

Def Leppard in 1985 formation:
Steve Clark, Phil Collen,
Joe Elliott, Rick Savage, and
Rick Allen (from left)



Def Leppard



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**THEY FORGED A NEW
POP-METAL SOUND WITH
MULTIPLATINUM RESULTS**
BY ROBERT BURKE WARREN

Missing his bus that autumn day in Sheffield, England, 1977, may have inconvenienced 18-year-old wannabe rocker Joe Elliott, but it set in motion a series of events that would lead to his fronting one of the biggest bands in history: Def Leppard. An undeniable eighties juggernaut still vital today, Def Leppard stand as one of a handful of rock bands to reach the RIAA's "Double Diamond" status, i.e., ten million units of two or more original studio albums sold in the United

States. Their club-mates: Van Halen, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, the Eagles, and the Beatles. But while the band's journey includes these and many other stratospheric highs of rock stardom, it also features some unimaginable lows – legendary dues paying, it seems, for all those dreams come true.

Looking back to the murky beginnings, Elliott recalled passing 19-year-old local guitar player Pete Willis on that unplanned walk home from the bus stop. It was, he said, "a sliding-doors moment." Elliott had just taken up guitar and asked if Willis' new metal band, Atomic Mass – which included drummer

Pete Willis, Allen, Elliott,
Clark, and Savage
(clockwise from
bottom), before a
gig at Atlanta's Fox
Theatre, 1981





Above: Elliott surprised by Union Jack-ed fans, c. 1981.
Below: Clark and Elliott at a Sheffield cutlery factory, c. 1978.



Tony Kenning and bassist Rick “Sav” Savage – needed another axe. They didn’t, but they did require a singer. Elliott, never having sung outside the shower, offered himself up. In lieu of a proper audition, Atomic Mass crowded into Elliott’s bedroom, where he wowed them with his extensive record collection, musical knowledge, and charisma. They also admired Elliott’s self-designed posters and concert tickets for his fantasy band, Deaf Leopard. He’d even reviewed the fictional group for a creative writing assignment in school. Elliott visualized a band with both hard-rock muscle and pop hooks, a gang akin to his heroes Slade, Mott the Hoople, and the Sweet – early 1970s glam hitmakers particularly beloved by young women. Elliott regaled his guests with tales of how Deaf Leopard would follow in the boot-steps of these greats, filling a vacuum that had opened up in U.K. music. Hadn’t they noticed? Outside his window, in blue-collar Sheffield and beyond, punk rock and new wave were all the rage, and an edgier, faster brand of

heavy metal was rising from the recession-decimated streets (Atomic Mass were, indeed, of this ilk). But the tunefulness, fun, and pizzazz of Ziggy Stardust, T. Rex, et al., were sadly absent. The young, studly Deaf Leopard, he predicted, could bring it all back, with a bang.

Though Elliott did not sing for them that day, the boys from Atomic Mass were sold on his vision, cool band name, and willingness to chip in on a rehearsal space and P.A. Within weeks, the fledgling Deaf Leopard set up in a spare room in a Sheffield spoon factory. The band fired up Bowie’s “Suffragette City,” and Elliott finally sidled up to a microphone and sang in public for the first time. Fortunately, his voice was something they could work with. “I learned as I went along,” he said. After Kenning suggested a spelling change to distinguish them from popular new-wave bands with animal monikers – the Flying Lizards and Boomtown Rats – Def Leppard was born. Soon, Willis recruited 18-year-old, classically trained six-string whiz “Steamin’” Steve Clark to audition. After playing the entirety of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Free Bird” unaccompanied, Clark was in, cementing Def Leppard’s twin-guitar attack.

Intent on steering clear of the cover band rut, Def Leppard immediately began writing original material to play alongside their favorite tunes. When time came to record a debut EP in late 1979, Kenning abruptly quit, ultimately replaced by 15-year-old Rick Allen. With a loan of approximately £148 from Joe Elliott’s father, Def Leppard recorded and pressed up a thousand copies of the three-song *The Def Leppard EP*. Elliott’s mother helped glue the sleeves together, and the band sold them for £1 each at gigs. When iconic London DJ John Peel visited Sheffield, Elliott, full of characteristic chutzpah, seized the moment. “Peel was doing a disco at Sheffield University,” Elliott told a reporter. “I jumped up onstage and said, ‘Play this!’” Eventually, Peel did, and the ball started rolling. The EP soon sold out and would go through multiple pressings.

Def Leppard gigged throughout 1979, both solo and as an opening act, most notably for AC/DC, which



Clockwise from top left: Allen behind the drums, Detroit, 1987; Clark and Collen, back to back, c. 1985; Elliott in mid-scream, *Pyromania* tour, 1983.

After all this time, amid the outrageous fortune and misfortune, few can match Def Leppard in terms of quality and classic material.

led to their introduction to AC/DC manager Peter Mensch. Mensch looked at the *Tiger Beat*-attractive band – average age, 18 – and recognized the potential for Def Leppard to rise from “the New Wave of British Heavy Metal.” Unlike their peers in Motörhead, Saxon, and Iron Maiden – all possessed of dazzling musical chops, yet largely ignored by radio – Leppard, Mensch reckoned, could cross over.

