

Night Ranger rocking a particularly strong look in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 3 August 1985. L-R: Jeff Watson (guitar), Kelly Keagy (drums and vocals), Jack Blades (bass and vocals), Alan Fitzgerald (keyboards), Brad Gillis (guitar)

# BOOGIE NIGHT!!

Everybody knows that **NIGHT RANGER**'s 'Sister Christian' featured in the film *Boogie Nights*, but there was a whole lot more to this platinum-selling American rock band than just one great song. **Xavier Russell** hooks up with original members **JACK BLADES**, **BRAD GILLIS** and **KELLY KEAGY** to talk about the many highs and occasional lows of a stellar career spanning more than 35 years...

**BEFORE THE RATHER RUDE** interruption of 1982's Bay Area Thrash movement, San Francisco was the hotbed for AOR in America. Bands such as Journey, The Doobie Brothers, Eric Martin Band, Jefferson Starship, Steve Miller Band and Eddie Money all ruled the airwaves on both AM and FM radio in the late 1970s and early '80s. Night Ranger – the last of the great 'ER' bands – were one such outfit, mixing a heady brew of insistent hard rock with undeniably catchy and commercial ballads. The most well-known of the 'softies', the unforgettable 'Sister Christian' from their 'Midnight Madness' album, became a Top Five hit in the US in 1984, but would gain a whole new lease of life fully 13 years later when it featured as the musical backdrop to one of the most

memorable scenes of cult movie *Boogie Nights*. Who can forget the sight of actor Alfred Molina, coked up to the gills and with his dressing gown open to reveal his budgie smuggler underpants, interrupting a drug deal in his mansion to air drum to the Night Ranger classic? The band – whose best-known line-up featured bassist and vocalist Jack Blades, guitarists Brad Gillis and Jeff Watson, drummer and vocalist Kelly Keagy and keyboardist Alan Fitzgerald – would end up selling more than 10 million albums worldwide. Yet Night Ranger, with Blades, Gillis and Keagy now augmented by guitarist Keri Kelli and keyboardist Eric Levy, are still recording and touring, and are still happy to discuss a career going back a long, long way.

## WHAT WAS THE MUSIC SCENE LIKE IN SAN FRANCISCO WHEN YOU FIRST GOT TOGETHER ALL THOSE YEARS AGO?

**Kelly Keagy:** "It was really vibrant there back in the late '70s and early '80s. But what was really interesting was that there was so much varied music going on in the Bay Area at that time, from Santana to The Tubes. It was really inspiring."

## SO WERE YOUR FIRST MUSICAL VENTURES EQUALLY ECLECTIC?

**Jack Blades:** "Well, Brad and I formed a band called Rubicon way back in 1977, and yes, musically it was very different to Night Ranger, with much more of a funk rock groove. We released our debut album, 'Rubicon', [on 20th Century Fox Records] in 1978 and our high point that year was playing at the California Jam 2 festival alongside Aerosmith, Ted Nugent and Foreigner. Bizarrely, Rubicon also opened for Motörhead at The Old Waldorf in San Francisco? Can you imagine what that was like?! A seven piece white band driven by horns opening for Lemmy? It was awesome. Kelly joined the

band in 1979 and became our touring drummer, but when Rubicon eventually broke up we formed a group called Stereo and started playing all the small clubs in San Francisco. Huey Lewis and the American Express – as Huey's band was called back then – would come and see us. So would Eddie Money, Billy Satellite and Neal Schon from Journey."

**Kelly:** "It was a real mix of musical styles, including R&B, AOR and hard rock."

## BY 1980 YOU'D RECRUITED ALAN FITZGERALD AND JEFF WATSON TO THE GROUP'S RANKS AND HAD DECIDED TO CHANGE THE BAND NAME TO RANGER, IS THAT RIGHT?

**Brad Gillis:** "That's right. As far as I remember we drew names out of a hat and ended up pulling out the name Ranger, so went with it. It really wasn't any cleverer than that, to be honest."

## HOW DID YOUR DEAL WITH BOARDWALK RECORDS COME ABOUT?

**Brad:** "We were good friends with Gary Pihl, and ▶

Photo: Getty Images/Paul Natkin





You can still rock in America. Night Ranger appearing on the *American Bandstand* TV show, 16 January 1984



Jack and Brad rock out in Chicago, 5 August 1985

he had played guitar in Sammy Hagar's band for many years. He had an eight-track studio set up at his house in the North Bay at Santa Rosa and we ended up camping out at his place, recording demos there for something like two weeks."

**Jack:** "At one point Gary suddenly had to go off on tour with Hagar. He threw us the keys and simply said, 'Just don't burn the house down!'"

**Kelly:** "We finished those demos (without burning his house down!), then did some others in a couple of different studios. We started shopping them around to various labels and eventually Boardwalk Records, which was started by [former Casablanca Records boss] Neil Bogart, signed us."

## BUT EVEN BEFORE RANGER HAD PUT OUT ANY MATERIAL YOU WERE PLAYING GUITAR WITH OZZY OSBOURNE, WEREN'T YOU BRAD? HOW ON EARTH DID THAT HAPPEN?

