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MEAT LOAF BAT OUT OF HELL

(Cleveland/Epic, 1977)

The sound of the rock'n'roll apocalypse.

One of the greatest albums ever made. Obviously. Jim Steinman wrote epic, funny, lengthy songs where teenagers tried to lose their virginity, where girls were slim and devious and boys tubby and stupid, where the motorbike was an analogy for everything and, to quote a future Steinman moment of genius, "where everything was louder than everything else". Brilliantly, the distinctly rotund Meat Loaf sang the whole lot without irony, while Steinman and producer Todd Rundgren fashioned a widescreen, Wagnerian backdrop. Somehow, the whole was even mightier than its already heaving parts, hence the 10-minute title track where a man watches himself die; For Crying Out Loud, perhaps the most full-on, gut-wrenching ballad ever recorded and the sheer, onanistic frustration of All Revved Up With No Place To Go. There was nothing like it in 1977. There has been nothing like it since, Bat Out Of Hell II notwithstanding. Staggering.

KEY TRACK: Bat Out Of Hell

SEE ALSO: Meat Loaf, Bat Out Of Hell II: Back Into Hell (Virgin, 1993)

I WAS THERE

"Those songs didn't come from any assembly line of rock'n'roll. More than anything they came from my love of opera and theatrical music."

Jim Steinman, songwriter



O HELL

They've been feuding about it for nearly 30 years now. But here, Meat Loaf and Jim Steinman talk exclusively about the making of their masterpiece.

WORDS: MARK BLAKE



Meat Loaf meets meat truck, 1978.

GUILTY PLEASURES!

Meat Loaf – “a hothead kid from Texas” – and songwriter **Jim Steinman** first met in New York theatreland in 1972. Their experiments in fusing classical bombast with rock’n’roll would eventually produce one of the best-loved albums in history.

Meat Loaf: Even at school and on the football team, everyone called me Meat. I put together a band, Popcorn Blizzard, moved to Los Angeles, cut a first record, which did nothing, made an album [*Stoney & Meat Loaf*], which I didn’t like, and ended up in the stage musical *Hair*. By 1972 I was in New York doing all these Broadway-type shows. One of them was a two-act musical play called *More Than You Deserve*, which was written by Jim Steinman. Jim would come out in these crazy outfits, pound the piano and do stuff that was totally out there.

Jim Steinman: Growing up, I was into classical music. Then, one day, aged 12, I heard Wagner’s *The Ring Of The Nibelung* followed by Jerry Lee Lewis. I just went, “Wow! These things go together!” I went to New York where I tried to write musicals. Meat walked into an audition for *More Than You Deserve* and sang a gospel song. His hands convulsed and his eyes went up in his head. I thought, “This is the guy!” The fact that he was 350lb was part of it. He was like something out of a Marvel comic book.

ML: Jim and I began working together, but by ’74, we started to get serious. I decided I wasn’t going to do any more theatre. Then I got asked to understudy John Belushi in *The National Lampoon Show* on Broadway. When they said they were taking the show on the road, I agreed to do it only if they took Jim as the piano player. Ellen Foley was singing in the show, and we started to duet on one of Jim’s songs, *Paradise By The Dashboard Light*. The three of us worked on those songs, and out of them came the fantastic characters of *Bat Out Of Hell*.

JS: It was amazingly out-of-step for the time. But I wanted our records to be like movies. I wanted *Bat Out Of Hell* to be like entering a film.

ML: We auditioned for, like, 18 record companies and got turned down by everybody and their mother. We kept being asked, “Who’s going to listen to all this *long* crap?”

JS: We didn’t have a demo tape. We just had me at the piano and Meat singing. I remember we auditioned for [*Arista Records*] Clive Davis in a tiny office. There I am pounding the piano with my hands bleeding and Meat sweating like a maniac! Clive Davis didn’t get it. Sometimes we’d have two backing singers, Ellen Foley and Rory Dodd, with Meat French-kissing Ellen during *Paradise By The Dashboard Light* – making out like *Beauty And The Beast* in this tiny office. Nobody understood.

ML: As we’d walk down Sixth Avenue after these meetings, I’d rage at Jim. These fucking record company guys are so set in their ways... Jim would just laugh.

JS: I didn’t care, because I’m always convinced I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m the first one to think I’m a piece of shit [*laughs*]. Producers wouldn’t touch us either. Finally, though, we got hold of Todd Rundgren. He was the only one brave enough to take us on. He’d heard Meat and me do the songs on the piano, but he was the only one to turn around and say, “I see no problem here.” →



'It's my record!' 'No, it's my record!' Loaf and Steinman plug *Bat Out Of Hell* on US radio, 1977.

[now the *Apollo*] in London, then Manchester, and then the Old Grey Whistle Test TV show.

