

Batsh*t Crazy!

There was nothing remotely sane about songwriter **Jim Steinman**'s idea to make an OTT rock album with gothic influences. But his collaboration with vocalist **Meat Loaf** produced one of the wildest, most outrageous and most successful albums of all time. *Mick Wall* traces the convoluted history of the 1977 monster 'Bat Out Of Hell'...

MEAT LOAF WAS AN overweight misfit who came from trouble. Jim Steinman was an over-entitled product of an elite private education system. One a poor boy from Texas; the other a rich kid from New York. Put them in the same room and it could never work. Could it? As it turned out singer Marvin Lee Aday and songwriter Steinman somehow managed to produce 1977's 'Bat Out Of Hell', one of the biggest-selling albums of all time. And at the same time they proved the old cliché true: that opposites really do attract.

"I thought Jimmy was the weirdest guy I'd ever seen when we first met," Meat Loaf would tell me years later. "He walked into this rehearsal room wearing a cape and gloves. Then he walked up to the piano and peeled off these gloves - only to reveal more gloves on underneath!"

"I'd worked with all kinds of 'good-looking guy' singers," Steinman told me. "But they just didn't have what I was looking for. Then Meat walked in one day and I couldn't believe my eyes. He was huge, a monster! Then he opened his mouth and out came this huge voice! I thought, 'My God! At last. This is the guy I've been looking for!'"

IT WAS destiny. It had to be. Until then Meat Loaf had been a supporting singer-actor in freak show musicals

like *Hair*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *National Lampoon's Lemmings*. He'd tried his hand at fronting a band - Meat Loaf Soul - and had even scored a record deal, releasing the 'Stoney and Meatloaf' album in 1971. None of it gained any traction though.

Steinman, meanwhile, was a musical prodigy whose main influences were classical composer Richard Wagner and R&B crazyman Little Richard. He also had a soft spot for Phil Spector and leather-clad '60s girl groups.

Or as he put it to me, "I loved the idea of melding classical music with rock, drama with pop. I thought of myself as Little Richard Wagner."

By the time Steinman met Meat Loaf he'd already worked on Joseph Papp's *Shakespeare In The Park* theatrical programme in New York and written his own musicals, including one, *Neverland*, that was based on Peter Pan. Yet somehow he'd always failed to find fame.

The singer and the songwriter - the creature and the creator - worked on stage for the first time when they were both in the touring band for National Lampoon in 1975. When it was over, Jim invited Meat to work with him on his grand obsession, the music he was creating as an extension of his *Neverland* project that he wanted to turn into an album. The two men spent months holed up together working on it at the Ansonia Hotel on New

York's Upper West Side. The Ansonia was one of those boho residential joints that attracted artists. In the basement lay the Continental Baths, a gay bathhouse where Bette Midler provided the cabaret with Barry Manilow as her piano accompanist.

"It was me pounding away and bleeding, Meat sweating like a maniac," said Steinman. "Nobody could figure out what it would sound like when it was finished."

ALTHOUGH MUCH of the material that would end up on 'Bat Out Of Hell' came from Steinman's earlier attempts at musicals, Meat Loaf later insisted that he'd also had a big hand in the tunes.

"The first song I talked him into writing," claimed Meat, "was 'You Took The Words Right Out Of My Mouth'. Then we sat in a car one night, worked out 'Paradise By The Dashboard Light', and I made him extend 'Bat Out Of Hell.'"

According to Meat, it was also he who came up with the lyrical idea for 'All Revved Up With No Place To Go', based on a teenage date in Texas when he'd driven a girl down to a make-out spot by the lake.

"Jim is a better writer than I am; I can think of things, of stories, but I don't put it down in words too well."