A record deal with Phonogram/Vertigo (Mercury Records in the U.S.) led to Def Leppard’s 1980 debut, *On Through the Night*. Thanks in part to their tireless touring, it hit the Top Fifteen in the U.K., and paved the way for the band to tour America, opening for Pat Travers, AC/DC, and Ted Nugent. Soon, the quintet crossed paths with another incalculably influential associate: AC/DC producer Robert “Mutt” Lange.

Lange, whose résumé included everything from Graham Parker’s *Rumour* to the Outlaws to Foreigner, signed on to produce the 1981 album, *High ‘n’ Dry*. He introduced the band to layered harmonies (often featuring his voice) and densely sculpted, radio-ready rock & roll, a style that he’d used to great effect with AC/DC, garnering them worldwide success with *Back in Black* in 1980. The approach worked, with the single “Bringin’ On the Heartbreak” eventually hitting Number 61 on the *Billboard* Hot 100, helped along by the new venture MTV airing the song’s video around the clock alongside Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, and Hall and Oates. This alliance between the telegenic band and the soon-to-be ubiquitous music network would prove crucial to Def Leppard’s incipient superstardom.

That superstardom arrived in 1983, with the Lange-produced *Pyromania*. Launched with the band’s instant classic “Photograph,” the album could only be kept from the top spot on the *Billboard* chart by Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*. Not only had Lange upped the ante in the recording process, spending even more time meticulously recording and rerecording, editing, tweaking, and processing frequencies, he’d also cowritten the wickedly catchy “Photograph,” as well as subsequent *Billboard* Top Forty hits “Rock of Ages” and “Foolin’,” all of which featured ever more flashy videos. The heady times proved too much for guitarist Willis, however. The band fired him for “excessive drunkenness” during the sessions, replacing him with Phil Collen.

Four years passed before the next Def Leppard album. During this lapse, the pop metal forged by Lange and the band would dominate. Bands like Bon Jovi, Poison, and Mötley Crüe rose, clearly having paid close attention to Def Leppard’s output. After tour-

ing extensively, headlining arenas and stadiums, and a subsequent, aborted production with Jim Steinman (the mastermind behind Meat Loaf’s *Bat Out of Hell*), the band welcomed Lange back to the control room to work on songs and painstakingly record a worthy followup to the historic *Pyromania*.

Disaster struck in December of 1984, when Rick Allen crashed his Corvette, severing his left arm. This tragedy, however, morphed into one of the most amazing comeback stories in rock & roll or anywhere. Allen resolved to relearn to play, using a specialized kit and incorporating his left foot to trigger samples,

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



High 'n' Dry
1981 (Mercury)



Pyromania
1983 (Mercury)



Hysteria
1987 (Mercury)



Adrenalize
1992 (Mercury)



