

The REO line up that recorded 1977's 'Live: You Get What You Play For' album. L-R: Alan Gratzer (drums), Gregg Philbin (bass), Kevin Cronin (vocals and guitar), Gary Richrath (guitar), Neal Doughty (keyboards)



BEFORE THE STORM

REO SPEEDWAGON defined the sound of American radio rock with their 10 times platinum 1980 album, 'Hi Infidelity'. But the band had an extensive history of music-making throughout the '70s as they struggled to make the big time. As a new box set charting the years from 1971 to 1977 emerges, *Jon Hotten* talks to frontman **KEVIN CRONIN** and keyboardist **NEAL DOUGHTY** about the long, hard road they travelled...

KEVIN CRONIN HAS NO problem remembering the night his life changed, even though it was almost a lifetime ago. The date was 9 February 1964, when The Beatles appeared for the first of three consecutive Sundays on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the States. Cronin was 12 years old, and felt like he was the only kid in school interested in the guitar and piano rather than sports. When he carried a guitar to his weekly lesson – his parents rented the instrument for the sum of 50 cents a week from a shop called Rossi Music in Oak Lawn, Illinois – the other kids would bully him and take the mickey. But the day after The Beatles came on the television...

"Man, it was literally overnight. The girls didn't want to know those jocks any more... It was, 'Who's the sensitive guy with the guitar?'... I'd been taking lessons for a little over a year at that point and I didn't know why. I was just playing stupid little things like 'On Top Of Old Smokey' or whatever, and I was ridiculed by guys who thought they were badasses. That weekend The Beatles came on, though, suddenly all those guys started following me, because I was the only one in the neighbourhood who knew how to play the guitar. And the girls suddenly weren't so enamoured by the tough, greaser type guys. I

was just in the right place at the right time, I guess..."

Cronin, who's just celebrated his 67th birthday, is looking back over a life in music that began for real that day. It was one of the few overnight transformations that he or his band of 40-something years, REO Speedwagon, have had. The public image is of a group that recorded the proto-power ballad 'Keep On Loving You' in 1980 and relentlessly rode the wave they created, before sliding under the surface as the decade closed and generational change came along. The reality is quite different.

REO SPEEDWAGON formed in 1967, even before Led Zeppelin, and were, as *Rock Candy Mag* caught up with them, at the start of an American tour that will extend into April 2019 and their 51st year as a going concern. Their '80s chart success may sustain them as they and their peers ride a seemingly endless wave of nostalgia for classic rock music. But their story extends for many years either side of the glory days. The earliest of those, the band's formative period between their eponymous debut album in 1971 and the 1977 double live release 'Live: You Get What You Play For', is represented by a new box set, 'The Early Years'. It's a collection that reveals



REO performing with frontman Mike Murphy (centre). "His voice could not be more different than Kevin's. He kinda sounded like Ray Charles."

and revels in the roots of REO Speedwagon as a classic, riff-heavy, sometimes swaggeringly good American rock'n'roll band, one where the living was surprisingly hard for men who were labelled soft rockers, and one for whom stadium-sized success long proved elusive.

HALF IN jest, Cronin refers to himself as "REO Speedwagon's second and fourth lead singer." It's a gag that has its roots in the turbulent start he went through and the serendipity that eventually brought the band's classic line-up together.

"I wanted to be a singer-songwriter and a musician," he says. "When I saw The Beatles I was, 'Well that's what I want to do.' I'm sure a lot of people watching *The Ed Sullivan Show* that day had the same thought, and I'm one of the fortunate few that it actually happened for."

It's a typical Cronin sentiment. I've interviewed him on a few occasions and he is, at least under those artificial circumstances, one of the sunniest characters you'll encounter; genial, good-humoured, self-deprecating and quick to mention all of the luck that's come his way. He talks happily about his childhood in the Chicago suburbs, the family that encouraged his musical ambitions since the first day he sat down in front of his grandmother's piano as a three year old and began bashing away ("they thought they heard some sense of rhythm"), and his

