

'The NWOBHM was a nationwide ground-breaking phenomenon from which sprang such heavy metal legends as Iron Maiden, Def Leppard, Saxon and Diamond Head.'

—**Kerrang! NWOBHM supplement (1989)**

'The New Wave Of British Heavy Metal was crude, poorly produced and played by musicians with rudimentary talents.'

—**Joel McIver, Justice for All: The Truth about Metallica (2004)**

It wasn't only in Iran that there was a revolution in 1979. That year also saw a great uprising in the history of rock: the birth of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, or the NWOBHM as its famously unpronounceable acronym has it. But before we resurrect the spirit of those heady, heavy days, there's a crucial preliminary question to address: did the NWOBHM ever actually exist?

You see, there's a theory that the NWOBHM was first and foremost a media phenomenon rather than an authentic musical movement, a chimera in a journalist's overwrought imagination rather than a grassroots rock revolution. There's certainly some substance to the charge. It's hard to separate the rise of

the NWOBHM from a certain weekly music paper, the now-defunct *Sounds*, and its chief rock scribe, Geoff 'Deaf' Barton. It was Barton and *Sounds* who identified and relentlessly promoted the movement's key acts, and it was *Sounds* editor Alan Lewis who allegedly came up with the wonderfully uncanny 'New Wave Of British Heavy Metal' tag. To put it succinctly: the NWOBHM was *Sounds'* bitch.

So was it all just a music paper conspiracy, a way of creating a bit of extra reader interest in order to sell more copies? Perhaps. Barton even got his own publication out of it: *Kerrang!*, the first dedicated hard rock magazine, was launched in the summer of 1981 in the NWOBHM's wake. So, yes, you can definitely argue that without Barton and *Sounds*, the NWOBHM – or, rather, the NWOBHM label – would never have existed.

But there was also a real-world starting point for all this journalistic excitement. It's commemorated in the title of the debut 1979 release from the most enduringly successful of the NWOBHM bands: Iron Maiden's *The Soundhouse Tapes* EP. The Soundhouse, the NWOBHM's spiritual home, was a North London heavy rock disco run by DJ Neal Kay. Now, if the invention of the NWOBHM – though not its name – can really be attributed to a single person, it's probably the undersung Kay, who was both promoter and focalising mentor to many of the key NWOBHM acts. Maiden, Saxon, Samson, Angel Witch and Praying Mantis all got early live breaks as a result of his energy and

enthusiasm. Such was Kay's success in pulling together and giving definition to the new movement, he was soon compiling a weekly heavy metal chart for *Sounds* based on requests received at the Soundhouse. So



perhaps we should turn that original statement around and say instead: *Sounds* was the NWOBHM's, and Neal Kay's, bitch.

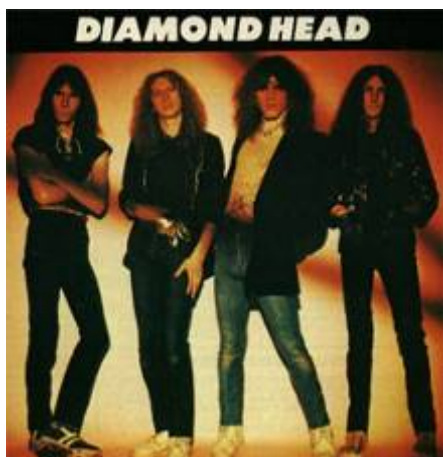
Aside from its titular significance, *The Soundhouse Tapes* is also useful in defining the NWOBHM approach to music making. In the first place, look at – and listen to – Maiden's singer: Paul Di'Anno had short, spiky-looking hair and a vocal delivery that bore the unmistakable influence of Johnny Rotten and his shouty-snarly cohorts. NWOBHM bands were inspired by punk and its DIY ethic in various ways: they played faster and louder than the previous generation of rockers, and they were much less likely to be influenced by the blues. Being proficient on your instrument wasn't a major consideration: energy was as important as virtuosity. If you didn't have a major label deal, that didn't matter either: you simply recorded and put things out yourself. That's what Maiden did with *The Soundhouse Tapes* and what Def Leppard did with their debut release, the *Getcha Rocks Off* EP. What a great name the Leppard came up with for their own label too: Bludgeon Riffola, a statement of no-nonsense musical intent if ever there was one.



