ALICE COOPER

[BY BRAD TOLINSKI]

By any standards, 1973 was an exceptional year for rock & roll. Its twelve months saw the release of such gems as Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*, Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy*, the Who's *Quadrophenia*, Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions*, Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, and debuts from Lynyrd Skynyrd, Aerosmith, Queen, and the New York Dolls.

But the most provocative and audacious treasure of that banner year was Alice Cooper's masterpiece, *Billion Dollar Babies*, a brilliant lampoon of American excess. Released in March 1973, the album showed the five-piece shock-rock act at the top of its game, not only as songwriters and performers but also as conceptual artists. In addition to reaching the top of the album charts, *Billion Dollar Babies* spawned four hit singles—the title track, "Elected," "Hello Hooray," and "No More Mr. Nice Guy"—and set the group off on one of the biggest, most elaborately staged tours that rock & roll had ever witnessed.

It was an unlikely triumph. Just a few short years before, in 1967, Alice Cooper had been scorned as "the most hated band" in Los Angeles. The group members weirded out the locals by being the first boys that weren't transvestites to dress as girls, and their wildly dissonant, fuzzed-out psychedelia sent even the most liberal hippies fleeing for the door. Any rational human would have said they were committing professional suicide, but the band members thought otherwise. Who cared if a bunch of Hollywood squares thought they were gay? At least they were being noticed. Every time they heard somebody yell "faggot," they swished more, and overnight they found fame as the group it was hip to hate. It was a lesson they would put to good use throughout the rest of their career.

THE BAND GRABBED HEADLINES AND MADE WAVES

By 1968, the band, which formed in Phoenix, Arizona, had settled into a stable lineup consisting of singer Vince Furnier (b. 1948), guitarists Michael Bruce (b. 1948) and Glen Buxton (b. 1947), bassist Dennis Dunaway (b. 1946), and drummer Neal Smith (b. 1947). They had dubbed themselves the Nazz, but that same year the group adopted the moniker with which it would find fame and infamy. In an apocryphal story, the members claimed

that Alice Cooper was a 17th-century witch who had been burned at the stake and with whom they made contact using a Ouija board. At first it was the name of the band, but Furnier later claimed it as his own.

The group's 1969 debut, *Pretties for You,* released on Frank Zappa's Straight Records, was a critical and commercial disaster, and as 1970 came to a close, Alice Cooper was $100,000 in debt. Destitute, the band mates landed in Detroit, the city of Furnier's birth. In a typically unlikely stroke of luck, they got a break when, during their performance at the Toronto Rock and Roll Festival, a fan threw a live chicken onstage. Furnier, now Alice, tossed it back, expecting it to soar over the crowd. "I thought chickens could fly," he still contends. "Really." Instead it plummeted into the crowd, where it was torn apart. Alice Cooper became known as "the chicken-killing fag band." Suddenly, kids everywhere wanted to see the group perform.

The band's growing popularity led to a deal with Warner Bros., which paired it with producer Bob Ezrin. The young Canadian, who had never produced anyone before, drilled the band members at their rented farm outside Motor City, forcing them to practice every day and to work on their craft, their songwriting, and even their trashy, violent, flamboyant stage show. "I think we would all agree that Ezrin was our George Martin," Alice says. "The amazing thing was that we actually listened to him, because, generally, we didn't listen to anyone."

PREVIOUS SPREAD *Alice Cooper: Dennis Dunaway, Neal Smith (holding Kachina the snake), Vincent Furnier, Michael Bruce, and Glen Buxton (from left), 1969.* **THIS PAGE** *From top: Smith, Bruce, Furnier, Dunaway, and Buxton (from left), Los Angeles, 1969; Smith, Furnier, Bruce, Dunaway, and Buxton (from left), 1972.* **OPPOSITE PAGE** *Alice in 1973—off with his head!*

Rhythm guitarist Bruce also began to take his job more seriously, polishing his chops and composing more commercially viable chord progressions and riffs. In January 1971, the hard work paid off when Alice Cooper unleashed *Love It to Death,* catapulting the band onto every radio playlist with "Eighteen," a hard-rock teen anthem that ranks with the Who's "My Generation" and Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit."

