



By John McGlasson - GJD Contributor

I was recently listening to Pandora free online radio as I do pretty much every day, and something hit me in the face, guilt. Because for the last 15 years or so I've been going around turning up my nose every time a Def Leppard song came along, since all I heard from them for years was the syrupy, sappy, pop-oriented crap they released on Pyromania and after.

But the song I heard was one I hadn't heard in possibly 23 years, "Wasted"; from the album "On Through The Night."

I was instantly thrust back to my teenage room, and I could feel exactly the way I felt listening to this album, and also "High & Dry". I was a HUGE Def Leppard fan! Though I'd had that fact washed away by two solid years of Malmsteenitis (a condition suffered at some point by millions of guitarists over 30, though it's seen a new resurgence recently), and a series of bad releases by the band, I'd forgotten how heavily influenced I was early on by Def Leppard.

I started a new Def Leppard station on Pandora so I could hear more, skipping the sappy tunes until the merciful software delivered another tune from "On Through the Night". I'd forgotten how I obsessed over these albums! I remembered how heavy this stuff was back then, there were heavier bands out there, but the rumors of this powerful band from across the pond had spread to small-town Illinois by 1981. There was an underground feeling to it because they had absolutely no airplay, the fanbase was grown organically, which obviously led to their signing by a major label, and the sterilization of everything that was great about them soon thereafter.

While I bought and enjoyed "Pyromania", a 10-million selling release, the band seemed to steal themselves from us, the teenage stoner guitarists who made them huge. They were top ten, everyone loved them, so why didn't I so much anymore?

Listen to the albums in order, and you can hear the progression. The first two albums were pure rock power, but "Pyromania" was calculated, big-label, mainstream pop music. Guitarist Phil Collen was added near the end of the recording sessions, replacing the tragically alcohol-addicted founding guitarist Pete Willis. Pete's story is not a happy one, he was a rock genius at a very early age who got literally an inch from the success he'd dreamed of and blew it, leaving him to live with that for the rest of his life. I saw a clip from an interview with him on VH1-Behind The Music, and it was clear that this near-miss is still the defining moment of his life.

I hope you'll take some time to hit your favorite online source of music and listen to some of the songs from their first two albums like "Wasted" and "Hello America" from "On Through the Night" and "Let It Go" and "On through the Night" from the album "High & Dry". Pete Willis and Steve Clark (who died from his alcoholism in 1991) had incredible rock tone and chops, but the songs were somehow bigger and more sophisticated than those of most of their rock peers. Pete wrote a great deal of the material on those first three albums, and the difference could be easily heard on the following releases produced without him. (I understand that there's no way to know how much of Pete's playing was left on "Pyromania", an album that was almost complete when Pete was booted and replaced by Phil Collen, and which contains thousands of overdubs).

Now that I've been listening to the first two albums again, I'm happy with the way they hold up today. Some bands I listened to in my youth don't, but Def Leppard showed enormous sophistication on those first two albums, and I get a thrill from hearing stuff today I'd loved so much in my younger days, but forgotten about completely. The bar was high back then, and Pete Willis and Steve Clark were two guys that made the grade, and deserve to be heard today.

Pete went on to form a highly experimental group known as Gogmagog with current and former members of Iron Maiden, and a band called Roadhouse for which I can't find any info. I understand Pete continues to drink heavily, and is not in the best of health. Such is rock, and life, when you're living with grand-scale disappointment. I wish him the best. Thanks for reading!