

DONINGTON

- A CELEBRATION

No rock festival in the UK is held in such affection by fans and bands alike as Castle Donington Monsters Of Rock. Not only did it define the '80s metal scene, but it also created an environment where rock fans could be loud, proud, and more often than not incredibly muddy! *John Nicholson* brings you a heartfelt appreciation of why Donington was so very special...

"We parked up and walked over the hill and looked down into the bowl for the first time. There, spread out before us, were thousands and thousands of rock fans from all over the country. And the great thing was, they all looked just like us! It was such a great spirit."

Andy Copping, Live Nation executive president of UK touring

WHEN PROMOTERS PAUL LOASBY and Maurice Jones of Midland Concert Promotions (MCP) sat down together in a pub somewhere in the East Midlands in 1979 and discussed the idea of putting on a one-day festival dedicated to rock and metal – and *nothing but* rock and metal – little could they have imagined just how legendary their festival would become and how, nearly four decades later, so many thousands of rock fans would look back on it so fondly. For many, it really was a life-changing experience.

This is the story of Monsters of Rock – or Donington, as all British rock fans know it – told by the fans and the musicians who rocked an unfashionable part of the country. This is the story of how an East Midlands racetrack became rock'n'roll holy ground.

BACK IN the late '70s there simply was no festival dedicated to rock and metal in the UK. Yes, you could go to Knebworth to see the likes of Led Zeppelin. But you'd have to sit through Chas and Dave, Fairport Convention and Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes. Fine musicians all, but definitely not heavy rock. You could also go to the Reading Festival, which was spread across three days. Reading *did* feature bands blasting out humongous riffs, but on any one day you'd be lucky if you got three acts you could truly call rock or metal. At some point there would always be a dreadful new wave band, followed by a bunch of old hippies and, more often than not, The Enid. Reading was very much a pick'n'mix selection. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, there was surely a gap in the market at a time when

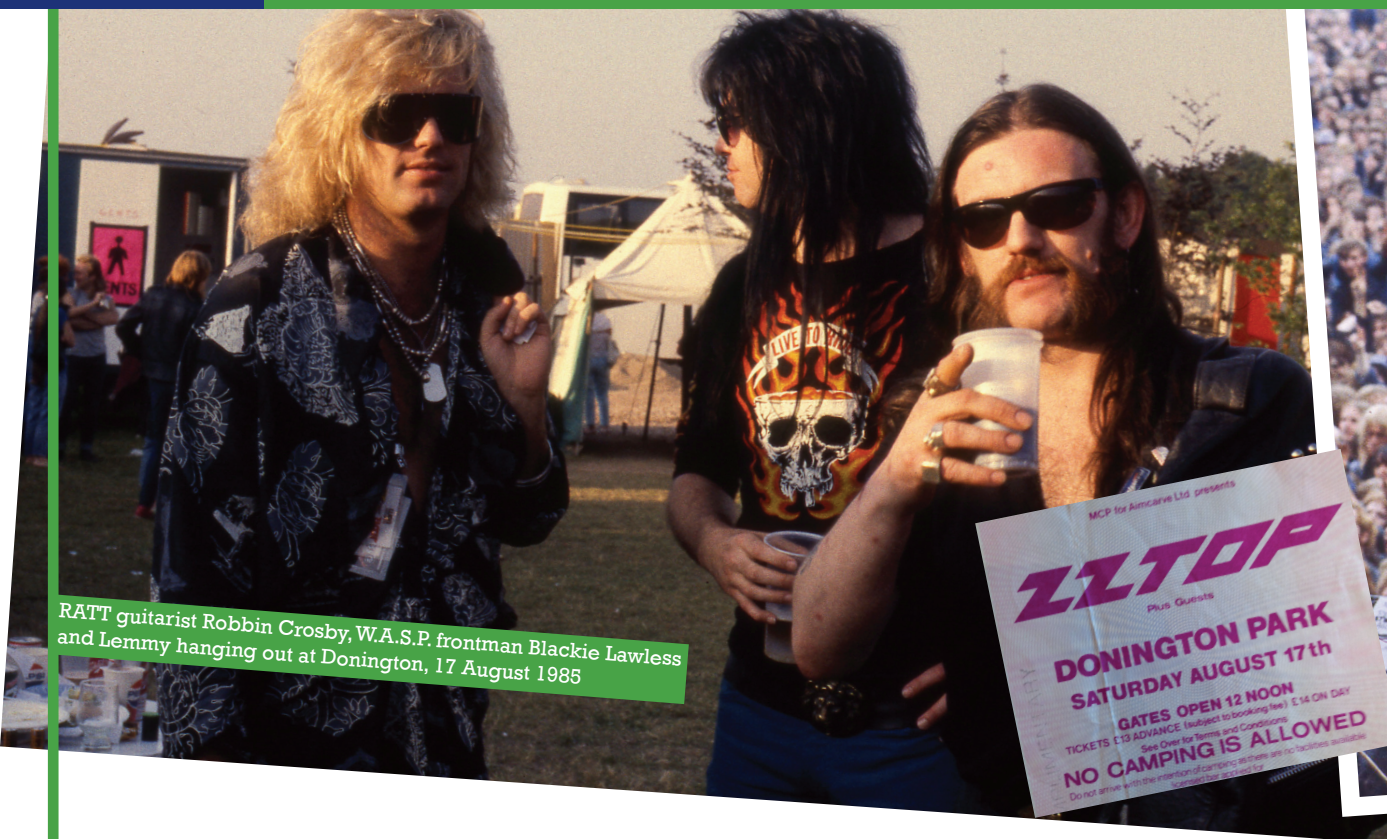
heavy rock was mutating into heavy metal, and when NWOBHM acts were pulling the music into a new decade with a speedier, more aggressive, reinvented brand of bludgeon riffola.

