



Twisted Sister photographed at the time of 'Come Out And Play' in 1985. L-R: Jay Jay French (guitar), Eddie 'Fingers' Ojeda (guitar), Dee Snider (vocals), AJ Pero (drums), Mark 'The Animal' Mendoza (bass)

PLAYED OUT?

Back in '85 **Twisted Sister** were riding high in the States on the back of their hugely successful 'Stay Hungry' album. New release 'Come Out And Play' was primed to be another winner. So how did it all go so badly wrong for these SMFs? *Malcolm Dome* talks to frontman **Dee Snider** and guitarist **Jay Jay French** to find out...

DEE SNIDER HAS HIS own take on what success can do to a band.

"When you're in a young metal act, being able to sell an autographed album or two at the merchandise stand while on tour can mean the difference between having the money to get to the next gig or not. But when you suddenly have success, that can really spoil things for a young band. It completely alters your perspective and your priorities."

The Twisted Sister frontman should know all about altered perspectives. After the massive success of the band's 1984 album 'Stay Hungry', Snider's outfit went into a genuinely unexpected and somewhat sharp nosedive just a year later when they released 'Come Out And Play'.

SURELY THE frontman from Astoria, New York, must have thought his days of struggle were long since behind him. Twisted Sister fought longer and harder than anyone to get even the tiniest amount of industry recognition. The band had been selling out the biggest clubs on the East Coast of America in the late '70s, culminating in an astonishing show in March 1978 at the prestigious Palladium in New York – a 3000 capacity venue that the band sold out by word of mouth alone. Yet despite this groundswell of public support, Twisted Sister couldn't attract major label interest. With no other way of getting recorded music out there, the band even resorted to releasing two independent singles, 1979's 'I'll Never Grow Up, Now!' and 'Bad Boys (Of Rock N' Roll)' the following year. Finally, a record label took note. It

wasn't a major, though, but rather a British independent called Secret Records that had a track record in releasing punk-oriented stuff. It was an unlikely, oddball marriage, but that didn't bother Twisted Sister any, especially when the label hooked them up with metal legend and UFO bassist Pete Way to produce their well-received 1982 debut album 'Under The Blade'.

Respected rock figures suddenly started championing the band, most notably Motörhead frontman Lemmy. And if the US wouldn't bend to Twisted Sister's metal will, it seemed that the UK was much more malleable. A 'blow 'em all away' appearance at the 1982 Reading Festival saw the band gathering more momentum, but it was a typically loud and obnoxious performance on cult UK TV music show *The Tube*, broadcast on 17 December of the same year, that

finally persuaded a major label to take a chance on Twisted Sister. A deal was signed with Atlantic Records, even though the industry rumour at the time was that it was against the will of label president Doug Morris.

"IT'S EASY TO THINK OF 'COME OUT AND PLAY' AS MARKING THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR TWISTED SISTER. BUT IT DEPENDS WHERE YOU'RE LOOKING. IT WAS OVER FOR US IN AMERICA, YES, BUT WE STILL HAD STRONG POCKETS OF SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THE WORLD."
DEE SNIDER

THE FIRST fruits of Twisted Sister's new label labours were released in 1983. An album, 'You Can't Stop Rock 'N' Roll' cemented the band's reputation in the UK and even gave them a Top 20 UK hit single with the catchy 'I Am (I'm Me)'.

The time suddenly felt right to launch a new assault on their home country of the US. Twisted Sister's third album, 'Stay Hungry' was recorded in the States between February and March of 1984. When it was released in May, the album quickly propelled the group to giddy new heights. Whereas it took a full 12 years for 'You Can't Stop Rock 'N' Roll' to reach gold status in

Photo: Mark Weisguy Weiss

the US for sales of over 500,000, 'Stay Hungry' hit the ground running. With two big hits, 'We're Not Gonna Take It' and 'I Wanna Rock', featuring heavily on MTV, the album sprinted to double-platinum status, eventually selling over three million copies. After years of struggle and derision for their pantomime image and basic metal music, Twisted Sister were now having the last laugh. Suddenly, band members who'd previously been dismissed as a bunch of clowns, had turned into idols and were fêted everywhere. Snider, guitarists Jay Jay French and Eddie 'Fingers' Ojeda, bassist Mark 'The Animal' Mendoza, and drummer AJ Pero were overnight sensations after a decade of slogging their guts out.

But with great power comes great responsibility. Much was expected – or rather demanded – of the band's next album. When record labels have major success they crave nothing more than... greater success! The pressure was on. All eyes were on the band's fourth album, 'Come Out And Play'. Released in November of 1985, instead of replicating the success of 'Stay Hungry', the new offering sent Twisted Sister into a tailspin it proved impossible to pull out of.

JAY JAY French feels problems for the band around this album started with a falling out between Snider and label boss Doug Morris.

"Dee hated Tom Werman, who'd produced 'Stay Hungry'," French told me. "In fact, Dee gives Werman no credit at all for the album's success. He desperately wanted a different producer for the next album, someone he had real confidence in. So he went to war with Doug at Atlantic. Doug wanted Werman to work with us again, but we ended up going for Dieter Dierks, because we loved his work with the Scorpions. And the success of 'Stay Hungry' gave us the power to make those sorts of choices."

