. I'm not knocking it, though. It's part of the job.

**What do you make of *Wheels of Steel* getting attention all these years later?**

**BYFORD:** It was a groundbreaking album for its time. It amalgamated a bunch of styles into what became the '80s British heavy metal. It stayed like that until *Denim and Leather*. It galvanized what is essentially a British style.

**QUINN:** It's a great feeling. Even now, just talking about it feels good. It's making my heart beat faster. In a way, we have an album that's become the soundtrack of fans' lives. To that effect, it's great. It's sort of like our own *In Rock*. [Laughs]

**GILL:** I still get the tingle down my spine when I



hear the first track off *Led Zeppelin* ["Good Times Bad Times"]. It still resonates with me after all these years. Remember, when we formed, we were lucky to see some of the greatest bands live. In '77, we had Rush, we had AC/DC, we had Black Sabbath, we had Journey, we had Van Halen opening up for Black Sabbath. They opened up with "Runnin' with the Devil." So, I understand it. I think it's great! I don't listen to the stuff I've done at home, but when I do hear it, like on Planet Rock, it's an amazing feeling.

**DAWSON:** It's pretty amazing. Records keep getting discovered by different generations all the time. We're lucky the album sells over and over again. It's not millions but it provides an income where we don't have to go to a factory every day. We're grateful for that!

**Any fun stories that remind you of that time?**

**BYFORD:** It was a weird time. We had money, but we didn't have money. We could have whatever we wanted, but not the cash. We were staying in theatrical digs. We had quite a lot of girls there. The actors would complain all the time. [Laughs] We had a parrot in the restaurant downstairs and we taught it to say, "Fuck off!" In a Yorkshire accent, as well. They kicked us out over that one.

**OLIVER:** The photograph on the back of *Wheels of Steel* was taken at the Marquee Club just before a gig. Lars Ulrich told me once, "That is the most devastating photograph I've ever seen." They have the photo pinned up in their rehearsal room to remind and inspire them to make real music. To me, it's just a photo. To Lars, it's a

photo that's moved him. Also, I'm not sure if you know, but I lost the tip of my finger in an accident in '76. I went to Tony Iommi for help. He gave me words of wisdom. I ended up trying all his fingertips, but none of them worked with my finger, so I was stuck with it. I lost more than the tip, so he and I both play handicapped.

**DAWSON:** We were at Rampart Studios one day, and upstairs in a storage area we found the pin-ball machine the Who used in *Tommy*.

**Is there anything you'd change?**

**OLIVER:** I'd leave it the way it is. I wouldn't change anything, really. The good memory I have is that we were five people, all friends, who wanted to make a great record. Like if somebody had a riff, everyone would take the time to listen to it or think about it. Nothing was dismissed right away.

**QUINN:** I think I would've gone for a real, true top-line manager. I think that would've improved matters on the business side of the band.

**DAWSON:** No!

**BYFORD:** I wouldn't change a thing on *Wheels of Steel*. There's a lot of passion in that album. It was our last-chance album. We worked very hard on that album. We worked hard on the choruses to make them memorable. It's a great, groundbreaking album.

**GILL:** It's always difficult. Being a seasoned musician, you can tell when it's on. You can hear it. The whole Carrere thing and losing management fueled the fire. We never looked at each other and said, "What do we do now?" We just did what we knew best. [dB]