



BLACK STAR RIDERS

**Ricky Warwick, Scott Gorham, Damon Johnson,
Marco Mendoza, Jimmy DeGrasso**

Black Star Riders - All Hell Breaks Loose

There's no hard rock super-project that's been as hotly anticipated in 2013 thus far than All Hell Breaks Loose by Black Star Riders, offshoot band from the wildly successful lineup of Thin Lizzy that has been charming audiences worldwide for the last few years.

It's a turn of events that had to happen. Not long ago, Lizzy began seriously consider utilizing the vast songwriting talent within the band and then began talking freely about it in the press. And then, long story short, with drummer Brian Downey stepping aside for consummate pro Jimmy DeGrasso, and Darren Wharton dropping out the project, the band felt it right to fly high under a new banner--Black Star Riders--allowing them to forge ahead somewhat freed from the huge legacy the Lizzy name brings.

For these seasoned pros—Ricky Warwick, Scott Gorham, Damon Johnson, Marco Mendoza and Jimmy DeGrasso—creativity, as well as craft, has always been key, and Lizzy name or not, there was nothing that was going to impede the writing, performing and producing of a defiant album. And what's most engaging—and even courageous—to a man, no one in the band shied away from evoking memories of the best of Lizzy, be that in Ricky's Northern Irish enunciations and lyrical sensibilities, or in the sinewy twin leads Gorham and Johnson weave effortlessly. And yet... it's a case of as needed, or when the spirit takes us.

“The Black Star Riders record is wholly and completely influenced by Thin Lizzy,” laughs Johnson, southerner, once leader of the effusively regarded Brother Cane, guitarist in Alice Cooper's band with Jimmy. “By, specifically, the classic lineup of the band between 1974 and 1980. That's the lineup that I think the fans gravitated towards the most; it's that period of time creatively that had the biggest impact, the most staying power. It's certainly the stuff that changed my life, long before I ever dreamt of meeting Scott Gorham and Brian Downey (laughs). So once I joined the band last year, and the discussion of writing came up, obviously I was elated, because I looked at it like... I've been writing for 25 years. And then we fine-tuned those conversations as to what we wanted the vibe to be. And it was exciting that it was an open palette from the standpoint that it was never like, well, let's make something like this record or let's make something like these songs. It's just more the spirit of it, of Thin Lizzy, that made sense to be part of the package.”

That Lizzy vibe can be heard, to be sure, joyously and with robust and rich pride, within lead single “Bound for Glory” as well as “Kingdom of the Lost,” which is destined to be an Irish traditional singalong classic live for 2013, given its “Black Rose”-like ambitions toward the weight of history and full-on twin lead excellence.

But “Bloodshot” and the intriguing title track? This feels like the tough terrain of Ricky Warwick, frankly, a creative force from the north of Ireland who could write these records on his own, had he not been surrounded by so many songwriters as capable of himself. And some of that toughness and tightness to the sound? One must credit the production prowess of Iron Maiden giant Kevin Shirley, who has recorded DeGrasso, specifically, with a booming street rock vibe perfect for the literary sensibilities of Ricky as well as the Chinatown-like urgency welling up from Scott's and

Damon's collaboration and the effortless bass power rising up from Marco. In fact, "Kissing the Ground," perhaps the album's reticent charmer, becomes a perfect microcosm for the album: Chinatown, with its lean and subtle inspiring by punk, meets The Almighty, Ricky's snarling rock vehicle from the '90s.

The freeing away from the name Thin Lizzy... "I do know absolutely that it took a lot of pressure off of Ricky," says Damon, "once we decided to go with a different name, and not label it Thin Lizzy. Because the reality of Phil Lynott songwriter, Phil Lynott front man, Phil Lynott icon, there's just not a lot of instances in rock history to compare it to. But the record's got a bit of everything. There are heavy songs in this record, but it's a lot more kind of timeless guitar sounds and timeless approaches to the recording and mixing. Still, we just have this incredible good fortune of having Scott Gorham in this band, and we can defer to him. There were definitely times where he said okay, I don't want it to sound so much like Bad Reputation. And some of those discussions, we would acquiesce and go, 'You know what? I see what you mean. Let's take this in a different direction.' But there were a couple of other tracks where we ganged up on him a bit and said this is it; I'm sorry if it sounds like another song (laughs)."