"But I knew we were in trouble when I bumped into Doug a month after the album's release and he said to me, 'You've got to fire Dee. He's destroying your band.' When the president of your label says something like that, you know you're in a lot of trouble! So from a political standpoint Atlantic refused to back us, and I knew things were going nowhere."

Snider has a somewhat different take on where the band went wrong at this point.

"Putting out a cover version of The Shangri-Las' 'Leader Of The Pack' as the first single from the album was a major mistake," he says. "What we really needed to do was release a single that underlined that we were still a heavy band, despite all the success we'd had with 'Stay Hungry'. Our diehard fans needed to be reassured about what kind of group we were, and that was never gonna

happen with a lead-off single like that. We were guilty of thinking too much about the mainstream and ignoring those loyal fans who'd stuck by us for years. So, what happened? We lost the support of the core audience, and that was our undoing."

"Twisted Sister weren't actually seen playing in the video that went with the song," Snider adds. "We got rid of the guitars and instead were in the video as comic characters. That was wrong too, because it meant people got to see us as nothing more than joke figures. It hurt us really badly and unravelled a lot of the positivity we got from the MTV videos that had made our reputation in the first place."

TO THE vocalist, forgetting about those fans who were truly *with* the band was simply unforgivable.

"Listen, I'd spent a long time trying to drag metal into the mainstream. I was the kid who bought the first albums from Blue Cheer, Black Sabbath and Grand Funk Railroad when they were released. I always wondered why metal was seen as being on the outside. I was convinced it could appeal to a wider audience and that was always my goal with Twisted Sister. Well we did it, and then I made the mistake of putting that new audience ahead of those who'd stuck with us for so long. The thing is that people who liked mainstream music didn't really care about us, so trying to pander to them was effectively committing suicide."

"We'd played 'Leader Of The Pack' live in bars for years," says French. "We even put a version of the song on our 'Ruff Cutts' EP back in 1982. It wasn't the fact that we recorded the song for 'Come Out And Play' that was a mistake. But we should *never* have put it out as the first single off the album."

"Recently this kid came up to me and said, 'My favourite Twisted Sister album is "Come Out And Play"... except for "Leader Of The Pack"! That says it all. If you want to look at where it all began to unravel for us, you have to talk about how much of a mistake that single release was."

THERE ARE also many who feel the way in which Twisted Sister in general, and Snider in particular, became associated with a censorship battle against the conservative pressure group PMRC (Parents Music Resource Center) did the band no favours at all. Snider

himself agrees that this association hurt the group.

"When I testified at the Senate hearing in 1985 about the whole idea of censoring records – which was what the PMRC wanted – I really kicked their asses. But the way most of the press portrayed it, I was the one who'd come off worse. As a result, a lot of parents saw Twisted

Sister as representing everything that was wrong with rock music. So we were in a situation where parents were literally banning their kids from coming to our shows! That's why the 'Come Out And Play' tour in America was disastrous. We were playing to half empty venues and even had to cancel a number of dates."

"I know we'd have sold many more tickets if the PMRC situation had never existed, because I've talked to fans who explained to me why they didn't come along. We had Dokken supporting us in the States and there was one kid who turned up at one of our shows wearing a Dokken T-shirt. He told me he loved Twisted Sister and didn't care at all about Dokken. But he was wearing their shirt because he didn't want his parents to know he was coming to see *us*! His parents hated what we stood for and had told him that he wasn't allowed to go to one of our dates! This sort of thing was happening all over the country. We were becoming pariahs."

MTV HAD had a really strong relationship with Twisted Sister for the 'Stay

Hungry' album. But Snider says the influential station also turned against the band, banning their video for 'Be Chrool To Your Scuel' – a song from 'Come Out And Play' that featured Alice Cooper – on the grounds that it was offensive!

"That was just pathetic," snipes Snider. "If ever there was a case of MTV looking for an excuse *not* to air a video, that was it. After the whole PMRC debacle they were clearly determined to find a way of legitimising a decision to avoid screening Twisted Sister videos. So they claimed that 'Be Chrool...' couldn't be shown because the video had zombies in it! I'll tell you how ridiculous that was. There was a lot more graphic zombie action in Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' video. Did they ban that?! Hell, no! But when it came to us... well, that was the stick they used to beat us. The upshot was that we were denied the sort of profile that could have helped to sell the album."

"I'm convinced that if the first single off the



"DOUG MORRIS SAID TO ME, 'YOU'VE GOT TO FIRE DEE. HE'S DESTROYING YOUR BAND.' WHEN THE PRESIDENT OF YOUR LABEL SAYS SOMETHING LIKE THAT, YOU KNOW YOU'RE IN A LOT OF TROUBLE!"

JAY JAY FRENCH



Dee Snider onstage. "I still love 'Come Out And Play'. It's got a lot of great songs."

Photos: Julia Goode