

Britny Fox in all their glory, 1988. I-R: Johnny Dee (drums), Michael Kelly Smith (lead guitar), "Dizzy" Dean Davidson (vocals and rhythm guitar), Billy Childs (bass)



20th Century Fox

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Photo: Mark Weiss

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AS THE CAB GLIDED through mid-afternoon traffic en route from Houston's Intercontinental Airport towards the Summit Arena, the driver asked if I was in a band. "No, but I write about bands," I replied. "Well, you sure look like you're in a band," she laughed.

There's an old saying that music critics are just frustrated musicians. There might be an element of truth in that, but while any musical talent in my family went to my brother, I definitely wasn't frustrated. My passion for music manifested itself through writing about it. And here I was in America writing for *Kerrang!*, unarguably the leading rock publication of the day. But it's true to say that if there were one band I would've loved to have been in back then, it was the one I was about to hook up with in the air-conditioned backstage area of the Summit; Britny Fox.

BRITNY FOX originally comprised vocalist/guitarist "Dizzy" Dean Davidson, lead guitarist Michael Kelly Smith, bassist Billy Childs and drummer Tony Destra. Destra and Smith had been members of Cinderella until they were both unceremoniously ejected from the band prior to the recording of the 'Night Songs' album in 1986.

That same year Britny independently released a cassette album, 'In America', on their manager Brian Kushner's Wolfe label. And then tragedy struck. A deal with the CBS affiliated Nemporer label was all but sealed when Destra was killed in a car crash on 8 February 1987. Adam West initially replaced him before being superseded by former Waysted drummer Johnny Dee.

IT WAS actually *Rock Candy Mag's* Master of Mayhem Derek Oliver who'd first passed me 'In America'. I immediately championed the band in the pages of *Metal Forces*, the mag I worked for before *Kerrang!* I first saw Britny Fox when West was still in the band, appearing at an all-day hard rock event in West Hartford, Connecticut alongside Hittman, Liege Lord and Manilla Road. They came over like a really heavy amalgam of Slade, AC/DC, Nazareth and Kiss, and with a uniform, dandified, glam look that was part *Amadeus*, part Kiss, I absolutely loved the band. So much so that, by the time Britny Fox had signed a major deal with Columbia and were set to release their eponymous debut album in 1988, it was easy to persuade fellow fan and *Kerrang!* editor Geoff Barton to allow me to write a cover story to coincide

with the album's release. Derek, Geoff and I all felt that Britny Fox were on the cusp of achieving something really big.

IN AN era that was over-saturated with groups raised on a diet of '70s glam, metal and Quaaludes, Britny were different. Their approach was far more professional than many of their peers and they largely eschewed the drink and drugs lifestyle. Dean was a bit of a loner, but he did share a fierce desire to succeed with his bandmates and a collective love of the same bands I'd also grown up with. My *Kerrang!* cover feature detailed catching the Fox on home turf and witnessing them in all their glory at the Empire Club in Philadelphia.

"That cover was huge for us," states Billy Childs nearly 30 years on. "It really validated us on more than a few levels."

"It gave us bragging rights and made more people take notice of us; even our clueless label!" Johnny Dee adds.

"The head of marketing at Columbia had no idea what to do with them," recalls manager Brian Kushner. "It was only when the band got the cover of *Kerrang!* that they suddenly realised they'd really been missing something with Britny Fox."

HAVING CAUGHT the band again in the summer opening for Frehley's Comet at the Limelight in New York City, it was finally in late October that I found myself cowboy booted and Bacofoil suited in Texas. By this point the Fox had gained huge support from MTV. The influential music station was playing the 'Long Way To Love' and 'Girlschool' videos on heavy rotation, the album was heading towards gold certification and the four-piece were out on the road on a three band bill alongside headliners Poison and Lita Ford. Why choose Texas? One of the songs on Britny's debut album, 'Fun In Texas', celebrated the Lone Star state. I wanted to find out just how much fun it could be.

"By the time we hit Texas we were having an absolute blast," recalls Billy. "We were virgins - in a touring respect anyway. But we felt comfortable taking the next step up and we felt we belonged. Poison couldn't have been nicer or cooler to us."

"There was amazing electricity around it all," adds Johnny Dee. "It was Poison's first headline tour, our first arena tour. The gigs were packed, hot girls everywhere. Poison had a condom machine on the wall as you walked into their bus... that about sums it up!"

In all honesty, while the Fox were just as good on stage as they always were, that show in Houston was something of a letdown for all concerned. "I hope you're not reviewing that," Johnny had remarked to me afterwards, "because that crowd was really lame."

The problem was that the venue's security had been rather over-zealous in carrying out their duties. This wasn't an arena full of booze-fuelled psychopaths intent

on ripping up the venue. It was 99 percent teenage girls.

"It does reflect on the band when you come out and play and the audience isn't allowed up front, but there's nothing you can do about it," Dean noted at the time. It would be a subject that would be revisited for the same reasons a year later when Britny opened for Alice Cooper at Wembley Arena.

STILL, HOUSTON was pretty well forgotten once band and crew had jumped on the tour bus for a three and a half hour, 190-mile road trip to San Antonio. I seem to recall stopping off at a diner where Dean tried to order everything on the menu. There was a distinct party atmosphere on the bus. The majority of the band's

crew were guys who'd been working with them in the clubs back in Philly and New Jersey; the exceptions being the tour manager, the band's wardrobe girl (who, it would transpire, was the tour manager's ex-wife) and guitar tech Steve Gosbee.

"Goz" was a fellow Brit who'd been hired on Johnny's recommendation. The pair had worked together when the amiable drummer was in UK-based Wausted. Goz was quite a character even in amongst a crew - Richie "Lights" Wuestenberg, bass tech Dan Paolucci and soundman Ace Porter - that was full of them. Porter appeared to be the guy responsible for the tour's ongoing Polaroid collection that he and Johnny had proudly shown to me just prior to arriving in San Antonio. Dubbed "The Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy", this Gene Simmons-style visual extravaganza depicted numerous ladies of all bra sizes in various states of undress, posing either by themselves, with each other or with members of the band - usually Billy - or crew.

Indeed, even while admiring the flexibility of Donna from Wisconsin or trying to figure out why Renée from Providence would ever think of doing that with a tyre iron, a new addition was made to the collection thanks to a charitable donation from Jennifer, a quite striking blonde who'd needed no persuading to join Billy on the bus to the next gig.

"IT WAS surprising at first that chicks would just jump on the bus with us like that," says Billy now. "But that was what life was like for a big rock band back then. I don't know about the others, but I would always cover what they needed to get home and took care of them the best I could."

"Everyone wanted to ride on the bus back then," says Johnny. "It's a shame, but that would be much more risky now. Lawsuits, smartphones, social media, psycho killers! No way!"

Jennifer's tenure with our entourage wasn't to last. After brunch in our hotel restaurant that overlooked the river on which tourists were ferried along at annoyingly regular intervals, Billy, Jennifer and I braved the midday heat and headed up the street to the Alamo, scene ▶

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JOHNNY DEE