The Soundhouse/*Sounds* axis might make the NWOBHM seem like a London phenomenon: it wasn't. Maiden aside, its most successful exponents came from the Midlands and the North: Leppard were from Sheffield, while Saxon were Barnsley boys. And that's also where the key independent labels prospered. Neat Records in Tyne & Wear was probably the most influential: *Sounds* even tried to launch a splinter North-East New Wave Of British Heavy Metal – or NENWOBHM – movement based largely on its output. It was with Neat that Fist ('Name, Rank and Serial Number' remains one of the great NWOBHM singles), Tygers of Pan Tang (with whom John Sykes cut his claws before joining Thin Lizzy and Whitesnake – one anecdote has it that Sykes only got the gig with TOPT because he had longer hair than the other auditionees), and black-metallers Venom (perhaps the most divisive band in the history of hard rock) all got their break.



So where are the classic NWOBHM albums to rival Led Zeppelin IV and *Dark Side of the Moon*? Quite simply, they don't exist. There are a handful of *very good* albums, of course, a healthy number of brilliant singles and a positive avalanche of genuinely great riffs (not many great lyrics, though, and let's not talk about the cover art). But the NWOBHM wasn't built to last, and for the most part neither were its recorded statements; it was an in-the-moment phenomenon, a gloriously if-you-weren't-there-you'll-never-really-understand-it-now affair. Clearly, some bands associated with the NWOBHM – principally Iron Maiden and Def Leppard – went on to produce classic albums, but by the time they did so they were no longer NWOBHM. As one of the Metal Storm website's '101 Rules of NWOBHM' reminds us: 'Bad production values are a MUST, if it's highly produced, it's not NWOBHM.' From which follows another insightful Metal Storm rule: 'Iron Maiden after *Killers* is not NWOBHM.' Needless to say, the brilliant, era-defining *Hysteria*, significantly enriched by the knob-twiddling attentions of Leppard's 'sixth member', producer Mutt Lange, doesn't qualify either.



It would be easy to devote the rest of this article to raking over the histories of the NWOBHM's most celebrated trio of bands: Maiden, Leppard and Saxon. But, as the last paragraph began to suggest, the NWOBHM isn't about multi-million sales and sold-out world tours. Once a band achieves that, it's transcended its NWOBHM origins. Rather, the NWOBHM is about the I-could-have-been-a-contenders of the music world, the might-have-beens-if-only-Saturn-had-been-in-the-ascendant-during-the-month-we-supported-Priest. The following are three of the leading NWOBHM bands with the most enduring legacies.

Diamond Head hailed from the West Midlands – always fertile ground for breeding hard rock heroes – and seemed to combine the finest qualities of their most celebrated Black Country predecessors. Scarcely exaggerating, NWOBHM cheerleader-in-chief Barton pronounced that 'there are more good riffs in your average single Diamond Head song than there are in the first four Black Sabbath albums', while long-locked frontman Sean Harris was regularly compared to Robert Plant. As Maiden bassist Steve 'Bomber' Harris said, it 'looked like they were going to be the next Led Zeppelin for a while'.

Diamond Head remain the quintessential NWOBHM band, partly because they were (arguably, let's say, although there's really no argument about it) the boldest and best of the late Seventies/early Eighties breakthrough bands, but no less crucially – and, as stated above, this is key to any definition of the NWOBHM – *because they never made it*. The NWOBHM was DIY, mates-in-their-parents'-garages-dreaming-of-the-Big-Time stuff. As soon as you got major label backing and converted your promise into polished product and massive sales – Maiden, Leppard, Saxon to some extent – you were no longer NWOBHM.

In Diamond Head's case, signing to a major label – MCA – only served as the cue for the beginning of their startling decline. The band's independently produced debut LP (now usually known as *Lightning to the Nations*, although the original release appeared without title in a plain white cover, hence the alternative name by which it's known: *The White Album*) had been hailed as a rough-hewn masterpiece, but the attempt to record a more commercial follow-up with producer Mike Hedges at the helm bore slightly bitter-tasting fruit in the form of the underwhelming *Borrowed Time*. The decision to retain singer Harris's mum as their tour manager, despite competing interest from industry heavyweights, probably didn't help with moving the band's career along either.



