

Breaking out in 1978:
Rick Nielsen, Bun E. Carlos,
Tom Petersson, and Robin
Zander (clockwise from top)





PERFORMERS

Cheap Trick

The group effectively combines rock chops, tuneful power pop, sarcasm, humility, and showmanship.

BY IRA ROBBINS

I

t's the start of 1977, my early days as a rock writer, and I'm up in Black Rock, visiting one of the few label guys who'll take my calls. A devout fan of Marc Bolan, David Bowie, and Jim Morrison, he absolutely loathes the Who, so we've agreed to disagree about that. He pulls out a white label of *Cheap Trick*, which Epic is weeks away from releasing. "Listen," he says, exuding real conviction – no mean feat for a man who is as sardonic as they come. "These guys are great. They're gonna be enormous." I'm pretty dubious about mainstream American rock & roll, at least as represented in the hallway outside by posters of Ted Nugent, Kansas, Wild Cherry, and Meat Loaf, but I try not to roll my eyes.





He puts the record on, guitars and drums roar to life, and I'm in love. So much for Anglophilia. Here was a band from the heartland that answered all my dreams: loud, ferociously energetic, original, funny, melodic, indefinable. Singing about things few others with commercial aspirations would dare touch: mass murder, suicide, taxation, greed, schoolyard creeps.

Big-league bands had grown entirely too serious and self-important by the mid-seventies, and a lot of the ecstasy, fun, and unpredictability had been pressed out of electric music. Punk's vituperative assault was one radical answer to the status quo, but not a commercially viable alternative. Cheap Trick didn't set out to wreak havoc, destroy passersby, or enrage the establishment like the safety-pinner did; they were in it for fun. But their version of fun arose from the same snarky reactor of aggressive

animation and spirited irreverence as the new wavers. The group cut a colorful swath through the land of the dinosaurs, high-power proof that rock writ large enough for stadiums didn't have to be preening, cocky, bombastic, or self-important. With the fundamentals well in hand – a good-looking dynamo of a lead singer, a shit-hot guitar hero who flipped off the deification of the role (while amassing a huge collection of its instruments), the wall-of-bass sound, and the decisive nonchalance of a deceptively straightforward drummer – Cheap Trick gave it all a checkerboard twist.

In Cheap Trick, America had its first chart-ready group who could effectively combine rock chops, tuneful power pop, sarcasm, humility, and showmanship. Singer Robin Zander, drummer Bun E. Carlos (b. Brad Carlson), bassist Tom Petersson (b. Peterson), and guitarist Rick Nielsen



Previous page: Rocking the Budokan, Tokyo, 1979.

This page, from top:
 Distracted but clean;
 Rick Nielsen meets Pete Townshend, c. 1980;
 with Andy Warhol, 1978.

managed to make stardom look like fun, not a chore or a right. The plush cushions of rock's throne weren't designed for the derrieres of court clowns, but that has never discouraged the foursome from being themselves, whether that's serious or silly. Nor has being idolized by generations dampened their own fandom, especially for the music of the Move, Jeff Beck, the Beatles, Elvis Presley, the Yardbirds, the Who, ELO, and Terry Reid, all of whom have left fingerprints in Cheap Trick's imagination.

The story begins in Rockford, Illinois, in late 1974, when Zander – one of rock's great voices, a singer of exceptional power and delicacy – was drafted to join Petersson, Carlos, and Nielsen, who had been together in the combo Sick Man of Europe. Cheap Trick has since played more than five thousand gigs, sold more than twenty million albums, scored eight Top Forty singles, seven Top Forty albums,



Winding down with room service, Chicago, 1979



They painted a carefully formulated image.

and collected seventeen U.S. gold and platinum awards. Their songs have popped up in dozens of film and TV soundtracks; the “Surrender” refrain was incorporated into the theme song for *That ’70s Show*.

Signed by Epic in 1976, Cheap Trick chose to meet the wider world with an enigmatic blank slate. The fabulist liner notes of the self-titled debut – written by label staffer Eric Van Lustbader in evident preparation for his future as a best-selling novelist – depict a “band without a history. . . . This band has no past. Literally.” In fact, the band had a lot of history. There were years spent barnstorming in the Midwest, genealogical connections to Nazz, Rick and Tom’s previous major-label stint as members of Fuse, and the Grim Reapers – a band of Rick’s that was, unhappily, the opening act for a 1967 show in Madison, Wisconsin, to which Otis Redding never arrived.