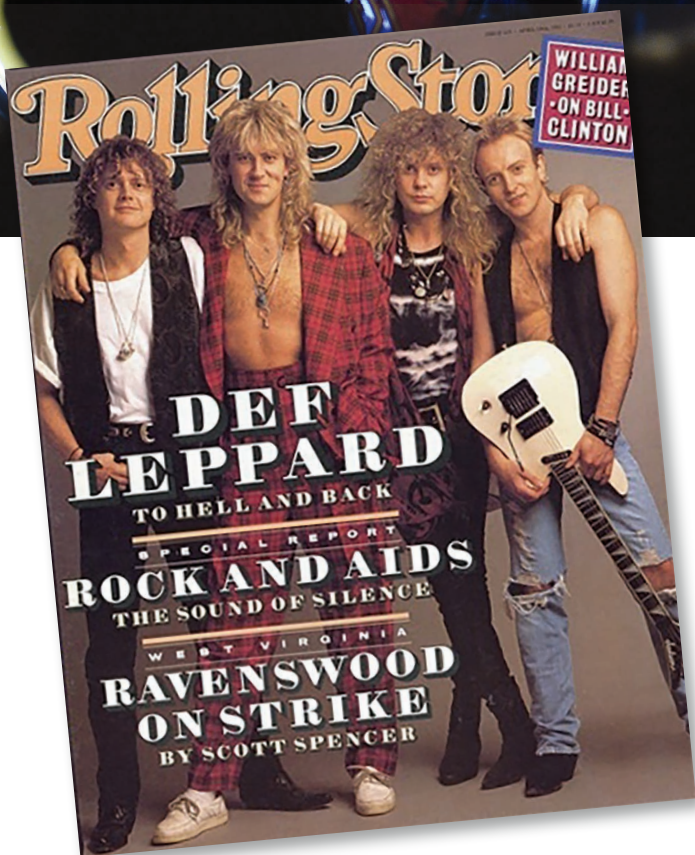
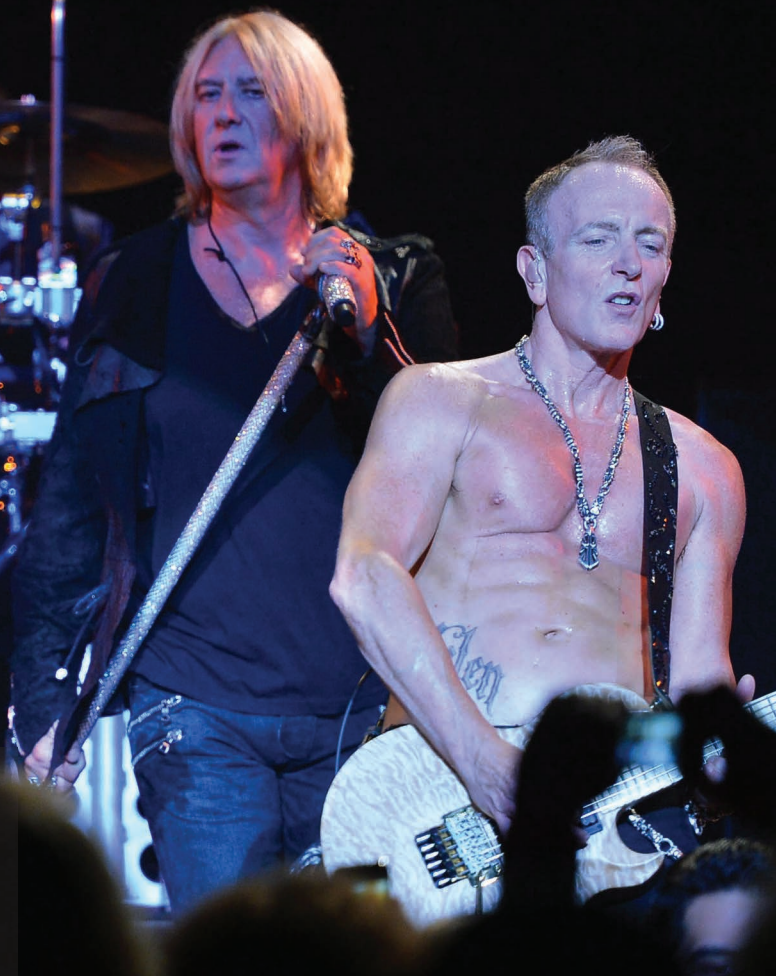
Slang
1996 (Mercury)



Songs From the Sparkle Lounge
2008 (Mercury)



This page, from top: Backstage, Elliott, Clark, a friend, and Collen (from left), c. 1987; jetting through Canada, 1996. Opposite page: Vivian Campbell with Elliott and Collen in Los Angeles, 2012.



a process that took more than a year. Lange and the band stood by him throughout. Finally, in August 1987, *Hysteria* was released. After a slow start, it would spend six weeks at Number One on the *Billboard* chart, propelled by a fourth single – and late addition to the sessions – “Pour Some Sugar on Me.” The next single, “Love Bites,” would go to Number One on the *Billboard* Hot 100.

From the outside, all seemed right again. But guitarist and principal songwriter Clark’s mental health and substance abuse problems worsened on the *Hysteria* tour. In January 1991, while the band was working on what would become the 1992 release *Adrenalize*, Clark died at age 30 from a fatal mix of codeine, Valium, morphine, and alcohol. The band brought in Irishman Vivian Campbell, veteran of Dio, Thin Lizzy, and Whitesnake, and soldiered on.

Adrenalize, meanwhile, debuted at Number One on the *Billboard* album chart, and remained there for five weeks, buoyed by hit single “Let’s Get Rocked.”

With the advent of grunge, Def Leppard adjusted. They embraced a darker, more raw sound with what many fans consider one of the best of their twenty (and counting) albums, *Slang* (1996). For their first release without Lange since 1981, the fivesome recorded together in a room, old-school style, with Allen on a semi-acoustic drum kit. After a boost from a must-see 1998 episode of VH1’s *Behind the Music*, the band invited Lange back one last time for the 1999 album *Euphoria*, which yielded the Lange/Phil Collen-penned hit “Promises.” The year 2001 saw the release of the acclaimed VH1-produced TV movie *Hysteria: The Def Leppard Story*, which brought the band’s stranger-than-fiction story to a new generation.

Def Leppard have continued to release albums well into the millennium – including a 2006 collection of covers, *Yeah!*. They still tour, often on multiple bills with bands they came up with in the 1970s and 1980s. Performing with superfan Taylor Swift, the band won over yet another new audience on a 2008 episode of CMT’s live concert show, *Crossroads*, released as a DVD in 2009.

Although Campbell was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 2013, he and the band, needless to say at this point, persist. Campbell keeps the disease in check with immunotherapy, and the band members continue their demanding touring and recording schedule, because they love what they do and because the fans – now multiple generations – clamor to see them, again and again. After all this time, amid the outrageous fortune and misfortune, few can match Def Leppard in terms of quality and classic material, delivered with all the passion and showmanship dreamed up in Elliott’s Sheffield bedroom just over forty years ago. Rock of Ages, indeed.

