

Kix shot in the garage at photographer Mark Weiss's house, Rumson, New Jersey, September 1989. L-R: Brian 'Damage' Forsythe (guitar), Jimmy 'Chocolate' Chalfant (drums), Steve Whiteman (vocals), Donny Purnell (bass), Ronnie '10/10' Younkins (guitar)

# GET YOUR KIX!

They may have scored a platinum album with 1988's 'Blow My Fuse', but for some reason **Kix** were never lauded as rock titans. *Dave Reynolds* aims to put that right...

**IT'S THE EVENING OF** Friday 18 November 1988 and Kix guitarist Brian 'Damage' Forsythe is on stage at Birmingham's Edward's No.8 club. To be honest, though, it's pushing things a bit to call the tiny area where he's performing a stage. I'm not sure what you'd call it, really. But what I am sure about is that Forsythe looks dangerously pale. For a man who claims never to be unwell, he looks very odd indeed.

During a break in a quite ferocious set the Baltimore-based band are delivering on their UK live debut, Brian is about to swap guitars with a member of the band's crew when he finally reaches breaking point. Forsythe moves behind the drum riser occupied by Jimmy 'Chocolate' Chalfant and is violently sick, before returning to the stage feeling slightly better, yet still suffering the effects of a bout of what turns out to be food poisoning.

There's still a problem, though. There's an electric cooling fan sitting under the drum riser, pointing in the direction of bassist Donnie Purnell. Now it's Purnell's turn to feel queasy as the unmistakable smell of vomit drifts across the room. A few punters are also finding it hard to keep their dinner down. This really isn't what Kix are hoping for from their first ever UK live show.

"I really wondered whether it was going to turn into that scene in Monty Python's *The Meaning Of Life*, where

the whole room is throwing up after Mr Creosote blows up!" Brian Forsythe laughs today.

This episode is one of the most powerful memories the ever-amiable Forsythe and equally cordial vocalist Steve Whiteman have of Kix's first foray onto foreign shores. It was an all-too-short, three date UK jaunt that remained the band's sole venture into Europe until Kix finally returned late last year for a one-off date appearing at the Rockingham event held in Nottingham in October 2017.

**TAKING A** no-nonsense approach to their craft and revelling in songs about sex, cars, heat and explosives (though not always in that order), the origins of Kix lie in a band called Shooze, formed by Forsythe, Purnell and fellow guitarist Ronnie '10/10' Younkins in Hagerstown, Maryland back in 1977. The group was briefly known as The Generators before settling on Kix, which is the name of a popular US cereal brand. With a line-up completed by the addition of Whiteman and Chalfant - who replaced original Shooze drummer Donnie Spence in 1979 - Kix always had a strong work ethic. The band built up a decent following along the East Coast of the States and eventually secured a deal with Atlantic Records thanks to their manager at the time, Bob Aiss, who'd also managed fellow Maryland act Face Dancer.

All photos: Mark Weiss/guy Weiss



Brian and Steve could always find innovative ways to amuse themselves on tour...

Kix released their eponymous debut album, produced by Tom Allom, in September 1981. It was a nine-track piece of bombastic plastic that gave a respectful nod to AC/DC, while retaining a 'Made in Maryland' feel. The album featured a number of songs that would remain live favourites for years to come, notably the raucous 'Yeah, Yeah, Yeah' and 'Atomic Bombs'. Yet 'Kix' was a commercial failure and the band were forced to go back to the drawing board for a second album, where guitarist Brad Divens, later of thrash outfit Wrathchild America, replaced Younkins. Whereas the debut album consisted entirely of band originals, 1983's 'Cool Kids' was produced by Pete Solley and stank both of compromise and record label interference. Featuring three cover songs ('Burning Love' by Spider [USA], Franne Golde's title track, and Nick Gilder's 'Body Talk') together with a number of originals, the majority of the tunes sounded like a band desperately trying to appease a record company demanding a hit to justify their investment.

I FIRST saw Kix when they headlined the L'Amour club in Brooklyn in May 1986 on a bill that also featured Cinderella. The band had released their third album 'Midnite Dynamite' in October of '85, produced by Beau Hill and with Ronnie Younkins back in the fold. Kix's reputation was on the up. Maybe it was the jet lag on a very late night in New York, but I came away disappointed by the band's performance, especially when I compared it to what Tom Keifer and his bandmates had to offer. I later reasoned that this was because Cinderella rehearsed their set to within an inch of its life, while Kix opted for a more spontaneous approach, with frontman

Steve Whiteman preferring to channel the spirit of James Brown. Cinderella put on a performance, but I soon warmed to the fact that Kix put on a *show*.

'Midnite Dynamite' was a huge improvement on 'Cool Kids'. It saw Kix reverting back to recording good, honest, hard rock songs just as they'd done on their debut album. Steve Whiteman may have been the band's MC, but it seemed clear to me that bassist Donnie Purnell was the *de facto* band leader. A feisty little chap, I got the impression that Purnell didn't suffer fools gladly. By this time he'd become the band's principal songwriter, but Beau Hill was convinced Purnell needed help if the band were to compete with the likes of RATT, Def Leppard and

Mötley Crüe, the era's big rock hitters. Purnell hooked up with Bob Halligan Jr., whose song '(Take These) Chains' had been a big US hit for Judas Priest in 1982. Crack The Sky's John Palumbo and Kip Winger also got in on the writing action, the latter three years before the Winger debut album appeared.