Truth be told, as one wades into the album, it's a fact that the band is writing without encumbrances, that there's a tough hide to the thing that very refreshingly is not particularly heavy metal, which would be the expected route. "Hey Judas," "Hoodoo Voodoo," "Valley of the Stones"... again, this is stripped rock 'n' roll with hooks, blocked chords... if there's anything particularly Thin Lizzy about this, one thinks of Phil out on the town with the Greedy Bastards guys or Bob Geldof of The Boomtown Rats. In other words, this is urgent, tight hard rock with as much of a street vibe as one evoking Thin Lizzy's regal European pageantry. Even more so, something like "Someday Salvation"... well, with that one, you've got a potential sleeper hit, a new "Dancing in the Moonlight," a fully charming melange between Van Morrison and Graham Parker.

Similarly, "Before the War" finds the band hitting on Almighty-like politics while striking some chords out of The Clash's "London Calling." What emerges as one stepping stones his way through this record, is that All Hell Breaks Loose is emphatically not delivering the expected. There's a complex songwriting dynamic at work based on vastly different life experience, and the beneficiary is the portion of the band's—and Thin Lizzy's—audience that is willing to take the leap of faith and live positively the next bunch of years with these familiar rock warriors that have given them so much.

"It's an odd situation... it's not really a bad situation," reflects Jimmy DeGrasso, who still notices and appreciates the source Lizzy sound even if it turns out to occur front-end loaded and onto only a few specific tracks. "I don't think this band ever really had to try to sound like Thin Lizzy, because as long as you have Scott Gorham in the band, it's gonna sound like Thin Lizzy (laughs). And you know, obviously the band's been playing the Thin Lizzy catalogue. The funny thing about the new songs, everybody's been hitting me up, what does the new stuff sound like? Well, you have to understand, Damon and Ricky wrote a lot of stuff, and they grew up on that whole generation of music. So their writing, especially Damon, Damon comes from the blues, sort of country/jazz background—he's not what I would term heavy metal. And there's a whole set of chord progressions that go along with that that is indicative of that music—I know, because I've done both. And the way they write, they don't purposely try to write, 'What would Thin Lizzy do?' They're just not in that headspace. They just try to write songs. And there are different feels in them, like a shuffle and a swing. Their stuff, you don't hear a lot of bands do. And I think that kind of lends itself to the Thin Lizzy vibe, because that band was very heavily blues-based as well, the original band."

"But it doesn't matter what we write," continues Jimmy, "because this happened a couple times when they were doing the record. Damon and Scott Gorham... you go to the studio, and they're doing dual guitar leads, and as soon as they do, we just sit back and laugh, because immediately it sound like Thin Lizzy. Because that was the signature sound of that band. And it's funny, I think sometimes Scott doesn't want to go in that direction: 'No, I don't want to sound like that.' Here's the funny thing: you're Scott Gorham. When you play, you sound like Scott Gorham, and Scott sounds like Thin Lizzy (laughs)."

"I'll tell you what," divulges Jimmy in closing, "I've never said this, but it's probably the best record I've done. And it's because I've never done a record where from top to bottom, all the songs are really good. You know what happens.

Okay, we're doing a record, we've got like two or three... you can't call them singles anymore, but two or three really great songs and then you write around those (laughs). This record, you know, it's a different time now, so I was talking to Damon about this. He said, we're just writing what we wanted to write, what we thought were good songs. We're not writing towards AOR rock radio or anything anymore, which is what we had to do in the old days, when he was in Brother Cane and I was in Y&T. It's a thing where we really just made this record for ourselves, and I think other people are really going to like it. That's why I'm really optimistic about it. I think it's going to do well, because all the feedback so far has been really great. I mean even Kevin Shirley, the producer, has been really on board with it, really wanted to do it. And I was thrilled about that because I'm a big fan of his."

Clocking out, the beauty of *All Hell Breaks Loose*—and the surprise to this writer—is how the album hugely embraces then delivers the unexpected. Kiss and Van Halen did well delivering the expected recently, and Aerosmith not so much. What we get with the concept that is *Black Star Riders* is a magical, organic, classic rock experience that doesn't so much sound like Thin Lizzy, but wells up emotionally into that space Thin Lizzy—and UFO and Queen in the '70s—occupied and exemplified so well, the idea that classic rock is timeless and beyond genre, that great writing trumps any sort of mathematically tallying of riffs.

And we should have expected it, really. *Black Star Riders* is nothing less than an army of songcrafters, put in touch with a great and grounded producer, all of them intensely debating one of the great legacies in all of rock, that of Thin Lizzy. Is it any wonder what we have at hand is a band that would have been the next Led Zeppelin or Bad Company or Aerosmith in a different and golden time and place?