

The end of the road

Deep Purple Mk IV photographed in Japan, December 1975. Top row L-R: David Coverdale (vocals), Ian Paice (drums). Bottom row L-R: Glenn Hughes (bass/vocals), Tommy Bolin (guitar), Jon Lord (keyboards)

DEEP PURPLE'S MK IV LINE-UP CRASHED AND BURNED IN SPECTACULAR FASHION IN 1976 AND MANY FANS THOUGHT IT WAS ABOUT TIME. BUT WHY DID THE BAND FALL APART SO PUBLICLY? WHAT PART DID IT PLAY IN THE DEATH OF GUITARIST TOMMY BOLIN? AND IS IT TIME THE BAND'S WORK DURING THIS PERIOD WAS RE-EVALUATED? ROCK CANDY INVESTIGATES THE DEMISE OF THIS VERSION OF PURPLE, BRINGS YOU AN EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT OF THEIR ILL-FATED LAST TOUR OF THE UK AND TAKES ANOTHER LOOK AT THE BAND'S OFTEN MALIGNED ALBUM, 'COME TASTE THE BAND'...

GUITARIST TOMMY BOLIN WAS just 25 years old when he died of an overdose of heroin and other substances, including alcohol, cocaine and barbiturates, on 4 December 1976. He'd been out of Deep Purple since a disastrous last show at the Liverpool Empire on 15 March that year had precipitated the end of the Mk IV version of the band. Born in Sioux City, Iowa, the American had joined the legendary English rock band in June of 1975. He'd replaced Ritchie Blackmore, a mainstay of the group who had got fed up with the band's move towards a smoother, more groovy rock sound. Despite being an acknowledged killer player – he'd first wowed Purple vocalist David Coverdale with his performances on Billy Cobham's 1973 jazz fusion album 'Spectrum' – nevertheless Bolin had his work cut out following in Blackmore's footsteps. The Man In Black had been responsible for some of rock's most powerful riffs and was a Purple fan favourite. Plus his abrasive playing style

and equally antagonistic character meant he cast a very large shadow indeed over all things Purple.

Bolin was an altogether more sensitive man. His playing was less hard rock than his predecessor, and his character – outwardly manifested by an almost feminine look, including multi-coloured hair at one point – was far gentler. Was he simply not cut out for the high-pressure world of monolithic 1970s touring rock bands? Did the pressures of replacing a legend like Blackmore drive him to drug use?

It's all conjecture, of course. But what is certain is that Tommy Bolin's tenure in Deep Purple lasted less than a year, the band released just one, not particularly well-received album during this time, and the group's legend was severely tarnished by the car crash live performances that led original members, keyboardist Jon Lord and drummer Ian Paice, to pull the plug on the band out of sheer embarrassment.

THE ACCEPTED view for a long time was that Deep Purple Mk IV was nothing more than the elongated death throes of a band that had long since seen better days, working with a guitarist whose talents didn't suit the group, and making music that was neither appropriate for the band's style, nor boasted the same quality that previous recordings had offered.

By the time Bolin hooked up with Purple the band had already survived one seismic line-up change. Vocalist Ian Gillan and bassist Roger Glover – both integral components of the sound that had made Purple so successful – had left the group after the 'Who Do We Think We Are' album and a final concert in Osaka, Japan on 29 June 1973. Gillan's distinctive vocals – slightly histrionic and punctured with many a lung-bursting scream – would become the blueprint for many rock singers to come. Fans were unsure as to whether Purple would be able to replace such an important

cog in the wheel. They were proved wrong. Bringing in unknown vocalist David Coverdale and former Trapeze bassist Glenn Hughes had proved to be a masterstroke. Coverdale had the power to match Gillan blow by blow, but he also showed a bluesy register in his voice that gave Purple more emotional depth. Hughes, meanwhile, had a much wider musical palette, not to mention an exceptional singing voice of his own. Songs like 'Might Just Take Your Life' and 'Mistreated' from 1974's 'Burn' – the first album the new line-up produced – opened up a world of new possibilities, without taking away from the group's essence. So it's not hard to imagine why the band would have felt they could pull off the same trick when Blackmore left; that they'd be able to evolve again with Tommy Bolin without alienating their fans.

WHEREAS 'BURN' and 'Stormbringer' – the other Purple album to feature Coverdale, Hughes and Blackmore

– had easily convinced the sceptics in Purple’s hard rock fan base, the first (and as it would turn out, only) album with Bolin, ‘Come Taste The Band’, had many people confused. On the one hand there were comments saying the album was “underpowered and way too relaxed for its own good. A harmless little sparkler where once there was a ton of TNT.” On the other hand, reviewers like

Kris Nicholson in *Rolling Stone* suggested Bolin’s “more flexible approach to writing and arranging produces a more melodic and dynamic feel.” The album didn’t incite an all-out revolt amongst Purple’s massive worldwide following, but it definitely sowed doubts as to where the established heavy rock juggernaut was heading.

