

CHEAP TRICK



RICK NIELSEN INTERVIEW

Interviewing Rick Nielsen, Cheap Trick's guitarist, songwriter and Olympic gymnastics prospect, is a task many writers turn pale at the thought of.

I mean, this guy is meant to be one step off being certified. He never gives a straight answer to any question, and he's replied to similar questions so many different ways that you're not sure he hasn't put everybody on.

Cheap Trick is meant to be a band without a history, the illegitimate child of a chance liaison in some obscure amusement park, which flourished in spite of seemingly insurmountable handicaps. Many stories are told, but how many can you believe?

The stories about Nielsen's baseball cap alone would fill an encyclopaedia. Does he really wear it even when he's in the shower? Is he a reformed longhair? Does Tom Petersson really give him haircuts in a darkened room? Is he getting thin on top?

The same can be said for the band's past. Stories have been told of them bumping into each other while taking the waters in the South of France. Petersson, in a previous incarnation, is rumoured to have earned a living as a busker in the Paris subways. See what I mean? Confusion mounts.

Talking with Nielsen is both disappointing and a pleasant surprise. Disappointing because he wasn't bursting out with the zany quotes that have been previously attributed to him, and pleasant because it makes him a damn sight easier to interview. He doesn't have to constantly live up to the hype these days. It's served its purpose, and he now seems happy to convey that under the baseball cap lurks a regular guy, albeit one with a sharply honed sense of humour and a taste for the ludicrous.

EARLY DAYS

Nielsen, Petersson and Bun E. Carlos originate from Rockford, Illinois. Robin Zander comes from Loves Park, a nearby suburb.

Nielsen is from a musical family, his parents being the proprietors of a music store in Rockford. His mother, who has survived five Cheap Trick gigs, says he started out like many others, with a band that threatened to demolish the walls of the garage.

Nielsen and Petersson are old buddies from way back, and have played together for some 12 years.

"We were actually doing things very similar to what Cheap Trick is doing today," Nielsen says. "It wasn't successful, but we weren't in it for the money, we were in it because we liked it."

The story goes that after playing with Fuse, a band which is about as well known as Whistler's Father, Nielsen and Petersson split to England. This was in 1969, when Beatlemania was all but dead. The two had a great love for British music, and wanted to see what was cooking across the Atlantic.

On their return home, they teamed up with some former members of Todd Rundgren's old group Nazz, and gigged anywhere they could, under a variety of names. This lasted only briefly. The inevitable split was followed by another European jaunt for the dynamic duo, where they met up with Carlos, and then Zander, who'd been up in Scotland trying to deny Nessie's existence, and Cheap Trick was born.

Carlos, a shy individual who had a sheltered upbringing, started out at the tender age of 13 in a Rockford band called The Pagans, with his big sister driving him to the gigs.

Before meeting Nielsen, he'd played with Bo Diddley, Freddy Cannon, The Shirelles, Chuck Berry (Who hasn't?) and many others.

A self-confessed vinyl junkie, Carlos collects records by the score, and never travels without a selection of tapes.

Zander, who can imitate anyone from Robert Plant to Neil Young, at first turned down an offer to join the tricksters. At the time, he was making a good living, singing folk songs at a resort in Wisconsin. But that didn't last forever, and on the second approach, he agreed.

"NO GOOD"

By this time, the Nielsen songwriting talent was starting to bloom. In 1972 the band was in New York, cutting demos for CBS. Among the songs used was "So Good To See You," which finally emerged on the *In Colour* album, "Mandocello", which appears on the debut LP, and a version of the infamous "Surrender."

"They told us the songs were no good and we were no good," Nielsen recalls, "which is crazy, because it was sort of similar to what

we're doing now. But that's the way it goes. At the time, they didn't want what he had."

So it was onto the road, gigging places where most people would think twice about dying, getting laughed at, and having things thrown at them.

It wasn't until 1977 that they were finally signed by Epic and recorded *Cheap Trick*, with Jack Douglas producing.