Before the year was out, the group followed up with *Killer*. In his liner notes to the 1999 box set, *The Life and Crimes of Alice Cooper,* Sex Pistol John Lydon hails *Killer* as "the best rock album ever made," praising its attitude, originality, gall, and bravery. *Killer* was certainly designed to shock, and its celebration of misfits, murderers, and dead babies delivered controversy in spades. Even its Motown-inspired hit single "Under My Wheels"—an uptempo ditty about a young man's desire to run over his annoying girlfriend with an automobile—raised eyebrows.

The subject matter was striking, but so was the sophisticated music that went with it. "The band would write all the time and rehearse nine or ten hours at a stretch," Cooper told journalist Jaan Uhelszki in 2008. "We worked really hard, because we knew we were competing with bands like Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones. We actually had an inferiority complex. We were sure

everybody was better than us, which made us work harder and pushed us to greater heights.

"Michael Bruce was a really good rhythm player. He was the guy that held everything together musically. He was our John Lennon in that sense. Neal Smith was the ultimate showman. He would find out how many drums the Who's Keith Moon had in his drum kit, then go out and buy one more and call Keith and brag about it. He would stand on his kit and twirl his sticks, and I would just look at him while we were onstage and laugh and think nobody has that kind of ego! Our bassist Dennis Dunaway was the artist—he was the best musician in the band."

As the band evolved, so did its lead singer. It was during *Killer* that a bratty, sarcastic trickster—more evil clown than drag queen—replaced Cooper's previous androgynous persona. The new, macho Alice was more likely to outrage his detractors by impaling a bloody baby doll with a sword onstage than wear a dress. As one journalist noted, "He went from mincing to menacing." The change was drastic, but the end result was the same: Alice Cooper continued to grab headlines and make waves. It's not a surprise that the group's evil burlesque would garner more attention than its musicianship, but Alice Cooper was as tight and as imaginative as any unit in the seventies. The oft-overlooked rhythm section of Dunaway and Smith were as nimble and creative as the Who's Moon and John Entwistle, and it could be argued that they were more disciplined. Lead guitarist Buxton and rhythm guitarist Bruce were not virtuosos, but they built parts that created a dramatic theater of the mind that was absolutely essential to the success of the band.

"We had two guitarists that were very different from each other," explains bassist Dunaway. "Michael had this cutting, inventive, riff-oriented guitar style, and Glen Buxton was like an angry hornet. Yet they were able to complement each other. I can't think of any other guitar duo that worked together like they did."

ALICE COOPER WENT FROM MINCING TO MENACING

By now, Furnier had *become* Alice Cooper, in the eyes of fans and outraged parents. Perhaps to satisfy both, the band's live show began to be presented as a morality play in which Alice was punished for his dirty deeds and put to death. The *Killer* tour featured a gallows from which he was hanged, blood spurting from his mouth as he dropped to his death.

School's Out, released in 1972, catapulted the band into rock's heady stratosphere. The title track became a hit single and helped propel the album to Number Two on the *Billboard* charts.

But it was with 1973's *Billion Dollar Babies* that Alice Cooper outdid itself. Already an international sensation, playing sold-out shows and earning $17 million dollars in 1973, the group needed to do something more sensational than ever. And it did, crafting a concept album that dealt with its own wobbly place at the top of rock's slagheap, and the decadence it found there.

"The two albums before *Billion Dollar Babies*—*Love It to Death* and *Killer*—were critically acclaimed," Cooper says. "There was a general feeling that each of our albums was a little better than the last one and that we were not just a flash in the pan. We kept raising expectations by coming up with good songs. . . . After *Billion Dollar Babies* came out, even people like Bob Dylan and members of the Beatles started saying nice things about us, which was the final stamp of approval. Dylan loved 'Generation Landslide,' and John Lennon's favorite song for a while was 'Elected.' It didn't get better than that."