Onto that blank slate, they painted a carefully formulated image, one that gave journalists plenty to write about: the messy typescript logo printed on everything from satin jackets to bow ties; the checkerboard motif; kinetic stagecraft; and a parade of one, two, and five-neck novelty guitars. In place of the scruffy look that had previously sufficed, the foursome revamped themselves as well. Bun E. stocked up on white shirts, vests, and ties, and kept a cigarette dangling from his mouth while he played. He also adopted a stage name “so the band didn’t sound like a bunch of Swedes.” He and Rick, whose bug-eyed face-pulling and flipped-up baseball caps routinely summoned comparisons to Bowery Boy Huntz Hall, were paired off against Robin and Tom’s pin-up appeal. (The stylistic contrast was underscored on the sleeve of *In Color*, which relegated the two goofs to puny scooters on the back, while Tom and Robin posed astride manly hogs on the front.)

The band’s shows quickly became legend. Rick, clad in custom sweaters and wrestling boots, flicked picks and shouldered a different guitar for each song. Robin, holding the spotlight, roared with enough vocal power to cut through the din. Tom made his seemingly unplayable Hamer twelve-string bass look easy. Bun E., pounding it out in the back, his head bobbing, occasionally hauled out a

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



CHEAP TRICK
Epic 1977



IN COLOR
Epic 1977



HEAVEN TONIGHT
Epic 1978



AT BUDOKAN
Epic 1978



DREAM POLICE
Epic 1979



NEXT POSITION
PLEASE
Epic 1983



WOKE UP
WITH A MONSTER
Warner Bros. 1994



MUSIC
FOR HANGOVERS
Cheap Trick Limited 1999

pair of giant drumsticks for a bizarre display.

With characteristic Midwestern industriousness and a backlog of original material, the quartet delivered a tremendous opening salvo of albums – *Cheap Trick* (“Elo Kiddies,” “He’s a Whore”), *In Color* (“I Want You to Want Me,” “Southern Girls”), and *Heaven Tonight* (“Surrender,” “California Man”) – inside of two years. But they had better success opening for the Kinks, Queen, and Kiss than they did on the radio or in record stores: Americans cheered but didn’t buy. Japanese teens, however, latched onto the band’s cartoony charms and mobbed them on a 1978 tour there, a trip that had an even greater impact back home. Unexpectedly, a single of “I Want You to Want Me” recorded onstage in Japan made the Top Ten in *Billboard* a year later. After proving its appeal as a pricey Japanese import, *At Budokan* was released in the U.S. and promptly went platinum. An ambitious new studio album, *Dream Police*, had to be held back as a result, but it nearly matched *At Budokan*’s success upon release in late 1979.

Petersson left the following year, replaced by two other bassists on four uneven albums made with a parade of producers. In 1982, the band served as a demarcation of the generation gap in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*:

Damone: Can you honestly tell me that you forgot? Forgot the magnetism of Robin Zander, or the charisma of Rick Nielsen? Dena: That’s kids’ stuff.

Damone: Kids’ stuff? How ’bout the tunes? “I want YOU . . . to want ME.” “The dream police da da da da da da da da.” “Your momma’s alright, your daddy’s alright, they just seem a little bit weird . . . Surrender.”

Damone was right to keep the faith. Before the end of the eighties, Petersson was back in the fold, and “The Flame” took the band to the top of the singles chart.

While the grunge era pushed some rock veterans aside, Cheap Trick had – and has – the respect of its youngsters. Perhaps they recognize a kindred spirit in Trick’s attitude and spirited DIY gumption. Kurt Cobain was a fan. Eddie Vedder has done shows with Rick. Billy Corgan and Slash were guests at the twenty-fifth-anniversary Trick show documented on the *Silver* live album. This past August, Dave Grohl invited Trick – which has included Nielsen’s son Daxx on drums since Carlos’ active role in the band ended in 2010 – to join Foo Fighters and play for forty thousand fans at Chicago’s Wrigley Field.

After the resurgent fun of *Woke Up With a Monster* in 1994, Cheap Trick left the major-label world and began releasing its own albums. Freed from record-company kibitzing and able to set their own course, they have since hit such stylistic poles as cutting a Sub Pop 45 (and an unreleased remake of *In Color*) with indie legend (and avowed Trickster) Steve Albini, and performing the entirety of *Sgt. Pepper* live, a feat that album’s creators never even envisioned. A massive Nielsen museum exhibit, *Rick’s Picks*, was mounted in Rockford’s Burpee Museum of Natural History a few years back. Still working hard in its fifth decade, Cheap Trick recently joined Big Machine, Taylor Swift’s label (imagine that collaboration!). Kicking off 2016 with its seventeenth studio album, *Bang Zoom Crazy . . . Hello*, Cheap Trick tonight joins its peers and acolytes in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.