Bob Harris: We first showed the video to Bat Out Of Hell and the reaction was incredible. It was a love-it-or-hate-it record, but we were struck by the sheer gothic, over-the-top splendour of the thing. They came to the studio and did *Paradise By The Dashboard Light*, and the intensity of the performance and all this sexual energy between Meat and Karla DeVito was mind-blowing. Meeting the man up-close, though, he looked awful – sweaty, puffy, pale-faced. I heard he had to be given oxygen after one of the shows.

ML: Then Melody Maker came out with a two-page live review, calling us “the worst band in the world” under the headline “Fat Out Of Hell”! At first I was seriously pissed off. Then we went back to New York and did a show in Central Park, and there were press from all over the world. There was one guy there from India and I asked him, “Why are you here?” He said, “Melody Maker... ‘worst band in the world’.” That’s when I realised it was working for us.

JS: I toured with the band until late spring ’78, and I went back home only to write the second record. One moment, we were just having fun playing the music, then all of a sudden, it’s all about record deals and delivering more songs. I wrote *Bad For Good*, which was supposed to be the follow-up to *Bat Out Of Hell*, but Meat couldn’t sing it. Meat had abused his voice on the road and by the end of the *Bat...* tour it was pretty much shot. Then “couldn’t sing it” became “didn’t want to sing it”, because he didn’t like it.

ML: I was mad at Jimmy; Jimmy was mad at me. We fought about everything. I didn’t want to make a Xerox copy of *Bat Out Of Hell*.

JS: So I sang it and *Bad For Good* came out as

a Steinman solo record in 1981 – and it nearly killed me, because it was all written for a voice that was about an octave higher. As for Meat, Jon Landau, Springsteen’s manager, suggested this guy in California, who was like a sort of witch doctor. The guy’s treatment is he injects you with your own urine and then beats the shit out of you.

ML: His theory was I had become traumatised when I fell off the stage and broke my leg in ’78, and this was the reason I couldn’t sing. His therapy consisted of having me lie down on the floor and sing notes while he vibrated a Black & Decker hand sander with a sheepskin pad on it against my leg – and it worked! In 1980, I began work on a new album, *Dead Ringer*. Steinman wasn’t involved, other than writing the songs and handing them to us.

JS: It was a stupid set-up because *Bad For Good* came out and then Meat Loaf’s second album, *Dead Ringer*, came out two months later. Crazy!

By 1983, the winning partnership had dissolved. A dispute over profits from *Bat Out Of Hell*’s sales led to Meat Loaf being sued by both Steinman and his managers. Meat Loaf filed for bankruptcy,

while releasing albums intermittently throughout the rest of the decade; none of which came close to matching the success of *Bat Out Of Hell*. Steinman began producing and writing for MOR artists, including Bonnie Tyler and Air Supply. Then came a chance meeting.

ML: I ran into Jim at the end of 1985 at the Power Station studio in New York. He goes, “You’re singing good. Why don’t you come out to the house?”

JS: I remember it well, because it was the day my mother died. He sang the entire *Bat Out Of Hell* album at the piano with me. He sounded great – and that was the key to *Bat Out Of Hell* 2. It was always really about the voice.

ML: The record company didn’t actually want *Bat Out Of Hell* 2, because they thought it would cost too much money. So it didn’t happen until 1993. Did I ever imagine there’d be a *Bat Out Of Hell* 3 [currently due for release in October 2006]? God, no! But Jim has no involvement other than we have seven or eight of his songs on the record. [Since being interviewed for this article, Steinman, who holds the copyright to the phrase *Bat Out Of Hell*, has refused to allow Meat Loaf to use the title for the record. In May, Meat Loaf filed a lawsuit against his ex-partner in response.]

JS: I love Meat Loaf as a performer. He has that sense of the Gothic and the ridiculous. And that’s a huge part of what *Bat Out Of Hell* is all about. That’s the very soul of the record.

ML: Would I change a thing about the album? No... How could you even suggest changing something like that? *Bat Out Of Hell* is still untouchable. ☑

*Further reading: *To Hell And Back: An Autobiography* by Meat Loaf, with David Dalton (Virgin Books, 1999)*

Who's Who?

MEAT LOAF

Texas-born singer and actor, born Marvin Lee Aday. Had appeared in the musical *Hair*.

JIM STEINMAN

Classically trained singer-songwriter. Nicknamed Little Richard Wagner by the *LA Times*.

TODD RUNDGREN

Pennsylvania-born singer, songwriter and producer.

STEVE POPOVICH

Former A&R man at Epic Records. Founded independent label Cleveland International in 1977.

ELLEN FOLEY

Singer and actress. Went on to teach musical theatre in New York.

BOB HARRIS

BBC radio DJ and presenter of the ’70s music show *The Old Grey Whistle Test*.