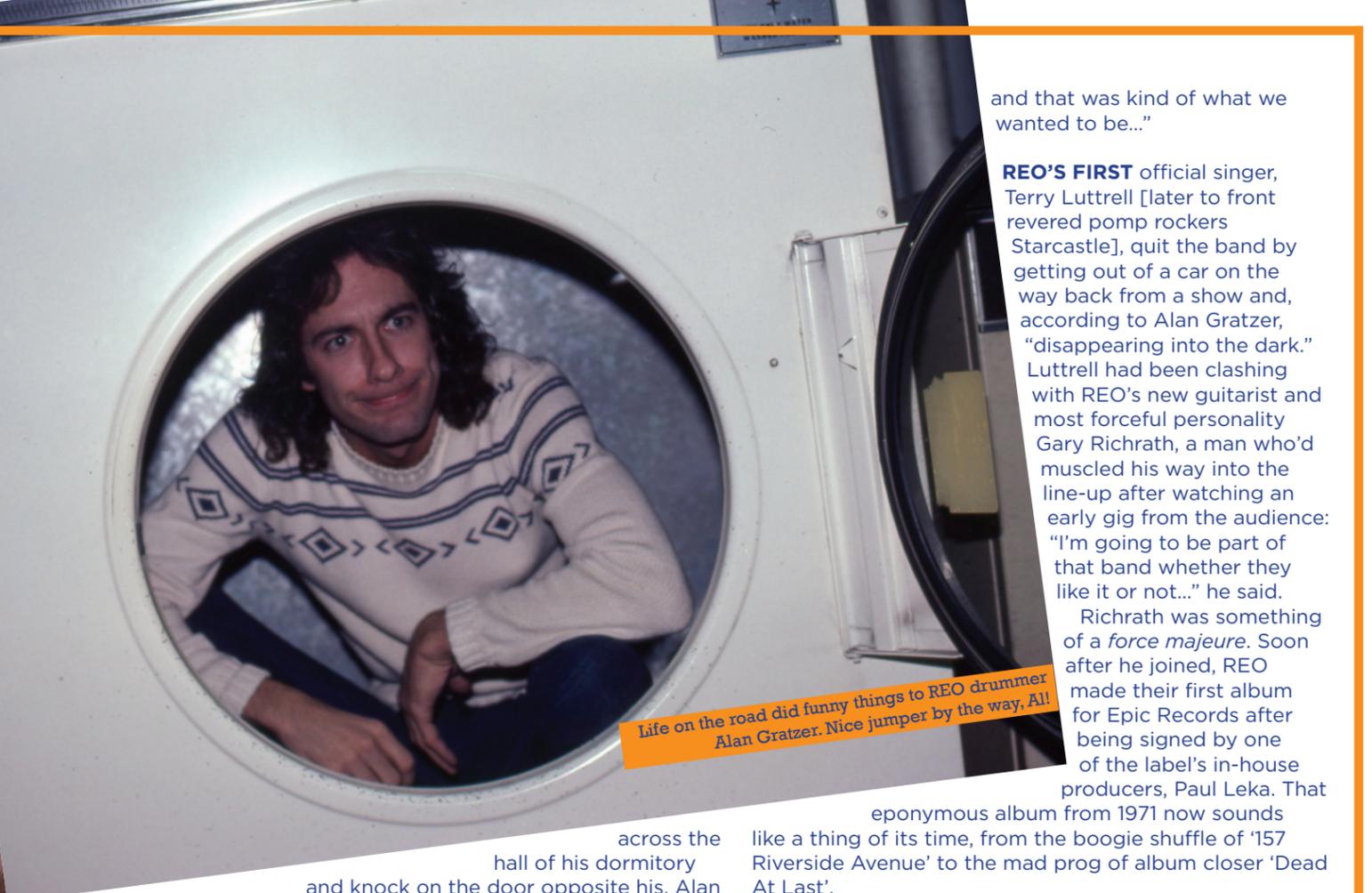
ambitions to become one of the folksy, sensitive singer-songwriters who dominated the early '70s. It's a sensibility that would prove crucial when it was added to REO's bar-room brawn. Cronin would also write the band's other defining hit, 1985's 'Can't Fight This Feeling', and his high, plaintive voice and mighty bubble perm came to represent a certain time and place in American music.

But before all of that he was an enthusiastic self-starter, moving from his high school band Fushia to the Chicago supper club circuit, where he tried to emulate his great heroes Jackson Browne and James Taylor. One of the tunes he wrote in homage was called 'Music Man'. "And if it wasn't for that song," he says, "I'd still be out there in the folk clubs of Chicago..."