Maurice Jones knew Tom Wheatcroft, who owned the Donington Park racetrack, complete with its iconic Dunlop bridge (bought at auction in 2012 by DJ Chris Evans for just £250). The racetrack was chosen as the perfect location for the proposed heavy rock festival because it was near to so many large urban centres – Birmingham, Derby, Leicester and Nottingham – and just off the M1. Most people in the country could get to the site within a couple of hours. And with its natural bowl in the middle of the track, the place offered good sight lines for the crowd.

Loasby and Jones set a date for the inaugural Monsters of Rock – 16 August 1980. Tickets cost £7.50. Some estimates put the attendance at 35,000, others at nearer 55,000. But it was clear from the start that there was real consumer appetite for the product.

RAINBOW WERE an obvious choice to top the bill for the first show, with a strong supporting line-up of Judas Priest, Scorpions, April Wine, Saxon, Riot and Touch. Loasby was Rainbow's European tour promoter and they were a huge live draw at the time. The band's fourth album, 'Down To Earth', was still bouncing around the charts nearly a year after its 1979 release, and the two singles from that album, 'Since You've Been Gone' and 'All Night Long', had both been UK Top Ten hits.

Photo: IconicFix/George Bodnar Archive



RATT guitarist Robbin Crosby, W.A.S.P. frontman Blackie Lawless and Lemmy hanging out at Donington, 17 August 1985

Even though this would prove to be Rainbow's last gig with singer Graham Bonnet and drummer Cozy Powell (the former having already signalled his intention to quit, dissatisfied at the more pop rock direction band leader and guitarist Ritchie Blackmore had chosen to follow) they had nonetheless prepared a spectacular set and stage show, perfect for closing the day.

But Donington was about more than a bunch of great bands all appearing on the same stage. To fully appreciate the cultural impact of the event, it's important to remember just how underground heavy music still was at this time. You never saw rock bands on TV outside the confines of 'Whispering' Bob Harris's late night broadcast *The Old Grey Whistle Test* or a super-rare *Top Of The Pops* appearance. National UK radio had just a couple of hours on a Friday night dedicated to rock via Tommy Vance ("TV on the radio") and a Saturday afternoon show presented by Alan 'Fluff' Freeman. If you were into rock in the UK, then you were outside of the mainstream by default. If you wore denim and leather with a patched battle jacket you were in a cultural niche, marginalised by the rest of society. Donington facilitated a gathering of the tribes in a truly visceral way: there you could see with your own eyes that you weren't alone, that you weren't a freak for liking heavy music, that there were thousands of other people just like you. This was one of the main reasons why the festival became so loved. And so iconic for rock fans the world over.

"THERE WAS something about the fact that it was such a big space that made a huge difference, and the atmosphere was really friendly," says Andy Copping. "I'm sure that's why it took off as a festival so quickly. All the

bands were greeted as heroes at that first show."

Saxon guitarist Graham Oliver remembers the first Donington vividly. "The roar of the crowd when we hit the stage was unforgettable," he says. "I remember thinking, 'This is the metal Woodstock.' After our set I was going to watch the Scorpions when a Mercedes pulled up right behind the stage. The window came down and it was Ritchie Blackmore. He spoke as if we were old friends and told us we'd played a great set."