"Every time we did a record Donnie just got better as a writer," notes Brian Forsythe. "He'd started to find his groove on 'Midnite Dynamite' and things really clicked for us with Beau Hill. The album didn't do as well as we'd hoped, but we were heading in the right direction."

ALTHOUGH 'MIDNITE Dynamite' wasn't particularly successful, you couldn't help but be impressed by the amount of work Kix put in to promote it on the road. "We were relentless," says Whiteman. "We were always very popular along the East Coast, so we'd bank the money we'd make from shows there to be able to head out into other areas of the country on our own dime

playing to crowds that, at the time, were out of our comfort zone. We soon started to sell out shows in places like Cincinnati and Detroit. Our hard work made things happen for us. Atlantic had noticed the pockets of support we had in other parts of the country and that definitely helped us when promoting the next album."

A falling out between Purnell and Hill meant the producer didn't work on the follow-up to 'Midnite Dynamite' and Tom Werman was behind the desk when Kix began work on 'Blow My Fuse'. It would become the most successful record of Kix's lengthy career. Was Werman the band's choice, or the label's?

"The label and our management were both very keen on Tom Werman," recalls Steve. "Every band he'd worked with had done well. He was a great A&R guy in that respect, because he could smell it when something was going to be a hit."

"I didn't feel like Tom was forced on us," says Brian. "He'd produced some classic records for acts like Cheap Trick and everybody was excited to work with him, even though Donnie wound up not getting along with him! Tom surrounded himself with good engineers - John Purdell and Duane Baron in our case - and they did a great job. I think Donnie felt those guys were doing all the work and Tom was just goofing off. Tom wasn't a musician like Beau, but he did have a very good ear and I respected him for that. I got along with him."

Werman believed Kix finally had the makings of a hit record with the material they had for 'Blow My Fuse'. Did the band feel the same way?

"Not really," says Whiteman, honestly. "After what had happened to the first three albums, all we could be was hopeful. But we'd worked very hard on the demos. We knew we had good songs."

"You know what? I *did* sense that we really had something," states Forsythe, offering a different point of view. "It was like you could feel the universe getting behind us. On that record everything fell into place."

Indeed it did. It didn't hurt that at this point in their career Kix were being managed by Mark Puma and Joe Gerber, who also looked after the affairs of Twisted Sister and Zebra. With both of those acts also signed to Atlantic Records there was already an established relationship between management and label - and with a great record produced by a band that wasn't afraid of hard work, the omens for 'Blow My Fuse' were good.



'80s metal photo sessions often happened in the bathroom!

"WE OPENED FOR YNGWIE MALMSTEEN, BUT I DIDN'T KNOW WHO HE WAS. HE CAME FROM A DIFFERENT AREA OF MUSIC TO THE KIND OF THINGS I WAS LISTENING TO."  
STEVE WHITEMAN

"MTV got on board," notes Steve. "They started showing the video for 'Cold Blood' and that took the album to gold status. And then 'Don't Close Your Eyes' was the single that helped us to platinum."

THE BAND'S first UK trip had initially been planned to coincide with the release of 'Blow My Fuse' in September of 1988, but an unfortunate event meant the shows were shunted back a couple of months...

"We were doing dates up and down the West Coast of the States," recalls Steve. "The guy responsible for driving our van got drunk and wrote it off in a crash, so we had to use the money we'd saved for the trip to the UK to buy a new vehicle."

"I'd been to England on a visit there in 1986, so I knew what to expect, but not how we'd be received," explains Forsythe, a

self-confessed Keith Richards devotee, and the one who most embraced the '80s glam look in Kix.

"The reason for the trip was to see if we could spark some interest," recalls Steve. "But it wasn't really a tour, because we only played three shows."

The first gig was in Birmingham and as a *Kerrang!* writer at the time I went along for the ride. I met the band at their base camp - the infamous Columbia Hotel in London's Lancaster Gate - at noon. The five band members, assorted roadies, co-manager Joe Gerber and I crammed into a mini-bus heading for the West Midlands. After dropping Donnie Purnell, Jimmy Chalfant and the crew off in Birmingham city centre, where the band had booked a day room at a Holiday Inn, the rest of the entourage (Steve, Brian, Ronnie, tour manager Bob Daniels and I) continued up the M6 for an appointment with esteemed DJ Paul Anthony at Signal Radio in Stoke-On-Trent. Given that he was the main songwriter, I found it odd that Purnell wasn't with us. "He didn't do interviews, except for the odd bit of magazine stuff," explains Brian. "Steve and I were always the guys who did the majority of the media work."

After the interview, the bus driver found a local pizza joint in Stoke where we stopped for a meal. Somehow I ended up footing the bill for it.

"I don't remember what kind of pizza I ate - and no one else was feeling sick - but I was feeling rough before we went on that night," continues Brian. "I felt like I wanted to throw up as soon as we got to the venue. I tried, but I couldn't. I was feeling miserable on stage and then just after we did 'Don't Close Your Eyes' I went behind ▶