The $1.2 million stage show for the tour was appropriately dazzling, as if lifted from a classic Hollywood film. During "Hello Hooray," Alice would materialize through a puff of smoke. Wearing white tails, a ripped leotard, and leopard-skin boots, he would high-step onto a revolutionary twenty-five-foot-tall stage weighing eight tons and

ABOVE Billion Dollar Babies *cover shoot, 1973: Bruce, photographer David Bailey, Furnier, Dunaway, Buxton, and Smith (from left); Alice doffs his hat, 1970.*

A BRILLIANT LAMPOON OF AMERICAN EXCESS

built on three levels connected by a huge staircase that lit up when Alice walked on it. Behind Smith's drum kit was an Egyptian sarcophagus, which shot lasers during the show while Cooper molested dolls, caressed a nine-foot boa constrictor, and, as usual, was executed at the show's climax—this time via a custom-made trick guillotine conjured by the magician the Amazing Randi.

"There's a great tradition of show business in America, and people could relate to the theatrical aspect of what we were doing," Alice says. "We were the rock version of Hollywood, and we just tap-danced across the United States."

Between all the dry ice, stage props, and show-biz razzmatazz, the thing that was often lost or ignored was just how talented the man in the spotlight was. With all the controversy surrounding his albums and concerts, to this day it's rare that anyone acknowledges that Alice Cooper was more than just a pretty face: He was also a brilliant singer, entertainer, and lyricist. Just listen to his explosive delivery on the violently poetic "Desperado" from *Killer,* or his nuanced vocals on the witty "No More Mr. Nice Guy," where he effortlessly shifts from pop crooning to sneering sarcasm to flat-out anger and disgust. And what about the uninhibited "School's Out," the hilarious "Elected," or the poignant "My Stars"? He crushes them all with his gritty-yet-appealing instrument in the way few singers outside of Kurt Cobain ever have.

As a wordsmith, Alice could speak to the adolescent condition with extraordinary empathy and humor. Joey Ramone once confessed that as a teenager he took "great comfort and solace in Alice Cooper . . . my favorite band." It's also telling that Dylan, who proclaimed Cooper "an overlooked songwriter" in a 1978 *Rolling Stone* cover story, appreciated what rock critics of the day often could not see. Once again, John Lydon explains, "[His songs are] about the fun of life. Mistakes, warts, and all, and sharing the ugly side of things with a sense of humor."

The *Billion Dollar Babies* tour was the largest rock extravaganza up to that time. Ironically, as is so often the case, just as the band was hitting its peak, it was falling apart. Blame it on years of tirelessly climbing to the top, churning out three albums in two years, exhaustion, or the jealousy of the band members toward their lead singer. Whatever caused the fracture, the personal and professional relationships of these five friends—four of them high school chums—were shattered a year after the release of *Billion Dollar Babies.* The group managed one more album—*Muscle of Love*, released a mere eight months after *Babies*—before breaking up in 1974.

Alice Cooper released his solo debut, *Welcome to My Nightmare,* in early 1975, followed by hits like "Only Women Bleed," "I Never Cry," and "You and Me," and he never looked back. Until now, that is. Rumors of a new album with producer Ezrin and a reunion tour (minus Buxton, who died of pneumonia in 1997), offer new hope that the world will be made *un*safe once more. ❁

So I was 12 years old, and I was staying in London with my aunt Janet and uncle Cliff. My cousin Sara, who was so much older than me, at least 15, had a poster on her wall of a man with long, dark hair and slashes of black eye-makeup. He looked evil, in the way that people on posters for films I wasn't yet old enough to see looked evil—Dracula and Frankenstein's monster and all those kinds of people. My cousin Sara had been to see his show, and she told me he had a snake onstage, and at the end of the show, he was hanged by the neck until he was dead. She said there was blood. His name was Alice Cooper, the man in the photo. And the band she went to see, that was called Alice Cooper, too.

There was something so shocking about a man with a girl's name, all those years ago. It was more shocking than any talk of blood. It was a raised finger to the idea that there were things that were right and proper. Men had men's names, girls had girls' names.