Biff Byford, Saxon's legendary singer, also looks back on the day with affection: "That first time was fantastic," he said. "Obviously it was the first major festival in England. Maybe Europe, but definitely in Britain. We were one of the rising stars of the metal scene back then, and we'd had a very big album, 'Wheels of Steel'. So it was just great walking onstage in front of people who all knew the songs. That was a new thing for us. Plus I went for a ride on Rob Halford's Harley-Davidson around the track. He didn't know I'd done it, though!"

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the more amazing because the facilities provided for the paying public were so awful. The toilets are remembered by one and all as both appalling and terrifying. Tommy Knight, who was there as a fan for that first event, has never forgotten them. "Those toilets weren't just bad, they were evil," he recalls. "I stood there, eyes closed, holding my breath and proceeded to pee all over my feet – just as Judas Priest came on stage."

What Tommy missed while he was piddling on his shoes was Rob Halford taking to the stage on the Harley whose seat had already been warmed by Biff. "I remember feeling immensely proud to be up there

THE FACT that the spirit backstage was mirrored in the crowd was all



Saxon guitarist Graham Oliver brings it to the Donington masses in 1982



Metallica's Lars Ulrich feels the full force of the Monsters of Rock PA in 1985

banging my head with thousands of metal heads in sync with us," said the band's guitarist KK Downing. Donington had that effect on a man.

At this time Priest were using a decent amount of pyro in their set. But after hearing that Rainbow had planned the mother of all firework displays to close the show, Priest decided to abandon theirs and simply divvied up their firework stash. On Bonfire Night later in the year, singer Rob Halford decided to let off his fireworks in his own back garden. And while Rainbow might have had enough to entertain the entire Donington crowd, Rob's personal stash was still more than enough to frighten the living daylights out of the good folk of suburban Birmingham. The police were duly called by neighbours who, naturally enough, had thought World War III was underway!

BACK IN 1980 you could bring your own food and, more importantly, alcohol to Donington. It feels almost surreal to think people were allowed to bring God-knows-what devilish brew on site, so long as it was in a plastic bottle. And nobody who ever went to these events will forget the sky turning black as bottles thrown by drunken punters rained down – often filled with dregs of booze, but more often filled with piss. The sense of camaraderie that existed at the first Monsters Of Rock didn't extend to refraining from covering a complete stranger in urine.

The lucrative business of merchandising was handled somewhat differently back then too, with some fans remembering people wandering around the site selling commemorative T-shirts – presumably knock-off – out of carrier bags. It was all a long way from today's tightly controlled operations.

"WE WERE BRIGHT-EYED AND COMPLETELY STAR-STRUCK AND WERE SO PSYCHED TO COME IN THERE AND BE A PART OF THAT WHOLE DONINGTON THING."
METALLICA DRUMMER LARS ULRICH

There was no doubt that the great leap into the rock festival unknown that was Monsters of Rock 1980 was a huge success. Rainbow sent everyone away happy with a brilliant version of 'Long Live Rock'n'Roll' and fans left the site to battle their way home, have a good long bath (because of course there had been tons of mud), and to tell everyone about how absolutely awesome the festival had been.

DESPITE THE fact that nobody had originally conceived of Monsters of Rock as an annual event, it soon became clear that this was definitely the way to go. So on 22 August 1981 Donington again played host to the festival

as AC/DC, Whitesnake, Blue Öyster Cult, Slade, Blackfoot and More entertained 65,000 rockers. People were only just beginning to wake up to the power of such an event. Slade, for example, had faded since their glam rock heyday of the early '70s, and hardly anybody would have regarded their Donington appearance as a reason to buy a ticket. But the band's performance that day – raw, rocking and, above all, great fun – brought about an instant career revival. Blue

Öyster Cult, on the other hand, turned in a rotten set, felt it was one of their worst ever gigs and damaged their reputation in the UK.

Whitesnake guitarist Bernie Marsden had an entirely different experience of Donington '81: "I regard the show as the most memorable of festival gigs, even though we weren't headliners. I remember looking out from the stage and realising the crowd was as big in width as it was in length and that shook me a little. Word has it that 140,000 could have been there that day, and I believe it." There's no evidence that such a huge number of people were there that day, but you can understand why the view from the stage might lead to that assumption.

TRYING TO maintain the impressively high standards of the first two years' line-ups was always going to be tricky, and the third edition of Monsters of Rock in 1982 – featuring Status Quo, Gillan, Saxon, Hawkwind, Uriah Heep and Anvil – was widely regarded as somewhat substandard. "I looked at the line up and it thought it was a bit stodgy," says metal fan Cheryl Findlayson. "I went anyway and I still had a great time, but only Gillan and Saxon were any good."

Still, Canadian frontman Lips, whose band Anvil opened proceedings on 21 August, has fond