



By Larry Dobrow - GJD Contributor

As a wee bitty shredder of riffmanship raw, I used to wait by the mailbox - literally - for the monthly arrival of Guitar magazine. Back in the 1980s, there weren't many other places to go for tablature. Unless, that is, you had the dough to spring for Cherry Hill's \$12.95 books of intermittently accurate Billy Idol transcriptions.

The mag did its best to cover a wide range of styles, often to its detriment; Crue-fixated tin-ears had no more interest in learning about Steve Lukather and his bountiful white-fro than they did in inhaling mountains of lima beans. The one mainstay in its pages that everybody seemed to adore, however, was Ozzy consort Randy Rhoads.

This adoration, at times, seemed to come straight out of the Leif Garrett/David Cassidy handbook. The otherwise finicky and massively, almost disturbingly argumentative readers agreed on Rhoads and Rhoads alone, according him every honor in the mag's regular polls - I think he made the Guitar Hall of Fame ahead of, like, Jimmy Page. They touted him as the nigh-perfect, barely human amalgam of Jimi Hendrix (see under: sonic innovation) and Eddie Van Halen (see under: semi-classical, feedback-drenched noodlings).

Me? I never "got" Randy Rhoads. Then as now - and this is said with all due respect for the departed - I didn't understand what made him that much more of a player than the other nu-classical-metalists who flooded the hair-band scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He played loud. He played fast. He played with enormous dexterity. So what? So did Vai and Malmsteen and Hammett.

Taking a look back at Rhoads' recorded oeuvre, what strikes me first is how little of it there is: a few albums with the first incarnation of Quiet Riot, two studio discs with Ozzy Osbourne, and a posthumous "tribute" release. Maybe this isn't a bad thing, as witnessed by the legacy-diminishing re-re-re-re-re-re-releases of everything in the Hendrix and Jeff Buckley catalogs.

At the same time, Randy doesn't give us late-appreciation types a whole lot to work with - and what's there doesn't transcend the conventions of the hard-rock genre. The hits ("Flying High Again," "I Don't Know," "Crazy Train") uniformly kick much tushie and make for a fine pre-kickoff soundtrack to any NFL game. But the riffs, solos and whammy-bar theatrics contained therein don't strike me as any more inventive than anything on, say, Love at First Sting.

The acoustic jingle-jangle of "Dee" might have prompted hairspray-addled gals to,

as the kids today say, "give it up," but it offers nothing that you can't find in more melodic form on a Lindsey Buckingham platter. Too, after Eddie V.H. traveled roughly the same look-ma-I'm-playing-really -really-fast-on-a-nylon-stringed-guitar! path on "Spanish Fly," the song loses whatever it might have scored in novelty points.

There are moments in the Rhoads/Ozzy catalog where you can practically hear the inner guitar hero R7 pressing up against the constraints of the meat-and-potatoes genre, notably on the live versions of "Children of the Grave" and misguided lawsuit magnet "Suicide Solution." But that's all they are: moments. As for Rhoads' pre-Ozzy work with Quiet Riot, well, good luck finding it. Originally released only in Japan, the records can't be located even on "non-official" music downloading sites. But gosh, if you want to hear the band's post-Randy, just-piling-it-on version of "Mama Weer All Crazee Now," you're in luck.

At the time of Rhoads' tragic death - made all the more tragic by the fact that it happened during what was essentially a prank gone awry - Rhoads was said to be contemplating ditching Ozzy's band to pursue further education in classical music. Who knows - maybe he would have earned all those plaudits that have since come his way. But without anything more than the music in front of me, I can't label Randy Rhoads as anything more than a sad case of what-coulda-been - and, as such, one of guitardom's most overrated players.