

CLASSICAL ROCK

Kip Winger achieved major success with his band **Winger** just before grunge changed everything. But the vocalist and bassist's undying love for music saw him not only weather the storm, but also develop a whole new career as a classical composer. *Howard Johnson* talks to Kip about his incredible, unusual life...

BACK IN 1993 WHEN grunge had unceremoniously cast '80s hair metal bands out into the musical wilderness, Beavis and Butt-Head's nerdy wannabe-mate Stewart Stevenson was seen habitually sporting a Winger T-shirt in the hit cartoon series. In the process, Stewart single-handedly made the band a short-cut term for the very epitome of uncool rock music. At that point in time you would surely have received the longest odds ever of the group from New York City being active fully 30 years later. And not only being active, but positively thriving.

"I know," says vocalist and bassist Kip Winger shaking his head in what appears to be disbelief when he pops up on our Zoom call from his home in Nashville. "When that video [for 'Nothing Else Matters'] where Metallica were throwing darts at my poster came out, and Nirvana were coming into the mix with grunge, and *that Beavis And Butt-Head* thing was happening, the '80s bands suddenly became very uncool very quickly. And it seemed that I was especially uncool. It felt like I was driving that particular car. And it was a 'What the f*ck?' moment for me. Like, 'Wow, what just happened?' And it really wasn't a good feeling to know that now you were toxic. We were like the coronavirus way before it happened, and I was the guy at the scene of the crime."

Winger's timing really wasn't great. The band – Kip, guitarist Reb Beach, drummer Rod Morgenstein, and guitarist/keyboardist Paul Taylor – formed in 1987 just as Guns N' Roses emerged to sow seeds of doubt about the validity of commercially friendly hard rock, or hair metal as everybody had started calling it at the time. All the same, Winger's eponymous 1988 debut album still made it to number 21 on the *Billboard* chart and stayed in the Top 200 for a mammoth 64 weeks, going platinum

in the process. Two singles, 'Headed For A Heartbreak' and 'Seventeen', pierced the US Top 30. A second album, 1990's 'In The Heart Of The Young', was also a success, going Top 20 and selling a million copies in the US. It really wasn't a bad start at all.

"And I made money," confirms Kip. "But it wasn't big money. The thing is, if Winger had been around three years earlier, then I'm sure we would have had a good run as headliners, which we never got. The wave that was our music came in and I got up on my surfboard right as it hit the sand."

BORN IN Denver, Colorado on 21 June 1961, Charles Frederick Kip Winger had already made something of a name for himself in the world of rock before Winger the band even existed. After cutting his teeth playing local clubs with his brothers, Kip took the plunge and moved to New York in 1982 looking to catch a break. Within a year he'd become friendly with up-and-coming hard rock producer Beau Hill and ended up co-writing a song, 'Bang Bang (Balls Of Fire)', on Maryland rockers Kix's third album 'Midnite Dynamite', co-produced by Hill and released in 1985. That same year Winger joined Alice Cooper's band and recorded two albums with the Detroit legend, 1986's 'Constrictor' (co-produced by Hill with Michael Wagener), and 1987's 'Raise Your Fist And Yell'.

It seemed that this rock'n'roll thing really wasn't all that hard, so Winger left Cooper in 1987 to start his own project, bringing Alice's keyboardist Paul Taylor along with him. Kip insists that it wasn't his original intention to put a hair metal band together.

"Things really started for me with rock when I first heard Jethro Tull, Yes, and Gentle Giant – bands that

Photo: Courtesy of Kip Winger