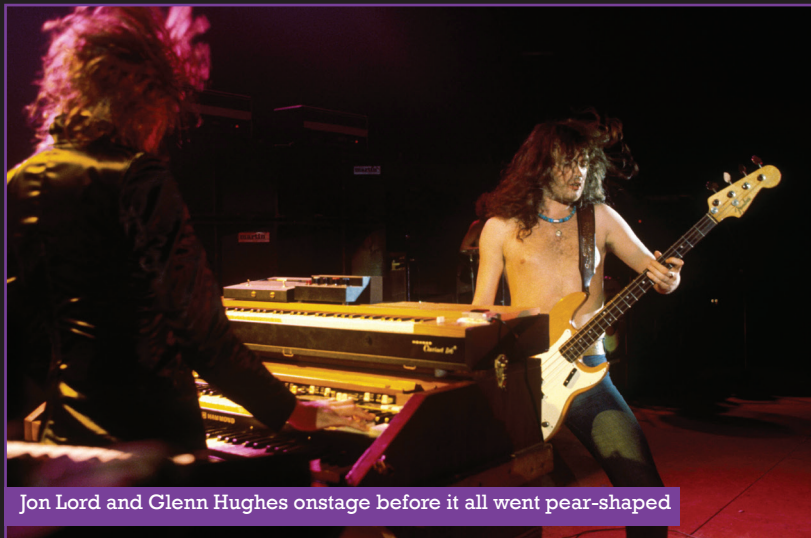
Not that sales of the album were any major cause

for concern, as ‘Come Taste The Band’ reached 19 on the UK album charts and 43 in the US. This might not have been the stellar success that Purple had enjoyed earlier (previous album ‘Stormbringer’ made it to number 6 in the UK and 20 in the US), but it was far from a flop.

So where and how did things go so badly wrong that less than six months after the release of ‘Come Taste The Band’ Deep Purple had totally crashed and burned?

AT THE start of the world tour that had been booked to support ‘Come Taste The Band’ there were no particular signs that things would spiral so badly. According to Jon Lord, the first shows in Hawaii, Australia and New Zealand that took place in November of ’75 were good, and band spirits were high. This might be surprising given some of the back-story that had leaked out about the recording of ‘Come Taste The Band’. Glenn Hughes had by this point developed a major cocaine habit that led to the band’s manager insisting the bassist go home to get well even before the album had been completed. It’s interesting, though, that nobody saw this as anything more than a minor hiccup.

As Jon Lord said when talking about Tommy Bolin. “It was California, mid-’70s. I mean goodness me, what was he going to be doing... drinking milk?!” When interviewed in Australia about his feeling about sex and drugs (“drugs, groupies, hypodermic needles... what have you got to say about them?”) vocalist David Coverdale had unequivocally answered. “Love it all.” A flippant response this might have been, but it was an interesting insight



Jon Lord and Glenn Hughes onstage before it all went pear-shaped

into how casually the players in this tale may have viewed the issue of drug use.

IT WAS when the Purple tour headed to Jakarta in Indonesia at the start of December that the wheels suddenly, and catastrophically, started to come off. Purple had signed a deal to play one major show in Jakarta, but it soon became clear that the promoter had

booked two gigs, but was only willing to pay the band the amount that was stated in the original contract. Unsurprisingly, this had caused ill feeling between the band and their touring entourage on the one hand, and the promoters and the police/show security on the other.

Various disagreements occurred at the band’s hotel, and one of the band’s security guys, Patsy Collins, ended up falling down a lift shaft. He died in hospital from his injuries the following day. Two other Purple crew members, tour manager Rob Cooksey and Glenn Hughes were all arrested on suspicion of murder, with the bassist only being let out of police custody to perform at the second concert.

Against a backdrop of threats, intimidation and financial shakedowns, unsurprisingly Purple couldn’t wait to get the hell out of Indonesia. Hughes says he’s amazed they made it out of the country alive, while Lord was convinced even at the time that Collins had been murdered. “The guys who were arrested had nothing to do with it,” he said. “I don’t personally believe Patsy would step into a lift shaft. You don’t open a door and step into the darkness.”

The air of invincibility that surrounded massive ’70s touring rock bands like Purple stemmed from a certain arrogance among musicians that they were somehow above the law. Drug dependencies would only increase that arrogance. But the Jakarta experience gave Purple an all-too-scary glimpse into a world where rock star fame counted for nothing.

THE PURPLE tour moved to Japan, a country well known for its low tolerance for illegal drug use. While Lord and Paice, the original Purple members, claimed not to know the true extent of Tommy Bolin’s heroin use, there was no doubt that they were aware of it.