**Brad:** "When we had finished the demo and started touting it around LA to all the different labels, there was a lag time of about eight months, I guess. I just wanted to play, but as Ranger we didn't want to be playing clubs to 10, 20 or 50 people, because we had no clout. So instead I decided to put a band together called the Alameda All Stars, who are actually still active today, and we started playing Ozzy songs in the set. Pat Thrall, who played guitar with Pat Travers, is the brother of Preston Thrall, who drummed in the Alameda All Stars. Pat saw me playing Ozzy's songs in the band, and Pat had played with Tommy Aldridge in the Pat Travers Band. Are you still with me? At this time Tommy was playing with Ozzy, and Tommy mentioned me to Sharon Osbourne, who is Ozzy's wife and manager, of course. They needed a guitar player, so I got the call to go out with Ozzy."

"During the time that I was on the road with him we'd gone into the studio at odd moments and finished the Ranger record. I recorded the 'Speak Of The Devil' live album with Ozzy, but towards the end of that tour [bassist] Rudy Sarzo quit the band to rejoin Quiet Riot and I ended up quitting to come back to Night Ranger, because by that time we had a record deal. It worked out great for me, because I came off the road with Ozzy and went straight back out again with Night Ranger, opening for Kiss."

**Jack:** "Ozzy and Sharon would come down to the studio while we were putting the finishing touches to our first album, 'Dawn Patrol', and he was very encouraging towards Brad and the band. It was strange, because we released 'Dawn Patrol' the very same week that Ozzy released 'Speak Of The Devil', in November of 1982. It was great for Brad, though, because he had two records out at exactly the same time."

## SO HOW DID RANGER BECOME NIGHT RANGER?

**Brad:** "We were getting ready to release 'Dawn Patrol' when one day I opened up *Billboard* magazine and there was a two-page ad for a band called The Rangers. They were a country band with a 20-odd year history behind them, so we pretty much had to change the name there and then."

**Kelly:** "And we already had this song, 'Night Ranger', on the album..."

**Jack:** "So I called everyone up and said, 'Come on, we can just call the band Night Ranger.' The other guys said, 'You think so? That name sucks! It's terrible!' But that's what we were kind of stuck with."

**Brad:** "There were already 10,000 albums printed up with the band name of Ranger on the cover! The record company had to dump them all in the trash... even though it seems that a few copies did escape... I've actually seen a copy of the Ranger album going for \$800 on eBay!"

## THE 'DAWN PATROL' ALBUM PICKED UP SERIOUS RADIO AND MTV SUPPORT STRAIGHT OUT OF THE BOX, DIDN'T IT?

**Brad:** "What was great about the music scene at that time was that TV and radio had actually started getting into heavier rock. Our first single, 'Don't Tell Me You Love Me', ended up all over the radio all across the country. MTV had recently launched and they picked up on the song too."

**Jack:** "We made a video for that tune on an ultra-low budget with some friends who borrowed all the gear on weekends from the film school at the University of California in LA. The only prop we had was a piece of railway track, so we made the most of it! MTV was this fledgling thing, but even then everybody was starting to watch it. So we gave them our video, and I think all they had was us, Duran Duran's 'Hungry Like The Wolf', and maybe two others. MTV started showing us on heavy rotation at least 13 times a day!"

**Brad:** "We didn't really know what we were doing with videos back then and we relied on the directors to come in with their ideas. Luckily enough, though,

we had about a dozen hit videos on MTV throughout the '80s, which was great for us. It put our faces on the map and it really helped our career, especially when we pulled into a new town, because by then people would already know who we were."

## THE NIGHT RANGER SOUND WAS DEFINED BY THE BAND'S ABILITY TO SWITCH SEAMLESSLY BETWEEN TOUGH ROCKERS AND BIG BALLADS. WAS THAT A DELIBERATE PLOY?

**Kelly:** "That was just us and the way we worked. We love pop music, but we also love harder rock. We're all really big Thin Lizzy fans too, two lead guitar players and a bass player that sings. We love full-on rock'n'roll and yet we all love the Beatles for their melodies and harmonies."

**Brad:** "And because of this mix people didn't really know how to describe our sound. We weren't heavy metal and we weren't pop, so we came up with our own phrase - Stainless Steel!"

## WERE YOU SURPRISED WHEN 'SISTER CHRISTIAN' FROM YOUR SECOND ALBUM, 1983'S 'MIDNIGHT MADNESS', WAS USED IN THAT LEGENDARY DRUG DEALING SCENE IN BOOGIE NIGHTS?

**Kelly:** "The director, Paul Thomas Anderson, was a big fan of the band, and he searched us out. The production company sent us a script explaining how

"WE HAD ABOUT A DOZEN HIT VIDEOS ON MTV THROUGHOUT THE '80S, WHICH WAS GREAT FOR US. IT PUT OUR FACES ON THE MAP AND REALLY HELPED OUR CAREER, ESPECIALLY WHEN WE PULLED INTO A NEW TOWN, BECAUSE PEOPLE WOULD ALREADY KNOW WHO WE WERE."

BRAD GILLIS