My cousins did things we didn't do at home, like watch Top of the Pops *on a color television, so I watched Alice Cooper play its hit "School's Out" on* Top of the Pops *one Thursday night, and from the first stab of guitar, I was riveted: "We've got no class, and we've got no principals/ We got no innocence/And we can't even think of a word that rhymes," the scary-looking man sang, first playing with a sword, and then with what looked like a strangling cord. Alice was dressed in black, in some kind of jumpsuit slit to the navel. And it looked mean and science-fictional and nasty, not silly. And the band . . . the band looked dangerous.*

Music wasn't dangerous back then, not really. All the glam stars, all the rock stars . . . it was all show business, and it felt like show business, and the "Is that a boy, or is that a girl?" questions that grown-ups asked about David Bowie were the same ones they asked about Donny Osmond. Despite the name, they didn't ever ask that about Alice Cooper. They were obviously male, and just as obviously, not people to whom you would entrust your car, your daughter, or the key to your liquor cabinet.

I bought the albums, the old LPs that opened up to reveal glorious designs: Billion Dollar Babies *scared me: "Teenage Lament '74" was my anthem when I was 13. I loved* Welcome to My Nightmare, *with Vincent Price narrating the horror, and in 1979 I paid my money for the Marvel* Alice Cooper *comic, in which a straitjacketed Alice is put away, and finds it's even crazier there than it is out here.*

And then came the punks, the awkward, pogoing, safety-pinned stepchildren of Alice Cooper. It's no coincidence that Johnny Rotten's audition piece for the Sex Pistols was Alice Cooper's song "Eighteen." Alice spawned the punks, just as Alice spawned the Goths who would come after them (the New Romantics, however, were not Alice's fault, and neither was disco).

I was a punk, and I didn't throw away my Alice Cooper albums as I grew older.

I got to work with Alice Cooper—the man, not the band—in the early nineties. He's an inexhaustible, cheerful, funny, smart, rock & roll legend, and I took more pleasure in putting him into a top hat and frock coat in a comic book than I can easily admit to here. He takes what he does seriously—the craft and profession of being a rock star—and takes his family and his God seriously, too, but nothing else: He had fun. The way he tells it (and you believe him), they were the band that couldn't shoot straight, and he glories in the tales of Frank Zappa signing them because they weren't like anything else he'd heard, of Shep Gordon becoming their manager because they cleared a 2,000-person hall just by playing a song—and he knew that a band that could do that could do anything.

In 1994, just before the BBC pulled the plug on the show, I found myself, for the only time in my life, in the Top of the Pops *studio, and up on the stage was a huge blow-up of a Michael Zulli comic-book panel, and in front of the comic-book panel was Alice Cooper, a.k.a. Vincent Furnier, his own self, singing,*

I can't get a girl cuz I ain't got a car,
I can't get a car cuz I ain't got a job,
I can't get a job cuz I ain't got a car,
So I'm looking for a girl with a job and a car. . .

And just for a moment, I was 12 again, and school was out forever. . . .

—NEIL GAIMAN

SHOCK ROCK

THE ATTACK OF ALICE COOPER, KISS, SLIPKNOT, AND THE 10,000-FOOT RADIOACTIVE TEENAGER

ALICE COOPER SPAWNED A NEW GENRE OF ROCK & ROLL THAT HAS ATTRACTED LEGIONS OF UNDERAGE FANS SINCE THE 1970S

[BY BRAD TOLINSKI]

IMAGINE, if you will, waking up on the morning of your junior high school dance and discovering that an unruly constellation of pimples has erupted on your forehead. This wouldn't be such a catastrophe if it weren't for the chrome in your mouth and the seemingly uncontrollable hard-on in your pants caused by the evil thoughts in your brain. As you stare in abject horror at the spotty monster in the mirror, panic ensues . . . the room begins to spin.

Your mom cheerily wishes you a "Good morning!" to which you growl, "Fuck off!" The next thing you know, you're in military school, surrounded by a pack of snarling, malevolent boys snapping your ass with a wet towel . . .

In the seventies, performers like Alice Cooper, Kiss, and Lou Reed posed the musical question: "Is there really anything more grotesque, outrageous, and demented than being a teenager?" With that simple query—and a whole lotta makeup—the surprisingly durable genre of shock rock was born.