The first album placed the accent on the band rather than the songs, and the sound was decidedly heavy metal. Douglas, who has produced Aerosmith, went for a raw, live sound, with very little overdubbing. It was fine for a first shot, but Nielsen decided a change was needed for the next outing. The choice was Tom Werman, another heavy metal man, who's also worked with Ted Nugent.

"Werman was more interested in the songs, and decided to put them across, rather than showcasing the band," Nielsen says. "That record (*In Colour*) wasn't as powerful as the first one. Each record since then has shown off the material, but it's also shown off the band."

MEDIA DARLINGS

In Colour was the album that made Cheap Trick a name to be reckoned with, and also brought them to the attention of the media. The British and American rock press have a strong need to occasionally show that they can let their hair down and enjoy music purely for the fun of it. That's as long as they don't compromise their often warped sense of values. Sure, the music can be 'fun', but it must have its intelligent side as well. Cheap Trick's visual appearance, coupled with Nielsen's ability to write snappy melodies and witty, incisive lyrics, made them media darlings overnight.

Being a favourite with journos is no picnic, as any former member of Little Feat will tell you. It can be the kiss of death, by alienating you from the public, as though you're the exclusive property of the rock press. Cheap Trick, because of their sense of fun, have managed to elude this trap, and be accepted by both the media and the public. No small achievement in itself.

Heaven Tonight barely bruised the American Top 40, but it gave the band its first decent shot of FM radio airplay. It also contained the magical "Surrender," perhaps one of the perfect pop songs, and still Cheap Trick's best known number. It was, however, a non-hit single, for reasons unknown to its composer.

"Everywhere we go, everyone knows 'Surrender' he says. 'It wasn't a hit, but everybody's heard it. If you had a radio, you heard the song."

"I don't know all the details of why it didn't do better, and why it did so good."

The lyrics, which are a trifle risqué, may

have had some effect on radio programmers, but Nielsen says they had already been tamed down, and were much lewder in their original form.

BIG IN JAPAN

The land of the cherry blossom now beckoned, on the strength of three number one singles and a couple of gold albums. Cheap Trick are simply enormous in Japan, especially among the little girls, who go for Tom and Robin in a big way. Every time they arrive, they are greeted by mob scenes matched only by the Beatles.

Touching on the sons of Liverpool, Nielsen obviously resents the constant comparisons with the way his songs sound.

"I don't think we ever consciously try to copy, or emulate or steal from anybody. To be compared with the Beatles is obviously the highest form of flattery a group could ever have, but we don't try to copy them."

"There are four personalities in the band, maybe that's part of it. There's a lot of melody and harmony, I think intelligent lyrics, good chord changes ... maybe that's it. Plus we speak in English. I mean, if we were Russian band and had the same tunes, nobody would notice."

The words of a man who's had the comparison drawn a few times before. But like it or not, the influences stand out a mile, not only of the Beatles, but other British bands, such as the Move and the Kinks.

Cheap Trick did the Move's "California Man" on *Heaven Tonight*, and their current stage show includes a Beatles number, though Nielsen says we'll have to wait and see which one it is.

Dream Police also has a strong Beatles sound to it, but more of that later.

Suffice to say Nielsen, like many other prominent tunesmiths, grew up with a radio glued to his ear, and a guy has to draw his inspiration from somewhere. Also, if you're going to borrow the odd idea, you might as well borrow the best, and Nielsen has in turn made them his own.

Live At Budokan exceeded all expectations. It was recorded purely as a souvenir of the triumphant 1978 Japanese tour by CBS/Sony, and was never intended for release outside Japan. The band concedes it's fairly rough in parts, some of the numbers being just first takes.

Nielsen, exuding self-confidence, was pleased, but not entirely surprised, by the hysterical reaction from audiences on that tour.

"It was a pleasant surprise, put it that way, but by the same token, we always felt the music was that good too. We wouldn't sit and scream at it, but we always liked what we were doing, and when we went there and found lots