

CULT

LEADERS



Cult mainstays Billy Duffy (guitar) and Ian Astbury (vocals) photographed in London, 5 March 1989

The Cult has always been a rock band that likes to be out of step with the general movements of the time. *Howard Johnson* reckons that's why they're special. As a 30th anniversary edition of their biggest album, 'Sonic Temple', appears, he talks at length to guitarist **Billy Duffy** about the halcyon period in the '80s when the band was at the forefront of contemporary rock'n'roll...

FOR MY MONEY THE Cult are the best and most interesting British rock band of the last 35 years. Ever since their signature tune, 'She Sells Sanctuary' became a UK hit single in 1985 the band have married traditional rock roots with a punk and alternative heritage, constantly looking to stretch themselves and re-draw the demarcation lines of what guitar music can be. Not everyone has enjoyed their blending of styles. Some see The Cult as opportunists whose hearts were never in the rock world that they came to inhabit in the second half of the '80s. But I've known the band's two founder members, guitarist Billy Duffy and vocalist Ian Astbury, for as long as The Cult has existed, and have closely followed the band's progress, interviewing them many times along the way. Their two vastly differing personalities have always been at the heart of the creative push and pull that makes The Cult so interesting. I don't think The Cult have ever been opportunists. They wanted success, but they weren't built to make enough compromises to grab the really big cash prizes. As such The Cult never became stadium staples. Rather they ploughed their own furrow as stubborn rock outsiders. Whenever they've worked together Astbury and Duffy have remained constantly creative, never happy to stand still, always keen to explore new corners of guitar-based music. Not everything they've done has been brilliant. But much of it has been.

Of course those who like their rock to feel classic will get most out of the period between 1985 and 1989 when three albums - 'Love', 'Electric' and 'Sonic Temple' - introduced The Cult to a mainstream audience. So it's this period that I wanted to discuss in-depth with Billy Duffy when I spoke to him recently...

THE 'LOVE' ALBUM, RELEASED IN 1985, WAS THE FIRST CULT RELEASE WHERE BRITAIN'S TRADITIONAL ROCK COMMUNITY SAT UP AND TOOK NOTICE OF THE BAND.

"That's true, but what's weird about that record is that if you take the title track and 'The Phoenix' off it, then you have a very different album. Those were the last two songs written, riffs I'd come up with the week before we went in the studio. I played the riff to 'The Phoenix' and [stand in drummer at the time] Mark Brzezicki played

these incredible drum fills. There are only four chords in both those songs, but what Mark did was allow me to build tunes. Plus our producer Steve Brown was open-minded enough to say, 'Why *wouldn't* you do five tracks of wah wah guitar?' 'Why *can't* we put a cowbell on a rock song?' There's cowbell all the way through 'Love! We were up for anything that was contrary and interesting. Ian heard 'The Phoenix', said 'That's amazing, the best thing I've ever heard. I'll be right back,' and he wrote the melody and the lyrics in about half an hour. We just went with our gut."

DID YOU FEEL YOU'D FOUND YOUR NICHE AS A GUITARIST TOO?

"I think so. I had a sound, the Gretsch through Marshalls and Roland amps to make this weird, chorusy sound. I felt it might have a future. It wasn't punk. It was rock, but it was edgy."

AND THE PUBLIC RESPONDED WELL...

"That's right, but bizarrely it was right at this point when the first cracks appeared in The Cult's armour. After the 'Love' tour Ian went off and met a girl and was a bit separate from the rest of us, which changed the dynamic. But also musically things got weird. We weren't idiots, so after 'Love' we went back in the studio with Steve Brown. We went for the same procedure, went through pre-production, wrote 'Love Removal Machine', 'Wild Flower' and 'Peace Dog'. We didn't have 'Lil' Devil' at this point. Steve Brown said we were one commercial song short. We'd been on the road and had started to get into the party lifestyle and we weren't ready to make another record. We needed a break, but were kind of forced into the studio where we just ended up layering more and more sh*t. By the time we did what became known as 'The Manor Sessions' - or 'Peace' - we knew something was wrong. 'Love Removal Machine' was probably the closest to what we wanted, but there were 11 tracks that weren't right. We took 'Love Removal Machine' and I went into a studio with a guy called Bill Price to try to tighten up the mix, but it still wasn't right. We pursued that album and spent hundreds of thousands of pounds recording it in the finest place... and I knew it wasn't right. We were going down a wormhole. We'd had