Glorious, massive failure notwithstanding, Diamond Head haven't been without influence. A young drummer by the name of Lars Ulrich was among the first worshippers at the DH altar, and the band he formed in their wake – you may have heard of them: Metallica – based their early live sets around DH numbers. 'Am I Evil?' then turned up on the B-side of their 'Creeping Death' single in 1984, with further DH covers appearing on the 1987 *Garage Days Re-Visited* EP and the 1998 *Garage Inc.* album. As two more nuggets of wisdom from Metalstorm's '101 Rules of NWOBHM' put it: 'Without Diamond Head, there would be no Metallica'; and 'Without NWOBHM, there would be no Thrash'.

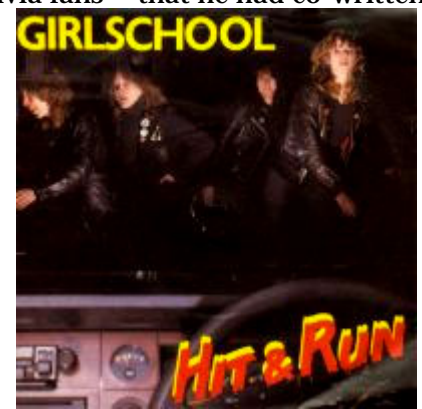
Not that Diamond Head have any reason to complain about Metallica's success in taking their legacy global. 'I didn't make any money from our albums,' DH guitarist Brian Tatler recently commented. 'I lived with my parents until I was thirty-three. Then the money from Metallica let me put a deposit on a house. It was the only way I would have been able to do that.' Few bands of any generation have ever been able to match the Head at their epic best. 'Am I Evil?', 'Lightning to the Nations', 'Borrowed Time', 'To the Devil his Due': heavy music doesn't get any better than this.



A second set of heroic NWOBHM failures pointed forward to another massively successful late-Eighties phenomenon. Look up Girl on YouTube and, among other things, you'll find a clip of the London five-piece on *The Old Grey Whistle Test* in which they're introduced by a wonderfully sceptical-looking Annie Nightingale. After making a disparaging reference to the current popularity of 'heavy rock', La Nightingale casts doubt on the wisdom of a band made up entirely of fellas sporting such a feminine name and New York Dolls-ish look. As it turned out, she was right to be concerned: despite some early successes (such as the clear-vinyl debut single which had the same track – the fabulously succinct 'My Number' – on both sides), Girl's glammy image proved a turn-off with the punters. Half a decade later, of course, boys with big hair and make-up were all the rage, but the glam/hair metal revolution came too late for Girl. Not that things turned out so badly

for all members of the band. Frontman Phil Lewis relocated to America, where he found success with L.A. Guns and covered one of Girl's best tunes, 'Hollywood Tease', a song – *nota bene*, trivia fans – that he had co-written with principal Girl guitarist Phil Collen. Recognise the name? Now, if you think the addition of Collen was an important catalyst in transforming Def Leppard from flailing wannabes into world-beaters, you really should give his earlier work with Girl a listen. Their debut LP, *Sheer Greed*, is about as close as the NWOBHM came to producing a classic album.

Was the NWOBHM sexist? Is Jonathan Ross overpaid? Well, first of all, as Spinal Tap pointed out, there's absolutely nothing wrong with being sexy. And second, even if its gender politics were a bit on the unreconstructed side (Witchfinder General's *Death Penalty* album art is an extreme but by no