On the National Lampoon tour there had been a

beautiful blonde singer named Ellen Foley. Meat thought it would be great to include her in the project. "I had Jim write a duet for me and Ellen Foley on 'Paradise...'," he explained. What few people knew at the time, though, was that Meat and Ellen had begun a relationship. Foley was tiny, probably weighing about 100 pounds - less than a third the size of Meat at the time - and Jim recalled people not knowing quite how to react to that information.

"I'm saying to people, 'It really doesn't involve a crane or anything like that'... Meanwhile I'm thinking, maybe a crane *is* involved."

FOLEY JOINED a growing Steinman/Loaf team of like-minded musicians and thinkers. Another person to sign up was Rory Dodd, whose soaring voice would later be heard singing the "Turn around bright eyes" line on 'Total Eclipse Of The Heart', Bonnie Tyler's Steinman-penned '83 smash hit.

According to Meat, "Rory invented many of the background parts that were real intricate inside different things like 'Paradise...' and 'Bat...'" But it wasn't always happy families...

"Jimmy had me doing different ways of singing 'For Crying Out Loud'," Meat recalled. "And we had a lot

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UNCOVERED THE STORY OF 'BAT OUT OF HELL'



Meat with his hog. "Even the ballads were motorcycle rock ballads."

of arguments. One time I turned over a piano on him! Then we panicked, because we had to put this piano back together." They did it, he said, "with chewing gum and string so no one would know it was broken."

Steinman told me that the major turning point on the project for him came with the title song. Until that moment, "I never really knew how to write. 'Bat Out Of Hell' was written like a Hitchcock film in the sense that the opening verses are just like the opening of [his psychological thriller movie] *Psycho*."

"Of course, I'm clinically insane and this is all being filtered through my mind, which is an X-rated forbidden zone. But it does function occasionally and the way *Psycho* begins is with a great long shot of Phoenix, Arizona. Then it goes to a medium shot of the motel room from the outside, then to a closer shot right outside the motel, and then to a close-up in the motel room of the two lovers in bed."

"'Bat Out Of Hell' basically starts with that long shot. *The sirens are screaming and the fires are howling way down in the valley tonight...*' So it starts with that overall long picture and then it keeps going in closer to the bedroom, which is when the girl and guy are together. I realised that I do write that way intuitively, probably having absorbed Hitchcock's language."

MEANWHILE, THE *Neverland* song-cycle that was now mutating into the 'Bat Out Of Hell' album was being added to and subtracted from, cross-cut and rearranged. You could read anything into these songs. It just

depended on how far you allowed your imagination to run free.

A sprawling 10-minute epic Jim had sweated bullets for titled 'The Formation Of The Pack' would, at Meat's insistence, eventually be cut in half, ramped up and re-titled 'All Revved Up With No Place To Go'. Jim had heard the first iterations of 'Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad' as a Hank Williams-type murder ballad ("because country music was so damn dark and so damn

desolate"), the lyric coming from a conversation with his friend, the actress Mimi Kennedy. "I was complaining to Mimi about no one liking my music, and she said, 'Well, it's so damn complicated, Jim.' Elvis was on the radio in the other room singing 'I Want You, I Need You, I Love You' and Mimi said, 'Why don't you write something like that?' I thought, 'Well I'll try...'"

'You Took The Words Right Out Of My Mouth' combined Steinman's love of The Who's upstart power chords with a full-on Phil Spector melody.

The spoken word piece at the start of the song, where Jim asks, "*On a hot summer night, would you offer your throat to the wolf with the red roses?*" and a breathless Ellen Foley replies "Yes" was another *Neverland* outtake.

SLOWLY, PAINSTAKINGLY, and over a period of two years, the finished songs emerged. The great problem with them was that they were hard to demo. If the idea was to have waves crashing, motorcycles revving, girls swooning and drums pounding, well that couldn't really be done on a four-track tape machine.