IT'S NOT SHOCK ROCK WITHOUT MAKEUP AND THEATER

For several generations, music fans have thrilled and delighted to the subtle menace, offensive humor, and in-your-face theatricality of shock-rock performers like Alice Cooper, David Bowie, Marilyn Manson, Rob Zombie, Slipknot, and GWAR. Those who would dismiss these artists as purveyors of cheap gimmickry and cynical marketing miss the point: The props, masks, and gallows humor aren't hiding a lack of talent—quite the opposite. They are used to shine a spotlight on the dark side of the teen experience, in ways both deeply sympathetic and entertaining. If most young people feel like scary monsters and supercreeps, what could be better than a rock star who actually looks, acts, and dresses like one?

Perhaps the most shocking thing about shock rock is the extent to which the bands understand the day-to-day nightmares of typical adolescents. Among shock rock's original practitioners, Alice Cooper was perhaps its most perceptive exponent. Not only did Alice Cooper pioneer the movement during its rather brief recording career, from 1969 to 1974, but the band was its funniest, sharpest, and most musically gifted interpreter.

In its 1971 breakthrough single, "Eighteen," Alice Cooper summed up the teen dilemma as elegantly as anyone ever has, and perhaps ever will. Over an appropriately bluesy, psychedelic groove, Cooper sings, "Eighteen, I get confused every day/ Eighteen, I just don't know what to say/ Eighteen, I gotta get away!" The protagonist of the song is a hormonally frustrated mess who frets, "I'm a boy, and I'm a man/I'm eighteen, and I don't know what I want." His transformation back and forth is as psychologically disturbing as any horror movie, but in the end, he decides, "I'm eighteen, *and I like it!*" (Just as I'm sure the Wolfman would admit while licking his chops over the entrails of some vestal virgin—he likes it, too!)

"Eighteen" was just one of dozens of brilliantly written and performed songs by Alice Cooper that celebrate and deconstruct the gnarly teenage mind. In other tunes, the Alice Cooper character has sex with the dead ("I Love the Dead"), blows up schools ("School's Out"), masturbates ("Muscle of Love"), tangles with his dentist ("Unfinished Sweet"), wants to be elected president of the United States ("Elected"), kills some babies ("Dead Babies"), and dies a million real or imagined deaths for the crimes he committed. Of course, none of these twisted teenage daydreams would amount to a hill of beans if they weren't attached to an insanely catchy song performed by what has to be one of the most underrated bands in rock history.

But it's not shock rock without makeup and theater, and Alice Cooper excelled at both. Each show was an elaborately designed passion play in which Alice, dressed in ripped tights, platforms, and evil-clown face paint, would assault community standards and pay for it with some intricately constructed form of capital punishment. The method of Alice's death changed each tour—first he was fried in an electric chair, next he was hanged, then he had his head chopped off in a guillotine—but the agenda remained the same. The band was always looking for that thing that would resonate with the kids.

"I wasn't as calculated as everyone thought I was," Cooper wrote in his amusing 1976 autobiography, *Me, Alice.* "I did many things on a whim, because I thought it felt right. I took a snake out onstage not because I thought it would get press, but because I liked the way it looked. I had a girl's name and dressed funny because, instinctively, I recognized this is a bisexual world. Most important, I was honest with the kids. I released their sexuality, and I was a catharsis for their violence. I did it for them."

PREVIOUS SPREAD *Kiss's Gene Simmons.* **THIS PAGE** *Kiss in 1976; Alice Cooper with special friend, 1975.* **OPPOSITE PAGE** *Marilyn Manson, onstage in 1996 (top) and on TV in 1995.*

