



STING IN THE TAIL

**Blackie Lawless** made his name courting controversy fronting **W.A.S.P.** in the '80s. But that almost gave him PTSD and led him to question exactly what he wanted out of music. *Howard Johnson* gets under the skin of a man who's actually got a lot more to say than many give him credit for...

**"IF I PUBLISH A** book - and that's something I'm working on right now - people are going to read it and they're going to think half of it's crap, stuff that's been made up just to shock and titillate. But I swear to you it won't be. People ask me all the time, 'What's the most outrageous thing that's ever happened to you? Well there's no way I can answer that because every day - especially when you're on tour - is more outrageous than the previous one. After a while you get desensitised to what's normal. Would I want it any other way? I don't think so. Has there been a price to pay? Absolutely. And that price has been really heavy at times, but I got into this business because I wanted some excitement. Well I definitely got my share - and somebody else's too!"

Blackie Lawless - or Steven Edward Duren as he was christened - is on the phone to me from the West Coast of America. And let's be honest, this is the kind of self-aggrandising statement you might well expect from any of the stars

of the '80s metal scene, a time when the US record-buying public loved to reward rock musicians who were loud-mouthed, larger-than-life, and more often than not downright *lewd*. Blackie fits the stereotype. After all, his band W.A.S.P. dealt the outrageous card with a flourish, first coming to the attention of the rock world outside of their Los Angeles base in 1984 through the 'Animal (F\*ck Like A Beast)' single that seemed deliberately designed to offend the United States' self-appointed moral majority. And of course, in doing so, W.A.S.P. also gathered the nation's disaffected under the one banner.

I did wonder whether the singer and bassist might still be living in that hair metal fantasy world of perpetual adolescence. 'Fear' might be a better term than wonder, actually. Would I be interviewing a man who at the age of 66 would still be thinking about the same preoccupations - women and sex, frankly - that had so obviously driven him 40 years ago? Fortunately I needn't have worried. It is true that Blackie is in the middle of a 40th anniversary world tour where he revisits all the key moments of his career including 'Animal'. It's also true that the tour poster features Blackie drinking blood from a skull in time-honoured tradition. But spending two hours talking to him reveals a man who's significantly more thoughtful than the broad strokes cartoon image might suggest. Personally, I found it far more interesting to get under the skin of the onstage metal persona that has served Blackie so well, and talk to the real Steve Duren. His world view and personal opinions are broad and varied. Turns out it's not all about outrageous codpieces and semi-naked women on racks after all...

**YOU SOUND A LITTLE DISTRACTED, BLACKIE. HAVE I INTERRUPTED SOMETHING?**

"To be honest, I was watching a fascinating documentary on TV about Elvis, his Southern roots, and his affinity for gospel music. And I was thinking about how much I identified with all that."

**REALLY? THAT SURPRISES ME...**

"Well, what you have to remember is that I was born in a swamp in the deep dark American South in the 1950s, The Bible Belt. And when I say I was born in a swamp, I don't just mean that it was a place where there were a lot of trees. It was quite literally a *swamp* in every sense of the word. For my first six years on the planet, there were panthers and bears, half a dozen different kinds of poisonous snakes, and alligators all around. And my family was part of that Southern Baptist thing; they were very, very devout people. My father was a Sunday school superintendent, my uncle was a preacher, and my grandfather was a deacon. Gospel music was all I ever heard growing up.

"But when I was about four years old, I was in the car with my mother. She was driving with her friend in the passenger seat upfront. I was in the back seat watching the world go by. And this woman started telling my mother

about this guy who'd come to town and, as far as I could understand, a bunch of women got angry with the guy and started tearing his clothes off of him. At the age of four I started trying to figure out what this person might have done to anger these women so much that they would become violent."

**SO LET ME GUESS. THAT GUY WAS ELVIS, RIGHT?**

"Right. Eventually I learned that the kid was Elvis and, of course, the women weren't *angry* with him. They were *excited* by him. Now, about a year later my mom took me to see this huge country star called Conway Twitty who was appearing at the opening of a new shopping centre near where we lived. We were maybe 10 feet from the stage, and there was a woman I recognised from our church in the audience. She was right up in front of the stage, maybe eight feet in front of us. And when Conway Twitty came on and bent down towards her at one point, this woman *lost her mind*. At this moment I started to understand the power of music. I'd already heard Chuck Berry's 'Sweet Little Sixteen' on the radio, and I swear when it came on it was as if a bolt of lightning shot right through me. And I thought to myself, 'What is it about music that can do this to people?' It was *intoxicating*."

**YOU SAY GOSPEL MUSIC WAS ALL YOU HEARD GROWING UP. WAS THAT MUSIC INTOXICATING TO YOU AS WELL?**

"Absolutely. Southern gospel is way different to the stuff you might have heard coming out of churches if you were growing up in the UK. There was a rhythm to it, a cool factor to it, even in the white churches that were in the South at the time. The rhythms of all that '50s music, from gospel to country and bluegrass, rhythm and blues, jazz, were where rock and roll came from."

**YOU MOVED FROM FLORIDA TO NEW YORK IN THE EARLY '60S. HOW DID THAT AFFECT YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND MUSIC?**

"We arrived in New York just as the British Invasion

Photo: IconicPix/George Bodnar Archive