There was only one thing for it. If Steinman were ever to see his songs realised on a fully-fledged record, then his best bet would be to call up record companies, find a piano, sit down and play the damn songs in front of them. To Meat and Jim, with their shared background in theatre, this sounded logical. To anyone in a record company, this wasn't the kind of thing you saw every day – the strangely attired and deliberately mysterious Jim and the 350lb Meat Loaf wearing a white dress shirt and tuxedo trousers, endlessly mopping sweat from his giant moon face with a red handkerchief. Sometimes the pair were accompanied by the elfin Ellen Foley so she and Meat could duet on 'Paradise By The Dashboard Light'. But these folk weren't necessarily a welcome sight to record company talent scouts of the day, in thrall as they were to the two big musical trends of skinny-tie new wave and thin-white-lines disco.

Again and again Meat and Jim crashed and burned. So much so that Jim commented, "We were even getting turned down by people who were *thinking* of starting record companies."

Every now and again, though, they'd catch a break. They got a publishing deal and an advance of \$40,000, which seemed like a huge fortune at the time. But it didn't last long once they started spending it. They got an appointment with the greatest pair of ears in the business, Clive Davis, who'd signed Janis Joplin, Santana and Bruce Springsteen when he was head of Columbia Records, and who now ran his own label, Arista. But Clive told Jim that he had no idea how to write a pop song and that he should listen to the radio more.

For years, Steinman saved the piece of paper on which Davis had scribbled the 'correct' chord sequences he needed to improve his "amateurish" songs – the same songs that just a few years later Meat Loaf would be performing in sold-out arenas all over the world. "I still have this paper that has A, A, B arrow C, C, C, C, C," says Steinman of his bitter little souvenir.

The problem was, Steinman wasn't interested in writing formulaic pop songs for contemporary radio. He was writing, "motorcycle rock songs. Even the ballads were motorcycle rock ballads." But no one was getting that.

And the more he tried to persuade people, the more



OK, OK, we get the Meat analogy!



Meat tells it like it is to Karla DeVito. It was extraordinary, deeply weird and not a little disturbing, apparently...

they pulled away. And then came Todd...

TODD RUNDGREN could play stacks of instruments; write an amazing assortment of songs; perform solo or with his band, Utopia; record; arrange; produce – all in a brain-scrambling variety of styles and genres.

When he wasn't making his own albums – an eclectic catalogue of pop, psyche, rock, prog, show tunes and soul – he was helping other artists make some of the most singular and influential albums of the '70s. One of his first gigs was helping to record and mix the 1970 album 'Stage Fright' for Bob Dylan alumni The Band. He'd then gone on to produce the game-changing first New York Dolls album and hit albums for Grand Funk Railroad and Hall & Oates. The

minute Todd clapped eyes on big, frown-faced Meat and crazy, cape-wearing Jim, he knew that he'd found some new friends.

Said Steinman, "You could say to him, 'I want a guitar that sounds like a motorcycle reproducing in a nocturnal alleyway,' and Todd would fiddle with a few boxes and buttons, strap his guitar on and do it." He laughed. "Todd is the only genuine genius I've ever worked with."

For his part, Todd was simply amused by the songs. "Oh my God," he'd said the first time he heard them. "I've got to make that album." The music was gothic and dramatic and passionate and *outré*. These were not the kind of songs cool people would necessarily write or listen to. But they were something different, they weren't like anything else, and they rang Todd's bell.

"All you need is a record deal," Todd told them, "and we'll go in the studio." Meat mumbled something about being signed to RCA, even though nothing had yet been confirmed. "Great," said Todd. "Let's get started."

THEY ALL went to Bearsville Studios in Woodstock, Upstate New York, where Todd had become a virtual artist-in-residence, recording many of his own albums there. It was 1975 and Christmas was coming. Todd brought in some guys from his own band, Utopia – Kasim Sulton on bass, Roger Powell on keyboards, and Willie Wilcox on drums – and then two members of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, pianist Roy Bittan and drummer Max Weinberg. All they needed now was the money to pay for it all.

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JIM STEINMAN

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