KEVIN CRONIN wasn't to know that the fates were already working in his favour. As he set out on his journey to become the next sensitive singer-songwriter staring down from the walls of a thousand college dorm rooms, Neal Doughty was enrolling at the University of Illinois in the city of Champaign, some 130 miles south of Chicago. He was going to study electrical engineering, "a very, very serious curriculum. It's rocket science and it's really hard..." and on his first night, decided to walk

"I GOT A CALL FROM THIS GUY WHO SAID HE NEEDED A SINGER, THAT HIS BAND HAD AN ALBUM OUT ON EPIC RECORDS, AND THAT THEY GOT A SALARY OF TWO HUNDRED DOLLARS A WEEK. I'M ON THE OTHER END OF THE LINE THINKING, 'THIS SOUNDS LIKE THE BIGGEST LOAD OF BS.'"
KEVIN CRONIN

"EVERY RECORD WAS A BRAND NEW EXPERIMENT. WE'D HAD THREE DIFFERENT SINGERS, WE WERE IN OUR 20S AND WE WERE JUST REALLY STILL FIGURING OUT HOW TO DO THIS. I THINK THAT MAKING MISTAKES IS REALLY UNDERRATED. WE MADE OUR MISTAKES IN PUBLIC, BUT FROM THEM I THINK CAME SOME STRONG MATERIAL."
NEAL DOUGHTY



Life on the road did funny things to REO drummer Alan Gratzner. Nice jumper by the way, Al!

and that was kind of what we wanted to be..."

REO'S FIRST official singer, Terry Luttrell [later to front revered pomp rockers Starcastle], quit the band by getting out of a car on the way back from a show and, according to Alan Gratzner, "disappearing into the dark." Luttrell had been clashing with REO's new guitarist and most forceful personality Gary Richrath, a man who'd muscled his way into the line-up after watching an early gig from the audience: "I'm going to be part of that band whether they like it or not..." he said.

Richrath was something of a *force majeure*. Soon after he joined, REO made their first album for Epic Records after being signed by one of the label's in-house producers, Paul Leka. That

eponymous album from 1971 now sounds across the hall of his dormitory and knock on the door opposite his. Alan Gratzner was the guy who answered.

"It was just pure fate that he was right across the hall from me," Doughty says. "I'd never met him before in my life, two engineering students who were becoming a little [disenchanted]... what we were there to study didn't turn out to be what we thought it would. I thought I was going to be inventing things on the first day. But it was very dry, pure mathematics. And Alan was drumming in a band that played around campus, and he wanted to do a lot of the new stuff, much of which was coming from England. "Neither one of us planned it to be a lifelong career. But once we started playing a few shows and staying out all night, we began missing classes and it became impossible to continue with our studies."

Doughty was a keyboard player who'd never been in a band before he joined in with Gratzner's. In turn, the drummer looked to Doughty to learn the new material that was just about beginning to appear on radio - music from America's West Coast scene played by underground stations. Doughty learned all of The Doors' 'Light My Fire' by ear and the band were up and running. And yet engineering still had one more gift to bestow on the pair. Doughty walked into a History of Transportation class one day, and written on the board were the words R.E.O. Speed Wagon, "a milestone truck of the early 20th century," as Doughty recalls, and one that would give the band a name before they had anything like a settled line-up. "It sounded sort of heavy duty and high speed,

like a thing of its time, from the boogie shuffle of '157 Riverside Avenue' to the mad prog of album closer 'Dead At Last'.

It was Richrath who realised things would have to change if REO were going to get anywhere. He'd noticed homemade flyers advertising a 'Musician Referral Service' springing up around music stores in Chicago, and decided to ring the number. On the other end of the line was the only musician who was actually a member of the Musician Referral Service, its owner and sole proprietor, Kevin Cronin.

"The idea was that I could help people who were looking to get into bands, but in the meantime I could skim the cream of the crop for my own group," Cronin recalls. "So I went around town putting the fliers up.

But the trouble with it was that everyone who called said they were the next Jimi Hendrix, the next Eric Clapton... You couldn't get a straight story from anybody and there was no way to check and see if people were being on the level. So by the time I got a call from this guy who said he needed a singer, that his band had an album out on Epic Records and was getting ready to go to Nashville to record their second album, and that they got a salary of two hundred dollars a week, well I'm on the other end of the line thinking, 'This sounds like the biggest load of BS I've heard yet'...

"Finally I get the name of the band out of him, and I thought, 'OK, I've kinda heard of those guys.' So Gary Richrath took a ride up to where I lived and I played him 'Music Man' and a song on side two of Elton John's 'Madman Across The Water' album called 'Holiday Inn', a thing I played when I did my acoustic shows. But

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