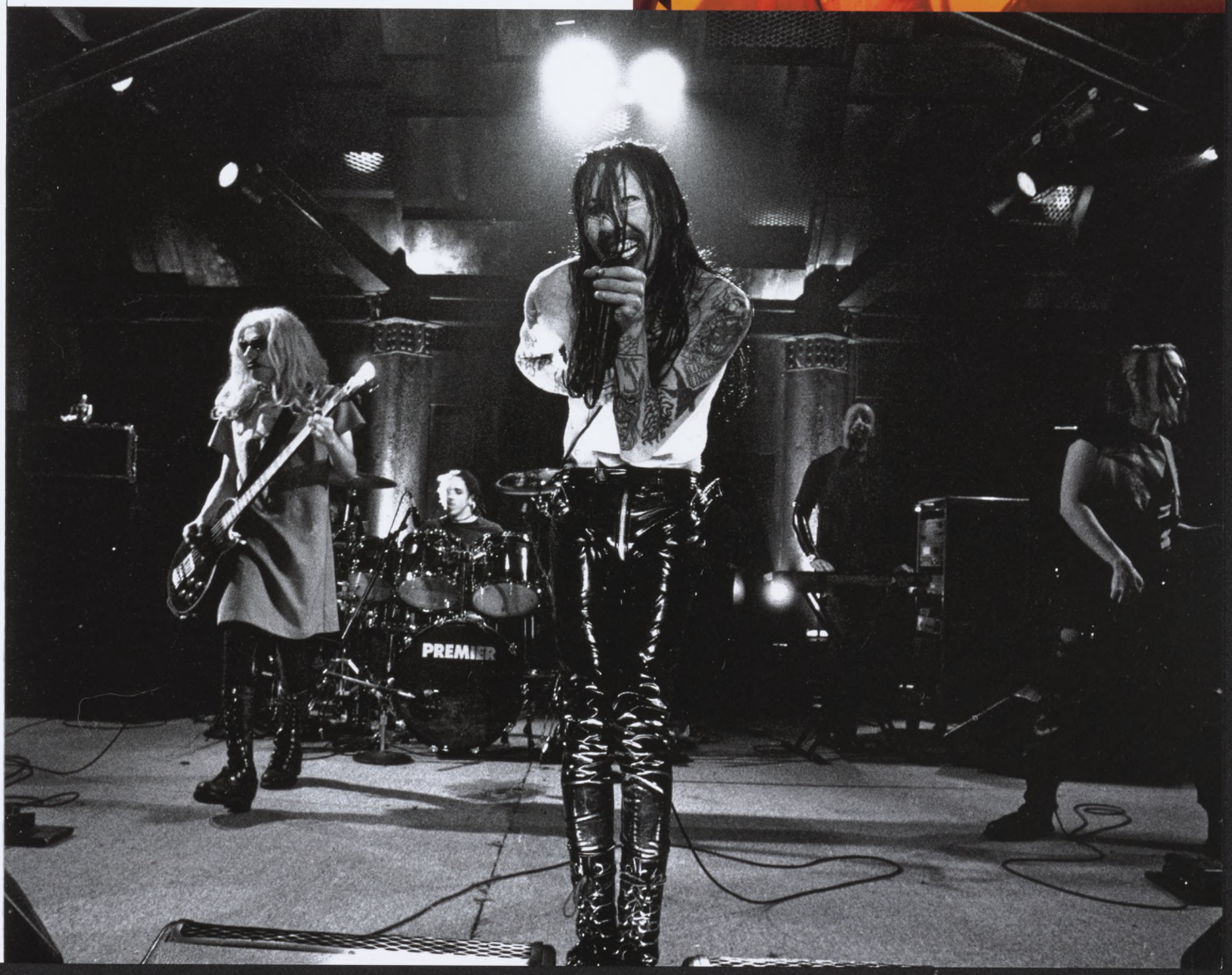
Alice Cooper, of course, wasn't the only group that used theater to reach all the young dudes. The street kids of Kiss dressed themselves as four demonic creatures and brilliantly tapped into the Freudian id of youth with their horny tales of greed, lust, power, and instant gratification. Lou Reed, on his 1973 tour, dressed as a glam Frankenstein, becoming one of the earliest gay icons in rock culture. More recently, Rob Zombie's "hellbilly zombie" has empowered a nation of heavy-metal geeks and nerds who live their graphic novels, sci-fi movies, and video games.