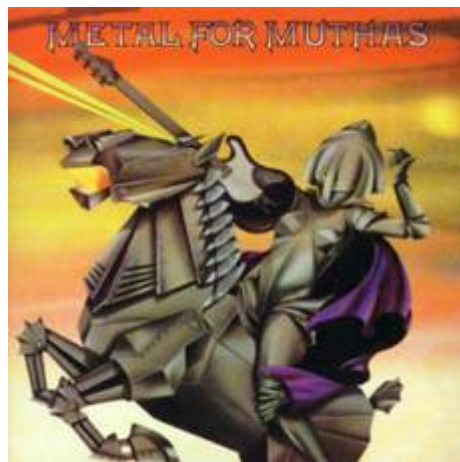


means atypical example of attitudes), the NWOBHM can still lay claim to launching the career of one of the first and best all-female rock troupes. Unlikely as it seems, Girlschool took their moniker from the B-side of Paul McCartney's very un-NWOBHM 'Mull of Kintyre' single. When their first, independently released seven-inch, 'Take It All Away', drew the attention of Motörhead manager Doug Smith, their destiny was sealed: signed up to support Lemmy and co on the Overkill tour, they also became Motörhead's labelmates on Bronze. The relationship proved mutually enriching, both musically and financially, and produced one of the defining moments of the NWOBHM era: Lemmy and the ladies performing together as Headgirl on *Top Of The Pops*. Their highly romantic collaboration, the *St Valentine's Day Massacre* EP, was released on Valentine's Day 1981 and went to number five in the charts. Left to their own devices, the 'School never quite managed to repeat that success (nor did the 'Head for that matter) but songs such as 'Emergency', 'Race with the Devil' and 'Hit and Run' are among the liveliest and best of the NWOBHM. And the band are still going.



That's only three of the NWOBHM's great have-a-go heroes and heroines, which leaves a whole universe of other neglected and underrated acts that deserve at least a mention here: AIIZ, Atomkraft, Avenger, Bitches Sin, Blitzkrieg, Hell, Holocaust, Raven, Shiva, Sledgehammer, Sweet Savage, Tank, Trespass, Witchfynde (that y-for-an-i is just *so* NWOBHM; and what a great debut their 'Give 'Em Hell' single was)...

Some are still performing, others have sunk without trace, but fortunately many of their stories are captured for posterity in two invaluable publications: John Tucker's *Suzie Smiled... The New Wave of British Heavy Metal* (2006) and Malc Macmillan's exhaustive *The New Wave of British Heavy Metal Encyclopedia* (2001). With the NWOBHM, the taking part was always more important than the winning.



With all this grassroots musical fermentation going on, what was 1979 like in hard rock terms? Well, it was a time when fans were regularly referred to as 'muthas' (EMI gave the word ultimate currency by putting out a NWOBHM compilation entitled *Metal for Muthas*); when the press was full of scare stories about the dangers of headbanging; and when any band with a guitarist was in danger of being labelled 'heavy metal' whether they rocked like true muthas or not. As Lemmy commented: 'all of a sudden everything was heavy metal. We were heavy metal, Journey were heavy metal, Hawkwind were heavy metal. Very strange.' It was also a time when, despite there still only being four national radio stations, hard rock suddenly had its own dedicated slot on the airwaves. Launched in 1978, Tommy Vance's *Friday Rock Show* on Radio 1 was to the heavy metal community what John Peel's show was to the punks and indie kids: a highly sought-after 'TV-on-the-radio' studio session could make or break

a band. This is where a lot of NWOBHM bands got their first – and sometimes last – national exposure.

Already established acts owed the NWOBHM a debt too. AC/DC (Angus appeared on the cover of the first issue of *Kerrang!*), Motörhead, Judas Priest et al benefitted enormously from the energy and excitement that the young DIY pretenders were stirring up. It's noticeable that a lot of the old guard produced definitive musical statements at around this time: *Ace of Spades*, *British Steel* and *Black in Black* were all released in 1980 and drew on the media and listener buzz created by the NWOBHM. In whetting an ever expanding audience's appetite for the wonders of rock, the NWOBHM also helped to break some more traditional, distinctly un-NWOBHM bands: Magnum, for instance, toured with both Def Leppard and Tygers of Pan Tang.

So even if you missed the NWOBHM first time round and can't now imagine why everyone got so excited about Paralex's 'White Lightning' or Vardis' 'If I Were King' when they were first released, you've still got a lot to be thankful to 1979 and the NWOBHM for. All hail, muthas, and happy thirtieth birthday!

Robert Shore
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