

# Start Of The Rainbow

When legendary guitarist **Ritchie Blackmore** left heavy hitters Deep Purple to strike out on his own with **Rainbow**, he created a different kind of metal with sword and sorcery overtones. With his new lieutenant, vocalist **Ronnie James Dio**, alongside him, Blackmore turned Rainbow into the quintessential '70s hard rock band. *Neil Jeffries* recounts the story of the first – and many say the best – version of the band...



**WHEN RITCHIE BLACKMORE LAUNCHED** the band we now know as Rainbow, he did so after what to him felt like seven long years as a member of the legendary Deep Purple. That timespan seems tiny in retrospect, but during that period Purple did have three different line-ups and make nine studio albums. The version of Rainbow we celebrate in this story lasted just half as long, from mid-1975 to the end of 1978, and made only three studio albums. Importantly, though, they're the only Rainbow studio releases to feature the otherworldly voice of the late, great Ronnie James Dio.

'Ritchie Blackmore's Rainbow', 'Rainbow Rising', and 'Long Live Rock 'N' Roll' were groundbreaking, exciting, and – for the most part – brilliant. They may not have sold in anything like the quantities the great rock albums of the decade that followed did, but to this day they remain both genre defining and much loved.

**HISTORY HAS** taught us to think of Rainbow as a revolving door through which musicians came and went at the whim of the band's creator, mercurial guitarist Richard H Blackmore. But in truth, this pivotal era of the band was built on a trio; the stable core of Blackmore, Dio, and drummer Cozy Powell. The latter was admittedly a little late to the party, replacing Gary Driscoll after the first Rainbow album in 1975.

So what if Rainbow had a bit of trouble with keyboard players and bassists? As Powell explained to Pete Makowski of UK music newspaper *Sounds* in 1977, "It's three of us running the show and there's not a lot of time or room for anybody else. Say, for example, a Keith Emerson or a Jack Bruce suddenly emerged from somewhere... we wouldn't last a week. There'd be an almighty punch-up and the band would cease to exist."

Reviewing press cuttings from this period in Rainbow's

history, it's surprising to see Powell, who died in a car crash in 1998, doing a goodly amount of talking. Perhaps reluctantly, Blackmore did most of the early interviews. The thoughts of Dio, who died of cancer in 2010, are much harder to find at this time. The singer sat alongside the guitarist when he spoke to *Sounds* for the first time after the band was launched, but nothing he said to writer Geoff Barton was quoted. All the same, the chemistry between these three musicians was crucial, and when it worked it *really* worked. But like most things, it couldn't last. Every democracy needs a leader and in Rainbow that leader was Blackmore.

**THE FIRST** line-up of musicians in Rainbow was simply Ronnie Dio's previous band Elf, minus their guitarist Steve Edwards. Blackmore's original idea had been to make a solo album while still a member of Deep Purple.

But he enjoyed the experience of recording at Munich's Musicland studio in Germany so much that he opted to leave Purple in April of 1975, the month after 'Ritchie Blackmore's Rainbow' was completed. During a long and boozy evening in Long Island in September 1995, Blackmore told me that the decision to call the new act Rainbow was made around two decades earlier during an equally alcohol-driven night in LA's celebrated rock'n'roll dive the Rainbow Bar & Grill on Sunset Strip. "I was in there with Ronnie, getting drunk as usual, and he said, 'What shall we call the band?', I just pointed to the sign..." When I suggested to Ritchie that it was lucky they weren't in the Pheasant & Firkin, Blackmore drily replied, "Or the Bull & Bush."

Blackmore and Dio launched Rainbow together, arm in arm and tipsy. Gradually, though – as he was happy to tell me in 1995 – Blackmore assumed greater

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