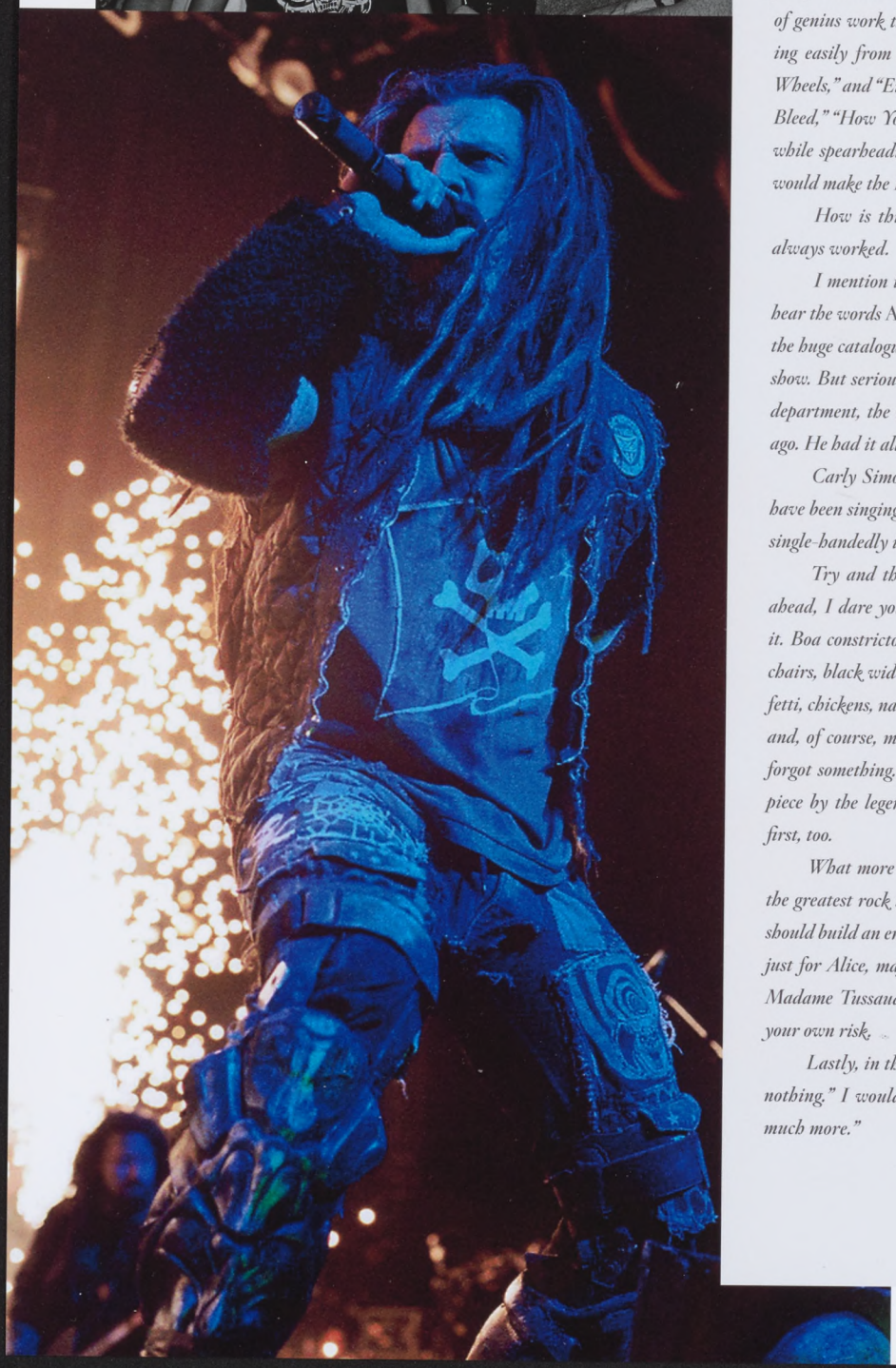
HORNY TALES OF GREED, LUST, POWER, AND INSTANT GRATIFICATION

Perhaps one of the most underrated bands among the shock-rock elite is Slipknot, an astonishingly poignant voice for lonely and disaffected teens—kids so lost, weird, and anonymous that they may as well be wearing masks. Finally, the provocative Marilyn Manson is a talent so dark, formidable, and artistic, there is a sense that one day he really will do irreparable harm.