Glenn Hughes, meanwhile, has admitted that, “Tommy and I were on a tremendous drug run at that point. I didn’t like the man I was becoming, but I couldn’t stop

this fucking merry go round. I couldn’t stop it.”

Was Bolin unable to get hold of heroin in Japan? Is that why he took morphine there? Whatever the reasons, a morphine-induced deep sleep led to the guitarist mangling the left hand he’d inadvertently slept on for hours. *Circus* magazine in America reported at the time that Bolin had “pinched a nerve” in his hand, leaving him with just two days to mend before the first Japanese

gig, in Nagoya on 8 December 1975. The performance wasn’t impressive, but by the time the band reached Tokyo for a show at the infamous Budokan on 15 December, *Circus* journalist Peter Crescenti reported that Purple were firing on all cylinders.

This simply isn’t true. It’s obvious watching video footage of five songs from the show that were eventually released as *Deep Purple Rises Over Japan* – ‘Burn’, ‘Love Child’, ‘Smoke On The Water’, ‘You Keep On Moving’ and ‘Highway Star’ – that Bolin is unable to play anything remotely approaching fluidly with his left hand, and Jon Lord is working manfully to fill in for him. The performance isn’t a disaster by any means, but it’s clearly a Purple that’s well below par.

Nonetheless, Ian Paice ended 1975 on a positive note. “This tour had to prove whether it could work or not,” he said of the new line-up. “This proved that it can work.”

“It proves that the band will always be this kind of band,” added Jon Lord. “But we’re trying to extend the variety of the things the band is capable of doing.”

1976 STARTED off with a run of 33 US dates before Purple headed to the UK for a tour that started in Leicester on 11 March. Despite the fact that Bolin’s hand had healed by this point, Purple were aware that their first shows on native soil would demand nothing less than excellence in front of a demanding audience that had yet to be convinced the band could survive Ritchie Blackmore’s departure.

Tommy Bolin’s performances came under intense scrutiny. *Rock Candy* boss Derek Oliver, who witnessed the band’s two performances at the Wembley Empire Pool in London on 12 and 13 March, was less than impressed, saying Bolin looked like he’d rather be anywhere else than onstage with Purple and had re-arranged the guitar parts to the point where many of the songs were unrecognisable. There was talk of stage fright. There was talk of Bolin being uninterested in

Purple and merely using it as a vehicle to eventually drive a solo career. And inevitably there was talk of drugs.

By the time the fifth date of the tour rolled around, at Liverpool Empire Theatre on 15 March, things had reached breaking point. Jon Lord explained what happened on the 2011 documentary *Gettin’ Tigher*:

“At one point during the show, Glenn said to the audience, ‘I’m sorry we’re not playing very well, but

we’re very tired and jet-lagged.’ And I remember spluttering to myself, ‘Speak for yourself.’ I was working like a Trojan to try to make this work... Paicey was playing like a madman just to keep it all together... Coverdale was singing his socks off. So to hear this guy who was extremely high on various

substances telling the audience, ‘I’m sorry, we aren’t playing well’ kind of rankled me a bit. I came off stage and went straight to my dressing room, which I was sharing with Ian Paice, and I said, ‘Ian... that’s it, isn’t it? That’s absolutely the end of this band as far as I’m concerned. Why are we doing this to ourselves?’ So he and I shook hands and said, ‘It’s over. Thank God.’

About 10 minutes later,

Coverdale came in, big blustery guy that he is, and he said, ‘I’m leaving the band!’ And we said, ‘David, there’s no band to leave.’”

THE BAND’S tour manager, Rob Cooksey, later explained that “it would be a lie to say there weren’t some personality differences. Everyone wanted to pursue his own career, and David Coverdale and Glenn Hughes have been driving me mad wanting to make their own albums.

“The real reason for the split is simple...” he continued. “Their talents have outgrown Purple. Their music has matured from the heavy rock that made them famous.”

This may have been true. But what was a much more fundamental cause of Deep Purple Mk IV’s crash and burn was the heavy drug use of at least two of its members. Before the year was out Tommy Bolin was dead of an overdose, as drugs claimed not only the career of one of rock’s biggest bands, but also the life of its talented guitarist.

After being interviewed by journalist Jon Marlowe just before his last ever gig, opening for Jeff Beck in Miami on 3 December, Bolin replied to a “Take care of yourself” comment with the words, “I’ve been taking care of myself my whole life. Don’t worry about me, I’m going to be around for a long time.”

Sadly, how wrong Tommy Bolin was. 🐻

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BASSIST GLENN HUGHES**



Guitarist Tommy Bolin (left) and bassist/vocalist Glenn Hughes. Drugs contributed to the downfall of Purple Mk IV