While shock rock feels like a relatively modern construct, Alice, Marilyn, and the rest come from a long lineage that has been with us for centuries. They are descendants of the classic mythological trickster deity that breaks the rules of the gods or of nature, sometimes maliciously but usually with ultimately positive effects. The bending/breaking of rules takes the form of tricks, and they can be cunning or foolish, or both. They are often funny, even when considered sacred or performing important cultural tasks.

What's the trick? What's the important cultural task? Shock rockers are adults who take on the guise and burdens of the lowliest teen—the true grotesque, awful, silly, lovely, amazing teenager. Through their artistry, they make the pitiful creatures feel like they're not alone. Is there really anything more rock & roll than that? ❁





THE ONE AND ONLY ALICE

Alice Cooper is the original rock & roll villain; he is the man and the band that drove a bloody stake straight through the heart of the peace-and-love generation. So long, flowers and good vibrations . . . . Hello, death and insanity. If somehow the planets did not align on that fateful day on February 4th, 1948, and the baby known as Vincent Damon Furnier did not come screaming into this world, we would have had to figure out a way to build him. Every great story needs a great villain.

How would you create such a strange and unusual creature, you ask? If Emma Peel and Dr. Frankenstein had a baby under the guidance of Screaming Lord Sutch and Frank Zappa? Would that work? Maybe, but I doubt it.

Still not weird enough.

There is only one Alice Cooper, and, thankfully, one is all we ever really needed. I have been a huge Alice fan for more than thirty-five years, and I still can't wrap my mind around the incredible body of genius work this man has created. The Coop is an enigma, shifting easily from balls-out rockers like "School's Out," "Under My Wheels," and "Eighteen" to tear-jerking love songs like "Only Women Bleed," "How You Gonna See Me Now," and "I Never Cry," all the while spearheading a bizarre Grand Guignol theater of death that would make the Ringling Brothers turn blue with envy.

How is this possible? I don't know, but he did it all and it always worked.

I mention the music first because, for the most part, when you hear the words Alice Cooper, *the first thing that comes to mind isn't the huge catalogue of classic hit songs—it's the groundbreaking stage show. But seriously, if the man didn't deliver the goods in the music department, the thrill of the show would have worn off a long time ago. He had it all.*

Carly Simon sang it about James Bond, but she really should have been singing about Alice in "Nobody Does It Better." This man single-handedly invented the "rock show." No small feat, indeed.

Try and think of a stage trick that Alice didn't do first. Go ahead, I dare you. Dancing skeletons? Did it. Giant Cyclops? Did it. Boa constrictors? Did it. Guillotines? Did it. Hangings, electric chairs, black widows, dead babies, cold ethyl, balloons, bubbles, confetti, chickens, naughty nurses, top hats, platform boots, straitjackets, and, of course, makeup—oh, that iconic makeup! Whew, I'm sure I forgot something. Oh, yeah, I did forget something. A spoken-word piece by the legendary Vincent Price. Sorry, Michael, he did that first, too.

What more can you say about this man? He is without doubt the greatest rock star that America has ever produced. In fact, they should build an entire new wing onto the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame just for Alice, maybe along the lines of the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussauds Wax Museum. Not for the weak. . . . Enter at your own risk.

Lastly, in the words of John Lennon, "Before Elvis, there was nothing." I would like to add to that: "Before Alice, there wasn't much more."

—ROB ZOMBIE

IS THERE REALLY ANYTHING MORE GROTESQUE, OUTRAGEOUS, AND DEMENTED THAN BEING A TEENAGER?

OPPOSITE PAGE
Rob Zombie, with White Zombie in 1987 (top) and onstage in 2002. **THIS PAGE**
Slipknot's Mick Thomson (top) and Corey Taylor (bottom) drive the teens wild.